

Book 7

Prologue

"Twenty-two: do not forget the rest of Creation in the pursuit of your nemesis. Small kindnesses are the seed of grand consequences. Evil stays, Good compounds."

– *"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", unknown author*

The entire Hirshwald, where she had once hunted with her cousins, was now painted grey. Teurshen and its lively muddy streets, Kleinach with its pretty green houses, Senken River where every spring people from miles away had come to fish. It was all grey.

Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, watched day by day as her realm died on beautifully painted map.

Word trickled in from every front, following the scrying lines she had laid down through the Order of the Red Lion, and with every dawn the court painter drew a few more leagues of the Principate grey on the map at the heart of the Vogue Archive. Hannover was now bare of life, likely beyond recovery in this lifetime. Her own Rhenia was entirely in the hands of the dead save for the besieged city-fortress that was its capital. Only its first two layers of defence had been lost, last she heard from her commander there, but scrying had since been cut. Twilight's Pass still held – the Morgentor had been lost twice, but the Kingfisher Prince and Otto Redcrown had led daring offensives to take it back both times – yet that was meaningless when the last fortresses of the Hocheben Heights had fallen and the dead were pushing deep in Bremen.

Ashen grey, death's breath grey, spread through towns and villages that Cordelia had ridden through as a girl.

"The north fell the moment the Heights did," the Forgetful Librarian told her the day the news came, bluntly but not cruelly. "There won't be a living soul north of Brus come next winter."

Cordelia thought of striking her but held back. It was not untrue, and these days she had come to rely on the Librarian's propensity for brutal truthfulness. Most people would have held back when warning her of the effective end of her people as more than refugees and soldiers of fortune, but Cordelia no longer had time to spare for being handled. Clarity was a priceless luxury when every hour, every decision had lives on the line.

Saale, a small fortress first raised under the Iron Kings. The seven adjoining villages called the Shwestern, which Cordelia had once developed with coin in the hopes that they might grow into a small city. The valley of Kaninchenbau. Grey spread on the map, like a maw opening to devour the world whole.

"The refugees cannot stay in Brus," Cordelia said, watching the end times take shape.

Her eyes had misted, when she'd heard that Frederic Goethal had opened his gates wide to all Lycaonese. Brus was not rich, its lands hardly any better than those of its northern neighbours', so the Prince of Brus had effectively bankrupted himself when he'd welcomed four principalities' worth of teenagers and children. More than that, too. Every piece of bread shared with her people could not fill the belly of his own, and these days no one had granaries to fall back on. He had sacrificed a great deal for innocents. *A crown is not a privilege*, she'd once told Frederic when they'd been younger. Unsure of their power, of where they stood. *It is a duty*. He'd not asked a damned thing for any of it, the Kingfisher Prince.

Cordelia had known few men worthier of being a prince than Frederic Goethal.

"Brus will soon begin seeing fighting," the Librarian agreed. "The captains in Neustria sent too many reports of their fortresses being bypassed by raiders. We send your refugees further south, then. Segovia?"

"The ships will make a difference in evacuating further south still, should the principality collapse," Cordelia mused, and so it was settled.

The Highest Assembly had voted her emergency powers allowing her to settle refugees wherever she wished in the Procer, so long as part of the financial burden was shared by the high throne. She'd nearly faced a revolt in the Chamber over the motion, which stepped on the neck of all traditional conceptions of royal sovereignty, but they'd not quite had the nerve. Cordelia had unearthed too many of the skeletons her princes had buried for them to want to risk it. When she'd passed a measure allowing her to appoint superintendence supervising the collection of princely taxes, the First Prince had gotten a closer look at their finances than any of them were comfortable with.

No wonder they'd been willing to fight her tooth and nail over the motion: a little over half of them had been cheating the high throne on taxes. In times of peace that would have been a minor scandal, but in times of war? Cordelia had the authority to have their heads for it, and that wasn't even the part that terrified them. All she needed to do to ruin them was spread word to the street: entire cities would riot, screaming for the blood of the

traitors. The way she kept ramming measures through was making her no friends, and even losing her allies, but Cordelia Hasenbach was not reigning for pleasure or friendship. If there was enough of Procer left to rebel against her after the war ended, she would walk to the headsman's block with a smile.

The Lafran Stretch, Belles Collines, Faudefer and Patrin. The last two had still been full of people when the dead tunneled under the walls. Grey spread across the map, and not only to the north.

Cordelia's dying homeland was but a third of the war, if even that, and dooms never came alone. Hainaut had come out the best of it, irony of ironies. The Black Queen had stripped the principality of most her armies before retreating, but she had left her last general – Lady Abigail Tanner – in a solid defensive position at the Cigelin Sisters. The grounds won against the dead by the *victory* at Hainaut had been promptly lost anew, the dead claiming them quicker than they could be defended, but the White Knight had broken the bridge to the north and so ended the immediate looming threat.

The Chosen had followed that up by scoring an upset victory at Malmedit that collapsed the tunnels and anchored the eastern defence line before dedicating himself body and soul to the war on Keter. He had led regular sorties into enemy territory to break up their forces before they could mass in large numbers, to great success. The White Knight had in truth been so effective there'd been talk of trying to seize and fortify the ruins of the capital to secure the locked Hellgate there, though General Abigail had forcefully stamped out any such notions. Once Cordelia would have enjoyed the White Knight's successes, the way they proved Damned were not the only ones who could lead in dark times, but no longer.

Hanno of Arwad had crossed a line in the Arsenal, when he'd made the choice to stand in the way of the preservation of Procer. If it had been only a moment of hard-headed principle divorced from the realities of the situation, in time Cordelia might have grown to forgive it. Trust would not have resumed, but wariness would have ebbed. But it was not as simple as that. Cordelia could not think of the way the White Knight had refused to negotiate, to compromise, without hearing in those terse answers the echo of another Chosen's voice. Laurence de Montfort, the Saint of Swords, feet on the table as she told Cordelia that the Procer must burn so something better might come of it.

Would Hanno of Arwad let them burn too, for his principles? Cordelia found she was not sure of the answer, not anymore. There could be no trust there, no relying on the Chosen. As in so many things she stood alone.

"The Heights were a body blow, but it's Cleves that will kill us if anything does," the Librarian sighed on a cold winter morning, sipping at a mug of tea.

The third and last front, Rozala Malanza's. For years it had been the story of victory, the proof that the dead could be beaten back that'd been so instrumental in keeping Procer from sinking into despair. And to her honour the Princess of Aquitan had stubbornly held even in the face of a Hellgate yawning open while she still suffered the siege of a great army of the dead. She could not be everywhere, though. The northern point of Cleves still held, and parts of the eastern shoreline as well, but Keter had swept out of Lake Pavin and devoured whole the western shore.

Tertre, Sengrin, Laguerroche. Grey spread like a sickness in the blood.

The walled city of Atandor was now under siege, and should it fall then the dead would have a way into the lowlands of Cleves. More terrible still, the forces of the Kingdom of the Dead would find nothing in their way as they spilled further south onto the plains of Brabant and Lyonis. And Atandor *would* fall, in three months at the latest. Agnes had been clear on that, as clear as the Augur could ever be. Its defenders had not run out of valour, but they had run out of food.

When the dead made it that far south, the war was over. Even if all they did was burn the crop fields before retreating, the ensuing starvation would collapse the Principate. Then even should the Kingdom of Callow be willing to starve itself feeding Procer, which was highly dubious, in practice the grain simply could not be moved and distributed quickly enough. There was a secret truth behind it all, though, one Cordelia had grasped in the wake of her uncle's death at Hainaut: the war was already lost. For Procer, anyway, if not yet the rest of Calernia. This was no longer about winning, it was about saving what she still could. Who she still could.

"We will have to recall Princess Rozala and her army before Atandor falls," the First Prince said.

It was giving most of Cleves over to the grey, but then it had already been made into a wasteland by Keter's Due when the Hellgate was opened near Trifelin. With so many of its best farmlands blighted, the principality could no longer feed itself.

"If she puts up a defence line around Peroulet it could hold for a few months while the dead are still massing," the Librarian muttered. "It won't be a popular decision, mind you, but it's the right one."

It was more than the army Cordelia wanted to salvage. Should she get assassinated – and it was becoming more likely that she would

be with every measure forced through the Highest Assembly – then the only other royal in Procer that could feasibly be elected to the high throne without too much quibbling was Rozala Malanza. The Princess of Aequitan might be one of the finest generals left to Procer, but she was now simply too valuable to keep risking in Cleves. Malanza would hate her for the order, but what did it matter? She had hated Cordelia to the bone since the Great War, and there would be no mending a hatred born of a mother's death.

"Gods forgive me," the Librarian suddenly said, "but we're not going to win this war, are we?"

Cordelia went still, for a heartbeat. She had not thought anyone else had noticed, not quite so soon. She needed a few months still before it became known, before panic and chaos spread-

"It'll be out east it's decided, in Praes," the Forgetful Librarian continued. "If the Black Queen can bring back diabolists and reinforcements in time for a strike at Keter to still be feasible."

The First Prince did not allow her relief to touch her face.

"Catherine Foundling will do what she must to settle the East," Cordelia said, dimly surprised to find she meant every word. "We must simply keep Procer afloat until she returns and the last gamble of this war can be taken."

That, though, was a lie. There was one last gamble awaiting beyond that, if arms failed and it all came down to the spectre of annihilation looming over all of Calernia. The First Prince had found the funds and the men, ensured all that could be done was. The corpse that had been dredged up from the depths of Lake Artoise could be awoken, the priests had promised her. It could be used as a weapon. One that would destroy Procer, perhaps, but Procer was already halfway into the grave. If it all else failed, Cordelia Hasenbach was not only the First Prince of Procer: she was also the Warden of the West. She had a responsibility to ensure at least some of Calernia survived the Dead King's fury.

And that responsibility, now, was as a finger laid against a trigger.

—

Alaya did not enjoy war.

It'd surprised her when she had understood as much about herself, as she'd believed herself a harder woman than that. No tyrant had ever climbed the Tower to less than a stairway's worth of corpses and she had certainly been no exception, so she'd wondered what it was about war that made her balk. It was not the violence, surely, for Alaya was no stranger to the use of it. Rarely by her

own hands, but to a Dread Empress of Praes assassination was no less a necessary tool of ruling than laws or taxes. Was it the magnitude, she had wondered? Edmund Inkhand had once written, in that sardonically pointed manner so typical of his journals, that men only disapproved of murder so long as it did not involve banners and great numbers.

Yet though Alaya had enjoyed reading the old king's writings as a girl and then differently so as a woman, she simply did not have it in her to care for people – strangers, people in the abstract – the way that he so obviously had. Grief at the human condition was not burden she had to bear, so what *had* been the source of her unease? It was the indiscriminate nature of it all, Alaya had later come to understand after decades of wondering. The Conquest had been one of the cleanest, most efficient wars in living memory: it had been largely soldiers that died during it, no cities were sacked and the countryside was not ravaged. And still the entire exercise had been like a stone in a shoe.

War could not be controlled, not really. It could not be contained the way that assassination and intrigues could, risk and results balanced like lines of a ledger. To Alaya's eyes, using war to achieve one's ends was rather like setting fire to a house to kill a man: dangerous as much to you as the enemy. No without reason was it an old saying in the Wasteland that a lit blaze knew neither friend nor foe.

Knowing all this about herself, Dread Empress Malicia found herself darkly amused that she had regardless spent the last five years and change at war with other powers to various degrees. Most ironic of all was the civil war that Praes was still in the throes of, which she had spent no small amount of effort to start and then maintain in order to preserve her interests and that of the Empire. Perhaps that was why even going from success to success had somehow only increased her unease.

The dark-skinned beauty ran a finger across the obsidian table at which the Imperial council sat in session, admiring how it was all sculpted out of a single piece. Reputedly it was the work of Regalia II, carved when she'd been out campaigning in Callow. Given her death abroad it'd never been used by the empress herself: it was her successor, Maledicta II, who'd been the first to sit at it. In some parts of Praes there was even a turn of phrase about the tale: 'carving an empress' table', which meant undertaking an effort that would benefit only your successor.

Alaya was not particularly fond of the sculpted rim, which was a parade of twisting devils and kneeling foes, but she had fond memories of the table itself. She'd spent many hours seated at it during some of the best years of her life, those heady days after she had climbed the Tower and she had set to reforming Praes with the people dearest to her in the world. Back then the heart of

her council had been made up of a trusted few: Amadeus, Wekesa and Ime. On occasion others had been brought in for a few months or years so that particular issues might be settled with their expertise, but they had always been temporary additions.

Nowadays Alaya found her council was little like the old one, for all that Ime and a Black Knight still sat on it.

The mirror above the ever-burning fireplace in the back subtly fogged over, the polished bronze growing clouded as the old enchantment bound to the hallways outside the council room were triggered. Malicia retreated towards the end of the table, ensuring she would be seated by the time the first of them entered – she took the time to array herself in the throne-like seat, draping the folds of her bronze and green dress in a way that she knew lent her a regal air. Ime was the first to enter, as was her habit. Malicia's spymistress was visibly aging these days, the alchemies and spells that had slowed the ravages finally unravelling.

It was not an unusual thing in highborn, who all suffered the same fate when their flesh inevitably grew inured to the alchemies and began rejecting the spells. Some became desperate and began dealing with devils then, but only the foolish dared and Ime was nothing of the sort. It was a graceful aging, too, for all that the spymistress resented it: though her hair was now turning white and her skin creasing, she remained in good shape and firm flesh. Not that Ime would see it that way, of course.

Alaya was well aware that Wasteland aristocrats had an instinctual disgust towards the signs of old age, most of them having come to associate it with the lowborn as a consequence of being raised by ageless and seemingly forever-young relatives. It was a self-reinforcing shame, as highborn visible aging tended to retreat from good society to maintain the illusion of agelessness through their discretion. Malicia's spymistress offered a short bow, her modest blue robes whispering against the floor as she did, and wordlessly headed for the seat to the empress' left as she had for decades. The other woman she had been awaiting took longer to arrive, and took a different route.

It was necessary, given that Malicia's current Black Knight was an ogre and so physically incapable of squeezing through most doors.

High Marshal Nim – raised above other marshals after coming into her Name – was a very deliberate individual. The eastern door had been heightened and broadened for her but even so the ogre opened it slowly, as if she were afraid of slamming it into the wall. The Black Knight lowered her head to pass the threshold and only straightened when she was under the high ceiling of the council room, her plain armour of dark steel plate pulling taut against her. She wore no helm, leaving bare two dark braids framing a

tanned face as the rest of her hair went down her back untied. Her large eyes were a pale brown that leaned into pink, and her face seemed pulled into a permanent frown that made her large nose even more prominent.

She looked like something of a brute, as all ogres did, but Malicia knew better. Amadeus, on one of their evenings drinking terrible wine together, had noted that while Grem One-Eye was likely the finest general in the Dread Empire the ogre was a closer match to him than Ranker by a significant margin. Nim inclined her head and chest in the approximation of a bow, taking her prepared enchanted steel seat at the end of table facing Malicia. If there were others the Black Knight would have been seated at the empress' right, as was customary, but there was no need for such pageantry when it was only the three of them. There would be no fourth: Malicia had not allowed the honour of the Warlock's seat to any of the mages serving her.

The empress opened the council herself, voice ringing out.

"We have word from Foramen," Dread Empress Malicia said. "The Confederation of the Grey Eyries was... emboldened by news of the Black Queen's coming. They have resumed their attacks against Foramen and High Lady Wither."

Nim grimaced, thick lips pulling at thicker skin. All expressions looked exaggerated on ogres, by virtue of their size. It often made them seem foolish or stupid, so most who left the Hall of Skulls learned to school their faces into neutrality to avoid the impression – and so now their kind was known as being inexpressive instead.

"That tangles up the entire south for us, Your Dread Majesty," the Black Knight said. "Wither won't move while the enemy is at her gate, and Kahtan will be looking to sink a knife in her back."

High Lady Takisha of Kahtan would no doubt phrase it differently, Malicia thought, but Nim was essentially correct. With Thalassina a blackened ruin and Foramen in goblin hands, Kahtan had become the last high seat in the hands of a Taghreb highborn and so incredibly influential among their people. High Lady Takisha was much more interested in putting that influence to use in reclaiming Foramen for one of her kin than fighting battles on Malicia's behalf, not that the empress had pushed hard for such contributions. Until recently, it had suited her for Kahtan to largely sit the war out: it lent credence to the perception of stalemate between Sepulchral and the Tower that had been the keystone of her diplomatic strategy. Malicia has bled Kahtan dry of gold and mages as recompense for the feet-dragging, too, both of which had been useful in pursuing her plans abroad.

"High Lady Takisha has called her vassals to Kahtan," Ime shared. "Most Taghreb nobles in Praes will be there, considering she's the last human high seat in the south. We could skip her and attempt to muster them directly when they're gathered."

"It would be hasty to attempt as much," Malicia said. "We're not intending on extended fighting against the Grand Alliance."

And once peace was made the empress would be able to use Takisha Muraqib's absence as a reason to draw heavily on her troops for the Empire's contribution to the war on Keter. It would weaken her significantly going forward, hammering down one of the last nails that might potentially stick up to challenge Malicia's authority in Praes.

"We can settle this without the Taghreb," the Black Knight calmly agreed. "The key is making sure the Black Queen doesn't end up backing Sepulchral for the Tower. That would be an alliance difficult to beat on the field."

"From what we've intercepted of their correspondence," Ime said, "it seems like the Grand Alliance is keeping High Lady Abreha at a distance. Not hostile, but hardly allied."

"That could change," Malicia said, "should we damage Foundling's armies too much. If Amadeus were there to back I could not fathom her choosing Sepulchral's candidature over his, but he remains in the wind. Incidents will have to be arranged to turn that distance into enmity."

And sometimes Alaya did wonder if that wasn't the very reason Amadeus was absent: so that nothing could coalesce around him too early. If he was not putting pieces into place without binding himself to them, getting forces in motion without himself needing to be at the helm. But if that was truly the case, where was he? Even now, with his old apprentice at the gates, there was no hint of a plot in sight. Malicia knew better than to believe a man like him would disappear quietly into obscurity. It was worrying, that even Ime's best efforts had not been enough to find his trail.

"Assuming Callow begins by linking up with the deserters in the Green Stretch, as is most probable, I'll have infiltrators in place by the time the Army of Callow begins marching north," Ime said. "Given the positions our people in Sepulchral's ranks, arranging those incidents is achievable."

"It won't be enough," the Black Knight said. "Foundling didn't fight half a dozen wars to roll over for the Tower at the first sign of trouble, Your Dread Majesty. We'll have to bloody her before she even considers terms."

"It will take more than that," Ime frankly said. "It's been personal for her since the Night of Knives. If she's not forced to choose between drastic consequences and dealing with us, it's my belief she will absolutely keep pushing."

Neither of the two looked at her, even though the so-called 'Night of Knives' had been ordered by Malicia personally. It'd had unfortunate long-term consequences, she would admit, but the notion had been sound at the time. It'd been only tangentially a reprisal for Foundling's assassination attempts of her in Keter, after all. The most important motives had all been political in nature. After securing the Dead King's aid to keep Procer in check, Malicia had believed that the last major loose end to handle was Callow. She'd had allies in the Free Cities and ways to collapse that alliance's coherence, meaning that the last potential territorial threat to Praes had been a resurgent Kingdom of Callow under Catherine Foundling.

Decapitating the small but skilled cadre of individuals that the young queen had been relying on to rule her realm and carry out her reforms had only been logical, and in that aspect worked exactly as intended. Unfortunately, instead of returning home and licking her wounds the Black Queen had instead disappeared for a year and re-emerged as high priestess of the drow with a set of fresh armies at her back. There had, in Alaya's opinion, been no way for her to really predict that. It had effectively set the balance of power in the other direction and begun a cascade of events that'd made Callow into the most influential member of the Grand Alliance, which had in turn forced the empress to implement drastic measures to compensate.

And it might have been dangerous, it might have been hard and Alaya had more than once hesitated, but her plans had borne fruit. Foundling was now here in Praes, on grounds Malicia had prepared for years and desperate enough to accept terms when she was brought to the table. Now Malicia only needed to walk the path a little further still and it would all fall into place – she was, in other words, in one of the single most perilous positions of her entire reign. The last inch to the finish line was always the most treacherous. Alaya would know, considering how many people she'd killed there.

"I do not disagree," Malicia finally said. "I naturally leave picking the battlefield entirely to you, High Marshal. All of the Tower's resources are opened to your office in the pursuit of bringing Foundling to the table."

"A great honour, Your Dread Majesty," the Black Knight said, bowing her head.

Ime seemed about to speak when she suddenly closed her mouth, and a heartbeat later there was a polite knock at the door. Malicia's spymistress glanced at her and the empress nodded permission. Ime

slipped out a few moments and Malicia made small talk with Nim about her eldest son, who had recently wed, until she returned. Both women gave the spymistress their full attention when she did.

"The Black Queen has arrived in Praes," Ime said, closing the door behind her.

Malicia smiled. Finally.

"How close to Satus did she gate out?" the Black Knight asked.

Ime's lips thinned.

"She is not in the Green Stretch at all, High Marshal," the spymistress said. "The word came from High Lord Sargon: she's less than a day's march away from *Wolof*."

Dread Empress Malicia went still. Wolof, which was on the other side of the empire from any sort of ally of Callow's. Wolof, whose high lord she held in her thrall. Wolof, where Malicia had laid seeds for a great victory – the filling of a fourth seat at this very table.

Someone had just made a mistake, and to Malicia's sudden disquiet she was not certain whether it had been her or the Black Queen.

IR

Welcome Back !! 😊

therealgridlock

Typo thread:

"Grief at the human condition was not burden she had to bear,"

>Either "not a burden" or "not the burden".

"No without reason was it an old saying in"

>"Not without reason"

"It was a self-reinforcing shame, as highborn visible aging tended to retreat from good society"

>I believe you meant "visibly aging" or "with visible aging" i lean towards the first.

"under the heigh ceiling of the council room,"

>I believe you mean "high ceiling" heigh is a word but not a kind of ceiling. Inb4 ceiling nerds correct me.

"Malicia has bled Kahtan dry of gold and mages"

>I believe this should be "had bled" it is past tense and "had" is used later in the sentence. Unless malicia is speaking in the third person about herself it doesn't make sense as present tense.

"Given the positions our people in Sepulchral's ranks,"

>"Positions of our people in" or "the positions our people in Sepulchral's ranks hold" missing a word either way, first is simpler and easier tbh.

As I am now current with the story, you can expect to see my typo thread near the beginning of every chapter's comments.

Also, for those of you who give a toss, go vote if you think it's worth it.

I think I voted for Worm once, but it's not something i care about, i just enjoy seeing the enjoyment of people in the comments, and the vote reminders.

pault52

Is Akua coming back to claim her throne?

Anomandris

Extremely plausible.

Alaya has guile in ruling, perhaps the most of anyone in Calernia, but conflict is a different beast; and she doesn't have the benefit of Black anymore.

Hot damn, it's got to get back to The Guide....

shikkarasu

Technically illegal. At the end of First Liesse, when Cat was blackmailing relatives of Akua's entourage, it was mentioned that anyone who has been dead cannot inherit seats of power like that. Since Akua is a type of undead now she cannot become Lady of Wolof.

I was today years old when I realised that she she may have transitioned to Diabolist, but only ceased to be the Heiress when she died.

agumentic

No, it is actually technically legal, specifically because Akua never quite died. Her body was destroyed, but her soul was separate from it, and thus did not suffer damage and was not brought back with necromancy. Cat was specifically blackmailing nobles with extracting the soul of their heirs and giving it to Black so he could threaten them with a valid claimant.

Shveiran

Uh. Actually... that check out. Good catch!

Though I really don't think Catherine's plans involve making a Praesi ruler of Akua. We are back to the whole recovering alcoholic argument, I'm afraid.

Gloweye

I know I'm a year late, but in Praes nobody gives a shit about what's legal. Instead, what matters is whether they can make it stick.

Levi Kalden

Undead technically aren't allowed inheritance

[Eau Richards](#)

I'm happy your Back EE, can't wait to read the new chapters

Benjamin

Ohohohoho.... Plots and schemes, plots and schemes always. The End is Nigh, the End is Night.

Raved Thrad

Chno Sve Noc!

ruduen

It's good to see things spinning up again. Time for the last (or not) book to start up.

And now, we first start off with the question – how many of Akua's old plots are still valid? After all, she had to have had plenty prior to her death.

And, as a refresher:

Vote!

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

Anomandris

Shoutout for EE's new book (wanted to post it on the vote link comment, sorry) which has the announcement in the next post – 2 chapters in and I am already hooked. Guide fans are definitely gonna love it...

[vernal.ancient](#)

BOOK VII LET'S GO!!!!!!

Enjoying the Prologue so far; Cordy watching Procer fall while Malicia thinks she's got everything coming together is a nice bit of mirroring. And then that last part where Cat comes out in Wolof turns it all on its head; suddenly, Malicia has reason to worry, and that gives Cordy reason to hope

Valor

"There had, in Alaya's opinion, been no way for her to really predict that."

You know what that's fair, actually. I wouldn't have guessed that either.

RoflCat

Definitely, who could predict 2 madlasses and a spooky specter going into drow territory planning to enslave them to return not only with a united drow army under their Goddesses, with one of said madlass at its helm, but also with a deal with the dwarves on top.

[signspace13](#)

Thing is she is taking the wrong lesson from it, she think LS that was a single anomaly, and her plans turned out fine-ish anyway. But fighting Catherine is a proccess of being constantly barraged with things outside your plans.

[308924810a](#)

Eh, she kind of predicted Catherine coming back with an army of Fae. She just seems to have assumed they would be essentially uncontrollable. And seems to have been more worried about Catherine coming back with an army that she would turn against Praes, or which she would indiscriminately use to war against everyone, rather than coming back with an army she would use to gain a dominant position in the Grand Alliance.

Tenthyr

Always forgot who Catherine formerly had in her thrall, it seems.

With someone like Akua Wolof is less a city and more a trove of Diabolic knowledge without compare.

Tenthyr

Oh, and I suppose Alaya expects to be choosing her Warlock.

I wonder if that was MEANT to be Akua.

grokkingstuff

Nah, Alaya wouldn't allow for the Diabolist (someone she funded at arm's length) to be held so close to her. Besides, Akua is dead and magicless – her spirit might still roam but she has yet to find an acceptable source of power

PapaBrogundy

I'm pretty sure Akua has magic. In the battle with the Tumult she scored a kill on part? of the gestalt with a ritual knife, the same knife she'd been planning to murder a fae with to regain magic. While we don't see her use magic on screen I think it's a safe bet.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not so sure. She expressed distaste towards getting power through murder and sullyng her childhood memories. Could go either way in this case.

beleester

Who rules Wolof currently? Both of Akua's parents are dead, so it must be someone we haven't seen yet.

That, or Malicia is taking a page from Akua's book and using a zombie Named. Akua's father was a really good sorcerer, right?

Darkening

It's some relative of Akua's. His soul was under Malicia's control and she used him to displace his aunt and they fought a civil war in Wolof and now he's super supportive of Malicia to maintain the legitimacy of his rule. So, a lot of Wolof's crazy stuff probably got used up in their brutal power struggle. As I recall he's kidnapping entire villages to replace all the citizens that died in the fight over the city.

RubberBandMan

Looks about what we knew from before, but with nice personal perspectives. Cordelia/Forgetful is a good ship, but Bard's

objects in motion plot is hard to derail. There are some who say Character is destiny, and Bard has the measure of cordelia's and DK's character. Neither are the type to bend because someone else predicted they would follow their own goals.

I think Malicia is making a mistake in thinking that Cat is here for a war, and not diplomatic shows of strength. But she's not going to be diplomatic with Malicia, she's going to give her the worst insult: Pretending she's not even there.

Cat wants daibolists and troops. Why would she need to talk to Malicia to get them? She'll just talk to the mages and troops directly. With the civil war, everyone is thinking very hard about which side they support, because Malicia wants them to. But now there's a third option, and Malicia probably can't stop cat from just murdering every high lord she gets her hands on (starting with Wolof) until she finds one willing to accept Grand Alliance support for their own position.

Malicia thinks that suddenly going 'I can give you everything you want, at the low low cost of taking it and doing what you want most to do with it, right now' will put Cat on the back foot and surprise her, and leave her without better options. But Cat is actually really good at getting armies to follow her, even her previous enemies. If Malicia can't get her armies fast enough to mess with Cat's armies, Cat can just recruit in a major city and leave before things get worse. One success will have others consider joining with her to stick a knife to malicia and the tower-claimant. it's not like the Preasi are likely to be fond of either of them, and would love to take deals that cut those two out of the loop.

dadycool

Cat: Yeah, I'll take some diabolists, maybe some Greenskins, and I'll definitely refill my supplies of Goblins and munitions. K, bye! (vanishes back into the Ways after basically swiping everything of value from Praes)

Malicia and everyone else "important": WTF? Hey, come back here! You haven't triggered any of my traps or plans!

Raved Thrad

Also Malicia: "How can I ensnare you in my elaborate traps and plots WHEN YOU WON'T PLAY THE GAME?!?"

Henry

So she's pretty much every dungeon Master ever

caoimhinh

And another thing, since Malicia has been prolonging the civil war and making it look like she is unable to beat Sepulchral, the rest of Praes is not gonna have a high impression of her, whereas Catherine comes with a legend of invincibility that has been able to halt the advance of Keter.

I find it funny how Malicia also thought that she could join the Grand Alliance and fight against Keter later, after she is the one that set the Dead King loose in the first place. Even in Praes, that has got to be some serious reason for mistrusting someone. Even Praesi dislike undead, and I doubt they would take Malicia's side if an alternative is offered.

Malicia really went down the Old Evil way the moment she didn't have Amadeus steering her from her most excessive impulses.

Matthew

This is the good stuff... straight into the veins.

Sea

Hoooooraaaaay!!!

antlan87

Alaya's mistake was forgetting that Catherine thrives in chaos and doing the unexpected.

Juff

Typo Thread:

on beautifully > on a beautifully
was not burden > was not a burden (or no burden)
No without reason > Not without reason
visible aging > visibly aging
heigh ceiling > high ceiling
kin that fighting > kin than fighting
Malicia has bled > Malicia had bled
positions our > positions of our

[B.J.M.S.](#)

FINALLY WE ARE BACK!!!!

[Adrian_V](#)

Another great start, i wonder what Cat and Akua are planning since its obvious Akua will have an important role here

[amit27592](#)

How...how did Amadeus know Cat will come to Wolof!
I mean he didn't know about Cat needing diabolists, even then, he and Hye are already at the outskirts of Wolof in the Epilogue.

Damn...it just got wayyy more interesting.

Anomandris

Daddy and Mommy always know...

Always.

jamesc9

Is there anything anywhere to suggest that Hye has had a child? And Kat has Daione colouring, as I recall.

[Liliet](#)

Huh. Maybe Cat came to Wolof because he's there?

hue hue

Because her friendly specter was the princess of Walof. Akua must know lots of the city secrets, it's kinda of obvious were she would teleport first

edrey

i give three days before wolof fall, the new warlock and the armies surrender and pass to her side. she also needs to solve the problem with the Night and wolof is full of secrets. no better place to appear and start the book.

[Adrian_V](#)

You forgot the completely necessary act of arson xD

caoimhinh

I think that is implicit in the phrase "three days before Wolof falls" XD

Frivolous

Lady Abigail Tanner. Funny that she chose that name. It's so common, and it's the profession she joined the army to flee.

I suspect Catherine gated to Wolof because of Akua. Sargon may not know all the secrets of Wolof that Akua does. There might be caches and hoards that are yet untouched.

Darkening

Aside from that, she probably knows the city wards inside and out and just immediately seizing one of the Great Cities is a hell of a power play to open up negotiations with various factions

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Wolof has never been conquered by an outside invader – even during the crusades. If Cat manages to take it quickly it'll be a huge power move. It'll make the other High Seats rethink their positions for sure.

Raved Thrad

If I'd been drinking anything when I read that name I'd have spewed it all over my monitor while laughing. Not only is Abigail *still* a general, but she's been ennobled, and with a very ironic name for her House, too! This all smacks of a joke that Abigail was just too timid (in her usual way with Catherine) to protest against.

Darkening

I mean, we saw on screen Abigail's reaction to Cat declaring her a noble. It was hilarious.

jamesc9

Of course she's still a general. Apart from the little problem of hating and fearing it, statistically she's a good one.

I don't know whether she's had the event yet, that Cat told her to expect, where she blunders and gets a large fraction of an army butchered.

[Burlyraven](#)

We're back, baby! Whoo!

Christian Oaks

Literally what I came here to post

[Tenmei](#)

Heck yeah, the best web novel is back in action!

Earl of Purple

Isn't Wolof the city closest to the Steppes and, therefore, the orcs? Can't imagine there being a lack of those willing to join the lady who led the first of their kind into a Name for a thousand years. Especially when the alternative is the army of

the people that, until recently, treated them as second class citizens, if they acknowledged orcs were people.

sengachi

I cheered upon being told this was back in business.

Also, ohhhhh yeah Malicia fucked up. In two huge ways.

1) She didn't realize the implications of Cat having access to Akua's shade for any possible war in the wasteland. She was planning on every major city being a radioactive hardpoint from hell. But Cat is going to go through Wolof like a hot knife through butter. Malicia's best hope here is honestly that Cat gets everything she wants from Wolof and leaves, and that the resulting destabilization isn't unrecoverable. (Hahaha, fat chance with Amadeus puttering around).

2) She -somehow- still hasn't realized Cat is riding a Protagonist's story. She's **perplexed** by Cat reacting to sudden friend and power base loss with a year long absence and power-up + ally making quest. But if she'd thought of Cat as a Hero, rather than a rival Villain, that would have been painfully obvious to her.

Malicia is dead six ways to Sunday. She made a **huge** mistake about the very nature of the war and she's using anti-Villain tactics against someone who's riding a Heroic narrative in all but Name. And adding in whatever Amadeus and Hye have been doing is just tossing goblin fire after the sharpers.

Liliet

Heroes are Alaya's blind spot, she never fought them.

sengachi

She's definitely fought them before, she's not blind to them. She just hasn't identified Cat as riding a heroic narrative.

Earl of Purple

She hasn't. Malicia has never left Praes*, and she's the background manipulator-type of Empress too, a political animal who fights political battles. Heroes don't usually fight political battles, at least not in Praes.

*She went to Callow at least once, but only when it was a province of the Dread Empire; and her meat-puppet envoys are disposable and she doesn't use them to socialise with, exactly. Besides, we only know of those in diplomatic meetings.

hakureireimu

Actually Malicia never having to deal with Heroes is
[WOE](#)

[sengachi](#)

Huh. Well my assumption from the canon we've seen would be that even if she's never been the one directly opposing them that she'd have picked *something* up from watching Amadeus do it.

caoimhinh

Yeah, she is savvy, but not by a lot.

It's like, she actually believed she would be fine from the Narrative repercussions of the Doomsday Weapon that Akua created if she merely held on to it instead of actively using it, for example.

Which Amadeus yelled her about, since that was stupid on her part if she actually believed that (plus, while she might have believed her reasoning, she was probably simply looking for excuses to justify her actions, when the real reason for it has already been stated to be because she felt that she needed to have a powerful weapon that only she could control, outside of Amadeus's reach).

[sengachi](#)

Oh, good point. It's been a while so I'd forgotten some of the ways in which it was foreshadowed that Malicia was never too savvy about how heroic narratives work.

[Liliet](#)

Evidently she wasn't watching – was too busy otherwise)=

These two are a tragedy

Andrew Smith

So a thought I had reading through those WOE, is the whole drow didn't get names because night is already sort of an investment of below so did cats name do the below tradition of backstabbing and worked to weaken night

[Liliet](#)

This is WoE. She hasn't fought them, it was Amadeus's job.

> Hakram, Prince among men:

> Is Malicia less story savvy than Black and Cat? (asking coz of the end of book 6 speech she gave)

> EE:

> Malicia is savvier than them in some ways, but has never

had to deal with heroes directly
> that is a blind spot

Raved Thrad

There's a PGtE fanfic (crossed over with Worm) with a similar idea. It has Taylor Hebert saying to Catherine, "Just because you're a villain doesn't mean you're not the hero of the story." 😊

[sengachi](#)

Mind telling me the title?

Raved Thrad

[Be Thou My Good](#)

Darkening

Is that the one where they summon her in marchford accidentally?

Raved Thrad

No, this one has her dumped in Calernia post-Golden Morning.

[origamiflame](#)

Welcome back!!! I've been looking at this date on my calendar for a while and am so ready, thanks for a fantastic prologue!

Shveiran

Yes! We are back!

Also... I really like you, Malicia. Honestly. You are an amazing, complex character who also happens to be more than clear sighted enough to justify your decades-long reign and you really, really don't get enough credit for that (mostly because Amadeus is there, but that's neither here nor there). But girl, I gotta say... you really don't have it under control here.

The first rule of war is to know your enemy, and know yourself. And... look, not foreseeing the Everdark arc? That's not on you. No one did. But here you go saying that Catherine not retreating to do damage control after you murdered her friends WHILE SHE WAS IN THE THROES OF WINTER was... unexpected?

I wouldn't have accused you of making a stupid move, because it was a crippling blow; but you thinking Catherine Foundling would go down with a whimper?

...No, Malicia, just no. You really don't get her, do you?

...And honestly, that's kind of strange. I mean, if you failed to read her, I'd expect you to fail to note the DIFFERENCES with Amadeus, not the similarities.

Regardless; you are making plans without understanding your enemy. And that is a fatal flaw in battle, let alone when using soft power and intrigue.

...Which is really all you have, when it comes down to it, because let's face it... the stuff of nightmares your council is not. Ime is an experienced spymistress, but she is nameless and Catherine has the Squire AND Akua Sahelian. I'm not saying Ime is outmatched, since this is her backyard, but there isn't that much of an edge.

Military, you are so outgunned it's not even funny. I don't want to sell the Legions short, but these Legions have, at best, fought Tasia's containment and Sepulcral's slow-paced civil war in the past decade. The army of Callow is hardened veterans that have fought nightmares day in and day out. You are outgunned in infantry, cavalry and priests. Sure, you may have more casters, but the opposition has Named Practitioners. Whatever you array against them is not gonna cut it.

And Nim... come on. I'm sure she is a very, very good tactician, and maybe she is even more than a match for Juniper, but it isn't Juniper she is going against, is it? Nim has no idea how many nasty tricks the Callowans learned in the past three years, because she was in Praes and Praes is not where the nightmares happened.

But more importantly, Nim is now Named... and she has no story. Who is she, in the grand scheme of things? She doesn't even have that strong a connection to Malicia.

I could point out she has no idea how story-fu works, but that's not even the problem: the problem is she has no weight even if she can find a lever that works.

The Black Queen will wipe the floor with her, if she ever bothers to take her on personally... I doubt Catherine is outgunned in Named here, and those that follow her do have both weight and experiences. Did Nim ever actually put down a Villain or a Hero? This is going to be brutal.

I'll be here with my cathartic pop-corns.

Sorry Malicia. It was a very good run, ain't no denying that. But you are going down hard.

caoimhin

Yep. Malicia is very delusional, and she keeps telling herself she is in control of things while she keeps procrastinating on solving problems merely because she is looking forward to gloating on the despair of her enemies when the prize is snatched when it seemed within their reach.

She has kept saying that she could have easily ended the civil war and crushed Abreha, but purposely kept it going because for some reason that was beneficial to her.

And alright, maybe it was like that at some point, but the more time passes the more unlikely that becomes, and currently it seems like it has spiraled out of her control and her capacity to predict.

She is screwed because of herself. Because arguably all of this mess was started by her, was kept going by her, and was escalated by her.

Shveiran

Uhm, I really feel like you are selling her short, here. I mean... yes, there is truth to what you say, but the world is on fire right now.

If we made a list of the Calernian Rulers that have things the most under control right now, I think the only reason Malicia wouldn't be on top is that both the Dead King and the King Under the Mountain.

But seriously... Levant is on fire, Procer is on fire, the League is on fire, the drows are on fire, Ashur is on fire, the Titanomachy is on fire, and Callow is most definitely on fire: Catherine has been ruling from abroad for over three years, invested heavily in the army and things were not ok when she left.

My point being, Malicia is on top of all things not Catherine Foundling, right now. Abreha, Kathan, the Steppes, the Eyres... she can fix all that more easily than anyone else can fix their messes.

As far as ruling goes, she is probably the one that achieved the most with less.

She is probably the best player, by far.

She just happens to not have a good handle on the Foundling situation and yeah, that's gonna topple her, and yeah, I'm going to enjoy it, but she really, really played well.

Making mistakes doesn't negate that.

I mean, I still think Black and Grem are amazing tacticians even if the invasion of Procer went how it did, you know?

caoimhinh

Hm, that wasn't really my point. I wasn't questioning her rulership.

You say "The world is on fire" and yeah, it is. And who set it aflame? Malicia.

The Dead King is the many large containers of oil that Malicia poked and spilled into Calernia before throwing a torch into it and pretend it wasn't her problem or fault.

And while Malicia *claims* that she can solve the issues with Abreha, Kathan, the Steppes, the Eyres, etc. and maybe she is right... she let the situations stagnate and then escalate, and because of that, now she is screwed. That was my point.

And as for Malicia being a skilled ruler, that is actually debatable.

Sure, she is a mastermind, a top-notch *politician* that excels at scheming and making people fight each other and creating political and economical traps for states and heads of states; but as far as we know, the enhancement and prosperity of the current Praes come from the social policies and cultural changes that were implemented in the last decades, (and a lot of genre-savviness necessary to not only survive but win against Narrative with Heroes and Villains going after you, as their very world works that way) and those came from Amadeus.

Then again, Amadeus is a great leader, a revolutionary and social reformist, but he is *not* a politician, so his approach would have ensured a bloody civil war again and would have needed to eradicate the nobility in the end just to set the grounds for the new policies to be implemented. And that's assuming he survived.

Amadeus and Malicia were such a great and successful team because they covered each other's blind spots and prevented each other's excesses.

Amadeus acted like a mad bloodhound to the nobility but he was the architect of the Reforms (which included military reforms and social reforms such as the integration of Greenskins into society as full-fledged citizens of Praes), while Malicia was necessary to keep the High Lords pinned against each other so they could not mess with the new policies implemented, which was something Amadeus would have never been able to accomplish on his own.

And it's not that Malicia just sucks at dealing with Catherine Foundling (everyone does), Malicia doomed herself because of her own actions due to Narrative, so even if Cat were to die or had been dead for years, Malicia's reign would still be at its end because of her own actions.

Shveiran

Again, yes, to an extent.

But you say that Malicia set the world on fire, and that implies a certain degree of fault.

And she is at fault, don't get me wrong.

But fault... fault is such a complicated thing.

She escalated a great deal by involving the Dead King, no two ways about it. And that was a huge gambit on her part, basically betting it all on the narrow outcome that the Crusade would beat back the Dead King BUT be too weak to keep attacking Praes.

But one could argue the world was already on fire: the west against the east, locked in bloody war to further Proceran ambitions and collapse any semblance of order in the east, not to mention restore the status quo of Callow vs Praes. And that happened because of Cordelia. In a very real sense, Malicia was brought to a desperate situation by the choices of others, and had to deal with the flames somehow.

One could counter that Cordelia first came to power – and inherited such a war-torn country – precisely because of Malicia's actions in the first place, bringing fault back around to her.

But a), that plan had Amadeus absolutely on board, and b)...

One could argue that the realities of Procer were such that only crippling it would make the Conquest possible, because the Principate would have intervened whether out of interest or out of fear. So in a sense, Amadeus and Malicia are not really at fault because there wasn't really a choice on the matter.

One could argue that it is always a damn choice to invade another nation, so yeah, they are very much at fault.

But one could consider that Callow and Praes are locked in an invaded-invader relationship since forever, ensure by the earthly necessities of the richest nation not starving, and commerce being at best a fragile thing between the two. So really, Malicia and Amadeus didn't have a meaningful choice because if they had abandoned every Callowan plan they would have been dethroned during the following starvation-caused civil war, and the newcomers would still have invaded Callow.

Reading your post, it seems (I might be wrong) that you think she is more at fault / a more direct cause of the current problem compared to everyone else, and I just don't... see it?

That's the beauty of the Guide, in my opinion, there is precious little Bad Guys, and most characters are just... stuck without good options, trying to do the best they can (including in figuring out what the best really is). And yeah, I want to strangle several of them, but... nearly all of them are understandable. Seeing through their eyes, it almost seems reasonable, what they choose.

And really... Malicia is not an exception. She played the cards she was given, and she played them well. But sometimes the hand is not quite good enough to make victory possible.

edrey

here i will give my grain of sand, from the narrative point of view, all this is about above and bellow, when the dwarfs started the planning of their conquest to the everdark, at least a century ago, so the Heavens sent the saint and the peregrime to clean the west of the continent, all with the goal to end Evil in calernia in a multi front attack. somethink like this. good rise in the west, evil rise in the east, the 10 crusade, Dk invade, K under invade the everdark, the sisters go to the surface without a guide and several decades later, Good is cornered so super Heroes, like the mirror Knight appear. however, Below plannig is different, since their direct intervention in the everdark, they had given up the age of wonder for the age of order, putting their pieces in place, like Cat. the three red letters were a signal, Praes is doomed, but could be in name or esence, Malicia is disposable. this about putting a new country of evil policy and equal to the K.Under also, in my opinion, Malicia fault was in her obsesione with control, if she had trusted Black she should have called him when no pattern of three had formed with white and killed akua before shit went down, half informing him of her plan maybe, but she wanted control and power of the weapon so this is what happend

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Great to have this back! Just FYI EE, the chapter and the new book aren't appearing in the table of contents.

I'm hoping the Praes arc will be a return to form for the Woe. The last couple of books had them make serious sacrifices and a lot of the victories felt bittersweet. Doubt this will be straightforward but in my black heart I'm hoping for a personal reaffirmation to each member and their way.

beleester

Place your bets, is the Angel corpse actually going to be used? Obviously it won't be detonated in Procer, but is it going to be set off somewhere else? In Arcadia? In the Hells? Put through a lakeomancy portal and dropped on Keter?

The story keeps reminding us that this weapon is on the table, that it might potentially get used despite being so destructive that it can't really be used without ending the story. And Tyrant

asked the question: "What happens when a Judgement-corpse is used, if Judgement is sealed?" which implies we could get an answer to that question. I get the impression that it's got a bigger role in the story than just Procer's nuclear deterrent.

Darkening

Shoved through into the serenity and detonated maybe. Maybe we'll get to see if you can actually destroy a hell lol.

Eduardo Perini Muniz

Thank you for the chapter, very good to see Catherine surprising everyone again.

laguz24

This really hasn't told us anything we don't already know. But it is good to be back.

hue hue

I bet that at least one Praes city will be burned down by globin fire

[308924810a](#)

and Catherine will protest that she didn't set that fire.

It'd also be interesting to see if Catherine is going to snatch those vassals out from under the remaining Tagrebi high lord because Malicia didn't.

Raved Thrad

"I didn't do it, nobody saw me do it, it was on fire already when I got here!" 🤪

Daniel E

Fourth seat the evil table, eh? Malicia said she wasn't giving it to any of the mages serving her. I wonder then if she's planning to fast-track a new Warlock who isn't currently serving here, but would.

Kage Lupus

Man, Malicia really does have a blindspot when it comes to what Amadeus might be planning. Right now she only sees two options for Cat: Support Sepulchral to take over the throne, or maybe to kick both of them out and take the throne for herself. But I think the real play here is Amadeus showing up and offering himself up as the new Dread Emperor, giving Cat a third option that she knows will support her against the Dead King and who is

also more willing to buy into the Liesse Accords. Not to mention that the Legions would be way more likely to back Amadeus if he went after the throne.

Malicia isn't considering it because she knows that Amadeus hates the idea of being a ruler and because she is still soft on him. But she is forgetting that the former Black Knight is the ultimate pragmatist and would have no problem sacrificing what he wanted in his quest to even the scales between Good and Evil. With Amadeus on the throne Praes is not just not a threat to the Grand Alliance, they could become an active member. Throwing their weight into that fight willingly would go a long way towards shifting the absolutely grim picture that this chapter painted of the fight against the Dead King.

All hail Dread Emperor Benevolent, I say.

mamm0nn

This story began with unfound rumours that Cat castrated an ogre in combat. Let's see if all of this was just an elaborate journey to that rumour becoming truth!

Shveiran

Considering Nim is female, that'd be quite a feat of martial skill.

[Liliet](#)

Trans people exist on Calernia, so it merely requires the right coincidence...

[Adrian_V](#)

Ok i will say right now: if by the end when they leave Wolof there hasn't been any bonfire either Idrani or Akua will burn a building just to screw with Cat xD

unLuckerII

Fix table of contents please.

Koi

Tbh a little disappointed her black knight wasn't Killian in full fae regalia with new mysterious powers and a lot of barbs to give Cat on who sacrificed the most lives. Tho I guess that would be a problematic story from Malicia's POV. Oh well, guess sometimes people just fade away, which has its own realism

[Liliet](#)

Killian was stationed in Twilight's Pass last we knew, Cat never lost track of her.

And we knew it would be Nim from the Epilogue.

Chapter 1: Debut

"The trick is to always invite an unrelated highborn idiot to every council. When you inevitably execute them, all the other highborn idiots will behave for the rest of the discussion."

– Dread Emperor Vindictive I

It was an impressive watchtower. All red brick and stone, three stories high and jutting out of the hills with an elegant silhouette. It'd fallen victim to that unfortunate Praesi tendency of having an open-sky spellcasting platform instead of a rooftop, but that was the most common practice in the Wasteland. The Sahelians had clearly shelled out good coin for this place, which made it all the more amusing that they'd not done the same for the force garrisoning it. The two dozen soldiers had prudently begun to leg it long before my first knights reached the bottom of the hills, so now it was my personal banner flying in the wind.

The phalange who'd pulled down the golden lion banner of the Sahelians and replaced it with the Sword and Crown was gone, leaving the four of us to look out at the view spread out below, and even though it was a thing of beauty I found myself growing irritated. No, not 'even though'. Because.

Wolof was beautiful, and it kind of pissed me off.

"This is ridiculous," I complained. "I read the reports, they had a goddamn demon loose in the streets just a few years ago."

"Ah, the old Wasteland special," Her Grace, Princess Vivienne of Callow, drawled.

I rolled my eye at her. Being a magnanimous soul, I was not bitter in the slightest that she could wear a nice pale blue dress with simple silver circlet over her milkman's braid instead of, you know, being stuck in full regalia and the Mantle of Woe. Truly, why would I envy anyone the privilege of not wearing a fucking cloak in the Wasteland's heat? It wasn't like I'd

seriously considered weaving a miracle that'd warm her with Night, much less almost done it twice.

I was a better person than that, and also she'd probably notice.

"That's actually civil war," Hakram noted. "Though considering the demon incident came at the end of a brutal war of succession, you're not entirely wrong."

Adjutant was standing on his prosthetic limbs comfortably, not needing to lean against the crenellation in the slightest, and like it often did the sight had my lips quirking into a satisfied smile. He wasn't going to be winning footraces anytime soon and I'd not send him into too rough a fight, but Hakram was far gone from the days of hissing pain and being wheelchair-bound. Masego's work on the arm and leg had been extraordinary, the shifting parts of steel and leather that mimicked muscles returning much of what he had lost to the tall orc. He no longer wore the whole set of burned plate he'd once been known by, instead keeping only the breastplate and the skirt, and his black hair was worn shorter than I'd seen it in years.

"You can never go wrong betting on civil war, when it comes to Praes," Vivienne conceded.

"Don't you two go pretending this is normal," I insisted. "I mean, look at the place!"

Almost half of Wolof's population had died when Sargon Sahelian rose up to overthrow his aunt, Lady Tasia, and the situation had gotten bad enough in there that the Legions of Terror had seen no choice but to forcefully invest the city. Something their doctrine specifically warned against attempting unless there was no other choice, when that city was a High Seat of Praes. Now, though? You'd never know unless you were told. Tall walls rose elegantly from the dusty ground, all sun-drenched stone and pale red brick, but from our position here atop a distant hill we could see a stretch of the city itself and it was *impressive*.

Wolof as it now stood had little to do with the village sprouted around a ritual site it'd supposedly grown out of. The modern city had actually shed those old grounds, part of them ending up as a handful of riverside villages that served as an informal port called Sinka and the rest now a closed compound to the north of the city that the locals called Zaman Ango: a great mass of mazes and pyramids hidden behind mud brick walls, ancient places of power that the Sahelians kept to themselves and their favourites. The actual city, surrounded by the greater walls, had instead been cut away at and remade until it was as glorious as its rulers believed themselves to be.

Broadly speaking, Wolof was a thin half-circle with the flatness facing north and two parts jutting out of said flatness: towering

noble palaces and the set of fortifications surrounding an aqueduct. Avenues criss-crossed the length of it like arteries, tying together gates and districts by a pleasing design, while that great aqueduct – much too ornate to be of Miezan make, with its stele-like pillars – swept down from a great hill to the north-east like a raised river of stone. Cisterns and smaller water funnels covered rooftops, spreading out like a web of stone and copper, while three-story houses on tall steps stood so close together their backs were as walls. Windows were curved and often thick pillars of stone jutted out of walls, like strange handholds for giants to climb.

It was the colour that staggered me, though. Wolof was said to be the greatest vault of magic in all of Praes, its libraries and spell repositories rival to the Tower's if not even greater, and unconsciously that'd made me think of it as dark and dreary. Black magic made into a city. Instead it was a riot of red and yellow, some paints fading but others biting fresh, and everywhere subtle lines of green were woven in. Rooftop gardens gathered around cisterns and pools were adorned with bright banners – green and yellow, orange and purple, cream and blue – hung to look like shivering walls. It was a gorgeous, thriving city that somehow made Laure look like half a hovel even after being half-razed by godsdamned demon of Madness. It was infuriating as it was impressive.

The last of us, correctly interpreting my vehemence as a polite and reasonable request of explanation, broke the almost melancholy she'd been in as she watched her childhood home in the distance.

"My cousin Sargon was made to study wards as a young man," Akua said. "For a time it was a fad with the great families, after Wekesa the Warlock came to prominence. Everyone fancied they would raise a mage to beat him at his own game."

I snorted. Yeah, they would. Never mind that Masego's father had been apprentice – and Apprentice – to the last Warlock as well as a frankly ridiculously talented man in a lot of regards. No doubt there'd been an expectation that gold and a noble pedigree would beat out any peasant mage's effort at anything.

"How'd that go?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Corpses and screaming, mostly," Akua noted. "Warding becomes a rather dangerous art when one reaches the heights of High Arcana."

"And this leads to the city looking pristine how?" Vivienne impatiently asked.

My successor, made a genuine princess by some truly inspired wrangling of Callowan law courtesy of Hakram, kept a civil tone

as she spoke. Much of the venom had gone out over the years, though Vivienne quite clearly despised the Doom of Liesse – who was not particularly above needling her when she could, I'd admit.

"Though Sargon was only ever a passable practitioner of the Art," Akua continued, "he *did* take to the paired engineering studies impressively. He was often called on for work in Zaman Ango because of this, and evidently his experiences there proved of use when rebuilding the city."

A grunt of acknowledgement was her only answer, while I allowed my own gaze to wander around.

It was a nice morning, I thought. The sun was warm, the wind lazy and the company more than decent. It was hard to enjoy nice mornings, though, when I knew the world was coming closer to toppling into the dark with every breath we took. Hasenbach was still keeping Procer together, but the cracks were spreading and I couldn't be sure how long it would be before the Principate collapsed. Still, at least the view was stunning. The watchtower the four of us stood on was maybe an hour's ride away from the city, set on few hilly slopes. South of Wolof, these were as close to heights as you could get for a dozen miles.

Behind us the Army of Callow and its auxiliaries were encamped in force, palisades already half-raised, while to the west the raging waters of the Upper Wasaliti roiled. The east led deeper into the Wasteland, into the lands of the closest families sworn to the Sahelians, while between us and the city there was nothing save roads and farmland. Not the kind of fields you'd see in Callow, though. Small hills of stratified stone and dust rose gently, with vividly green small 'valleys' filled with orchards or crops nestled in between. I couldn't see much wheat here, but sweet potatoes and cucumbers were common and I saw fruits that would be worth a fortune in Callow – lemons, dates and pineapples, to name just a few.

"Those small green nooks," I said, studying a few of the closer ones with a narrowed eye. "There's raised stones around them. Those aren't wards, though, are they?"

It'd be a frankly absurd amount of magic, if they were, and even people without the Gift or my sensitivities to power would have been able to feel it.

"Not exactly," Akua hedged. "It is the setting of a metaphysical boundary, but nothing as... decisive as a ward. It is meant to keep the magic of field rituals contained when they are used."

Right, I thought. They'd need to, otherwise the inefficiency of trying to make the ground cultivable would be a nightmare. The amount of wasted power would make the rituals nigh unusable, and

probably wreck the soil too. There was a reason magical healing was dangerous when you did it too much in the same place, and the principles involved here weren't all that different.

"You're saying all those gardens of green were made with blood?" Vivienne asked, sounding horrified.

"The grounds around Wolof are not so poor," Akua replied, shaking her head. "Perhaps a tenth of these are made fertile by ritual killing, on a good year. It is only when the weather spoils crops or the ground sickens that widespread sacrifices are required."

"And the Sahelians are said to have the finest rituals in Praes," Hakram gravelled. "Fewer deaths required and the ground is healed longer."

Akua laughed, the motion pleasing to watch in the conservatively cut but tightly fitting blue and orange dress she'd elected to wear as her form. As had become her habit she wore no jewels, even her black and orange cloak kept closed by a simple iron brooch.

"You can simply ask, Adjutant," she said. "It is true enough my kin's ritual rites are superior, though the mages of Kahtan yet make our attempts to manipulate the weather look like the work of fumbling children. My ancestors parlayed their advantage into expanded influence: we could usually afford to spare sacrifices as gifts, which in turn spared lords the costs of relying on the Tower instead."

As a young girl I would have been sickened to the bone by the thought of human sacrifice, and in truth part of me still was. Akua was talking about trading people like cattle – and the laws that restricted that fate to criminals only were rather recent to Praes – and consigning them to ugly deaths so magic could be squeezed out of their lifeblood. I'd sent too many people into the grinding gears of wars to be able to speak on that without the hypocrisy choking me, though. How many people would a Praesi lord kill like that, in a lifetime's span? A hundred, three hundred? I'd spent more of my people on skirmishes leading up to battles without batting an eye.

I could tell myself it was soldiers I'd spent and I'd not opened their throats like lambs headed for the spit, but that was just dressing up the truth. And so I stayed silent, did not allow my lips to curl in disgust. If a practice offended me, I ought to either act to end it or shut up. Empty condemnations served no purpose but patting yourself on the back. Establishing a solid grain trade between Praes and Callow would do more to kill the practice than the most convincing sermon in the history of sermons, and I fully intended on securing that by treaty before I left the Empire. Among other things. Praes had been left to

moulder for too long. That mess didn't look like it was going to fix itself, so all that was left was getting my hands dirty.

"Horrid," Vivienne flatly replied. "Though it seems to have bought loyalty. My Jacks believe none of High Lord Sargon's vassals have turned on him."

"Not openly, anyway," I muttered.

"Scribe was in agreement, before you sent her away with Archer," Hakram reminded me.

"Scribe lost control of the Eyes in the empire to Ime," I said. "She's got people around here, but she's not all-seeing."

The Webweaver, like every other kind of spider, needed a web to crawl on.

"In the wake of my mother's death and the financial difficulties that preceded it, I expect the Tower's spymistress to have sunk deep hooks in the region," Akua sighed. "My cousin proved to be a fine enough lord, but his seat was shattered and he had to spend time to consolidate power. The Eyes will not have missed the opportunity."

We weren't blind in the region, far from it, but it couldn't be denied the opposition had better eyes on most everything. That was fine: I'd gotten used to fighting that sort of war. The trick was to hit hard and move quicker than the enemy could follow.

"The real question is how many of his vassals will bring their armies if he calls," I said. "Only a third of his personal forces are with High Marshal Nim's field army, but that doesn't make what he's got here a large force. He'll need his lords if he wants to do more than hide behind his walls."

We believed Sargon Sahelian to have forces in the area of five thousand soldiers in the city and its outskirts, which in most cases would have been a pittance compared to the sixteen thousand Callowans and auxiliaries I'd brought with me. The trouble was that this wasn't a petty border fort, it was Wolof. If we tried to take that city by force our numbers might genuinely not be enough. High Seats were always full of nasty surprises, and this one would be worse than most.

"If it comes that, we'll have to take the city before they get here," Vivienne said.

"I do not recommend trying the Sererian Walls," Akua frankly replied. "Repairing their wards will have been my cousin's utmost priority after his ascension, it will be long done. His mages will hammer away at any force we send from behind their protection."

"Juniper doesn't believe we can take the city in fewer than six months," Hakram noted. "Even if we seize the fortress in the northern hills and cut off the aqueduct there, there are too many wells inside the walls. We would be betting on food running out instead of water if it comes to a siege."

Which would be quite the gamble, considering we had no supply lines of our own. We might end up hungry before the enemy did. My army was carrying its foodstuff with it, in the Legion manner, but aside from the rare convoy through the Twilight Ways there wouldn't be more coming. If we'd emerged further south, closer to the Blessed Isle, it might have been possible to arrange a supply line out of Callow. I'd chosen otherwise, though. First because down south was exactly where Malicia and Sepulchral wanted us, but also because I didn't want to set up that supply line in the first place. I couldn't really afford to, when I needed all that food and people headed west instead for the greater war still being waged there.

So instead we'd emptied granaries and grabbed everything we could before moving out east. In practice we had about six month's worth of food with us, though with the planned convoys we would *maybe* manage to stretch that to seven in a pinch. That would be enough if everything went according to plan, which pretty much meant it wasn't enough. So the Hellhound and I had gotten... inventive.

"We don't actually need to take the city," I said. "It's not what we're after here. There's going to be a battle before this campaign is over, but it won't be in Wolof unless something goes catastrophically wrong. We're here to *rob* Sargon Sahelian, not kill him."

Funny thing about Wolof, these days: it was probably the only High Seat in the whole of Praes that had a significant food surplus. After its losses during the war of succession its population had been massively lowered while its farmland remained largely untouched, and it'd kept trading heavily with Callow until relations broke. Throw in that the field force it'd had to feed had been relatively small – by virtue of large chunks of the Sahelian household troops either dying at Second Liesse or when the Fourteenth stormed the city – and the city was currently the Wasteland's undisputed queen when it came to the fullness of her granaries.

I wanted that grain to feed my army, so naturally I was going to trick a High Lord of Praes out of it.

"Banners are approaching," Vivienne sharply said.

I followed her gaze, eye narrowing as I found what she meant. Riders, maybe twenty of them, and a half dozen banners between them. I murmured a short prayer to the Crows before drawing on

Night, a sluggish handful of power answering my will after a moment. I sharpened my eyesight with it, wasting not a drop, and studied the approaching men. The golden lion of the Sahelians flew highest, standing out starkly on the elaborate banner of that line: an oval filled with curved swaths of black and red, stripes of small white teeth cutting through looking outwards. I saw a blue stork and purple dog flying lower, while the other banners were entirely patterning of colour.

"The stork and dog are the Bassa and the Chenoi," Akua explained after I shared. "The two closest houses to the east. They must have already had a presence in the city when we arrived."

So Sargon was sending us a message that he wasn't standing alone. I rather admired how quickly he'd gotten over the surprise of our arrival, considering my army had begun moving out of the gates south of Wolof barely an hour before dawn and it wasn't even noon. In a few hours he'd put together enough of a plan to feel comfortable sending an embassy to me, which I took as a healthy reminder that underestimating anyone who'd been able to claim and keep a High Seat of Praes was a good way to end up dead. I watched the riders approached and smiled, rolling my shoulder as if to limber it.

"Finally," I said. "Let's go see what your cousin has to say, Akua."

—

I waited for them at the top of the shallowest slope, easy to see from a distance.

Hakram and Vivienne stood at my right, Akua at my left and around us the Order of Broken Bells sat the saddle in utter silence. Like statues armoured in shining steel, lances raised like a whispered promise of violence. The envoys dismounted at the bottom of the hill. Not all of them, though, only three: two men and a woman, all Soninke and no older than thirty. Akua leaned closed to whisper in my ear.

"The man in the centre is Chikodi Sahelian," she said. "He is my cousin twice removed, but more closely related to Sargon. They were at odds as children."

I inclined my head in thanks, her breath still warm against my cheek. The other two were nobles too, going by the golden eyes, so at a guess I'd say they were from the Bassa and the Chenoi. The rest of the delegation stayed mounted like my knights, their horses well-disciplined and their colourful scale armour of fine make. Career soldiers, those, career killers. That was fine. I had those too, and mine were better. Chikodi Sahelian, a strikingly good-looking man almost as tall as Hakram, took the

lead of his party and rose halfway up the slope before offering a perfect courtly bow.

"This one humbly greets you, Queen of Callow," the noble said.

Ugh. I glanced at Akua, who looked amused. She'd only ever used formal Praesi diplomatic language with me the once and it'd been mostly to mock me, something I found myself belatedly grateful for. Not the mockery, the other thing. If he stuck to that the whole time this was going to be irritating.

"So, out of curiosity," I said, allowing a Laure drawl to slip into my voice. "What is it you *did* that made you so eminently expendable you got picked?"

Chikodi's face blanked. Ah, how nostalgic. As if him aggressively not giving me a reaction wasn't already one.

"This one begs your pardon, mighty one," Chikodi calmly said, "for he does not understand your meaning."

"He used to shove Sargon down the stairs in the Western Palace," Akua noted. "And spill ink on his parchments just before we had assignments due. There was also enmity between their fathers over the position of seneschal of Sinka, I believe."

"And Sargon sent him here over that, knowing there was a decent chance I'd just crack open his skull and rip out whatever I wanted to know?"

Chikodi's face did not change, though a slight tremor went up his leg. Akua elegantly shrugged.

"We are *Sahelians*, dearest," she reminded me.

"Cold," I replied, not without appreciation.

Small slights and all that. I'd never been one to mind a bit of petty retribution.

"Gods Below," Chikodi hoarsely said. "It is true. You really are Lady Akua returned, as the stories said."

The woman at his side, soft-skinned but sharp-eyed, let out a small hiss of surprise. I glanced at her hand and found a few fading motes of magic there, reluctantly impressed she'd been able to use even a minor spell without my noticing.

"And unbound," she said. "A shade, yet unbound."

The conversation might have unravelled further, if someone hadn't stepped in.

"You used a spell on one of us under truce banner," Vivienne said, tone even.

All three of them froze. It wasn't necessarily a breach of truce terms to do as much, in truth, but it was... toeing a line.

"Not on any of you, not directly," the woman began, but I interrupted with a snort.

"What an auspicious start," I said. "Fine, I'll let this one go."

She looked relieved for a moment, before smiling and bowing and thanks.

"Break your fingers," I casually said. "Five of them. Same hand."

The smile went away. A moment of silence passed, all eyes on me. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Well?" I asked.

Golden eyes sought me out and found not a speck of sympathy. You couldn't let Wasteland nobles get one of you, not even a small thing. And you could never just let it go without answer – they'd lose all respect for you immediately, see you as someone that could be crossed with impunity. The fingers would heal easy enough, she might even be able to do it herself if she was a fine enough mage. It was the pain that was the price I was asking. The pain and the humiliation. She looked through the rest of us and found no purchase, no willing intercessor, and her face stilled.

"As you say, Black Queen," the mage replied.

There was a sharp crack, as she began with her thumb and swallowed a scream. Granting her no further attention, I moved my gaze to a shaken Chikodi.

"You've got my attention," I said. "What does High Lord Sargon want?"

"The High Lord desires only peace and friendship, mighty one," Chikodi said. "And shares that this is the will of Her Dread Majesty herself, not merely his own wish."

"Huh," I replied, unimpressed. "That's quite polite of you, really, but I happen to have come over for a spot of war. Whether or not that involves me sacking your city and putting every Sahelian not in my service to the sword is up to Sargon, but I'll be honest – we're not looking good at the moment."

It was surprisingly cathartic to threaten Praesi nobility like this, I found. I really should do it more often.

"The Sererian Walls have never fallen," Chikodi evenly said.
"This would be-"

"They fell to the Legions, when your lord was raised," Adjutant interrupted.

Anger flickered on the nobleman's face, the most visible reaction so far. It took me a heartbeat to understand why he would likely be more offended at Hakram interrupting than the rest of us, and my fingers tightened around my staff when I did. Ah, Praesi. The remembrance of why I'd despised so many of them as young girl had begun to fade but here they were, so kindly restoring it for me.

"They have never fallen when the city was not at war with itself," Chikodi curtly said.

"Not quite as impressive a boast," I noted. "All right, this is beginning to turn into a waste of my time. What exactly is it that Sargon's offering as terms so I don't torch his home to teach the Tower a lesson?"

Chikodi's eyes moved to Akua, but she only faintly smiled. She had asked no mercy of me when it came to Wolof or her kin. I was still uncertain whether that was before she did not believe it would be needed or because she did not believe it deserved. I glanced at the mage, who had finished breaking her fingers, and coldly smiled. She flinched.

"High Lord Sargon requests nothing of you, mighty one," Chikodi said. "He only offers tokens of his friendship and esteem, as well as his help to achieve your intent in these lands."

"So a bribe," I said, rolling my eye. "Disappointing. Give the numbers on offer to Adjutant, I've been bored enough for a day."

I didn't even bother to give goodbyes before turning my back on him, limping away. It was hard to see properly under the helms so I couldn't be sure, but what little I could glimpse told me that more than a few of my knights were grinning like sharks under their helmet. For all that they looked dignified, they must have been enjoying seeing Praes being under the boot after keeping it on our throat for over half my life. Vivienne fell in at my side, abandoning the talks just as indifferently. We'd never had any intention of negotiating with the first envoy the High Lord sent us.

"We've given enough slights that Sargon should be livid when he hears," Vivienne said.

Which was good, because right now we wanted him angry.

"He's a Sahelian," I reluctantly said. "He won't be that easy to bait."

If he were, he'd be dead by now. I had little good to say of the way Praesi highborn raised their own, but I'd not deny that their methods were cruelly effective at weeding out those who could easily be manipulated.

"That's not necessarily a bad thing, Catherine. I know Juniper wants him goaded into an attack, but we don't need that to get what we want," Vivienne said. "So long as he believes you meant what you said, that we came for Wolof to burn out Malicia's allies, we have our foot in the door."

That had been the point of mistreating and mocking the delegation so much, after all: getting across the impression that was utterly uninterested in talks. Making sport of envoys was the sort of thing a half-mad warlord might do, if she really had come here to sack the city so that Malicia would lose her strongest northern supporter. Why bother to keep to the niceties when you were talking to torch fodder? What Juniper had wanted out of this was more military in nature. She was hoping the insults would either anger Sargon enough to risk a night attack on our camp or make him desperate enough that he resorted to one anyway to improve his bargaining position.

We'd be waiting for him if he did.

"If we catch him out while he's trying a sortie and wipe the attacking force, it only strengthens our hand," I said.

The first part of robbing someone was putting their knife at their throat. People were disinclined to part with gold and goods unless you made it clear they had something a lot more precious to lose. It was why the Army of Callow had crossed into Creation so early: I wanted our fortified camp built, finished with some time to spare for the men to rest. My soldiers wouldn't be getting a full night's sleep: under cover of dark, we would be going on the offensive.

"So long as we come out on top of that skirmish," Vivienne said. "If we lose, it's us who's pushed on the backfoot."

"Best we don't lose, then," I simply said.

Wasn't that always the way? Some of my officers still insisted that the Battle of Hainaut had been a victory, but I knew better. In a strategic sense, the battle had brought us to the ragged edge: a major defeat either here in Praes or on any Proceran front was now all it took for the house of cards to come tumbling down on our heads. Besides, there was another plan behind all this that my friend didn't know. One I was keeping closer to my chest: it had not been a mistake that Akua was there for the envoys to see, so verifiably unbound. I was dangling bait for someone to catch.

"More than you know," Vivienne said. "I got word from Archer before joining you with the delegation."

My limping steps stuttered to a stop.

"And?" I asked.

"They'll be here tonight," the blue-eyed princess said. "I expect losing a fight while they're watching would rather undermine our cause, so caution is in order."

I grinned. Splendid timing, this. A little too splendid to be natural, in this case it was no accident: I'd sent Archer and Scribe ahead counting on 'coincidence' ensuring they came back at the right time. I'd not yet known what the right time would be, but what did that matter? The day didn't matter, so long as I knew where the step was in the dance. I knew my grin had turned a tad savage, but I didn't mind. This had been overdue. Malicia had had herself a grand old time these last few years, lighting fires in all our backyards while she rode out the messes she caused hidden in the Tower. Safely away from the fray.

It was time I returned the favour and started lighting fires of my own.

Frivolous

Ah, a heist. But a heist over food? That can't be all of it, or the only thing Callow intends to steal from Wolof.

Hakram can't wear the entire suit of burned plate anymore because part of that burned plate covered his legs. It must be rather difficult to wear regular armor over a prosthetic. I do hope his meat leg is still armored, though.

Anomandris

Well, pride is a Praesi sin, after all. They can't help plot, think and then overthink. A heist just throws more oil on the flames in their heads.

I can't recall in which series, or even the exact wording of the quote, but it went something like "While your opponent is playing chess, the best strategy to win is to simply smash the chair over their head"

I believe you're thinking of Gen. Foundling's famed "box" strategy.

> "What Foundling does isn't thinking outside the box so much as stealing the box and hitting her opponents with it until they stop moving."

– Extract from "A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars", by Juniper of the Red Moon Clan

Burnsy

Might not be the same quote you're thinking of, but Blake from Wildbow's Pact web serial does mention the pigeon strategy at one point: 'knock over all the pieces, shit on the board, then strut about acting like you won.'

[onedollargum](#)

I think there's an equivalent metaphor in the Wandering Inn about flipping the board and punching your opponent in the face, but don't quote me on that. Worm also had a similar metaphor with "shaking the box", right?

James Grieves

"It admittedly took me a few years to make my peace with the fact that Lady Foundling's take on diplomacy is essentially to bring a bottle of cheap wine and a sword to the table, then remind the interlocutor that while the wine might be awful it is still arguably better than being stabbed." – Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara – Chapter 12: Double Down

and

"What Foundling does isn't thinking outside the box so much as stealing the box and hitting her opponents with it until they stop moving." – Extract from "A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars", by Juniper of the Red Moon Clan – Chapter 27: Callow's Plan

Daniel E

I was just thinking of those, lol.

hue hue

I prefer the use of an international ballistic missile over a simple chair

shikkarasu

It's not an uncommon joke, so you might have heard it anywhere, but the two that spring to mind:

"I've found that the best way to win at shatranj is usually to turn into a giant snake and tear my opponent's throat out."

– Dread Empress Vindictive III

"What Foundling does isn't thinking outside the box so much as stealing the box and hitting her opponents with it until they stop moving."

– Extract from "A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars", by Juniper of the Red Moon Clan

dadycoool

I think part of why he doesn't wear the leg part is because of how it would detract from the look of his half-dead body. He has to keep the Aesthetic, after all. It's why he didn't ever, ever cover any of his other prosthetics, those being his hands.

Cpt. Obvious

Hierophant also wanted to replace the skeletal "Dead Hand" at one point. Hakram however choose to keep the first hand that Masego had made while he still was the Apprentice even though he now said he could graft on a much better hand. I don't remember that we were told what the improvements were, but I figure it probably looked more normal. And as he was now known as Dead Hand changing it would not fit his image. But I also think there were some vanity involved. The skeletal hand was a hit amongst the orcs. The human soldiers were both intimidated and fascinated by it and the hand had by now featured in songs, stories and reports. If anything the stories about him and the hand probably strengthened his name.

Now with both an arm and a leg being replaced with magical prosthetics he's even more imposing even though he's not currently as physically dangerous as he used to be. But with more notoriety he gains even more traction with the stories that makes up the weave of Creation.

His prosthetics are probably as close to indestructible as Masego and whoever else was involved in making them were able to make them, and so need no armor. As for the rest of him he's currently not really ready for battle, and still learning to walk and fight. So I can see why he would forgo leg armor.

Wabbitking

Ah the things people will do for a proper fruit salad.

[308924810a](#)

Maybe also steal their magical knowledge, or their mages somehow? We keep hearing about how Wolofites are so much better at certain types of magic than everybody else.

Of course, now the question is whether Sargent will intuit that he's being baited, but decide to just hit so hard he breaks the trap, something that might be made achievable by mass conversion of those citizens he's stolen from elsewhere into summoning resources, and might be made worthwhile by asking Malicia to compensate and help recover after going above and beyond in fighting against the largest threat to her rule.

[308924810a](#)

D'oh.

'Steal their mages'

If they bring in drow who have magical talent to steal the Night off of Wolof's mages they can just steal the years of training in diabolism they've got, and many of their other mystical secrets besides.

Earl of Purple

I think Night subsumed the Gift, when the Empire Ever Dark fell. There are no drow mages, at least without Night.

[308924810a](#)

Why do you think that?

I'd been assuming that their lack of fielded mages was due to their terrible educational system, and how in general casting with Night is both the cultural fad and an easier skill to acquire.

If they genuinely have absolutely no mages then their type disadvantage against Demons might be insurmountable.

Earl of Purple

I'm honestly not entirely sure, but the way their magic-powered siege weapons now work through Night is one. Another is that Pascale, the Stalwart Apostle, had her Gift scoured out of her when the Gods granted her the ability to channel Light, and we have never seen anyone- with the exception of Masego, who cheats with ****Wrest****, and possibly Roland, who cheats with ****Confiscate**** and ****Use****- who is both a priest and a mage, implying there's some Creational law against stacking too many power sources into one person.

WuseMajor

Masego has mentioned before that magic apparently requires a specific philosophy and mindset. As such, trying to learn multiple fundamentally different types of magic apparently produces enough cognitive dissonance that you either can't do it, or you'll go mad from trying.

The Drow could certainly steal a lot of knowledge though, whether or not they can use it.

Konstantin von Karstein

I don't think there's any Drow with the Gift left, all became Night. On the other hand, Mighties could certainly create new secrets derived from magic.

caoimhinh

Obviously the real deeper reason is what is said in the last paragraph: Cat wants to be lighting fires of her own XD

[Adrian_V](#)

Lets open the betting pool with 100 imaginary \$ with less than 24h until arson!!

[sengachi](#)

I dunno, I could see food being all of it.

Praesi has a crippling food problem at the best of times, it's why they attack Callow. They've been cut off from Callow's grain supply for a few years and going through a freaking civil war. Even if the war itself has been on a low burn, simply keeping the armies involved mobilized must burn through food like no one's business.

If Catherine makes the Empire's food problem bad enough and then dangles the Callowan grain trade as a carrot, it could make Malicia come to the table no matter how much she hates it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

We already know from last book that she does want those diabolists.

WuseMajor

See.... I'm like 90% certain that Cat would only want to be facing Malicia over a negotiation table if she had a way to murder her via her link to whatever drone body she was using at the time.

Cat doesn't want to negotiate with Malicia. Cat wants to murder her and take her stuff.

Not just because Malicia has crossed Cat one too many times, but because Malicia's strengths are in plotting, planning, and talking. If Cat can keep everything at the military scale, she has a chance of taking over the country and getting what she needs. As soon as she has to face Malicia over a negotiation table, Malicia has the advantage again, and Malicia has repeatedly demonstrated that she really cannot be trusted once things reach the point of negotiations.

Or, well, that she can't be trusted, period. So, negotiating with her wouldn't have much point for three reasons.

I suspect that Malicia will try to sue for peace in fairly short order after she finds out what Cat does to this place, but I suspect that it will end up much like when Cat told Cordy that the Dead King was starting to move and Malicia will get to see what it looks like when the Long Price comes due.

...You know, Cat should name her sword the Long Price or something. Or, pack a bunch of goblinfire grenades in a bag labeled "the Long Price." Or give it to the legion that's heavy on sappers and military engineers as a cognomen. Something, because it's too good as a name not to use.

Victor?

First?!

Victor?

Ah NVM I was close though.

ruduen

Things have shot back to the top with the story resuming, but if you haven't, boost and help push things along!

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

So, what are the odds that Wolof ends on fire despite the stated goal of theft?

Anomandris

Considering how a verbose nature it's attractiveness was described in, I would say even odds...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Considering Catherine's history, I'd say better than that,
dadycoool

Wow, I hadn't realized how much I missed Cat being in Praes. I think this is the most fun she's had in literal years, maybe even since last she'd left the Wasteland. I love how their plan is basically saying "Look! We're here for a battle! Watch us massacre our way through the Empire, starting here!" and then stealing their food with minimal blood and vanishing. "It was time I returned the favour and started lighting fires of my own." Wow, Cat, way to hang the lampshade. Ooh, now that they're back in Praes, maybe the fire will be green again!

Odd

Considering that the folks returning with Archer are almost certainly goblin Matrons to be swayed into assistance by exquisite backstabbery, I'd say green fire is back on the menu.

Juff

Typo Thread:

comes that > comes to that
as young girl > as a young girl
that was utterly uninterested > that we were utterly uninterested
their knife at their throat (is this intentional, or should it be
"the knife")
natural, in > natural, but in

Anon

I wonder if we should start adding every time Catherine thinks "my eyes" to the typo thread?

At the start of the chapter she only rolled her "eye", but later on she uses plural..

Anon

to the east the raging waters > to the west*

therealgridlock

Typo thread!

"simple silver circlet over her milkman's braid"

>Almost certainly mean "milkmaid's braid" since it's been called that before and milkmen don't stereotypically have braided hair, or exist until after cars are invented.

"set on few hilly sloped."

>"Set on a few hilly slopes" my autocorrect tried to make it sloped as well, so it's easy to miss.

Didn't see any others, either fixed or too tired at 4 am to spot them.

edrey

here i have a theory after re-reading the novel so i want to give my grain of sand, from the narrative point of view, all this is about above, below and the game of balance, when the dwarfs started the planning of their conquest to the everdark, at least a century ago, the Heavens sent the saint and the peregrine to clean the west of the continent, all with the goal to end Evil in calernia in a multi front attack. something like this. good rise in the west, evil rise in the east, the 10 crusade, Dk invade, K under invade the everdark, the sisters go to the surface without a guide and several decades later, Good is cornered so super Heroes, like the mirror Knight appear (old version). however, Below plan is different, since their direct intervention in the everdark, they had given up the age of wonder for the age of order, putting their pieces in place for this, like triumphant, Cat, etc. this is about creating a new evil country equal to the K under, so all surface countries are done, but united, the accords are the first step in that and the fall of the Dk is the pivot to a new era.

this is just me, but after reading the chapter where black and Tarik talk, i couldn't help but think this theory.

[Burlyraven](#)

Still holding out on saying what exactly Vivienne's Name is, I see. I don't know whether I would be more frustrated or amused if it was a running joke of this arc.

gwennafran

EE did a Discord AMA last week where he was asked if Vivienne got a Name.

The reply was: "Vivienne does not currently have a Name"

Earl of Purple

Nobody at the time asked if she was a Claimant, however, which maybe was an oversight.

[Adrian_V](#)

Who was the girl Cat saved and when was that?

Earl of Purple

The girl in book one, right at the beginning, shortly before her first meeting with Amadeus.

[Adrian_V](#)

Huh, the way it was asking i was certain it was another, like she saved her after becoming famous xD

[Burlyraven](#)

Yeah, that doesn't sit right. If she's not at least a claimant, that's a full on retcon, and a kind of sketchy one at that.

Agent J

Hakram finagled literal bullshit to make her a legitimate Princess. If she doesn't start shining by book's end, I'll eat my boot.

medailyfun

she's probably Cat's daughter now

Raved Thrad

"You don't look much like a 'Black Princess' to me."
"Yeah, mom, I prefer to wear blue, myself."

Shequi

I'm a fan of the idea of her being "The Sun Princess", given her backstory to date.

Miley

I know it's been a while, but Vivienne not having a name is the whole *point* because of the terms Cat intends to put in place after the war. There's no good replacement that we know of to rule Callow and the whole idea is that Named individuals cannot hold positions of authority, because it gives them way too much access to cause widespread destruction.

Shveiran

It's not the whole point, it is A point.

Catherine would definitely prefer rulership being separated from Names, but she doesn't really have the power to impose that. Names stem from culture and it is unlikely culture will reject them if Calernia is saved by Named.

Maybe Vivienne will rule as Nameless, maybe a long-lost member of House Fairfax will pop up to claim the Name of Good King and Queen and Vivienne will have no choice but to embrace her own claim to keep the throne.

No matter what happens in Callow, it is probably a given that the Accords won't ban Named from ruling.

Praes? Levant? Heck, if by the end of the war First Under the Night isn't a Name among the drow I'll eat my hat.

jamesc9

Rule by non-named just became a lot more likely in the Levant.

Marco Boscolo

The Wheel of Time had a line that went:

"How do you fight someone smarter than yourself? The answer is simple. You make her think that you are sitting down across the table from her, ready to play her game. Then you punch her in the face as hard as you can."

[Adrian V](#)

I was also thinking it was that one

Raved Thrad

That last line pretty much confirms for me that Catherine is going to set something alight with goblinfire, even if only as a possible memorial to Robber.

I still can't believe the little shit is gone. Glory to the House of Lesser Footrest!

Golden Lark

I daresay that Callow has a very, very strong story backing them right now.

Praes has been stealing food from Callow for GENERATIONS. Even when they go to war, even when Callow doesn't lose, that imbalance still stands.

Now, Callow is coming to steal food from Praes. There is no narrative in the world strong enough to stop this balancing of the scales. As long as Cat keeps stealing Malicia's snacks, she is unstoppable.

[vernal.ancient](#)

Dear God I've missed Catherine's narration and social interactions. I have nothing deep to say about the chapter, just that I loved every second of it and can't wait for the next one

Alex K

Catherine is mugging someone again? Neat!

[boballab](#)

She is also about to embrace her inner pyromaniac as the last line appears to show. Make Fire Green Again!

Darkening

Just as long as she remembers, "Pillage, *then* burn."

Raved Thrad

"Kill them and take their stuff!"

[Adrian_V](#)

Mmm who else thinks the reason Akua was there is so they saw her unbound, like those nobles will spread the word and rumours will fly, things like she alied with Cat and came to be installed and replace her cousin, or even that she somehow is actually running the show (afterall how could a callowan become so powerfull instead of a praesi noble, is what they will be thinking).

The point being that Sargon is bound so to speak, i think Malicia had his soul or something like it? So the idea of Akua running the show would look much more attractive to them, and being praesi it won't be long before they plot away. This pressure will force Sargon to move to either eliminate her or just a show of force.

Darkening

I think he got his soul back from Malicia after he ousted his aunt.

Simpli

Excited to see the new book, ever amused at the Army of Callow continuing its Schrödinger State of being halfway between being an green mess with too few officers, one crushing catastrophe after another etc. and at the same time being able to always open new fronts and fights whenever Kat needs them half a world away.

Well~ At least I can hope that my favorite Character makes a good showing before she gets clobbered, but so far Malicia was build up quite well at least~

Miley

Counting on coincidence, I wonder which Hero she invited. Pilgrim is dead, White is busy, not a lot of the big Heroic Names are left. WK and MK are likely seeing large boosts in power to maintain the balance, or maybe there's a new Name in town. It could be the Bard, since Cat's now doing what Bard wanted all along, though how she tracked down the WB would be yet another mystery.

Shveiran

There is no way in Keter that Catherine is teaming up with the Bard.

The Bard is the most dangerous when she has access, you win by keeping her away from everyone. That was the mayor win out of the Arsenal mess: that nearly anyone doesn't talk to her, and that slows her down.

Abnaxis

Why do they need an aqueduct when there's a massive river right there?

Earl of Purple

It's easier to control the purity of an aqueduct, especially compared to a river. People live upstream, because people always do, and they're using the river in fishing, washing, and drinking... and also to flush away their waste. In addition, if Wolof were besieged, they no longer have access to the river, as there is now an enemy army in the way. If they have an aqueduct, they still get water. Plus, a river can always be dammed, or if there's a long enough drought it could dry up on its own.

Chapter 2: Perplex

"People are never easier to fool than when they believe they're fooling you."

– King Alistair Fairfax, the Fox

When was the last time I'd gone even six months without sleeping in a tent?

The thought amused more the more I thought about it. Elizabeth Alban, the ol' Queen of Blades herself, had conquered the closest thing there ever was to a Callowan empire before the Watch slit

her throat in her bed. My war record had led people to compare us on occasion – apparently there was a ballad and everything – but I actually figured I had more in common with her successor: Richard the Elder. They only started calling him the Elder in later histories, see, after he named his eldest son Richard as well. At the time they'd called him 'Richard Saddlesore'. The sobriquet was well-earned, considering he'd spent nearly all his reign moving from one side of his realm to another putting down rebellions.

Most everything the Queen of Blades had conquered west of the Whitecaps rose up the moment she died, and then Callowan nobles afraid of the growing power of the Albans promptly crowned his cousin the moment he crossed the mountains to handle said revolts. Praes had inevitably thrown its hat into the ring when they smelled blood, of course, never mind that they'd *just* gotten whipped back into the Wasteland under Regalia II. King Richard the Elder had actually done pretty well at staving off the collapse of his inherited 'empire' for a generation, only ceding independence to a few western territories, but by the time he'd died in his late thirties it'd been almost a decade since he'd last set foot in his own capital.

It'd been much shorter than that, for me, but I couldn't deny that I'd spent most of my reign as Queen of Callow outside my kingdom. There was always another fire to put out, wasn't there? I raised a small cup of wine in the air, drawing a raised eyebrow from Akua.

"You and me both, Richard," I muttered. "May we rest our buttocks in the next world."

There was a moment of silence.

"I'm not touching that," Vivienne decided.

Hakram, the sole loyal soul in this nest of traitors, raised his cup of water to match my toast and we drank. The four of us had convened in my tent, around the beautiful table that Indrani was still adding to. The last relief was parts of the Battle of Hainaut, and I was always careful to sit on the other side. Robber would have loved the sight of him striking a match and the Dead King's plans going up in flames, but I still couldn't look at the carved goblin face without my gut clenching. There were quite a few seats prepared, since even before most of us stayed for the upcoming war council we had a report to entertain. We couldn't really finalize our plans for the night without Masego's seal of approval.

The phalanges had notified us he'd returned through the Ways and Zeze wasn't the type to go wash and change before reporting, so I wasn't even halfway done with my cup by the time he swept in past my guards. His informal pupil followed, my waved hand stopping

the legionaries from taking issue with it, and I rolled my eye at Masego as he dropped himself into the seat across from me. The black robes he still wore had a subtle gold filigree, nowadays, but aside from that little of him had changed since he'd first become the Hierophant.

He still bore the same long braids inlaid with trinkets, wore the same black silk eyecloth over his burning glass eyes – nowadays a match to the one I wore over the eye the Hawk had taken from me – and wore the same comfortably worn old boots. The only change was that he'd begun to grow a beard: still glorified stubble, for now, but it rather suited his face and made him look older. A little like his father, actually, though the Warlock's beard had been much fuller. He looked tired but in a good mood, which I took as a good sign.

"The warding scheme has changed from what you outlined, Akua," Hierophant said.

Behind him, already forgot, his recent shadow was shuffling about on her feet awkwardly. The Apprentice, the young Ashuran mage known as Sapan, was coated in dust from head to toe and visibly exhausted. He'd probably made her do all the groundwork, I thought with a twinge of amusement. She looked hesitant to take a seat at my table without an explicit invitation, so I took pity on her and caught her eye before nodding in invitation. She bowed her head in thanks, sliding into a chair even as Masego helped himself to a pitcher of magically cooled water with equally magically obtained lemon quarters floating in it.

If you counted sending a cohort of goblins to empty High Lord Sargon's orchards as magic, anyway.

"It was a possibility, as I mentioned when we discussed the matter," Akua replied. "Yet the central patterns remained the same, I expect?"

Masego drank deep of his cup of water, filling it again almost immediately and not noticing Apprentice's hand inching halfway towards it before she drew back with a sigh.

"More or less," Masego agreed. "They mostly made changes to more strongly close off entry by Arcadia or the Ways. Recent modifications, about as old as the Arsenal. I imagine the city will have received the same work."

We'd expected as much, but it was useful to know both those options were off the table if it came to an assault on Wolof.

"You managed it anyway," I said, half a question.

Under the cloth he rolled his eyes at me.

"It was not that sophisticated a ward," Masego said. "Of course I cracked it, Catherine. It's done, and it was subtle enough they won't notice."

He mulled over things for a moment longer, dutiful in his attempt to make a report – though apparently not dutiful enough to ever read the text about how to give them the Legions had written. Not for lack of opportunity, since Juniper still had a scroll thrown into his tent at least once a month. I was pretty sure Indrani was making a pyramid.

"Sapan crawled uphill for half an hour under an illusion to place my artefact against the bottom of the wall," Hierophant noted. "She did well. She should get a raise."

Apprentice look startled and a little flattered, but there was one detail wrong there. I cleared my throat, but Hakram took one for the team and spoke up first.

"We don't actually pay her," Adjutant informed him.

Masego eyed me skeptically, brow rising.

"Is that slavery?" he asked. "We're against that, I feel. *I'm* against that."

"We're against slavery," I confirmed. "There's laws and everything."

He seemed pleased at me personally, like I actually had anything to do about that.

"Experience could be considered to be her compensation," Akua suggested.

Well, she *had* been Evil for decades. That was bound to leave marks.

"Spoken like someone who's never had to pay taxes in their damned life," I muttered under my breath.

Her lips quirked in a sly smile but she did not deign to answer my accusation. Gods, now I *had* to pay the girl otherwise fifteen-year-old me would have slit my throat over it. Mind you, that girl had never been one to mind a bit of knifing so it wasn't as strong a remonstrance as you'd think.

"We'll put aside a stipend for you on top of what the Grand Alliance already offers," I told Apprentice. "Your help in this is much appreciated, Sapan."

The dark-haired girl licked her lips, nervous, and nodded.

"May I – Your Majesty – could I... trade that for an hour a day with Lord Hierophant's grimoires?" she hesitantly asked.

I turned an eye to Masego, who actually looked rather charmed. He'd taken well to her since Hainaut, I suspected it was half the reason Hanno had agreed to lend her to us – the other half being Arthur had come along too and the two were thick as thieves.

"Keep her out of the dangerous stuff," I said.

"Of course," he immediately agreed, sounding surprised.

Ah, my mistake.

"Akua," I said, "please go with them and tell him what the dangerous stuff is."

"I feel like the situation has gone in somehow disastrously wrong, when I am called upon as the voice of sorcerous restraint," the golden-eyed shade noted, but she was still smiling.

"Tell me about it," I sighed.

She rose smoothly, offering me an ironic bow I rolled my eye at, and linked an arm with Masego as he did the same. They immediately started arguing in Mthethwa about what qualified as 'safe' – Zeze was insisting that the smiting spell was exactly that, so long as you kept it aimed at the enemy – while Sapan followed suit after affording me a deeper bow.

"I'll see to the stipend," Adjutant gravelled. "And extract a fuller report out of them while you two handle the war council."

Though the Night had been shattered and broken first by the Dead King's sorcery and then Hierophant's even harsher mercy, I had still been bound to the power in a deep and intimate way. Night came slower these days, and it was granted only by the will of the Sisters where once it had flown freely, but the mark of Sve Noc on my soul had not waned. I could still sense the coming of night like a sixth sense, through that strange instinct that was inhumanly accurate. And what I sensed told me that, as usual, Hakram was right. Nightfall was only two hours away, which meant we'd be cutting it close if we didn't split to attend to our duties.

"Much appreciated," I replied.

We rose to follow the others after scratching a few notes on parchment with his bone hand, sending in a few phalanges after him to prepare the tent for the war council. Juniper, as was her habit, came in half an hour early to make sure everything was to her tastes. I'd forgotten how tall she was, in our years

physically apart: she still had almost two feet on me, and she was built *thick*. With that grim, broad face and the sharp white fangs she made for an even more imposing sight than before now that we were older. Which made it all the more of a contrast when Aisha followed in behind her, the very picture of a quintessential Taghreb beauty with her carefully styled hair and elegant smile.

"Move the maps away from wine carafe," Juniper ordered a phalange in a growl. "Whose bright idea was that?"

"Good evening, Catherine," Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara greeted me.

The faint exasperation at her friend and superior's growling about was a worn and beloved habit, almost made a game between them from years of use.

"Aisha," I grinned back. "Juniper."

She turned to look at us, almost surprised, and nodded.

"Catherine, Vivienne," she curtly replied.

Vivienne was no more offended than I, the two of us well used to the Hellhound's ways. At times, though, it felt like she was being twice as hard as she used to be to make up for the way she'd been knocked out of the war for two years. Even now Aisha had told me that she visibly trembled when exhausted and slept uneasily at least a few nights a month. I wouldn't have placed her in command if she were any worse, even if she would likely never have forgiven me for that, but sometimes I was still... concerned. I kept it to myself, though. There was no doubt in my mind that she'd see it as an insult.

Our war council streamed in, either early or on time. General Zola Osei, Hune's successor who'd ended up as Juniper's second in the cobbled together First and Second Army we'd taken east – some had taken to calling it the Fifth as a jest. Grandmaster Brandon Talbot for the Order, and for the Dominion the two lordlings that Tariq had placed in my care before his death: Aquiline Osená and Razin Tanja. Named, too, though their seats were lesser ones. Alexis the Argent, the Silver Huntress, and Arthur Foundling with her. The Concocter didn't usually show to meetings like this, but the Barrow Sword did and seated himself by Vivienne. Ishaq would have been a good pick to leave out west, but I had a purpose for him here: it wasn't a coincidence I kept making him work with the Blood. The Grey Pilgrim had asked three boons of me, and I intended on seeing all of them through.

"Let's not waste time," Marshal Juniper of Callow began, voice rough. "Night's coming and we have a schedule to keep. We

received confirmation from Hierophant that the assault on Jinon is feasible, so we'll be going through with it."

Wolof was, in part, fed water by an aqueduct whose source was in the hills to the northeast of the city – the Jinon Hills. The place where the structure connected with the city walls was fortified, naturally, but so was the source in the hills that the water flowed from. A small but solid and heavily warded fortress had been raised there, over an underground basin where overflow could be directed to when heavy rains struck the aqueduct hard. There shouldn't be more than two or three hundred soldiers there but all my officers were in agreement that the fortress of Jinon – I'd yet to get a definitive answer on whether the hills were named after the fortress or the other way around – would be a nightmare to assault.

Tall and heavy walls, steep slopes all around and there was bound to be a heavy mage contingent garrisoned. We *could* take the fortress by assaulting the walls, there was no doubt about that. We had the numbers. But it would be very costly in casualties and we honestly couldn't afford that. We were already going to be starkly outnumbered in the latter parts of this campaign, throwing away lives on a hard assault would be sheer stupidity. We did need the place, though, in part to pressure Sargon and also because it was crucial to some other schemes I had in mind. Which was why I'd sat with Juniper and Pickler to plot Jinon's fall, and then sent Masego ahead to make sure what we intended was possible.

"I'll be leading that part of our offensive personally," I said. "For that purpose, I'll be taking two cohorts, our false guards and whatever warband Lady Aquiline deems fit to grant me."

Which, given how Levantine honour worked, would lead her to...

"I will go myself," Aquiline Osená replied without hesitation. "And take my slayers as retinue."

There we go, I thought. One of them with me to keep an eye on, and I'd pass off Razin to Hakram and the Barrow Sword.

"Good fit," I nodded, and she straightened her back some.

It was true, even if it wasn't the only reason she'd picked her most prestigious unit to take into battle with me. Levantines were surprisingly good at night work and surprise approaches, I'd found, which I really should have expected given that they spent most of their time raiding each other back in the Dominion.

"Taking Jinon will be tricky work," Juniper said. "It could go badly for us if Wolof tries a sortie at our back while it happens. Which is why we'll be drawing Sargon's attention elsewhere as that attack happens."

She tapped a finger on our map of Wolof and its outskirts, everyone's eyes following towards the west. It was the fishing villages by the shore of the Wasaliti she was indicating. Sinka, they were commonly called. There was no port proper for Wolof – nowhere near enough river trade to warrant it – so it was all very informal, with the Sahelians effectively owning one of the villages and keeping their own barges there while the rest of the villages were left in the hands of merchants and locals under the loose supervision of an appointed seneschal.

"The Sahelians no longer have a significant river fleet, courtesy of Princess Vivienne during the Liesse Rebellion," Juniper continued, which drew some laughs and cheers, "but Sinka is still a major asset to the city. It's a source of fish and lumber – they send people across to cut from the Greywood – and they import goods from further south through it. It will be a blow for them to lose the district. Fortunately, its defences are limited. General Zola, if you would?"

The dark-skinned woman cleared her throat.

"Our scouts have confirmed a garrison of around five hundred, most of them household troops," General Zola said. "The walls are mud brick and wood, and only three of the five villages have them. The barracks are reinforced, however, and built to be defended. There are also two watchtowers, so we can safely assume we will be seen approaching."

From the corner of my eye I saw Arthur leaning forward, itching to ask a question but holding himself back. Going wider, I saw incomprehension in the eyes of the Blood and even Ishaq. I raised a hand, stopping Zola before she could continue her briefing.

"Squire," I said. "Out with it."

His eyes widened for a moment, but he gathered himself quick.

"Why are you so sure we'll be seen, ma'am?" he asked the general. "It'll be under cover of dark and we have scrying countermeasures."

Ah, so that was it. I glanced at Zola, silently indicating I was going to cut in. I forgot, sometimes, that he was young. And that some of the people at this table had never truly had to consider what it would mean, going to war with Praesi.

"Aisha," I idly said, "would you please put your hand to a candle?"

A few people raised their voices to object in surprise and she gave me a dry look for the dramatics, but the tent went silent when she placed her hand over the open flame without so much as a

twitch. She drew it away after a few heartbeats, revealing to all smooth skin unmarred by burns.

"This is the Dread Empire of Praes," I flatly said. "We've gotten used to having the upper hand in sorcery, fighting out west, but leave that behind you: we're now facing the makers of all the spells we cribbed. It's in the blood here, Squire. If they don't have a spell then they'll have someone whose blood lets them see in the dark, or a monster that smells the wind, a pack of flying devils or a hundred other things. They'll see us coming, count on it. It's what they *do*."

I'd not meant it to, but I caught a certain amount of pride in the bearing of my Praesi officers after the tirade. I couldn't begrudge them that, I thought. Where you were born, is stayed with you. Good and bad. And in the end, I had not forgotten it was not only my countrymen who had joined the voices to the tune of *In Dread Crowned* when we marched on Dormer. There was a difference between hating the high lords of Praes and hating Praesi. I passed the proverbial baton back to Zola, who finished outlining what we knew of Sinka's defences as well as the plan of attack.

It was a fairly simple straightforward thrust with three thousand foot from the south, led by Vivienne but commanded by General Zola herself, with a screen of goblin skirmishers up front. Another two thousand foot, half of them Levantine and under the overall command of Razin Tanja, would move between the city and Sinka to dissuade a sortie. They'd have the two thousand horsemen of the Order of Broken Bells waiting in the wings for support. We'd keep a loose reserve of three thousand to throw at either battlefield, just in case. Afterwards it came to distributing Named, and there I took the lead again.

"The Silver Huntress will lend her skills to our skirmishers, though she will remain an independent command free to act as she sees fit," I laid out. "Squire and Apprentice will accompany Princess Vivienne, under her authority. The Barrow Sword will go with Lord Razin. The Hierophant will be accompanying me, and as usual the Concocter is not to be considered a combat asset."

Lady Alexis worked better when left alone when she wasn't the leader, I'd found. Not unlike Archer, though both would resent the comparison. As for the two young Named, this was as much about them keeping Vivienne's head on her neck as it was the other way around. Admittedly, when it came to Arthur I did have other motives. Getting him used to obeying my chosen successor was a necessary precaution, as far as I was concerned, especially now that the Jacks had established that a dynastic marriage was a dead end should he become a locus of opposition. Finding that out had been relatively simple: we'd sent one of the Jacks around his

age to make advances, he'd gently let her down by telling her he was not interested in women that way.

Adjutant had insisted I could have simply *asked*, but this was probably safer. The Squire might not easily figure out why he'd been asked the question, but he'd know people with stronger insights into Callow's politics who very much would.

"Expect surprises," Juniper gravelled, concluding the council. "We'll be surprising them too, but don't forget for the moment they had the same day to plan that we did."

I toasted to that, finally polishing the last of my wine, and to war we went.

—

I didn't like being blind, and I didn't mean in the losing-an-eye-sense.

Although, to be fair, I wasn't enamoured with that one either. What I meant, though was that I'd gotten used to being able to rely on Night to get a good view of the battlefield even as fights were happening. Unfortunately, drawing on that kind of power so close to mages of the calibre Wolof was going to field would be like unveiling a lantern in a black pit. Impossible to miss. Being robbed of that view was making me restless, though, especially since I was distinctive enough in appearance that I couldn't be on the front seat of either of the large ox-drawn wagons going up the smooth hillside path. It was pretty comfortable huddled out in the back, at least, except for the part where Masego was absolutely demolishing me at shatranj.

"How is everyone I know so good at this game?" I complained in a whisper, losing my last mage to a pin.

"I still play with Indrani regularly," Zeze informed me just as quietly. "Although you have always been terrible at this."

"I'm pretty widely known as a cunning schemer, Masego," I told him, a little affronted.

I sent a knight forward, hoping to at least make my death throes interesting. If I had to lose to him a fourth time in a row, someone was going to get killed.

"Yes," he happily acknowledged. "One who just lost her chancellor. Kingtip in three."

I cursed, and it was an awfully close thing when I decided against the cart suddenly shaking and toppling the board by happenstance. Damned thing was enchanted to stick anyway, I wouldn't be fooling anyone. The two of us were playing in the

dark, since it was as day to our common sum of exactly one meat eye. We were nestled between the kind of barrels and crates that Wolof used to send oil and foodstuffs up to Jinon, though naturally they were actually full of soldiers. Who I hoped we'd been whispering quietly enough had not all heard me getting repeatedly brutalized at shatranj by my own court wizard.

There were only twenty soldiers by wagon, since more would drag noticeably on the road, but we had more forces at hand. Some of them were even visible. Armours the Callowan treasury had kept since the Doom of Liesse had been brought out of the vaults and polished up, meaning that the thirty handpicked Soninke legionaries making up our drivers and foot escort of the wagons were in genuine Sahelian household armour. That ought to sell the illusion some, though I wouldn't be relying entirely on it. We had more forces out there in the hills, hidden. Part of it was a cohort of regulars we'd walked out of the Ways out of easy detection range and then snuck closer to the fortress, while the rest was Aquiline Osen's handpicked slayers. Two hundred of them.

Those moved around like shadows, probably the finest human sneaks I'd seen – not quite in the league of goblins, but close.

Our wagon began to slow and I cast a glance at Masego, whose eyes swivelled in their sockets. He nodded. We had arrived. As Hierophant began putting away the shatranj board I swallowed a groan of pain and began wiggling around until I had my elbows on a crate and could discreetly look out the front of the wagon. Sergeant Kadeem was a large and bulky man, enough so that I'd heard a few jokes about him being a dark-skinned orc, but he was deft with the reins. His family were travelling traders, apparently. Moving slightly to the side of him to get a better angle, I had my first close up look at the fortress of Jinon. Heavy stone blocks, I noted, granite that looked to have been fitted together without mortar.

No wonder Pickler had been adamant trebuchets wouldn't do much.

I studied the gatehouse that'd be our way in closely, as it was the key. Two squat bastions crowded a gate wide enough for a cart to pass and then some, pale yellow magelights hovering above it. There were two sets of gates, both thick wood barded with steel, but they were open: only the portcullis in front of them both was down. From above, the gatehouse rampart, I heard voices hailing us in Mthethwa. It was Captain Diara who answered them – we'd picked her because she was native to Wolof and cold-blooded by reputation – and she put irritation in her voice as she told them to hurry up so she could unload the goods and leave. Masego got closer to me and I glanced at him curiously.

"My amendment to the wards appears to be intact," Hierophant murmured.

I nodded. So far, so good. The guards above insisted there had been no planned supply run, which was true, but we'd thought ahead: Captain Diara waved around papers she informed them were proof, signed by her superior in the city. Hakram was a splendid forger and Akua had helped get the details right, should they actually bother to look at them. See, if we were infiltrating a Proceran fortress then the papers would be what they looked at. This was a Praesi fortress, though, so when the agitated guards went to get their office the man in question scoffed and ordered one of them to go tell a scrying mage to contact the city for confirmation.

This would be where the plan fell apart, if I hadn't brought Hierophant along.

We waited for some time, Masego's eyes on the sky, and eventually there was a subtle ripple of power as Hierophant **wrested** the scrying spell the slightest bit, pulling apart the magic so it failed. Thrice more they tried it, and Masego played it artfully: on the second try he let it pass through for a moment, severing the connection late. We were pretending that the city was under magical attack, that it was why the spells weren't working. Captain Diara, meanwhile, pretended to grow increasingly agitated. She asked for names, claimed she would speak to her relatives in the High Lord's service about this, cursed them for lazy incompetents. I was impressed, she was definitely getting a commendation. We'd been at this for more than half an hour now, so the officer who'd ordered scrying fell back on the tried and true method of all career soldiers: he kicked the problem up the ladder.

"Describe me the armour of the officer they went to get," I asked Masego.

He did, quietly, and my lips thinned. That was the fortress's commander, for sure. They'd not wasted time going to the top, then. The woman in question, who introduced herself to Captain Diara as Lady Semira, proved to be a calming presence. She ordered for soldiers to take position behind the portcullis and then told Diara to come forward alone with the papers proving she was truly here under orders. *So now we're putting Hakram's forgeries to the test*, I thought. Diara didn't hesitate, passing the papers before the portcullis closed anew and they were sent up to Lady Semira.

"These appear to be in order," Lady Semira said, looking down from above.

If I bent, I could make out a glimpse of her standing above. Tall and imperious, with eyes a hue between yellow and brown.

"Is there a particular reason, Captain Diara, that this run was not handled by Tabansi instead?" she asked.

I tensed.

"Didn't ask, my lady," Diara replied. "If it doesn't help me get back into bed, it's not my concern."

"So I see," Lady Semira replied, tone amused. "It will only be a moment, captain."

I breathed out. Had we gotten away with it?

"She is gesturing at soldiers," Masego told me, studying the scene with his eldritch eyes. "One just went towards the barracks. Others are being told to... head towards the gate?"

Evidently we had *not* gotten away with it. It was the second string to our bow that'd make or break this.

"Progress?" I quietly asked Hierophant.

"Not there yet," Masego replied.

Sighed. That meant there was only one thing for me to do. I cracked the side of my neck and dragged myself up.

"Signal me when the time comes," I asked him.

I dropped into the front seat next to Sergeant Kadeem, who hid his startlement well. I pulled the Mantle of Woe tight around me and went rifling through the pockets, finding my pipe with a little noise of satisfaction and unceremoniously beginning to stuff it with wakeleaf. I handed Kadeem a match and he gallantly struck it on his arm before lighting my pipe for me. Good man.

"Tell everyone to be ready to fight," I murmured around the rim. "Soon."

He froze then nodded, retreating into the back of the wagon and leaving me to pull at my pipe under the stare of the soldiers up on the rampart. I breathed in deep the of the acrid smoke, letting it sear my lungs before I spat it back out in a stream. Up there, behind the crenelation, Lady Semira was watching me through narrowed eyes as her fingers tightened around the stone until the knuckles paled. Even out east it seemed that my reputation preceded me.

"Black Queen," the commander greeted me, voice laudably even. "It seems we now dispense with the deceptions."

I shrugged.

"What was it that gave it away?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Captain Tabansi was publicly drowned last week, for having stolen Sahelian goods and sold them on the black market," Lady Semira said. "The entire garrison was made to watch."

Which, admittedly, would make it difficult to lead a supply run. Not impossible, mind you. This *was* Praes.

"That'd to it," I ruefully said.

If we'd had Scribe with us I might have heard of even a relatively minor incident like that, but I'd sent her off with Archer. It had paid off in other ways, but there were costs to everything.

"I am under orders to avoid fighting you if I can, Your Majesty," Lady Semira told me. "Your ploy was well-crafted, but it has failed. My soldiers are on the walls and my mages awake. I would invite you to withdraw, and offer my oath no attempt will be made to hinder your departure."

I smiled, because I knew something she didn't. When I'd sat with Pickler and Juniper to figure out how we might take Jinon as bloodlessly as we could, eventually we'd stumbled onto an interesting question: where did the shit go? Jinon had one source of water, and they couldn't foul it. It fed right into the aqueduct that Wolof used. So a pit under it? The fortress had existed for several centuries, though, it would have filled by now. If this were Callow it would be a matter of chamber pots and dumping them somewhere far enough the smell wouldn't reach the walls, but Wolof was *rich*. Nobles served in its garrison too, people not used to roughing it.

So instead they'd had built latrines, sophisticated little things that dumped their filth neatly outside the fortress into a series of pits.

"You're polite," I said, approvingly. "So let me make an offer back: if you and your garrison surrender, you will be treated under Callowan terms for prisoners. No mistreatment, regular meals and you'll be offered up at the first prisoner trade with your sworn lord."

It was Praesi who'd built the latrine, so of course it wasn't that simple. They were a paranoid bunch, Wastelanders. The latrines tunnels were too small for someone to crawl up and they were warded in case someone tried to send devils through instead. The Sahelians had, however, made a small mistake. I breathed in the smoke, the end of the pipe burning like a red eye in the dark, and when I breathed out I let the grey drift upwards. No wind, tonight, so it stayed around me like a crown of fumes.

"I do not deny your power, Black Queen," Lady Semira carefully said. "Yet the wards of this fortress are old and powerful. You

will not find them easy to batter down. And steel will not carry this day if your might cannot. I can only-"

A hand tapped my shoulder. Masego, giving me his signal. I smiled. I'd kept her talking long enough, baited enough soldiers to the walls.

"It's over," I interrupted. "You've lost."

Her face tightened with anger.

"Close the gates," Lady Semira ordered.

There was a long heartbeat of silence as nothing happened. Then I put fingers to my mouth and whistled, meeting her eyes. Barrels and crates cracked open, soldiers crawling out armed to the teeth, and out of the dark came marching the first of the two cohorts I'd brought. Aquiline and her slayers crept up the hill, still unseen. But the killing blow was something else entirely. There was a distant sound of cackling, and a heartbeat later the portcullis began rising to the vivid horror of the Sahelian soldiers manning the gate. The cohort of goblins I'd sent up the latrines had seized the most important room in the gatehouse, the one controlling the portcullis and gates. There would be no preventing our entry. To hammer that point home, Hierophant came out of the wagon to sit by my side and put an end to any hope of wards or sorcery stopping us.

See, the latrines were too small for *humans* to crawl up them. And the wards had been meant to stop devils going up, not goblins, because the Grey Eyries were on the other side of Praes and no Sahelian had ever had to defend this fortress against them. All it had taken to make my cohort's infiltration entirely unseen was Masego disabling the small part of the wards that would trigger an alarm if something large entered through the latrines, the kind of small detail that it would take an in-depth check of the wards to notice.

But, as this land of diabolists ought to know, the devil was in the details.

"Sleight of hand, Semira," I told my enemy, not unkindly. "If you're watching me, you're not watching where you should be."

I breathed in deep of the wakeleaf, then blew out one last breath.

"So," I said. "Are you going to surrender now, or do I need to... how did you put it again? Ah, yes."

I met her eyes with my own.

"*Batter you down*," I coldly said.

The possibility of violence hung in the air, thick as smoke, while the noblewoman weighed her chances. She eyed my forces once again, then finally grimaced.

"Jinon is yours, Black Queen," Lady Semira said.

Well, I thought as my men began cheering, *it's a small victory, but it's a start.*

Dave

first!

dadycoool

Hey, it worked this time.

Ash

Is that slavery? -> Isn't that slavery?

[Liliet](#)

Nah, Masego's voice is like that. He's asking for clarification, not making a rhetorical point.

Yunamed

It's good to see your comments on the story again.

shikkarasu

Indeed! Welcome back, Liliet.

Anomandris

"Experience could be considered to be her compensation," Akua suggested.

Well, she had been Evil for decades. That was bound to leave marks.

Well, that confirms it. Lawyers and Bankers are Evil, I guess?

The Litigator, anyone?

Blue Dragon

More likely the "Solicitor," "Attorney," or "Barrister." Could see "Litigate" as an aspect, though.

Anomandris

That would've been so OP against an invasion like DK's.

"And with her right to LITIGATE, she had stalled out the undead army for close to half a decade. Behind her Procer and the rest of Calernia continued to amass forces for the final push against the Unnamed Horror"

Joshua

Now I'm imagining this setting in the analog of the Gilded Age. An evil name like "The Cowardly Scab" who has aspects Segrogate, Undermine, and Capitalize.

Schumi23

Ooo I like this idea – so kinda a "The Gods Are Bastards" version set in this setting 2000 years later?

Wanderer

Consider one man is basically injunctioning the Choir of Judgement into at least a stalemate, and may even be gaining ground. After being basically obliterated.

Lawful can indeed be Evil.

jamesc9

"lawful can be evil"

Yes; with a margin for the moral status that you assign to the Choir of Judgement.

nick012000

It sounds like the wards wouldn't stop goblin-sized undead from crawling up the latrines, either. It's probably a good thing that Praes isn't fighting the Dead King right now!

caoimhinh

Well, they *did* have wards that would detect if something large passed through, which is what Masego disabled. Also, I think undead would trigger some of the stuff, due to being constructs filled with sorcery.

[Adrian_V](#)

Like caoimhinh said the wards would detect the magic signature of an undead, and they can alert to everything because otherwise every rat would trigger them. Or even insects

jamesc9

So a mass corpse explosion of insects might be worth exploring.

[sengachi](#)

Ahhhhh. It's good to be reading this again.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, it's like we're back in books 2 and 3 😁

Benjamin Huang

Ah yes, the ol' latrine trick. Feel sorry for any poor bugger who was using the loo whilst a cohort of angry armored armed greenies were crawling up his behind. You would think that praes would plan for goblin incursion tho. whatevs. good read, good plots, good story.

Earl of Purple

As it mentions, too far away. Wolof is at the foot of the Steppes, the northerly most city in Praes. The Grey Eyries, home to the goblin clans, are across the Soninke lands, the Wasteland, and the desert at the far south end of Praes. It's never had to worry about goblins, because unless they're in the Legions it's too far to travel.

[Adrian_V](#)

Ahh its always the shit that does you in....xD

Raved Thrad

I see what you did there.

[Adrian_V](#)

I regret nothing!! xD

dadycool

Wow, Cat. Way to treat your Goblins like shit.

This book is definitely shaping to be an amazing one. It was fun watching her dance around the western half of the continent for, what, an IRL year? More? But Praes is where she first cut her teeth, this is the environment that she grew up in, this is where she first learned what Real Power could be. This is home, in a way that even Laure isn't. The Prasi think they have the Home Field advantage, but they've only known her as Squire, with mere hundreds following her. Now she's the Black Queen, very soon to

be something so, so much more. None of them have any idea what's coming for them, least of all the woman that's been tossing Sharpers at her from atop her Tower for years. Now she's decided to actually fight back, and those who think themselves wolves are about to find out what it's like to be lambs.

Fayhem

> Wow, Cat. Way to treat your Goblins like shit.

On the contrary, shit goes DOWN the latrines. If anything she's treating them like the opposite of shit! Which does, technically, count as their bonus pay for the year.

[Burlyraven](#)

Wow, what a shitty plan. Worked beautifully, just as expected.

Also, I'm glad that Squire and Apprentice are still getting along. It means that Cat might actually survive being their tangential tutor in the short and long term, for reasons previously described and too long to copy here.

[boballab](#)

This is what always happens with plans when you finally meet the enemy...they go to shit.

Juff

Typo Thread:

more the more > me the more
already forgot > already forgotten
in invitation (might want to remove this to avoid repetition)
from wine carafe > from the wine carafe
born, is stayed > born, it stayed
enough had > enough that they had
slightest pit > slightest bit
Sighed. That > I sighed. That
"That'd to it," > "That'd do it,"

therealgridlock

Typo thread!

"We rose to follow the others after scratching a few notes on parchment with his bone hand, "

>"He rose" it would be our bone hand otherwise, and i don't think both of them have bone hands. You know, pronoun agreement.

"Move the maps away from wine carafe,"

>"Away from the wine carafe,"

"Where you were born, is stayed with you."

>"It stayed with you."

"From above, the gatehouse rampart, I hard voices hailing us in Mthethwa."

>"I heard voices" don't get me wrong, i hard about many things but I don't think I hard voices.

"so when the agitated guards went to get their office the man in question scoffed"

>"Went to get their officer" i don't think an office can scoff, or is a man.

"wrested the scrying spell the slightest pit,"

>"The slightest bit," don't worry, as a dyslexic i constantly get my b and p wrong.

"That'd to it," I ruefully said.

>"That'd do it,"

That'll do it.

Miley

I think this line sums up the chapter besr: "surprisingly good at night work and surprise approaches, "

Earl of Purple

For anyone who might be wondering why Aisha wasn't burnt by the candle, a very long time ago it was revealed her ancestors include djinn. It took me a moment to remember.

Darkening

Yeah, Taghreb in general were described as being fairly prolific about mixing magical creatures into their bloodlines to boost their magical ability.

Black Spiral Dancer

Awesome chapter.

Always love to see Masego interactions.

And always cool to remember how magic is so like programming code.

beleester

So, what's the goal in conquering Jinon? The obvious threat is to Wolof's water supply, which would be necessary for a siege, but we know that Cat doesn't actually want a siege, so what's the real goal?

Every time "water supply" is mentioned I start thinking about Still Waters. An undead plague would be too evil for Cat, but has anyone tried delivering other forms of sorcery via water supply? Or one of the Concocter's brews?

JRogue

I agree, I think it something to do with the Concocter. Cat specifically said she wanted to lose as few people as possible, so this might be that she is going to put everyone to sleep in some way. The Concocter puts something in the water supply that works under some specific condition. Put it in the water, wait 3 days, trigger the... whatever it is, and then just walk in having to only fight the things immune to these types of things. Devils will be a thing for sure, but with no one there to guide them it might be a lot easier.

Who knows tho, every time I think I have some scheme figured out, EE surprises me.

That Other Guy

Cat doesn't want to besiege Wolof any more than she wanted to besiege this outpost. She just needs a sharp enough knife at their throats that she can to the 'negotiation' stage quickly, just as she did here.

Once the bigwigs in Wolof recognise the threat that Cat will present to the city, they'll come parley, she'll get what she wants, then she and her merry team of ne'er-do-wells will be on their merry way.

Great to have more Practical Guide. Thanks, EE

'Ladi Williams

Yeah. What he said. He put it better than I did.

'Ladi Williams

I think taking Jinon is just to put the lord of Wolof on the back foot when they want to negotiate...he would think they are ready for a siege and serious business and so would be ready to part with more when they "rob" him off all they can. More like misdirection I think.

Cpt. Obvious

Thinking of what's been said about Wolof that probably isn't a good idea. I remember Akua talking about how the wards made the wall hard to breach and that even if they were to lay siege to the town they had food for probably at least six months and enough wells that water not being a problem. Add that any competent leader would recognize that the aqueduct feeding water into the town would be a tempting target for the hostile army, so scrying the troops at the well is probably done several times a day to make sure everything is OK. Get the wrong response and they plug up their end of the aqueduct.

Aduro9

Partial credit for following the Evil Overlord List.

2. My ventilation ducts will be too small to crawl through

Good work applying that to the latrines. Not so much forgetting that Catherine has goblins. Solid C- Effort.

[Liliet](#)

Hm.

> The Concocter didn't usually show to meetings like this, but the Barrow Sword did and seated himself by Hakram.

So did Hakram leave to debrief Masego in more detail or?...

'Ladi Williams

I saw that too and wanted to comment on it. I think it's a typo or EE forgot Hakram had been sent somewhere else.

Shveiran

I think Catherine and Hakram split to do different things before the military council, then both came to be a part of it.

[Liliet](#)

> We rose to follow the others after scratching a few notes on parchment with his bone hand, sending in a few phalanges after him to prepare the tent for the war council. Juniper, as was her habit, came in half an hour early to make sure everything was to her tastes.

The only period of time between them parting and the war council is while Juniper is there. Which is I guess half an hour?

Shveiran

> The only period of time between them parting and the war council is while Juniper is there. Which is I guess half an hour?

It's definitely unclear, but I think it's possible? Cat has to do something unspecified, Hakram needs to talk with Masego... it could be something short.

...Though I'm not sure why it was mentioned at all, come to think of it. Mhm.

Still, it's probably nothing.

[Liliet](#)

Well, I AM assuming it's not a hidden plot point, it's just unclear what was supposed to be happening in the end.

Frivolous

Still no word on Vivienne's Name or proof that she has or does not have a Name.

Disappointed, me.

peaksofblue

A friendly reminder what happened to Juniper, anyone? It evades me.

Loc

She had met Malicia. So she had the tendrils of Malicia's Speaking in her head, and was hit by that when Malicia suborned the Legions of Terror from Amadeus by activating those tendrils and marching them back to Praes to serve her rather than her upstart Black Knight. I think Juniper was able to stay out of that because she's not loyal to Praes any more, not really; she serves Queen Catherine of Callow, so instead of having her loyalties rewritten she was hit by headaches and mental attacks that resulted in fits and other unpleasantness.

– Thank Earl of Purple, who accidentally replied in the wrong thread.

Earl of Purple

Thank you for noticing, as I hadn't. I'll add now that Malicia can Speak non-verbally, and Akua mentions really early on that if an agent is in the same room as her, the Sahelians treated that agent as compromised.

Earl of Purple

She had met Malicia. So she had the tendrils of Malicia's Speaking in her head, and was hit by that when Malicia suborned the Legions of Terror from Amadeus by activating those tendrils and marching them back to Praes to serve her rather than her upstart Black Knight. I think Juniper was able to stay out of that because she's not loyal to Praes any more, not really; she serves Queen Catherine of Callow, so instead of having her loyalties rewritten she was hit by headaches and mental attacks that resulted in fits and other unpleasantness.

lenethren

First time I have seen time referred to as hours instead of bells.

Chapter 3: Wage

"I was privileged to receive audience with a shaman of the Red Shields clan, who after receiving gifts was willing to indulge a few of my questions. My attempts to understand the lay of her people's statecraft, however, were met with a simple laugh and the quote of a Kharsum proverb that translates as such: 'throw meat or be meat'."

– Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

Jinon fell to the Army of Callow at the price of twelve dead and five wounded.

Three wounded and two dead were of ours. One of the former was, I'd been told, a legionary from the regulars cohort who'd tripped going uphill and broken his foot. He was now being mercilessly mocked by the rest of his tenth, who had tried to get him officially commended for 'heroic injuries sustained in the line of duty'. I was giving it serious thought – laugh aside, playing along with this sort of thing tended to be good for morale. Most the corpses and wounds had taken place when my goblins infiltrated the fortress, silencing witnesses and taking the gatehouse. That left me to handle the two hundred and forty-three members of the Jinon garrison that had surrendered, a number that included seven minor nobles sworn to Wolof.

One of them was a branch Sahelian, their head mage, and she'd been trying to barricade herself in a fortified room when

Hierophant came and stomped out the notion by casually wresting her sorcery away from her. I'd left him to interrogate her and gone to supervise the movement of the prisoners instead. We'd made a gate into Twilight right outside the walls and we were herding the disarmed prisoners across by groups of twenty, into the tender waiting embrace of legionaries waiting on the other side. We'd be marching them straight into a warded prison pit that Juniper had ordered dug inside our camp, where the Jacks and the phalanges would begin interrogating them for news about the state of the city.

I was now leaning against stone on the same parapet Lady Semira had stood on when we'd talked, watching it unfold as I chatted with Captain Diara.

"- moved them to a freehold in the Green Stretch as soon as I could afford it," she told me, speaking of her parents. "My brother's still out east in one of the Bassa towns, I think, but we haven't talked in years."

"I hear it's good land down in the Stretch, so long as the levees don't break," I said.

"It is, but there are dangers. People were worried it was going to be trouble when you first took the throne, Your Majesty," Captain Diara admitted. "That's passed, of course. Now they know that even if comes to steel there won't be paladins knocking at the doors for 'tithes' and pointed questions about troop movements."

The Order of the White Hand were still considered heroes, back home, tragically destroyed by my father in the first stroke of the Conquest. The freeholders of the Green Stretch had been significantly less convinced of the heroism of said paladins, not without reason. Callow had been occupied by the Dread Empire for so long it was easy to forget that the Old Kingdom hadn't been saints. It'd not been worse than most nations out there, but it'd not been any better either.

"It's the Tower my dispute is with," I said. "It's the Tower I'll settle it with."

The captain slowly nodded, expression hard to read. Whatever she might have said was not to be, as Masego strode out of the stairway with his robes sweeping behind him. He looked in a fine mood, and I could smell the scent of power still on him. He was holding magic.

"Time for me to check on my sergeants," Captain Diara tactfully said. "It was an honour, Your Majesty."

"It was *my* honour to hear you harangue those poor bastards for half an hour," I replied with a smile. "See you around, captain."

She offered a salute to Hierophant as he passed, which he returned with an absent-minded nod before coming to stand at my side.

"Got anything good?" I asked.

"Several of the ciphers the Sahelians use when scrying," Masego said. "It will be of use when intercepting their communications."

"Cutting High Lord Sargon off from Malicia would be ideal," I admitted. "It'll be easier to force his hand that way."

Malicia had soulboxed him when she'd put him on the High Seat, which meant she could effectively torture him with impunity and at will, but that was the kind of tool she wouldn't use blindly. If he wasn't contradicting an explicit order from the Tower when he surrendered his granaries to us, the ruler of Wolof was a lot more likely to fold. There wasn't a lot I could threaten him that would be worse than what Malicia could do with half an hour and an incantation.

"It will do Sapan some good to study higher order mathematics," Hierophant mused. "I'll make her work on the ciphers with me."

"Surprised she doesn't know about those already," I said. "Ashurans are famous sailors and navigation's all about numbers and stars, way I hear it."

"She meant to be a healer, so what they taught her of mathematics at that academy in Ashur was insultingly limited," Masego said, sounding peeved. "Sabrathan sorcery encourages specialization, Catherine, as the knowledge overlap between its different disciplines is supposedly very limited."

I hummed in understanding. For all that Hierophant had always rather looked down on the sorcery the Thalassocracy of Ashur practiced, what I'd heard of it was rather impressive. They had finer healing mages than the Praesi and they could whip up winds and storms out of blue sky. Sabrathan magic did seem to have pretty stark limits on what could be done well with it, though, so I wasn't surprised Masego held it in such low esteem. He'd been raised to treat magic as something more than just a tool, a philosophical quest for the truth of Creation. There was little chance of him respecting people who, in his eyes, willingly chose to cripple themselves before even beginning that quest.

"Tell me how it pans out," I shrugged. "I'm curious how much she'll take to your teachings."

I was more curious if she was going to end up a long-term threat to people or places I cared about, to be honest, but Zeze enjoyed talking about his pupil and I enjoyed indulging him. While Masego cordially disliked teaching large groups, the way he had when I'd

asked him to make my Legion and later Army cadres into mages capable of battlefield ritual magic, he seemed to be relishing teaching a single highly skilled pupil. It was the kind of teaching he was likely most familiar with, I'd eventually realized. Just like Warlock had done with him.

"I will," he assured me. "Though none of this is why I came. You earlier mentioned intending to scry Juniper for news of how her warring went. Shall we, before I must release the magic I wrested?"

I'd actually figured it would be one of our mages I relied on for that, but if Zeze was volunteering I wasn't going to complain. And if this marked yet another instance of him keeping someone's magic in his hands just a little longer than was strictly necessary, well, part of loving someone was knowing when you needed to avert your eye.

"Please do," I replied.

It didn't take long to get a hold of my marshal even though the night's action was far from over, as she'd been expecting me. After the fortress was invested one of our mages had sent word that things had gone well, but not gotten much in exchange: the offensive had still been happening. After a few moments Aisha's face appeared in the mirror-like circle of magic that Masego had drawn in the air, offering me a smile before disappearing and being replaced with the Hellhound's thicker features.

"Warlord," she greeted me.

"Marshal," I replied. "How did the attack go?"

"We hold Sinka," Juniper said. "The garrison in the villages began to retreat after skirmishing against our vanguard and we caught fewer than fifty of them. We didn't get any trouble out of the people themselves, the seneschal fled after leaving orders to surrender without violence."

Huh. That was unusually caring, by Praesi standards. Most Wasteland nobles would have sent their people into the grinder without a second thought, thinking a few of my soldiers killed a fair trade for bleeding the populace of a port they no longer held. High Lord Sargon's orders, or the small rebellion of a decent man in a bad position? Hard to know.

"Any moves from Wolof?"

"They tried a sortie," Juniper acknowledged. "Two thousand household troops, with mage support and about a hundred *walin-falme* for vanguard. They hit our screening force head on and withdrew when the Order flanked them. They sacrificed the devils to eat the charge and retreated into the city."

"That looks like a straightforward blunder," I frowned. "Only two thousand? It's a large chunk of their forces, but they have to know we'd eat that on the field. Especially when we have cavalry and they don't."

My marshal looked pleased, licking her fangs in approbation.

"It was a pin," Juniper said. "They were tying down our screening force while they hit the men I sent to take Sinka. They waited until after the surrender, when we'd begun to split the force into the smaller garrisons we'll be leaving."

My brow rose. That implied they'd managed a night ambush on open grounds while we fielded goblins.

"They had illusions good enough we couldn't see through them?" I asked.

"The attackers were in the river," Juniper grimaced. "Deep enough our first sweep with mages didn't catch them. They had boats hidden on the far side of the Wasaliti under illusions and some kind of half-fish devil in the-"

She turned a moment, leaning towards someone I only dimly heard speak before nodding thanks.

"Sahelian sends word the devils are called *nikyana*, and that Wolof usually keeps a few contracts but nowhere as many as we saw tonight," the tall orc growled. "At least seven hundred of the bastards popped out of the river on our flanks and they would have caught us entirely by surprise without the Silver Huntress giving alarm. They don't use weapons but they're quick and strong, we lost almost a full cohort before we realized what was happening."

I winced. Caught out of formation, my legionaries would have had a hard time handling devils. Like with heavy horse, you needed thick ranks and spellfire to handle a charge of those.

"And bleeding us wasn't even the point of the attack," Juniper revealed.

My brow rose.

"They infiltrated a mage cadre with escorts to try to grab Vivienne in the chaos," Juniper said. "The Squire and the Apprentice drove them off, but apparently it was a close thing. The moment the grab failed the entire attack was called off and they retreated into the river."

I let out a low whistle. That'd actually been a sharp play from Sargon, assuming it really was the young lord's plan. Vivienne was one of the few people in my army I couldn't afford not to

bargain for, if she were taken prisoner. Should Sargon threaten to put her head on a pike unless I retreated, he would have me in a very tricky position.

"Total casualties?" I asked.

"Between Sinka and the plain, we lost three hundred and twelve," she said. "Cost them at least two hundred where Tanja held command on top of the forty and so we captured, so there's that, but they're keeping to standard Praesi tactics when it comes to soaking up casualties with devils."

Forty years ago, before the Reforms, orcs and goblins would have been right with the devils eating those Callowan blades, I thought. Bleeding so that their *bettors* wouldn't. Looking at the hard cast of my marshal's face, I suspected I wasn't the only one who'd thought that. I quickly went over the fall of Jinon for her and concluded with the prisoners now headed her way.

"Good news," Juniper said. "I have mages and the Huntress following the diabolists on the river. We'll try to hit them before they can retreat to Wolof."

"Take prisoners if you can," I said, "but our people come first."

I wanted diabolists, but I didn't need them *that* badly. A handful grabbed off the field weren't going to be enough to handle the Hellgates, I was going to need a genuine diplomatic concession to secure that many. Juniper nodded, offering me a crisp Legion salute before the spell died and the magic displaying her face dissipated. I rolled my shoulder, sighing. It was already a long night and it was still far from over. I turned to Masego.

"Assuming the prisoners are out, I'll need to help establish our own garrison here," I said. "Do you think you could check the wards for nasty surprises?"

The Concocter would be coming along later too, to see if my idea about how get into the city was feasible.

"I will," Hierophant said, burning eyes swivelling lazily in their sockets, "but I expect you'll have more pressing matters to attend to."

"Like?"

"Aunt Eudokia just walked through the gates," Masego said, "and she looks in a hurry."

—

Scribe looked both healthier than when I'd last seen her and deeply exhausted. It was the good kind of exhausted, though, the kind you got from putting all of yourself into something you

loved. Her back was straight and though as always my attention slid right off her – save for the same detail, the perennially ink-stained hands – I got a sense of vitality from her that she'd lacked when she had first reached out to me in Hainaut. I had come to believe that, more than anything, Scribe thrived on being useful. The cause didn't matter much, it was about stretching her abilities to the limit. In a way it was like Ranger's thirst for worthy fights, though neither woman would thank me for the comparison.

"Queen Catherine," she greeted me, shortly bowing.

"Scribe," I replied. "Pleasure to have you back with us, though I expected it would be back at the camp."

"There has been a change of plans," she said. "The envoys heard there would be an assault on Jinon, and they insisted on speaking with you here."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"They want to see if I'm strong enough to beard the Sahelians in their own backyard," I said.

Which was fair enough. Nobody liked backing a losing horse. Besides, orcs respected strength above all and this bunch was more opportunistic than most.

"How long until they're here?" I asked.

"A quarter hour at most," Scribe said. "I requested of Archer that she slow their passage through the Ways, but there are limits."

"She'll do what she can," I muttered.

My mind was already racing ahead, putting the pieces in place. I would have preferred having Vivienne here for this, since any deals made would be inherited by her, but that'd be hard to arrange. This wouldn't end with a single conversation anyway.

"Indeed," Scribe said. "A stark improvement on her predecessor in every regard, Archer."

I eyed the villainess amusedly. She'd been less than fond of Ranger even *before* the Lady of the Lake had put an arrow an inch away from her heart.

"Thanks for the heads up," I said.

"There is more," Scribe said. "I received word from my agents in the northeast: the fortress of Chagoro has fallen."

I took me a moment to place that name in my mental map of Praes. It was one of the main fortresses north of the High Seat of Okoro, an important strategic position since it was close to the two easiest passes into the Northern Steppes. It was the keystone of Okoro's northern defences, and supposedly one of the thornier fortresses in the region.

"Who holds it?" I frowned. "It is one of the Clans?"

High Lord Jaheem Niri was one of Malicia's supporters and his domain has been largely spared the depredations that most of Praes had suffered, so this was something of a surprise. The Niri could still field one of the largest private fighting forces in the Empire, and they wouldn't skimp on their northern defences when there was trouble in the Steppes. A surprise attack by supporters of Sepulchral, maybe?

"No one holds it," Scribe evenly said. "It is full of corpses."

My thoughts ground to a halt. What?

"My agents confirmed that the killing was done by blade, over the span of less than an hour, and that the assailants took no casualties," she continued.

"That's absurd," I bit out. "How many soldiers were there in that fortress, Scribe?"

"A little over a thousand," she replied.

"It can't be the Dead King," I frowned, "he's bound by oath to attack neither Praes nor Callow. Who could-"

I closed my eyes, abandoning the train of thought. It was a dead end, there were too many monsters out there in the wilds that I knew little about. Capacity for destruction, for killing, was not that uncommon. It would instead be much more useful to figure out who gained from Chagoro falling. I did, since it made Okoro a lot more vulnerable to attacks by the Clans, but this hadn't been a scheme of mine. Sepulchral benefitted as well, arguably, since anything weakening a backer of Malicia's helped her cause. She shouldn't have assets capable of something this flashy, though. Could the Empress herself have done it? She certainly had the ruthlessness, but I wasn't seeing a gain for her to make. Even of Jaheem Niri had been about to turn on her and she wanted him kept busy, there were better ways.

And this timing, I thought, it was *too* good.

I wanted to bring the Clans into the war, specifically for them to fall on the back of Malicia's northern allies, and the High Lord of Okoro had been a major obstacle in that regard. With a major gap in his defences, however, there were now chances that

orc clans would go raiding even if it had nothing to do with me whatsoever. And it was coming at a precisely the right time, while I was mauling Wolof with the Army of Callow and Malica's armies were still making their way up from down south. Okoro stood alone and with its pants down. That wasn't a coincidence, it was too precise for that, and-

"Black," I murmured. "*Black* did this."

"Ranger is powerful, but not so powerful as that," Scribe objected.

He shouldn't have the resources to pull off something like this, that much was true. It was pretty much just him and the Lady of the Lake out there, wasn't it? He'd not even picked up that nice army of deserters waiting for him in the Green Stretch – though I had my doubts about that, it seemed a little too convenient – and taken them in hand. Archer and Akua had believed, I recalled from the last time we'd discussed the matter in council, that he *couldn't* take up such a position. It would be a death trap to be visible, since Ranger was being hunted by the Emerald Swords. My thoughts stalled for a moment after that, as the realization sunk in, because surely he hadn't.

It was the kind of reckless play I would have made, nothing like the calculating and cold-blooded man who'd taught me. And yet.

"Eudokia," I quietly said. "Your agents, they said it was done with blades. Did they get a read on the number of assailants?"

"No," Scribe admitted. "All they could give me was that it looked like halfway through the fight soldiers began fleeing and they were run down to the last."

And that wasn't much, wasn't a confirmation, but it fit.

"Fuck me," I said. "He used Ranger as *bait*, Scribe. The Emerald Swords did this. He drew them there to clear out the fortress."

She blinked in surprise, then after a long moment sighed. Tellingly, she did not disagree. Silly me, how could I not have expected my father would find a way to turn his sole companion being hunted by ten of the most dangerous people on Calernia into an *advantage*. I'd come by my bastardry honestly, I shouldn't have forgot. And against my better judgement, I found my lips twitching. *Welcome to the war, Black. Finally making your move, are you?*

"So he wants the Clans going on the offensive too," I mused. "Interesting."

What exactly my father wanted and how he intended to achieve remained unclear to me, and likely would for some time. If he'd

wanted to speak with me, he would have by now. I cast a look at Scribe, who had remained silent as I thought.

"If you offered your services again," I said, "I'm not sure he would refuse you a second time."

I was under no illusions that our months of collaboration in any way trumped decades of close friendship. The Calamities had been tightly bound, before they began dropping dead.

"You worry of my loyalties," Scribe said.

"I don't," I said. "I know exactly where they lie. And it's not empty words when I say that there would be no rancour, should you-"

"I am not a good or pleasant woman, Catherine Foundling," Eudokia the Scribe said and for a heartbeat I saw brown eyes flashing with anger, set in a tanned and freckled face. "I do not pretend otherwise. I have little use for the morals you espouse or the causes you champion, save when they intersect with my own diversions."

"But," I said.

"But I am a woman of my word," Scribe said. "I believe in contracts and the worth of promises. Even should I decide to leave your side – and if I do it will not be like *this*, like some beaten dog crawling back to her master's feet – even then, I would no more reveal secrets learned in your service than I have revealed you those I learned in his."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. How much of that had been truth and how much of it a lie? It was the proportions that made the difference between poison and medicine.

I was going to be betrayed at least once before the month was out, but would Scribe make the second?

"I believe you," I lied, and we prepared for our guests.

—

Sometimes diplomacy was about making a point.

That was why, when five orcs passed through the gates of Jinon following Indrani, they stopped and stared at the sight awaiting them for a beat. It was not the throne that caught their eye, though shaping it out of roiling Night had lent it a certain imperious look. It wasn't the deadwood staff across my knees either, or crow-shaped shadows perched above my shoulders. It was the piles of arms and armour that filled the courtyard, glittering and ornate Praesi armaments spread around like a carpet of steel. Hundreds of swords and shields, of cuirasses and

helmets, and not a corpse anywhere around to be seen. Only steel and silence, with the moon high above and dark walls around us.

That was my point: *I took this fortress, and I did not even bleed for it.*

Archer was hiding a smile as she walked to us through the path. I had a small honour guard around me, a simple line of regulars, and though Hierophant was somewhere above on a parapet it was Scribe who stood behind me on my left. There were five seats awaiting, for the five orcs that the clans I'd reached out to had sent. Scribe whispered the names into my ear even as they approached, their body language wary. Asny of the Graven Bone Clan, taller than even Hakram and sister to her clan's chief. Valborg of the Stag-Crowned Clan, stooped but strong and eldest raid leader of the Stag-Crowned. Skarod Longaxe, the small but nimble husband to the chieftain of the Blackspear Clan. The twins Sigvin and Sigvun of the Split Tree Clan were the last, rumoured to both be shamans and shapeshifters.

It was the clan I needed on my side the least that'd sent two envoys, ironically enough. The Blackspears, the Graven Bone and the Stag-Crowned were the three largest southern clans, but that wasn't actually why I'd reached out to them. I had decent relations with the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves – Juniper and Hakram's clans – and they were among the great orc powers too. No, those three were here because Malicia had raised them over other orcs by ennobling their chiefs as Lords of the Steppe and empowering them to collect tribute on behalf of the Tower. The Split Tree twins, on the other hand, were here for slightly more complicated reasons.

Their clan was respected and well-connected, boasting a number of genuine spellcaster shamans, and it'd made the Split Tree Clan an important part of the alliance that'd formed around the Lords of the Steppes. Those three clans had... mixed reputations. The Split Tree being part of the alliance lent it respect it badly needed, considering when the Howling Wolves – currently the largest and most well-respected of the clans – were at the head of the alliance opposing the Lords of the Steppe. For me that meant having them on board was much to be preferred, if a bargain was to happen, but they weren't strictly required. Archer left their side after offering me a grin, coming to stand at my right. As the orcs approached a legionary came forward with a plate holding a large cut of salted pork and a mug of beer.

"I offer you meat and drink from my table," I spoke in Kharsum.

They each took a bite and a sip – I noted that the Blackspear envoy, Skarod Longaxe, went first – and only then did the wariness leave them. I'd just formally given them my hospitality, and though the custom was not as ironclad with orcs as it was with Taghreb it wasn't something to lightly cross.

"Good, we're done with the shite then," Asny of the Graven Bones grunted, spitting to the side. "Hail, Black Queen."

"Hail, Asny of the Graven Bones," I replied, faintly amused. "And to you all."

It got growls in answer, rough acknowledgement.

"You wanted to have talks, Black Queen," Skarod Longaxe said. "Talk, then. You're not the only one with a war on."

"That one's her war too, unless she's stopped trading weapons to our enemies," Valborg of the Stag-Crowned peevishly said.

I hadn't. Hakram's revision of the proposal that'd troubled me so much had proved viable in arming the clans we wanted armed in the Steppes. We'd taken to buying *dwarven* weapons through Mercantis, which while relatively low-quality were cheap and came in large crates. We traded them to friendly clans in the north for amber, furs and raw iron ore – which we then traded back to Mercantis at a mark up, making a small but tidy profit. We could sustain that trade route for years, considering Callow had nowhere enough trading barges to flood either market to the extent that prices would lower. The kind of diplomatic flourishes I'd gotten used to trotting out in Procer would be useless here, so instead I leaned into my natural instinct.

"You hitched your chariot to a dying horse," I bluntly told them. "It's time to cut loose before it drags you down with it."

Asny barked out a laugh.

"You've got guts, Queen, I'll give you that," she said. "But it's a little soon to make that claim, yeah? Tower's still standing."

"There are many who have fought Dread Empress Malicia, over the years," Sigvin of the Split Tree said, voice soft for all that she was built like barn door. "Some even had the better of her, for a time. None still remain."

I smiled at them, all teeth and malice.

"If my armies are at the gates of Ater, what use do I have for any of you?" I said. "When the Tower falls – and it will – what reason do I have to care about your enemies butchering every last one of you? If you're of no use to me, you're meat. Now is when you earn your worth."

Skarod Longaxe, envoy for the Blackspears, spat to the side on some soldier's shield.

"So you want us to kneel to your little favourites," he said. "Which will you crown, Black Queen, the Howling Wolves or the Red Shields?"

He bared his teeth, contemptuous.

"Will you make one of your servants chief first, just to tie it up neat?" he mocked. "Your own little puppet king in the Steppes, ready to do your bidding."

"Fuck that," Asny of the Graven Bones growled. "We're too many corpses deep in this feud to roll over for the Wolves."

"Little has been offered," Sigvun of the Split Tree Clan mildly said. "Much has been demanded."

I drummed fingers against the arm of my throne.

"Did I ever speak of surrendering to anyone?" I asked, irritated. "The next person to put words in my mouth will be made to swallow them."

"We're under hospitality," Skarod Longaxe harshly said.

"Hospitality keeps you your life, Longaxe, not your teeth," I replied.

Asny and Valborg laughed, though the twins looked unamused.

"Are these talks not meant to broke peace between us and the Howling Wolves, then?" Sigvin of the Split Tree asked.

"I'm here to broker a war," I said. "If you want to make peace with the Wolves, make peace with the Wolves. It's the business of the Clans, not Callow."

I stared them down from my throne, the crows stirring at my shoulders. The attention of the Sisters was not in the shards, leaving them as little more than creatures of shadow, but they still made an intimidating sight.

"What I want to know," I said, "is why you're fighting other orcs for snow and grass when you could be biting deep in the riches of Okoro instead."

"We didn't choose to feud," Skarod Longaxe snorted. "The Wolves did."

Bullshit. The Blackspears had wasted no time in using the powers Malicia granted them to try to extort all their neighbouring clans, they'd known it would come to war. They'd just figured they were going to win it.

"Okoro's belly is well-guarded," Sigvun of the Split Tree pointed out. "Much of its armies have remained north, its walls are tall and its devils many."

"We could take them," Asny of the Graven Bones scoffed. "If we didn't have to keep half our warriors home to fight off raids, we could smash through Okoro."

"The only thing you'd smash in Okoro is your skull on Chagoro's walls, pup," Valborg of the Stag-Crowned dismissed. "That fortress has broken more warbands than you've had lays."

"Chagoro," I calmly said, "has fallen."

Five pairs of eyes went to me, stillness hanging in the air like haze.

"There is nothing left between those walls save corpses," I said. "Do I now have your attention?"

"You lie," Skarod Longaxe accused.

I glanced at Scribe, who took a single step forward.

"It is the truth," she said. "My agents have confirmed it."

That took the wind out of Longaxe's sails. The Calamities weren't necessarily loved by orcs, but they were *respected*. Scribe putting her weight behind this wasn't something they'd dismiss. Hells, it was the reason I'd sent her with Archer into the Steppes in the first place. Indrani wasn't known up there, but the Calamities? That name still turned heads, even with most of them in the ground. It'd made them take me seriously enough to send envoys in the first place.

"That changes things," Valborg of the Stag-Crowned admitted, clicking her fangs in hesitation. "Without Chagoro in the way, we could make it past the fortress-lands."

"We can't mount a raid worth a goat's spit with the Wolves up our asses," Asny of the Graven Bones said.

"Okoro's wealth isn't worth kneeling to our enemies," Skarod Longaxe said, but his tone was more careful now.

Less hostile, I decided. He still didn't think much of me or my offer, but the thought of raiding Okoro's holdings appealed. As I'd thought it might.

"Offer truce," I said. "If you do, I will back you under threat of ending sale of arms."

"Truce isn't peace, but it won't be easy to swallow," Asny growled.

"Fight for a thousand years, for all I care," I snorted. "But do it *rich*. Do it with great herds of cattle, with granaries of grains and the wealth of a hundred tributes. Do it wielding

enchanted blades. You think you're the only ones who want to sink their teeth there? How many warriors from the Shields and the Wolves do you think would rather raid south than fight *you*?"

That was why I was sitting with these five instead of clans I could more easily have made allies of, in the end. I could back those friendly clans all I wanted, but it wouldn't cost Malicia anything. What did she care that there was a civil war in the Steppes, so long as it didn't spill over anywhere that mattered to her? It wouldn't conclude quickly enough to be a threat. I actually suspected she'd meant her raising of the Lords of the Steppes to trigger that very civil war, since if the orcs were fighting each other they weren't making trouble for her. She'd picked clans with bad reputations to raise, too, and that didn't look like a coincidence to me. They were the same clans that were almost guaranteed to have gone raiding at her unprotected back, were they not busy defending their noble titles.

If I turned these, though, not only would the betrayal be a public slap in her face but close to the full might of the Clans would come into play in the greater Praesi civil war.

"And if this truce was sought by your alliance," Sigvun of the Split Tree said, "you would support it?"

"I'll even send an envoy at the talks," I smiled, hiding my triumph.

I said it like it was a concession. Like it wasn't what I'd been after from the start. Like the moment the rest of them began to agree, as they hesitantly did, I'd not gotten exactly what I wanted: an army that, though it didn't know it yet, was going to march on Keter with the rest of us.

Now I just needed to figure out why my father had wanted this too, and if the two of us were at war too.

ruduen

Do the thing at topwebfiction!

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Is this our first view of non-army orcs? I imagine things will be more straightforward with them than with some of the more politically-minded places around, but I also suspect there's going to be another few rounds of Foundling Diplomacy before everything's settled enough to make for reliable assistance.

Miley

Speaking of Foundling diplomacy, we've seen her use fire, water, and [steel, wood and/or heart], but what about the other 2 classical elements?

Shveiran

You refer, of course, to the classic element of wine.

Black Spiral Dancer

May I point out that Steel and Wood are as different as fire and water. Also, Wood and Heart can be associated, Steel can't.

If we're looking at the 5 classical elements in eastern occultism, then if she has used Fire, Water, Steel and Wood, then that only leaves Earth. Wind isn't an element in their scheme. While we use the 4 directions, 4 elements, they use the pentagram (which, by the way, is much more complex – no wonder, they had millennia to wise it up through the ages in China).

Anomandris

The last line really raises an interesting question – similar armies, who would win? Black's tactics or Cat's chaos??

Also, I don't know why she thinks he's against her – isn't the castle falling perfectly in her interests? And the last they interacted, they weren't at bad terms (unlike the seperation before, you know, the one with the stabby stabby....)

Liliet

She doesn't THINK it's against her, she just CANNOT RULE IT OUT. Because he didn't come to personally speak with her, but did something behind her back that intersects with her plans. Not the first time he's helped her like this, but you can't be too careful.

Opposing Black has been Catherine's personal nightmare since Book 2! No matter how unlikely it's just too scary/upsetting a possibility for her to not consider.

Cat has a very particular brand of trust issues: she gathers her wits and confidence enough to make bold gambles, then immediately loses belief they'll work out. See Everdark, where she laid down her life to make an offer to the sisters and then was deeply and earnestly surprised when they took it; and see here, where she took Scribe in with a dismissal of any possibility of fighting Black because it was honestly statistically negligible and the Woe agreed with that analysis.

But now that she's not making wide sweeping gestures of trust she's back to the fear :3

Zach

Cat doesn't really do the chaos thing as much now; that was more the trademark of her younger self. She's quite the schemer now, even though she's not the elaborate planner Black is.

[Liliet](#)

It's the same way she's now surprised at Black doing a chaotic thing: the more assets you yourself have, the more chaos would damage THEM in a way you can't control. When Catherine was alone against the world with, like, two thousand people behind her (not even a spot on the map), she thrived in chaos, but now that most things around are HERS and she would like to keep them intact, she's going with deep planning, scheming and tight control.

Black's the same way: when he was operating on his own territory, with everything around him being assets he wanted to preserve for one reason or another, he went with tightly controlled schemes and cold plans. But when it's basically just him and Ranger, he descends into WHIRLING CHAOS because it'll definitely do more damage to opposition than himself, in absolute terms.

dadycool

I'm picturing Black looking around, counting his assets, realizing that the entire list in his mind is various facets and aspects of himself and Ranger, remembering what Cat was like when she was in "destroy everything around me" mode, and going "Fuck it."

[Liliet](#)

It was onscreen and it was even greater.

> Amadeus no longer had his armies, not even his personal guard – he had left them in Catherine's hands, requesting she safeguard them through the strife to come.

>

> Amadeus no longer had spies, or wealth or even the power of a Name. He had sent away Scribe, failed Captain and lost Warlock. Assassin was gone, if not from Creation then at least from his service.

>

> Alaya would see him kneeling, or forever gone from her sight.

>

> Tabula rasa, a blank slate. After so many decades, the

thought of it should have angered him. Should have brought in him despair and bitterness, for all he had built went up in smoke. Instead he felt relieved. Like a weight had been lifted from his shoulder. It was just him, now. Him and a sword and a plan against all the world. He looked up at the starry sky and laughed.

That Other Guy

Cat can't be too careful when dealing with Black. Yes, he's has a relatively soft spot for her, but he is also quite the cunning pragmatist. If a situation comes up where Cat needed to be knifed for his overall plan to succeed, I think he'd rely on her aversion to dying more than once a chapter and let her cop it. He wouldn't be keen on her taking the hit, but when his goals are at stake he's pretty good at setting aside excess sentimentality.

Besides, this is Praes. It's not that everyone is out to get you, it's just that you're only paranoid if you're wrong.

[Liliet](#)

On one hand, every single objective factor in the situation points to Cat being not only beneficial but utterly necessary to Amadeus's plans.

On the other hand, back at Second Liesse, every single objective factor in the situation pointed to Cat not being about to become a Black Knight, Amadeus alive being one of the most valuable assets she has, and killing him being quite possibly the MOST braindead thing she could do, strategically.

An actor who always makes the perfect play is predictable. An actor who... well, Amadeus. Not.

jamesc9

"An actor who always makes the perfect play is predictable. An actor who... well, Amadeus. Not."
"

In the same way that Cat said that Juniper was predictable, back in the War College.

[Liliet](#)

That's exactly what I was thinking about, yes!

naturalnuke

Thanks for the chapter! And knew it had to be the Emerald Swords somehow

Miley

Calling it now, Cat is going to take on several of them at once to save his ass, after whittling down their number a bit first.

dadycoool

Black: "Hmm, what should I give my little girl for a 'Welcome Home' present? Oh, I know! A gaping hole in her enemy's defenses! That'll cheer her up!"

Cat, rubbing her chin: "That bastard's up to something."

Cat, later to the envoys, getting ready to use her daddy's gift: "Look at how amazing I am. Bask in my glory. Not only am I so amazing, I speak your language, on multiple levels. I'm also four parallel universes ahead of you and my goals are beyond your understanding. There is no move you can make that will not benefit me in some way and I've already made certain that the move you Will make will be the one most beneficial to me."

Blazer5402

How sweet of Black. Dude just wants to help out his kid, and if he has to use his girlfriend as bait for a bunch of racist elves, so be it.

[*Liliet*](#)

Well, Black usually uses *himself* as bait. He finally decided to bring Ranger in on the hobby!

Raved Thrad

Ranger was probably pouting all the while. "What do you mean I can't kill even just one?!?"

[*Liliet*](#)

Counterpoint: Ranger was probably hysterically laughing the whole while.

Raved Thrad

"Did that elf actually manage to shove that guy's head up his ass? While he was still alive? Dammit, I *have* to **Learn** that!"

Sinead

Current crack theory: the climax of this arc will be a repeat of Malicia, Amadeus, and Cat high stake discussions like at Second Liesse. However this time, Cat makes the deciding move that manifests her Name and overshadows the others in contrast to the last meeting where she was just a pawn.

dadycoool

I wonder if she'll Command them somehow, cementing her role as a ruler of Named. Not only would that be badass, her doing the same to GP and WK by accident makes that even more likely.

[Liliet](#)

Bonus points if it's an exasperated "Shut up both of you!" again

dadycoool

Just casually, offhandedly silences the two most powerful, influential individuals in the East. She probably wouldn't notice it until seeing the looks on their faces, just like last time.

[Liliet](#)

YEP

[Liliet](#)

Malicia is stunned. Amadeus is beaming with joy and pride, mutely.

shikkarasu

I want to see him, having lost some of his composure along with his Name, excitedly try to mime "See that? I taught her that. That's my girl."

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

Sinead

This made me realise that Amadeus and Hye are really cases of 'opposite attract', aren't they? Amadeus is (within certain limits) good at saying "that individual has surpassed anything I can personally do.". It's probably why he's so good at using others to get things done that he cannot do. The reason the Conquest work is that he built up Praes to win the fight, then intertwined Callow with it so it wouldn't break. Unfortunately, the last gasp of the Old Tyrants broke those initial ties, though the Armies of Callow prove that those bonds are a lot more tenacious than what may previously have been thought. In any case, I would love it if there is such a Speaking scene for Amadeus to be completely against every other instance of Speaking and

rejoice in it. Especially if Cat's order is 'Stop talking.'" and he _laughs_ in absolute joy.

...And then there is Hye...

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Hye and Amadeus are VERY opposites attract. They're complementary in IMHO a very unhealthy way, though the way I read their relationship as strongly toxic is not the point here (tl;dr Amadeus cannot quite conceptualize the idea of "being taken advantage of" because he's already dedicating his entire life to other people, while Hye takes advantage of everything and everyone around her that she physically can not even reflexively but more like slime adhering to surfaces).

dadycool

So, we've got a Villain with a Self-Sacrificing Hero Complex paired with a woman who will sacrifice anything and anyone to benefit herself. This actually sounds a lot like a Sadist and Masochist getting in a relationship. Sure they're both very happy with the situation and they complement each other very well, but no one would ever call that healthy.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, BDSM relationships can be very happy and healthy.

Assuming the "top" isn't personally Hye Su.

(Also the BDSM part is pretty blatantly hinted at as what's actually happening, in canon.

> There was a lot to parse there, aside from a few revelations I could have done without – namely that watching Black turn into the Carrion Lord had got Ranger going and that she probably saw taking out knives as foreplay.

> "Mercy, Lady Ranger," he implored drily. "Spare my already aching bones. Anyhow, if you damage me too much you'll have no more use of me." [...]

"That'd be unfortunate," the dark-eyed woman admitted shamelessly. "I've finally gotten you trained up to my tastes."

...Yeah. I'm not one to begrudge people their kinks but Hye does not have the, uh... basic decency? it takes to have this kind of thing not be...)

[Liliet](#)

tl;dr don't insult healthy kink play by equating it with... the same scenario in real life lmao.

dadycoool

Right, right, you're right. I guess I internalized the kink-shaming that everyone loves to do to S&M and used Hye as an example, nevermind that she's an outlier and that any relationship at all is based on mutual care, including every single kink. In a healthy relationship, both members care for each other and want the other to be happy. If the couple gets pleasure out of one inflicting pain on the other, then as long as they both respect each other and their boundaries, it's fine.

It's just that we have here a really, REALLY bad example of a healthy relationship because they both take it to an unhealthy level. Malice! I just realized what I was searching for! It's not that she's sadistic, it's that she's maliciously sadistic. I honestly feel so much better with that realization.

shikkarasu

Not to cast stones, but genuinely curious, what makes you think Hye is taking advantage of Black? The whole relationship seemed like her following his lead until she thought it would become boring. Yes, she walked out as soon as the final battle was won, but Black always knew she would and didn't even hesitate to cross that line. They spent near 20 years together, but when their lives became incompatible they parted ways. 25 years later when circumstances changed? They got back together. Ranger not being the kind of person who can take tedium and Black not being the kind of person who can leave a project half finished, neither resenting the other for their choices.

Again, I may be missing some subtext, and I will definitely add it to my reread notes to look for clues.

[Liliet](#)

Ok so let's start from the part where they met when he was barely out of his teens, she became his mentor (in swordplay) and also was attracted to him from the start (Regard ends with her seeing

him for the first time), which several years later resulted in him trusting her completely and entirely. At which point she “trained him up to her tastes” (quote by her).

There’s Wekesa’s analysis of the relationship,

> It was the worst argument they’d ever had and for that Wekesa blamed Hye, who’d left before the Conquest even ended, and managed to both cut Amadeus to the bone and leave him twice in love as before with the same sentence when she walked away. The wound had never entirely healed, and Warlock had ended up paying the price in a deadbeat Ranger’s stead. Typical of her, really. She never stuck around for the parts that weren’t thrilling, the sometimes tedious spadework of building and maintaining relationships. Tikoloshe had noted it was almost mythically hypocritical of him to blame someone for having bonds only on their own terms, but his husband was wrong. He’d put in the work, afterwards, to clean up the mess between himself and his oldest friend in the world. Hye, on the other hand, simply made do with visitations every few years that Amadeus came back from split halfway between longing and chagrin. Wekesa’s long-standing reservations about that arrangement had been the tide that carried him closer to Alaya, as it happened.

There’s the fact that Amadeus, when asked what he likes about Ranger, says “she doesn’t need me”. Always a great sign of a healthy non-toxic relationship, right?

There’s the point in Book 3 where Hye meets Catherine.

> “I dislike ignoring my impulses,” Ranger said casually. “So do not suggest that again. He would be angry, if I killed you, but we’ve been angry before. It passes.”

There’s Scribe’s analyses that Amadeus always forgives people he loves for everything, which goes really well with the above.

> “He would have forgiven her, Catherine Foundling,” Scribe said. “Without ever using the word forgive, but that would be the truth of it nonetheless. No matter what any of us said, he’d make peace again.”

>

> “Look, I’m not going to argue he doesn’t get

sentimental on occasion," I said. "To be blunt, there's a reason I'm still breathing. But he's still Black. There's lines, and if he has to choose between the Praes he wants and Malicia-"

>

> "He'll try for both," Scribe said. "Offer her to be his Chancellor, another leap of faith: trusting that she would be one of the few who never schemed the death of their tyrant."

>

> "That would not be acceptable," I sharply said. "If she takes a ship across the Tyrian Sea I won't pursue, but she doesn't get to stay anywhere near the reins of power. Not after all the shit she's pulled. He knows that."

>

> "It won't matter. He always forgives," Scribe said, and under the calm tone that were and old and cold anger. "Malicia. Ranger. Even Wekesa, who spurned one of the few ways the Empire could be corrected without steel in hand out of sheer petty apathy. He always forgives them and takes up the work instead. It will kill him, Catherine. It has been killing him for years, but this once he might as well slit his own throat. I will not have it."

We have Amadeus's overall amazing personality, where he considers himself completely expendable and also believes love is never a weakness and calls Ranger the love of his life.

We have what we know about Hye, who "dislikes ignoring her impulses" and thinks watching children in her care beat each other bloody for status and her approval is amusing and great.

This relationship is *kisses fingers* the
wooooooorst

shikkarasu

Fair points all 'round. I guess I fell into the same trap as Maddie and read those bits generously. Put together it does not paint a very good picture of Hye at all.

Konstantin von Karstein

Did Hanno get affected too?

dadycool

Pretty sure. Can't remember what chapter it was, otherwise I'd go verify.

Liliet

Well, he already wasn't talking, I think. Let me check.b

> "Shut up," I Spoke.

>

> With a snap their mouths closed, like puppets whose strings had been pulled. I felt the gazes of both heroes in the tent move to me in surprise, which surprised me in turn. The Pilgrim, at least, should have known I could now Speak again. I had disciplined the Silver Huntress using the talent. Yet after a glance their way, I saw that it was not the Speaking itself that'd startled. His mouth had wavered. Just for a heartbeat, I figured, but for the barest of moments my words had had an effect on the Grey Pilgrim. It was me who was astonished, as I'd not tried to exert my will against him in the slightest. The rules behind Speaking were opaque even to me, but usually it only worked on people weaker than you. Even then it wasn't a guarantee, some sort of claim to authority over them tended to make it easier. And I'm not much stronger than the Grey Pilgrim, I thought, if I am at all.

>

> What that implied..

>

> I withdrew any strand of will lingering against the four men at the table, freeing them of struggle. The Prince of Hannover looked wary, but Prince Arsene was outright gasping. He rasped out a breath.

So Hanno is also surprised, but Cat only saw it working on the Pilgrim.

That said, we also have "any strand of will lingering against the **four** men at the table".

> The chatter died when I hobbled into the pavilion. I leaned on my staff, step after step, and felt the eyes of all assembled fall on me. I saw **the Iron Prince** first, at the end of the long table: the white-haired general had risen to his feet and he offered a short bow, to which I returned a nod. The Heavens had their men as well, a tired-looking **Hanno of Arwad** on his feet besides **Tariq**. Their greetings were silent and I returned them just as quietly. The last man at the table seemed like he'd aged a decade since I'd last seen him, as if some capricious god had kicked the vigour out of his bones, but the dark hair and elaborate moustache of **Prince Arsene of Bayeux** could not be mistaken. He did not seem pleased to be here, I decided, as was only fitting.

...four is including Hanno.

[Liliet](#)

She wasn't a pawn, exactly. She was just the kid ignored while mama and papa are fighting.

Sinead

That's fair. I was thinking of Malicia depending of Cat to shut Akua down as comparable to Amadeus' manipulation of Cat.

They planned around her without including her.

If we draw direct parallels, I wonder if what we'll see is Cat also hearing The Girl who Climbed the Tower and instead of seizing Dread Empress, she censures the Name and breaks the throne.

She may be Callowan, but she is also Amadeus' heir. And Amadeus was described as "the beating heart of a new Praes".

Also, it may be an interesting parallel to the Pilgrim's meteor shower, as Cat breaks a Name at the heart of governance of a nation and allows for something new to grow. Especially since she seems to be aiming at raising the autonomy of the various nations within Praes (to stab at Malicia, but it still has other consequences)

[Liliet](#)

Well, Malicia's original plan was depending on Amadeus to shut down Akua, Cat was just added as a last minute factor as a proxy for him. So it wasn't against Cat specifically, she was manipulating him just as much.

[Liliet](#)

So I take it one betrayal is Akua. What the fuck is up with the phrasing on that?

SpeckofStardust

She (being cat) is in a position where she narratively has to get backstabbed at least once during her opening moves. Mostly because that's Malicia standard playbook, and she's too important to not get some nonsense set off.

Yunamed

I doubt Akua would betray her, but even if she did, I want to believe that it won't have serious consequences to Cat's plan or life.

[Liliet](#)

I'm figuring a Loki / Severus Snape kind of thing. Cat has mentioned her being bait before.

agumentic

I mentioned before that I expect some kind of betrayal-shaped move from Akua before all is said and done, It makes sense for her narrative path. If I had to guess, Akua will first "betray" Cat according to the latter's plan, but then will have an opportunity for a genuine betrayal and even go through with it for a bit, before deciding to finally go Cat's way for sure. I won't mind being surprised, though.

[Liliet](#)

I can see Akua taking very betrayal-looking steps and I can imagine her contemplating betrayal as a fun mental exercise but I cannot imagine her seriously intending it after Lost&Found.

agumentic

I think it is one thing to sacrifice yourself on doom's approach, but it is another to go against the teachings of your blood when they are laid so clearly and enticingly before you. No, I think that even after Hainaut Akua will have to struggle through one last temptation.

[Liliet](#)

Maybe! We'll see.

Matthew

Also, we have Black back in the game. That's all that matters.

[Burlyraven](#)

The Praesi surrendering so quickly is a trap. With Wolof's magical archives, there has to be some sort of time delay sacrificial great summon, and the POWs are a primed grenade.

[Liliet](#)

We know Sargon is currently focused on increasing his population, we know he started out with negotiating on Malicia's behalf because she wants peace, we know Praesi have a historical rule to submit to the strongest.

[Burlyraven](#)

All the more reason it's a trap, going by story beats.

jworks17

What did Cat mean when she said she knew she'd be betrayed once within a month? I can't think of anything

[Liliet](#)

Cat has mentioned before that Akua is bait.

hoser2

Possible betrayals list (feel free to add):

1. Procer, but just falling doesn't seem like what you would call a betrayal
2. The Dominion (or whatever you call where the Pilgrim came from).
3. The Arsenal (or whoever leads it)
4. Hellhound
5. Sve Noc? Possibly by offering to make Akua the new First Under the Night.
6. Dwarves making peace with Keter
7. Callow

The Crows are interesting, A parting seems messy, but they seem like they are in a desperate situation.

hoser2

8. Abigail
9. Hanno
10. The Mirror Knight
11. Squire, Apprentice and ?
12. Akua is obvious, but if she is bait, then whoever takes the bait might be the more significant betrayer (if an ally).

I don't count Scribe, because the quote refers to her as another betrayal. I don't count Amadeus because he doesn't really seem like an ally even if there is a shared purpose.

shikkarasu

1. Cordelia is getting ready to pull the trigger on the Angel Weapon. Whatever it does, Cat has expressly told her it is not worth it.
2. The Dominion was wrangled over the course of several books and Pilgrim has died for her cause twice. They have too much honour to turn coat before Keter is defeated.
3. Masego. Masego leads the Arsenal. Next question, please.
4. Malicia's control over Juniper was removed, and Juniper gains nothing by backstabbing Cat.
5. I can see this. Cat has had the Night for a while, and we know that her Holy Texts are considered heresy in the future, based on one of the opening quotes.

6. The Dwarves have been shown to want little more than to put the Dead King in a box.
7. Callow still loves Cat as their liberator, and who exactly is going to spearhead her removal? The entire chain of command is in Cat's inner circle.
8. If Abigail tries anything I will eat my hat. It is a large hat and has a lot of faux fur, so I do not make this statement lightly.
9. Hanno has the motive and power. I'll grant that.
10. The Mirror Knight already tried and is recently unmanaged. He's a wildcard.
11. The heavens have all but written "Kill the Queen" in 40ft flaming letters in Squire's Name dreams. I want to trust him, but simply can't.
12. Well put. Akua will be fun to watch, but relatively little paranoia is needed.

Juff

Typo Thread:

were of ours > were ours (or maybe three of the wounded and two of the dead)
if comes to > if it comes to
He was holding magic (extra space)
alarm They (missing fullstop)
about how get > about how to get
Even of Jaheem > Even if Jaheem
at a precisely > at precisely
intended to achieve > intended to achieve it
built like barn > built like a barn
badreputations > bad reputations

therealgridlock

Typo thread!

"He was holding magic."

>Double space. "He was"

Actually, going back and looking for double space, found one at the end of "but they still made an intimidating sight. " before the line break. Interesting.

"They want to see if I'm strong enough to beard the Sahelians in their own backyard," I said.

>Beard? Maybe beat? Herd? I'm not sure *beard* is the correct term here. Unless it's vague unused slang I've never heard of, or a european thing.

I try not to comment on word choice or editorial style, only when it is super obvious that the word used is not the correct or intended one, like typos to words that are close enough to escape a spell check. But this? I'm baffled, but pretty sure she's not going to beard them.

"Even of Jaheem Niri had been about to turn on her "

>"Even if"

"Are these talks not meant to broke peace between us and the Howling Wolves, then?"

>"Broker peace" or "break peace" don't think it's "broke," in the next line Cat even says broker.

"picked clans with badreputations to raise"

>Do i even need to point it out? I best anyway. "Bad reputations"

Sinead

To beard is valid phrasing.

""to beard" someone, especially in their "lair" or "den," means to confront them as directly as possible, and, of course, to win the fight."

Source: <http://www.word-detective.com/2010/07/beard-to/#:~:text=%E2%80%9Cto%20beard%E2%80%9D%20meaning%20%E2%80%9Cto,with%20no>

Darkening

The classic usage is, "To beard the dragon/lion/bear/etc in it's lair," One of those archaic terms that doesn't really get thrown around outside of a single phrase, but definitely a usable word.

Earl of Purple

Well, the Emerald Swords are scary. I wonder if the Watch of the Deoraithe are going to get involved, if they find out that there's some elves running around in Praes. Probably not, they're too dangerous I think.

Konstantin von Karstein

Also, the Watch is one of the very few force securing Callow, and sending precious soldiers on a merry chase in the Wasteland is a bad idea. The Deoraithe probably hope the ES will get themselves killed by a Demon or something.

Shveiran

True. The Watch getting involved in Praes seems unlikely... although I have to wonder whether they will use the ES's absence as a reason to attack the Bloom.

The ES must be a good portion of the Bloom's strength, or... well, otherwise the Bloom would likely be a lot more relevant than it is.

Darkening

I mean, conquering Calernia would mean having to interact with the lessers, and even at the point of a sword that's a terrible thing for an elf to have to put himself through. Wars are generally fought for resources, and there's not really anything the Elves can't get for themselves (aside from a forest that doesn't hate them, but conquering the continent wouldn't help with that). Since they mostly just want to keep all the filthy sinful humans out of their territory and be left alone, it still makes sense they haven't had a lot of presence even if every single elf alive is equivalent to a minor Named.

Konstantin von Karstein

Don't forget that the average Elvish soldier can kill 10 times his number in human soldiers. And there's still the problem of letting Callow defenceless.

There's also the fact that the Elves are sterile and can't replenish their numbers, so they're unlikely to send troops outside their border without a really good reason and being sure they will win. Which proves they're stupid, given that the FK send his 10 best warriors in Praes to kill Ranger while she's with Black 😏

Darkening

Well, they've got the Spring Crown now, so it's entirely possible they're currently using that to sort out their fertility issues.

jamesc9

Other problem with the Watch, they're powered by the bundle of souls of their past members, but they partially lost control of it. Have we heard that that's sorted?

Xcarcea

Thanks for the chapter!!

beleester

Incorrect APGTE quotes:

Scribe: "Black could turn his own death into a tactical advantage."

Cat: "I've done that before. It hurts, but it's actually not that difficult."

(Actually from Schlock Mercenary)

superkeaton

Funny, I was expecting a whisper of Cat's Beast during her show of power

Sykomantis

The envoys aren't Named so it doesn't have a reason to show up

Silverking

I think I understand why Cat's going to solidify her Name here instead of against the Dead King. Her true specialty isn't "total war", it's "dealing with people". When she was fighting the Dead King, every single fight was a slog, and her only opponent was an immortal bore who always played the optimal strategy every time and couldn't be negotiated with. Even when she's able to pull off her "five steps ahead" tricks with the Heroes and Villains, it was always constrained by the fact that, at the end of the day, she's still going to have to work with these frustrating short-sighted people if she wants to succeed.

But here in Praes, it's a whole different game. There are factions to exploit and opponents who want several different things. Here, she can actually issue ultimatums and burn bridges if she really wants to. Here, she can actually take a fortress without bleeding for it. Cat's got an army of veterans at her back and the most dangerous Named on the continent at her side, and she's going up against the in-fighting factions who haven't seen any of her new tricks, and a Story-blind Empress who has sown far too many seeds of her own destruction over her reign.

They're never going to know what hit them.

Sinead

She's crafting a story that gained a Name, rather than taking a Name to new heights.

....

Considering the comparisons between Cat and Triumphant, my overtired brain wonders if the Name of Dread Empress was a chain on her rise to power, binding her to the limits of the Tower. She was seen by Nemashah as a peer, but she never made it to ascension (that we know of).

[Liliet](#)

IIRC the name Dead Empress only solidified into that instead of Tyrant either shortly before Triumphant or directly with her.

Sinead

That is a solid point!

therealgridlock

instrumental grunge metal plays

Instrumental grunge metal stops

Kingpin (with 17 levels in barbarian) turns, puts his finger on the table and says one word:

“Wage.”

Instrumental grunge metal beat intensifies

flashburn283

What could Black be up too, 5 bucks says he just wants Praes to rip itself to pieces and burn to the ground.

jamesc9

“I want my home to be more than a temporary alliance of the starving.”

Or words to that effect, in the Tower’s archive, shortly after he worked out that the Meizian food magic was breaking the soil.

Chapter 4: Stock

“It is unseemly to poison an ally in the first month, wear white at an assassination or use the same curse more than once per decade. Fashions will change with year and season, but always these three will be a mark of crudeness.”

– Extract from ‘The Behaviours of Civil Conduct’, by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian

The way Indrani and I kept sharing a bed was the longest I'd ever been involved with anyone.

It wasn't a love affair, at least not in the sense that I was in love with her or the other way around, but it was no less meaningful for it. More than that, it'd become a creature comfort of sorts on top of being very enjoyable. My part of the arrangement was probably the easiest to navigate, which honesty compelled me to admit might be for the best considering how things had ended with Killian. My time with my former Senior Mage had ended with frozen silence and avoiding each other, which didn't bode well since aside from the occasional tumble before I became the Squire that was pretty much the sum of my relationships. Indrani didn't ask much aside from a place in my bed, which was just fine by me. That much I could handle.

It was what bound her and Masego that I found interestingly nuanced. The two of them were distinctly 'involved', but it was more an intimate partnership than anything like the chaste marriages people without inclination to sex sometimes entered in. Masego wasn't inclined towards that either. Zeze seemed happy with the arrangement, anyhow, and Indrani certainly was. While she'd let him set the lines, aware he hadn't been made of quite the same clay than she and I in this regard, she'd not been afraid to speak up when she wanted something. It was how they'd come to share rooms in the Arsenal. Masego also considered anything she and I got up to as not related to him in the slightest, I'd confirmed on the one awkward instance where I'd tried to broach the subject with him.

He'd been confused at my bringing it up in the first place, since it struck him as a private affair, and once I'd made sure he was both aware and indifferent I'd been more than happy to drop the matter entirely. It'd been a relief. I didn't count myself as particularly shy, but as I aged I'd noticed that I was getting more closed up about intimacy. There were just too many ways it could be used against me if it came to light.

Indrani's part of this that was the trickiest. She was the one who had to draw lines and figure out limits. Distinctions. It was in the small things, like the way that after returning from a long trip, as she had yesterday, she always spent the night with Masego. She'd also been out in the wilds for about two months, though, so pretty early the morning after she came to visit me and I strengthened the privacy protections around my tent with Night. Quite a while later, we had a breakfast together. I was seated at the end of the table on my favourite seat, picking at the plate of sliced fruit my attendants had brought in and occasionally passing Indrani a cut of mango or passion fruit while I read through the papers Adjutant had sent me.

High Lord Sargon had sent a messenger to arrange talks, much as we'd expected he would, and they'd been set for midday on relatively neutral grounds. The envoys from the Steppes were settled in, I read, and soon we'd have the second round of talks so we had all the details hashed out before they left. Hakram would have to be there for those, as I fully intended for him to be my envoy up north.

Indrani was sitting cross-legged on the ground, absent-mindedly munching on the pieces I put on a plate in hand's reach as we chatted and she carved at the underside of the table. I was careful with my sleeves as I devoured the mango – one of the few sweet things I liked, and so rare back home – since the green tunic I'd put on had long ones. It was a little warm for this weather, but I didn't feel like having to explain the slight rope burn around my wrists should someone see it. Especially when the reasons for it had me in such a boneless, lazy mood. It was a rare enough these days, I wasn't going to spoil it.

"So the two ducklings you picked up," Indrani began, knife chipping away out of my sight.

I finished a piece of passion fruit, licking my fingers clean.

"Sadly," I slowly replied, "you're going to have to be more specific than that."

She snorted.

"Really living up to that whole Queen of Lost and Found title, huh?" Indrani said.

I rolled my eye at her.

"Which ones do you mean?"

"Razin and Aquiline, the duckling lords," Archer elaborated.

"What about them?" I said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Shouldn't they be married by now?" Indrani said, then clicked her tongue.

She dipped deeper under the table, knifepoint scratching against the wood furiously. Missed a detail, had she? I pushed a few more slices of fruit onto her plate and slid it across the table closer to her.

"They're going through with it after we take Keter," I informed her.

"Bold," Archer said, tone approving.

Actually very cautious of them, and so likely Razin's idea. He tended to be better at that part. If they got married right now, they'd be a power bloc that the other two great lines of the Blood – the Champion's and the Brigand's – would feel strongly threatened by. With the Pilgrim's Blood gone the way of dust, the Dominion no longer had an even theoretical ruler. Which meant after the war Levant would either fracture into smaller warring fiefdoms or another bloodline would take the Tattered Throne. An alliance between the Osenia and the Tanja would be the clear frontrunner in the race, always a dangerous position to be in. As things stood, though, Lord Yannu and Lady Itima were a lot more likely to bet on one of them biting it in the war than try a knife in the back.

Why take the risk, when the Dead King might yet do the work for them?

"It'll make for a damn good story, if they pull it off," I admitted.

It was the kind of foundation a dynasty could be built on if they played it right. Indrani made an approving noise.

"You ever wonder what stories they'll tell about us?" she asked, tone light.

"Probably that fucking story about me castrating an ogre," I grimly said. "That one'll follow me into grave, mark my words."

"Don't undersell yourself," Archer said, and I heard the grin.

There was a beat of silence.

"You castrated him in *single combat*," she said. "That makes it all the more impressive."

I groaned, making an obscene gesture she didn't even bother to look at.

"Our jaunt to Keter's going to make a good one, I think," Indrani mused. "It's got all the good ingredients. The five of us and Akua, a journey into the Hells and the worthy enemies."

Metaphorical Hells, since it'd been Arcadia we traipsed through. Hopefully chroniclers wouldn't ask too many questions about the plan in Keter. I'd yet to live it down, though in my defence it had sort of worked?

"The Princess of High Noon," I suggested. "That was a good one for retelling. Masego found his eyes and all five of us had a hand in that win."

It'd ended on a sour note, but that was war for you.

"Still can't believe Vivienne didn't even try to pawn that sun," Archer grumbled. "What kind of a thief was she? It would have fetched us a fortune in Mercantis."

"I think in a way she did," I said. "It's on her personal arms now, did you know?"

A white sun on Fairfax blue. If there was to be a Dartwick dynasty after me, I figured they were as good arms as any.

"My sources informed me," Indrani mysteriously said.

The effect was somewhat spoiled by the way she groped blindly above the table to steal a few pieces of fruit I'd laid out to scarf them down noisily. Well, that and we both knew that by sources she just meant Hakram. The gossipy bitch.

"After Zeze pulled out that echo of the sun in Hainaut, people started telling the story again," I mused. "Pretty sure it's spreading quicker than it naturally should, too."

Indrani's head popped over the edge of the table, brown face openly curious.

"Hakram's building her a legend?" she asked.

"He probably is," I said, "but I don't think it's entirely *natural*, if you catch my drift."

Names could form in a lot of ways, but one was the most common: like a boulder rolling downhill, gathering weight and momentum. In that moment in Hainaut, when the hour had been at its darkest and she'd ridden out to turn the tide, I believed Vivienne had sown the first seeds of a Name. I had mixed feelings about that, to be honest. It would be the final nail in my hopes of having the Liesse Accord ban Named rulers, should my guess turned out accurate. But if I was going to trust anyone Named with my home, it'd be Vivienne Dartwick. *And the chances of that measure going through are getting slimmer by the day, so I might just have to water my wine there.*

"I did notice people called her a princess even before you made that official," Indrani said. "But it can be a thin line between the start of a Name and simple reputation."

I grunted in agreement.

"Pretty sure I'm standing in its way, whatever it is," I admitted. "I think it'll only coalesce properly when she's got the crown."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Archer said. "You're looking at Names and Roles of Old Callow, and sure enough she doesn't fit those properly, but if you go *simpler*—"

A guard popped in his head through the tent's flap, and I realized with mild embarrassment I'd never loosened the Night-workings I'd put around the tent. I wouldn't even have heard it if there was a hurricane outside.

"The Concocter to speak with you, Your Majesty," the legionary said.

Ah, good. She'd finished her tests then.

"Let her in," I replied.

The Concocter's appearance had changed since she'd accompanied us to Praes, which I'd been told was a regular occurrence with her. Her hair was now aquamarine blue, pulled up in a bun behind her head, with matching lips and golden-yellow eyes. Though often sullen, for once the alchemist seemed in a pleasant mood. She offered me half a bow and Indrani simply a droll look, which Archer returned with an indolent wave of her hand before helping herself to the rest of the fruit.

"Your Majesty," the Concocter greeted me.

"Concocter," I replied. "You have results for me?"

"I do," she said. "Of the three products we salvaged from Sudden Abjuration before shutting it down, two proved functional in the water of the aqueduct. The amaranthine salt rock dispersed too easily, however, so I would recommend the use of the evanescent powder instead."

I pushed down a grimace. The salt rock would have been easier to carry and less would have been needed, but I wasn't going to be taking risks with this. Well, not more than the plan involved in the first place anyway. It, uh, wouldn't be the safest thing I'd ever done.

"How many bags of powder will be necessary?" I asked.

"At least eight, standard Arsenal measurements," the Concocter said after a moment, calculating in her head. "Assuming the dimensions given by Lady Sahelian are accurate."

"They should be," I said. "Just in case, I'd request you make us ten bags. Better to have a margin of error."

"It can be done by tomorrow morning, if I don't sleep," the villainess replied, sounding almost enthusiastic at the thought. "As for the breathing potions they're already done. Four doses, as you asked."

Good, it was all coming together. Indrani let out a noise of surprise.

"The underwater breathing brew, you actually got it working?" she asked.

"I did," the Concocter preened.

"Damn," Archer said, sounding impressed. "It's been what, over ten years? Congratulations. What was missing?"

The Concocter cleared her throat, seemingly embarrassed. I could understand why.

"Powdered dragon bone," she said.

Which made each of those four vials she'd brewed me worth more than their literal weight in gold. My pipe was dragonbone, and that little artefact alone would be enough to buy you a large mansion in Ater. Thankfully, at least part of the bill for this was being covered by the Grand Alliance. Indrani laughed at the answer and the Concocter subtly tensed.

"Yeah, not a lot of that going around Refuge," Archer said. "Makes sense you wouldn't have figured it out there."

"I'd had good results with drake blood, it was a hint," Concocter admitted. "Mind you, those pigs still drowned."

The tension in her shoulders loosened, and I wondered if Indrani realized how precarious the entente she'd reached there still was. Having the Silver Huntress in camp had been as much a help as hindrance there. Cocky and Alexis tended to argue when left to their own devices, and the Concocter then often sought out Indrani, but the Silver Huntress was openly resentful of that and it was leading to friction between the three – Archer wasn't the kind of woman who took kindly to being snipped at when she didn't believe she deserved it.

"Encouraging," I drily said, and she looked a little embarrassed for a moment.

"It'll work, Your Majesty, I tested it myself," the Concocter said.

"Your work has given me no reason to doubt you," I calmly said. "Kindly send me word as soon as you've finished preparing the powder."

The other villain understood it as the dismissal it was, and after the usual round of courtesies she was on her way out. I'd kept Indrani's attention, though. I'd figured mention of the water breathing potion would do the trick.

"So, I see you've got plans," Archer said. "Going somewhere, Cat?"

"I am," I said. "And taking people with me, too."

"Oh?" Indrani said, with transparently affected nonchalance.

The potion would be a new experience, something she craved like a drunkard craved the bottle, and on top of that she knew I wouldn't be mauling my treasury paying for those for just any old place. I was going somewhere interesting, and she wanted in. Which made it good thing I'd planned to bring her from the start. While I could have teased her and strung this out, I decided to reward her having interacted with a fellow pupil of Ranger without anyone getting angry or bitter.

I was going to train it into her, I swore.

"Hey," I asked with a winning smile, "wanna to come with me and Akua to rob a secret Sahelian vault full of horrors beyond comprehension?"

She choked in surprise and delight, hazelnut eyes alight with pleasure.

"You say the sweetest things sometimes," Indrani grinned.

—

There was no one in the world like the Soninke and their highborn gloried in that.

Our party had come to the orchard first so that we would be able to look for traps before High Lord Sargon arrived. Hierophant led a mage cadre in combing through the spread of tall lemon trees, boots crinkling against the dry earth as the sun pounded down on all our heads. There was not so much as a hint of breeze today, the heat was suffocating. We'd agreed on bringing no more than thirty guards each, so twenty knights of the Order of Broken Bells sat the saddle in good order behind me. Inside those shells of polished and hymn-inscribed steel they must be cooking alive, but they made for an impressive sight. Decked in plate from head to toe, their chargers wearing carapace in black and bronze, they kept their shields close and their lances raised. Their banner hung by my own, dead for the lack of wind.

Masego had wandered off to sit under a tree after looking around, popping open a book larger than my head in what looked like an older dialect of Mthethwa, which left Akua and I to stand under the shade of a tall lemon tree halfway through the orchard. She had decided to wear my colours, today. The dress was a long one, going down to her feet, and it was of a traditional Wolof cut: the neckline was narrow and though it went beyond her collarbone it did not venture far. It clung loosely to her body, tied up at the waist by two sleeves of cloth that were part of the dress. It was black, though from the top of her collarbones to well below

her tight there was broad silver-and-gold embroidery. It looked almost like a stole, though it was part of the dress, and the intricate patterns there matched those at the end of her sleeves and the cloth tied around her waist.

There was, as had become her habit, not a single piece of jewelry on her.

Stunning as she was, I might as well have worn rags for the difference it'd make. Still, I'd humoured the notion of royal splendour: though I wore a breastplate and greaves, because I wasn't a fool, I'd put my hair in a long braid and worn my crown. The Mantle of Woe and my staff served as the regalia of my rule, truer to me than anything I might have dragged out of some dusty Fairfax vault, and instead of an aketon I had worn a thick black tunic touched with silverwork around the edges. Nothing as intricate as what Akua had on her, but then my bloody clothing wasn't made out thin air. We made a memorable enough sight, I figured, and drew the eye enough that the little surprise I'd kept up my sleeve shouldn't be noticed.

Then Sargon Sahelian's party came riding into the orchard, and it was an effort not to stare.

All thirty of the high lord's bodyguards were mounted on pale horses, a breed short-backed with a high-set tail, but little of the coat could be seen: long quilted armour in red, black and white covered them all the way down to the lower leg. The patterns were eye-pleasing, sharp triangles and long stripes colourful enough the thin strands of copper woven into the quilt were hard to make out. Enchanted, I thought. Those were definitely enchanted. The riders themselves were no less splendid. Their segmented steel lamellar bore a single pauldron on the right shoulder lined with lion's fur, while from the left hung a long sash whose patterns matched those of horse's armour – if you did not pay attention, your eye might be tricked in thinking them a single creature.

They each bore a spear, a shield, and curved sword and three javelins. All glittered with rubies and ivory. *Light cavalry*, I thought. They'd break under a charge of my knights, but my men would die of exhaustion before catching up and those javelins looked nasty. Javelins could punch through plate, if you knew how to throw them. Ornate helmets added the final touch, rounded tops bearing bright red feathers with an eye-catching mouthguard made of two ivory tusks atop a coloured veil of mail.

Splendid as they were, though, the soldiers were nothing to the three nobles that had come. To the sides of Sargon Sahelian were mage nobility, amber-eyed and smiling. Over silk coats they wore breastplates entirely decorative – they went only halfway to the belly – but beautifully crafted, inlaid with gold filigree and rib-like white enamel stripes. They wore gorgeous red cloaks

bordered in gold, and at their sides were jewel-encrusted swords too pristine to have ever seen use. Each wore a king's ransom of artefacts as earrings and bracelets, necklaces and trinkets. Beautiful and poisonous, they laughed as they pressed forward their horses.

The High Lord of Wolof made them both look like beggars. For half a heartbeat I thought he had dressed severely, a simple painted scale armour over a red coat, but then the 'scale' caught the light. It wasn't painted, I realized. It was made of precious stones, every last scale: garnets and tourmaline and rubies, sapphires of every tone and colour, onyx and chalcedonies and amethysts. I found the sheer waste fascinating, in a repulsive sort of way. The hem and sleeves of his coat were embroidered with black and white maze-like patterns that were dizzying to look at – enchanted, probably – while High Lord Sargon's shoulder-length black hair was flecked with pale feathers longer than any bird I knew could grow.

Golden eyed like his cousin, the High Lord of Wolof rode in the shadow of the lemon trees and his retinue followed. The dappled light danced lightly across the colours, making it seem as if they shivered like waves on a pond, and my breath caught in my throat at the sight of them all. Beautiful and terrible, as Akua had once proclaimed at the Doom. There really was no one in the world like the Soninke, was there? Sometimes, about some things, their arrogance was not unwarranted. One of the two nobles peeled ahead of the rest, reining in his mount thirty feet or so away from us. I felt the weight of his gaze sweeping across us for a moment before he offered a short bow.

"You stand before High Lord Sargon Sahelian of Wolof, he who rules over the temples antediluvian and the vaults of forbidden knowledge," the man announced in Mthethwa, his voice pleasantly rich. "You may kneel in awe."

How nice of him to give us permission. We were a stiff-kneed bunch, Callowans, so no one took him up on the kind offer. To my surprise, Akua took a step forward. The noble's eyes moved to her, gone wary the way you would when encountering a venomous snake.

"You stand before Queen Catherine Foundling of Callow, the Black Queen," Akua announced, tone light and amused, "she who has broken gods and bargained with them, stolen the sun and contended Choirs three. Your boasts are *shallow*, Naiser Mutinda."

The man sneered down at her.

"The once-proud daughter of Wolof returns a lackey," he said. "Disappointing."

I drummed my fingers against the side of my staff.

"You're wasting my time," I mildly said, staring at the man.

He hesitated but Naiser, since that seemed to be his name, wasn't quite brave enough to mouth off to me to my face.

"High Lord Sargon blesses these talks with standing of truce," the nobleman said.

The actual reason he'd come, this. Making sure we couldn't take swings at each other without consequences.

"So do I," I said. "Now let him talk for himself, lackey, before I begin to lose patience."

"There was no need for that sort of talk, Naiser," an urbane voice chided. "My cousin's return is something to celebrate, not take offence to."

Sargon Sahelian had dismounted while we entertained his man, the noblewoman to his side having followed suit, and as Naiser deferred to his liege lord I took a moment to study him more closely. The precious scale armour somehow didn't look ridiculous when worn on foot, which surprised me, but not as much as the realization that the High Lord of Wolof wasn't actually good looking. His chin was a little weak, the arch his eyebrows uneven and his nose too large for his face. He was far from *ugly*, but I'd gotten used to unearthly beauty being the norm among Wasteland aristocrats. The pageantry called attention away from it, though, and for a moment I thought of Cordelia Hasenbach.

"Do I pass muster then, Black Queen?" the High Lord of Wolof amusedly asked me.

Huh. It'd been a while since someone had called me out on studying them.

"I'm just amazed your armour doesn't actually seem to be uncomfortable," I replied, half-serious.

He laughed, revealing white but slightly crooked teeth.

"My great-grand uncle was vain but not foolish," High Lord Sargon said. "He knew he'd have to wear the artefact after ordering it crafted."

"He also ate tiger hearts for supper every other day," Akua noted. "Let us not hasten to the conclusion of wisdom."

While I was morbidly curious as to why anyone would eat a tiger heart, much less a regular supply of them – I bet it was a virility thing, always was with wealthy older men – Sahelian family anecdotes weren't why I'd come out here. I lightly slapped my staff against the side of the tree I stood under, claiming their attention.

"You wanted talks, High Lord," I said. "You have them. I recommend against wasting that chance."

The dark-skinned aristocrat nodded, seemingly unconcerned.

"I could dance with words over Wolof not having warred on Callow under my rule, but I imagine that would go against the spirit of your recommendation," Sargon said.

"Malicia's my enemy," I said. "You're one of hers."

If Wolof followed the Dread Empress of Praes, I would treat it accordingly.

"That is unfortunate," Sargon said. "Though I would convey that she does not wish to be at war with you anymore than I do. She seeks to offer peace terms, Queen Catherine."

"It's more than a few corpses too late for that," I sharply replied.

"Are you truly so petty you would not even listen to the terms, Catherine?"

My fingers clenched. Among the riders, one of them had taken off her helmet. It wasn't Malicia's real body but the cadence of the words, the presence? The body she was possessing with that ritual of hers smiled at my anger, but I didn't let it burn hot. It went cold instead, frozen, and I raised my hand to snap my fingers. Malicia's mouth opened, but before she could speak so much as a word there were a few flickers of light. An arrow streaked through layers of enchantments and tore right through her throat. She fell over, gurgling, and already halfway into the grave. Archer did not miss, not at this range. Even as the retinue began to raise their spears and my knights lowered their lances, I met Sargon Sahelian's eyes.

His calm had not broken and neither had mine.

"I trust you have a good reason I shouldn't just burn you all alive for bringing her to these talks," I conversationally said.

He didn't even flinch, which reluctantly raised my esteem of him a notch.

"I have on my person three artefacts known as the Weeping Snares," Sargon replied. "They contain demons, and I have had an artificer bind all three seals to a command artefact in my possession."

"I have the Hierophant," I said. "Any leash you have on them will be mine before the first incantation's finished."

"There are no leashes on them, Catherine," Akua quietly said. "It is why my ancestors left them in the vault instead of using them for war. They are simple containers, forged in cruder times."

I hummed and thought for a moment, Sargon never blinking as he watched me. I could see sweat beading on the back of his neck. Not worth the risks, I eventually decided. Even should I weight that it was worth the damage to my reputation to break truce and kill the High Lord of Wolof, there was no guarantee that his successor would be more pliable – or that they'd negotiate with me at all.

"Clever," I finally said. "Talk, then. We both know you came to make an offer."

"You have seized Sinka and Jinon," the High Lord said, "and this tightens the noose around my city. Yet we are each aware that Wolof could withstand a siege for longer than you can afford. I do not believe that you want to storm my walls anymore than I want them stormed, Black Queen."

He shrugged, offering a disarming crooked smile.

"Would you be terribly offended if I offered you a bribe to go away?" he baldly asked.

It's the teeth that give you away, Sargon, I thought. They were just one step too far. Even in Callow there were hedge mages in some cities that could straighten your teeth. There was no way that the High Lord of Wolof couldn't get his own fixed, which meant keeping them was a choice. How many of your countrymen fell for that little smile, Sargon? Its just honest enough to trust, to believe coming out of a lesser branch's son. How many saw it coming before you slid the knife? Aisha had warned me once, about charming Sahelians and the dooms they wrought.

"We can call them war reparations, somewhat overdue," I mused. "I'm interested."

"That is... pleasing to hear," Sargon admitted.

He looked faintly relieved, though I wondered how much of it was feigned.

"I'll want your granaries," I idly told him, "your treasury and a pledge that Wolof will withdraw from the civil war."

With each addition his smile grew more strained.

"Some of this can be haggled," Sargon tried. "The last cannot. If the Webweaver is truly one of your followers now, I imagine you know why."

Malicia had soulboxed him and was unlikely to be pleased if he abandoned her cause. Terrible torture would ensue, presumably. It was an opening I'd been waiting for, though, and half the reason I'd made the demand in the first place.

"Hierophant can cut the city off from scrying," I said. "She wouldn't know until much too late."

I saw him hesitate a fraction, then push through.

"Wolof has secrets beyond the ken of Wekesa the Warlock's knowledge, or that of his son," Sargon said. "Your premise is untrue."

I hid a smile. I'd given something by revealing Masego could put them in a box if I wished him to, but without knowing it he'd given me something too: he was afraid of Malicia *personally*, not as an abstract. Not through scrying, assuming I even believed his vague talk of secret Wolofite magics that Hierophant couldn't dismantle. *She still has another body in Wolof*, I thought. My fingers clenched with something that was neither quite fear or triumph. It was too strong an investment for me to be the sole reason for it. I had put out my bait in the right place.

"It seems we're at an impasse, then," I shrugged.

"I can still offer great... reparations of gold and foodstuffs, Queen Catherine," High Lord Sargon said. "Can a bargain not be had?"

"Of course – I'm a reasonable woman, High Lord Sargon," I lied. "I just want your entire treasury and all your food."

I paused.

"And also the armour you're wearing," I whimsically added. "As a polite reminder that if you ever try to bring a Named capable of mind control to truce talks again, I will brutally murder you as an object lesson."

I was going to have to get everyone checked for hooks in their minds, which would be a pain. That'd cost him.

"Well," High Lord Sargon muttered, "at least it is a *succinct* sort of extortion."

"And to think they tell me I can't do diplomacy," I brightly smiled.

"I can't imagine why," Sargon amiably replied, not batting an eye. "I will have to discuss your terms with my advisors, Queen Catherine. Perhaps negotiations can resume at a later date."

I shrugged.

"If you want," I said. "Until then, I'm under oath to offer you an exchange for the prisoners taken in Jinon. As you have none of mine imprisoned to trade, I've set ransoms instead. Akua?"

She offered the scroll, which without hesitation the High Lord of Wolof took. He unfolded it, eyes scanning the lines. I'd set truly extortionate rates, ten year's pay for every soldier and officer as well as massive lump sums for every highborn. Even for someone as wealthy as the High Lord of Wolof, it'd be a costly racket. My bet was on him bringing home only the highborn, part of the reason I'd jacked up their ransoms on principle. The rest was that I had a godsdamned war to pay for, and it wasn't going to pay for itself.

"Yes," Sargon Sahelian briskly said. "I'll send the sum to your camp by cart before nightfall. I trust you will return them to the city at the earliest convenience."

I hid my surprise, but not quite quickly enough he didn't notice it.

"We're a greedy breed, Sahelians," the High Lord crookedly smiled. "The coin I'll make again in time, Black Queen. People are not so easily replaced."

Huh. That was the closest to respect I'd felt for him all day, even knowing he might be playing me. The talks ended without further ceremony, and it was in a pensive mood that I rode back to camp. I felt like I'd missed something, though I couldn't put my finger on what.

So far, we hadn't missed a beat.

—

I woke up in the middle of the night to the screams and smoke.

Kal

closes to====> closest to

ruduen

Huh. Another fire. Any bets on if this one will be attributed to Cat or not?

Go boost!

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

dadycoool

Well, she is right there, after all.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Of course – I'm a reasonable woman, High Lord Sargon," I lied.
"I just want your entire treasury and all your boosts."

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Liliet

I read that as "all your boots" at first and it was glorious.

Gotta say, "boost" looks more charmingly dorky and less annoying than "vote" in these.

Someperson

"No apologize. Boots!"

dadycoool

Malicia did basically the same thing that one prince did waaaaay back in the day, the guy with the Page that had a crush on him. She essentially challenged Cat to a duel of some sort, in this case words, and rather than even entertain the option, she shot her in the throat. Just like that prince. Honestly, what IS it with these old-fashioned Named and their clutching to melodrama? It's stupid, especially when they know damn well that they're going up against Black's daughter.

Shveiran

Unlike the Exiled Prince, Malicia lost nothing but a sorcerous double to that gamble.

Even if it was unlikely to work, why not make the attempt?

And considering Cat awoke to chaos, murder and chaotic murder, I'm not committing to the idea it didn't work.

Brakham

Prince was indeed a melodramatic fool that got shot. Malicia's body here was an expendable resource, perhaps it would have better been quiet, but Malicia has plenty of backups.

onedollargum

She can afford to take that loss of a body, especially if it happens to set up a pattern of three.

Catherine doesn't have so many bodies to lose.

Lord Haart

Don't think that interaction has the narrative weight to be part of a pattern of three, since Cat didn't even acknowledge her.

But yeah nothing lost.

[Burlyraven](#)

Well, a lot of things I've had concerns about and issues with got addressed in this chapter, so that's cool. I may yet get to say "I told you so" on the surrendered troops being a trap, though the origin of the trap would certainly be up in the air.

Tony

My guess is that Sargon memorized all the names of the prisoners on the scroll and then used magic to kill them so as to discourage any further surrendering to Cat

nick012000

Hmm. I wonder if the contents of the carts were full of devils or fire elementals or something rather than the loot Cat was extorting him for in exchange for prisoners. IIRC it was mentioned that some of the Praesi nobles were descended from genies.

[Liliet](#)

Aisha Bishara, specifically.

It's the Taghreb whose signature is intermarriage with magical creatures, Soninke just do regular human eugenics.

Shveiran

I think it is more supernatural eugenics than intermarriage for the Taghreb.

At least I hope so, considering one of the achievements on record was inserting DRAKE blood into a bloodline.

I'm not one to shame over kinks, but marrying a magical alligator seems logistically complicated.

[Liliet](#)

Valid.

But we do know actual intermarriage is a thing too, see: Kilian.

Shveiran

True.

Then again, the exception may be the Fey. After all, we know they have stories about fathers and therefore have stories about breeding, which in their case is the same as having compatible genitals.

Drakes or even genies might not allow the practice, though it is a given that at least one Emperor would have made the attempt.

superkeaton

And she wasn't even conscious for this conflagration. That's impressive, Cat.

Frivolous

EE: Thank you for giving us firm knowledge on the status of Vivienne. I'm happy to know she's not Named yet but is probably going to be. The uncertainty was driving me a little batty.

On the other hand, giving us a cliffhanger like that is cruel, just cruel.

I wonder what or who is causing the screams and smoke. Did someone set the orchard on fire? That's a shame if so.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cat is right there, so clearly it's her fires. Again.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Finders keepers, and she is the Queen of Lost and Found.

[David Lynch](#)

> "I wouldn't be so sure about that," Archer said. "You're looking at Names and Roles of Old Callow, and sure enough she doesn't fit those properly, but if you go simpler-"

...is Vivienne going to be *Heiress*, you beautiful mad bastard?

RubberBandMan

. . .That would be her **stealing** a name from the Preasi. Would she really do something like that?

Shaerick 68

Oh heavens no, Princess Vivienne isn't some petty thief... anymore...

dadycool

A chill legit went up my spine when I read that. It's beautiful.

[Liliet](#)

The "princess" thing is significant and is most definitely going to be part of the Name.

Itarion

You pegged her as Shining Princess to be around Hainaut, and while it wasn't enough then, a good old fashioned war with Praes, where a princess leads Callow's army? That will be enough.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani is suggesting "something older and simpler", so that might not be Shining Princess. Sun Princess, someone suggested?

Sinead

The laurel is a plant sacred to Apollo...(but I may be stretching there). Running through old Callowan heraldry, I do not think any of them have a Sun motif. But since the divide between Callow and Praes is literally carved into the land (fall of the Drakoi), that 'sun against the darkness' may be a forgotten basis of the 'Shining Prince(ss)' Name.

Archer just knows things she has no reason to, after all thanks to Ranger's education.

hakureireimu

Indrani's was objecting to Cat's statement that Vivi wouldn't get her Name without the crown. Specifically, Indrani objected to the notion that Vivi doesn't fit the Role of the princess of Callow. She's saying that if you take a step back and squint, Vivi fits that role perfectly fine. So it's going to be Shining Princess 100%.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani also said Vivienne doesn't fit the Roles of Old Callow

though that actually might still go with Shining Princess if what she meant is "the Role can work in another way if you go more literal"

Shveiran

My thoughts exactly.

...It's probably wrong, but I'm gonna believe it's right until I'm proven wrong.

ohJohN

This line confused me a little – Vivienne is now Officially A Princess^{3M} and well-known for her association with Summer's sun, which sounds like a *perfect* fit for the Name of Shining Princess?

Even for the Role, what little we know of the previous Shining Prince was that he lead the Callowan troops at the Fields during the Conquest, and Vivs did lead the troops at Hainaut in a desperate last stand against the dead. Maybe the fact that it wasn't a direct defense of Callow's borders gave it the wrong shape, or something?

[Liliet](#)

There were multiple beautiful, oh so beautiful things here.

1. Elaboration on Indrani's relationship status!
2. CONTINUATION OF THE REFUGEE STORY!!! Catherine is invested ♥ ♥ ♥ (so am I)
3. Elaboration on Vivienne's status!!! FUKKEN KNEW IT though the hint is that it's not Shining Princess. Awwwww.
4. Soninke aesthetics I am DRINKING this with my eyes best worldbuilding is best
5. Goddammit I lost my bet on discord: something went wrong but Cat DIDN'T get a chance to curse about it.
6. Cat did have a guess about whatever the fuck it is Malicia has cooking in Wolof. Blessed & beautiful.
7. Hi Malicia. Bye Malicia. Blessed & beautiful.
8. Sargon is REALLY hurting for manpower, huh?

hakureireimu

2. Refugee story? You mean Refuge story? Otherwise I'm not sure what you meant.

3. I have an opposite interpretation; Indrani is explicitly objecting to Cat's notion that Vivi won't be Shining Princess.

[Liliet](#)

Refugees = kids from Refuge :3

Juff

Typo Thread:

anyhowm > anyhow
than she and I > as she and I
this that was > this was
bee easier > been easier
enthusiastic the > enthusiastic at the
it good thing I'd > it good thing I'd > it a good thing that I'd
wanna to come > wanna come
today, the heat > today, and the heat
below her tight (missing something)
arch his eyebrows > arch of his eyebrows
I weight that > I weigh that
closes to respect > closest to respect

therealgridlock

Typo thread!

"Zeze seemed happy with the arrangement, anyhowm,"

>"Anyhow"

"was black, though from the top of her collarbones to well
below her tight there was broad silver-and-gold"

>Tight? Tight what? Ass? Or perhaps this is "waist" instead.

"They each bore a spear, a shield, and curved sword and three
javelins."

"A shield, a curved sword, and three javelins." Oxford commas
are nice, also.

SpeckofStardust

So the real question is this the first betrayal or not?
Or is this just a night attack?

[Adrian_V](#)

Was there any danger or difficulty to the body switches Malicia
does? Otherwise it wouldn't really count as an investment to have
2 bodies in the city. Can't remember if it was mentioned back in
keter.

Also is better they were deal some damage right now so long as its not critical, it actually adds story weight for the final plan to work if not all is perfect during these early parts.

[Liliet](#)

I think just cost as a resource, in time and attention.

[Adrian_V](#)

Yeah i mean that among others, like i can't remember if the bodies needed to be really special, is not like they are clones right?

[Liliet](#)

No, but they do need to be prepared in all kinds of magic ways that are likely expensive.

[Liliet](#)

(Also, she can only inhabit one body at a time, so to keep them running when she's not there she needs to set up an AI which is even more of a resource sink)

[Liliet](#)

Oh also if she needs the body to masquarade as a noble she probably needs to kill an actual noble for it

nick012000

If Maseru got his hands on one while Malicia was piloting it, and he managed to prevent her from jumping out, he'd be able to break her power and drive her crazy the same way the previous Dread Emperor got his power broken and was rendered insane by the Wizard of the West during a battle.

Also, I think she needs to make the bodies by using sorcery to rip people's souls out.

nick012000

*Masego. Not sure why autocorrupt turned it into Maseru.

ninegardens

Welp, glad to see that the prisoners were appropriately "Paid for"

[benthelynx](#)

Is anyone else finding that book 7 is a little clunky so far?

dadycoool

Eh, only in the way that Cat has a bunch of plans that we haven't gotten the chance to see unfold/get elaborated on. The foundation is the most boring, blocky part of any building, after all.

[vernal.ancient](#)

"It is unseemly to ... wear white at an assassination"

Lady Sahelian would not get along with the Parshendi, I think



[vernal.ancient](#)

Welp, that was supposed to be its own comment... thanks
WordPress

Aduro95

Yeah, didn't really need so much explanation for Cat Masego and Indrani's relationship. Since we already know they stand. Show don't tell would have been smoother.

I'm also not really feeling all these costume description in a row.

Lord Haart

Not personally, no. Though I do find the end of each book is usually so full of things happening very quickly with little explanation (E.g. What did Pale Knight say to Cat to make her freeze and why hasn't it been mentioned since, was it mind control shenanigans?) that jumping into each new book with a bit of a fresh start and more world building can feel comparatively slow. I think this is just good narrative pacing though, and I've liked the extra details.

Matthew

The fact that she didn't have a "That went too well, double the watch!" means Cat is losing her touch.

Honestly, that whole end read like a rookie mistake that Cat wouldn't make.

[Liliet](#)

I am guessing the watch was doubled off-page and it just didn't help.

Matthew

Still that's not the point. There was that glorious scene in the Free Cities where Black and Warlock were just crushing a

group of heroes and then they both decide to pull out because they know it is going way too well for them as evil named.

Ever since Cat took Black as her father... she has been less and less cognizant of the whole "You are an evil named, the universe is looking to screw you over."

[Liliet](#)

TBF she's been getting cozier and cozier in unambiguously heroic stories.

And she DID say she felt like she was missing something because everything was going too well.

She didn't start panickedly running around like a chicken with its head cut off but IMHO that's for the best?

ninegardens

Black was playing a villanous story against heroes.

Cat is playing a ... neutralish story against villains. The story rules be different.

(She STILL should have doubled the watch)

mamm0nn

Cat: High Lord Sargon seemed surprisingly decent and normal so far.

Later that evening: Hahahahaha! You fools! I transmuted my soldiers into coins and then turned them back once giving you your 'payment' for the hostages! Also, I've hidden devils in every citizen's right boot and this armour of mine is actually just an elaborate way to smuggle precious gems out of the city and to the Mercantis dealers that you cut me off from! And those fortune cookies on that tray! That's right, fear me for I have put my evil monologue down on paper and you'll have to read it cookie by cookie! Mhu-hahahahahaha!

Shveiran

Glorious.

[308924810a](#)

I suspect that this lord is the next Warlock. But I'm not sure.

Shveiran

You know, I thought so too but... that would be kind of stupid, wouldn't it?

I mean, Sargon main use for Malicia comes from the fact that she has so much leverage over him it's not even funny. But that's... magical leverage. It doesn't take a genius to figure out Sargon would rather like not to be soulboxed, so if he gets a Name based on magic I'm guessing he would try to fix the situation. And I'm sure it's complicated, but that's what a Warlock does: spells that are impossible to everyone else.

From a story perspective, it would be a given Sargon would escape the box.

Even if Malicia didn't think of that, it would still be a big blunder from a manipulation perspective: it empowers someone that owes her no loyalty while simultaneously giving him the means to escape her power over him and also making her own death the natural progression of his power. After all, more than one warlock climbed the Tower.

I still have no idea who Malicia meant (the only one I can think of would be Akua, but she offers even less of an angle that I can see) but I'm rather sure it's not Sargon.

Earl of Purple

I like Lord Sargon. He's dangerous, and clever. Malicia probably forced him to take her with, and I reckon her second Wolofite body was another of the riders. She'd know Cat would kill the one that revealed itself, most likely, so I think she took both so she could still watch.

beleester

I don't think Malicia can control two bodies at once, so her backup body would have to be asleep somewhere safe.

Shveiran

True.

Though let's face it, if she wanted to, the logistics are probably not that complicated. Glueing a body in armor to a saddle and make it stand straight shouldn't be too complicated.

Though I do believe if she wanted to watch she would just have kept quiet.

She had an angle there, I'm just not sure which.

Earl of Purple

She had three bodies in Keter. The Malicia that Cat killed, the spare that Archer sniped, and the servant Neshamah had given Cat. Pretty sure the Malicia that was killed and the

servant were active at the same time- though the servant might have been running mostly on pre-programed behaviour.

Liliet

Malicia can make an AI to run the body when she's not there, like she did with the Keteran servant.

ninegardens

Let's face it, she probably doesn't have *one* more body in the city.

Though, tbf, with Zeze hanging around, I'm not sure that that is to her advantage. He might not have been able to "catch" WB, but Malicia's soul drifting around body hopping... that... could be an opportunity...

Huh... do you think Zeze is willing to harm "Aunty Malicia"? I... kind of suspect he'd prefer not to.

Cicero

I don't know about that. Malicia ordered his father into protecting that city that ended up getting his fathers killed. And pushed his father to take a strict position against Cat, causing tension between them in their last meeting.

While Black was always closer to him, and Black has sided against Malicia.

Chris

What's with the repeated and blatant call outs to Akua's lack of jewelry?

Shveiran

I was wondering that myself. It's a near certainty it's going to become relevant at this point, though I can't fathom how. The main jewel that I can recall having a meaning in the franchise is Ranger's "Ring of Nightfall"

Klatn Yelox

Loved that little nod. I wonder if the reason is that a famous assassination happened back in the day with the assassin wearing white.

Probably more just that it's a bit on the nose to wear a color that symbolizes purity when someone is going to get killed, but Praes has a lot of traditions based on history so The Assassin in White as a historical Name is my headcanon.

Mental Mouse

Probably the other way around – the Praesi are patterned after African cultures, and AIUI, in Africa white is the color of death – so an assassin in white would just be cheesy, like the overdone-Goth thing for Anglo-Europeans.

Chapter 5: Incursion

“The Heavens pick the victor, my friends, but the Hells detail the aftermath. How else can it be explained that when a battle is won we most commend the general – that is, the only man in the army that can be relied on not to have picked up a weapon?”

– Captain Thierry the Acerbic, addressing his company before the Battle of the Twelve Routs

It was tempting to just run out sword in hand to find out what was happening, but I resisted the urge. I’d learned the hard way that recklessness could have permanent costs – like half someone’s total supply of eyes, for example. I put up my hair in a loose ponytail and strapped on my armour, not without fumbling, and only after putting on a helmet did I finally limp out. Sword at my hip and deadwood staff in hand, I looked out into the night and found entire swaths to the south of my camp aflame. Had Sargon played me with the ransom payment? It shouldn’t be. Hierophant had inspected the ingots personally and they were in a warded pit anyway. It made no sense either, considering I hadn’t even given him back his prisoners yet. I’d kept them overnight as a precaution against foul play and he had to know I might hang them as an object lesson if he tried something.

Sargon Sahelian hadn’t struck me as the kind of man who pissed away either gold or lives.

I made my way to the tent closest to mine, where Adjutant had placed a station of his adjunct secretariat, but there were no phalanges there. I found a line of regulars hurrying south through the dirt avenue passing by my tent, however, and wasted no time approaching the lieutenant in charge. A young Taghreb, no older than twenty and rosy -cheeked.

“Your Majesty,” he breathed out, before snapping into a more professional salute.

“Lieutenant,” I said. “What’s happening? I’m not hearing the alarm wards.”

"Our wards are down, ma'am," he replied. "All of them. And we're under attack by giants."

Our wards were *down*? I felt a shiver of unease. Not even the Dead King had managed that so easily. The mention of giants, though, had me skeptical. I seriously doubted the Gigantes had anything to do with this. Ogres, though, I'd be willing to believe. I had less than a tenth of ogres left in the entire Army of Callow – our campaigns had not been kind, and none lost were ever replaced – but the Dread Empire would not be so limited. That would mean a Legion raid, which did nothing to settle my discomfort. I'd learned enough at the feet of the Legions of Terror to know how brutally skilled they were at what they did.

"What did they hit?" I asked.

"I don't know, Your Majesty," the lieutenant admitted. "My orders are just to head at the southern rally point with my line and await further orders."

I smothered my irritation. It wasn't his fault I wasn't aware of what was going on and taking it out on the kid would help no one.

"Let's go then, lieutenant," I evenly said. "There's no time to waste."

I pulled at Night – and how crisply it came now that dusk had passed, almost as easily as before the Ruination – and killed the pain in my bad leg so I would be able to keep up with the brisk pace of the legionaries. We passed through a sparsely manned checkpoint, but there was no way the sergeant in charge would know more than the lieutenant I was with so I pushed on. At the second checkpoint, I found Adjutant waiting for me. He was armed and armoured, with an axe in his dead hand and a broad shield in his steel one.

"Catherine," he gravelled. "Apologies, by the time my phalanges reached your tent you'd already left."

I waved it away and didn't bother to ask how he'd known where I would go. There were lines between us where there once had been none, but he was still my Adjutant.

"What's happening?" I bluntly asked.

"The Legions of Terror are hitting us," Hakram gravelled. "Less than a hundred, nearly all ogres. They gated out of Twilight a foot away from the outer palisade and smashed through, then used some sort of artefact that fried our wards. Hierophant and Akua are working on getting them up again."

"Fuck," I eloquently said. "Do we know what they're after?"

"They split into two forces," Adjutant said. "The one lighting the fires is going straight for our supplies and Juniper's mustering men to drive them out. The other force – smaller, we think – is headed west."

My eyes narrowed. West had Sargon's soldiers and the rest of the warded pits we'd dug. Was this a rescue operation? That made little sense. The High Lord of Wolof had already paid their ransom and they'd be handed over come morning. Something didn't fit, and that made the second force the odd hand. The one to watch out for.

"That's the one we'll intercept," I decided. "Where's Archer?"

"She's -"

"Disappointed you didn't hear her coming, is what she is," Indrani drawled.

My hand was halfway to my sword when I recognize her voice, and my muscles stayed tense until she'd moved out from the tent she'd used as cover for her approach. There was some alarm as legionaries began to notice her, but it didn't last long. She was a known quantity for my soldiers.

"That's what we have you for," I retorted. "Vivienne, Huntress, the kids?"

"Vivienne is with Juniper," Hakram said.

"Alexis went to guard Cocky," Indrani said. "I'm not sure for the kids."

For a moment I almost sent Adjutant to look for them – he had the right aspect to Find the needle in the haystack – but I held back. He might see it as him being sent away from the fight, one which would be hard enough *without* shedding off a third of our Named before we started.

"Send one of yours to Vivienne," I ordered Hakram. "I want them kept from getting into too much trouble."

Entirely out of trouble was sadly more than could be reasonably asked for, given that they were Named. Hakram nodded and saw to it, even as I checked my gear one last time. I made a note to have a bag of goblin munitions prepared for me and kept in my tent. Now that Scribe's scheme had paid off and we'd essentially bought out High Lady Wither's stocks of munitions – with the blessing of the Matrons, who saw it as weakening her military strength even if our grain helped her maintain control in the short term – I could afford to start using them again. The moment Adjutant was back we headed out together, moving fast. Since our wards were down and we had an idea of where our enemies were

headed, we took a shortcut through the Ways to try to intercept. We sidled through instead of using a gate, since Indrani found us a path in moments, and it allowed us to skip over all the barricades, checkpoints and mustering soldiers.

The advantage of fighting people as tall as ogres was that, given the average height of tents in our camp, we could easily see them from a distance. Within moments of leaving Twilight I had my eyes on maybe twenty towering silhouettes, all decked in pitch-black plate engraved with runes and wielding massive flanged maces. Those were *not* Legion heavies, not any kind I'd ever seen.

"Archer, go around," I said, already pulling at the Night. "Begin on my signal."

"Gotcha," she said, pulling down her hood.

She slipped into the shadows, swift-footed even as she began to string her bow.

"Adjutant," I said, shaping the Night, "I want you to bait them. Take the front and draw them in."

"Warlord," Hakram replied, flashing his fangs happily.

I finished the last touch on the 'eye' of Night I'd made and threw it up in the air. A shadow on black, it remained unseen to our foes even as I closed my physical eye and made myself see through that one. It didn't tell me much more about the enemy force itself, but it *did* give me a bird's eye view of them moving around the camp. *They're not headed towards the prisoners*, I realized. They'd walked right past an avenue that led to their pit, and I doubted it was because of the two lines of regulars manning the palisade around the prison pit. They were after something else and moving like they knew they layout. Which they would, of course, since the Army of Callow pretty much used the Legion layout with a few modifications. It sunk in a moment later.

The ransom. It was further east in a guarded pit as well, and the group – twenty-one ogres and two humans, I counted – would soon get to an avenue that'd lead them straight there. But why the Hells would Malicia care about the gold? The empress still collected taxes from most of Praes, she was positively rolling around in coin she couldn't spend for lack of friendly neighbours. I set the question aside for now, as I had more urgent cats to skin. I checked Adjutant was on the right path to reach the enemy, which he was, and then prepared to disperse the eye. There was no point in even trying to find Archer, I knew that from experience.

Then the night lit up with a flash of sorcery as streaks of flame hit one of the lead ogres, scarring the black plate, and I caught sight of two small humans getting in the way of the enemy.

"*Fuck*," I cursed.

The kids were there and getting in over their heads. These weren't Bones or a handful of necromantic monsters, they were a well-armed Legion strike team. I broke into a run without hesitation, knowing that if I lingered for too long they might be dead by the time I arrived. So much for springing an ambush. Calling on Night, I formed a rough wedge of power in front of me and ran straight through the tents in my way. It was a quick approach but not a subtle one, as was made clear when one of the ogres grabbed a javelin the size of a small tree and threw it my way.

I twisted the Night into a different working, catching the weapon in flight and turning it around before tossing it back. A miss, I saw, but hopefully it'd discourage a repeat. I formed another wedge and immediately another ogre threw a javelin at me. I cursed, resorting to the same trick and this time scoring a glancing blow against an ogre's breastplate. They weren't trying to kill me, I grasped, they were slowing me down. The bastards weren't even intending to fight us, were they? They'd just do what they'd come for and then retreat.

Gods but I hated fighting against well-trained soldiers.

Thankfully, I could fall back onto the sage lessons of my childhood: if the other guy had a better plan, you just had to sock them in the face real hard until they forgot it. I abandoned the idea of the relatively harmless wedge and instead drew deep on the Night, waves of heat emanating from me as I formed a massive ball of blackflame and tossed it in a straight line in front of me. It burned through tents and barricades, clearing me a straight path and smashing into one of the ogres. Even as I ran, my brow knotted when the flames cleared and I saw my working hadn't actually broken the ogre's plate. It'd blackened it further, half-melted it, but the fire had only gone through the armour's visor. It was still enough to have the soldier screaming and clawing at his face.

Archer put an arrow between the hands and straight into the skull a moment later, dropping the ogre.

I unsheathed my sword as I crossed the last of the distance separating me from the melee, the flash of flames flickering at the edge of my sight and bathing the silhouette of the closest ogre in light. The great flanged mace rose, and Night or not there would be no *parrying* that. I struck out with my staff, black flames boiling out of the top as I aimed for the visor again, but I was forced to abandon the working when another ogre

used drove a javelin like a spear into my flank. I hastily backpedalled out of range, almost eating the mace blow from the first as I did. Redirecting the black flame into striking the side of the mace's head got me out of it, but the ground shook as the flanged head tore into the earth besides me. Worse yet, more and more of the ogres were converging on me.

A few I could handle, but ten? That was going to get tricky.

Then Adjutant came out swinging from their left flank a heartbeat later, proving once more that splendid timing was written into his very Role. The surprise earned me a moment to shape Nigh,t in between ducking away from a wild mace swing, and I threw up another eye so that I could see through it and grasp the lay of the entire melee. It was only the beginning. Power coursed richly through my veins even as I saw one of the ogres draw back his arm to throw a javelin, but I grit my teeth and kept weaving my miracle. My eye in the sky stayed focused on my enemy's arm, spellbound. *Almost there*, I thought, watching as the plate-covered arm flexed and the tree-sized javelin went flying. I breathed in and out, listening to the instincts trained into my body by years of war.

A half-step to the side, the movement precise enough I felt the steel head of the javelin brush against my side, but I'd done it. I was finished.

"Bang," I grinned, staff coming down against the floor in a strike.

I kept the eye for just a second, long enough to place the ten orbs I was capable of handling at one time. Night formed out of thin air in front of ten visored faces, looking like spinning orbs for half a heartbeat before they burst and air was sucked in. I'd first used the air explosion trick against demons at the Arsenal, but I'd improved it in the months since. This time, at the heart of the 'orb' there was a seed of blackflame. The air getting sucked in pulled in the ten ogres, just in time for the blackflame to grow unstable and explode in their faces along with the sharp burst of air. The result was a brutal blow of physical strength and fire that dented the visors before delivering the blackflame through the opening. Most of the ten died instantly and those that didn't began to scream in pain.

From the corner I saw Adjutant take a blow on his shield, aspect pulsing as he withstood the strength as if it were a breeze. He struck with perfect timing as the ogre withdrew, toppling his foe down into an already-trampled tent. He had that under control, I decided. I could push through to the kids.

I ran past a slowly falling ogre, clutching at her broken and burning face, and as she struck the ground behind me like a small earthquake I found myself frowning. There had been two humans

earlier, mages presumably, but I couldn't see them in the melee at the moment. Where – the only warning I got was the feeling of the air being moved, and I wasn't quite quick enough. My staff was struck as I got pushed away, the silhouette of an ogre coming into sight for a flickering second as I was blown off my feet and my staff went clattering in the distance. *Fuck*, I thought, rolling away as I felt the air move again and the ground was hammered in front of me. One of the mages was using illusionary enchantments. I rose back to my feet lurching about, grasping a handful of Night and throwing it blindly ahead.

It stuck, as I'd hoped, and a blotch of darkness appeared on what looked like the side of the mace trying to smash me to bits. It'd do. Slicing behind me with my blade, I opened a gate into the Ways and stepped through. I glimpsed greenery and felt gentle wind before crossing back into a warm Wasteland night, coming out on the side of the mace I'd tagged and spinning out chords of Night. I hooked them around the mace, forcing it and the ogre back into flickering visibility, and then wrapped the chords around the shoulders and helmet of the ogre. Hands tight on the bonds I twisted, Night obeying my will as the ogre struggled to keep the mace away from their helmeted head and I tightened the noose. I was cheating, of course. It wasn't strength I was using to tighten the chords but willpower, weaving Night, and the limits on my will were lesser than those on the soldiers' body.

With a third twist of the wrist I tightened the chords into a vise and the side of the mace went through the helmet with a loud crunch. I wasn't sure how far it'd gone into the skull beneath it, but the ogre was out of the fight regardless. That freed me to go forward, where I saw Arthur Foundling being battered down with brutal efficiency by an ogre. His shield was already a crumpled ruin and one of his shoulders obviously broken. The Apprentice was shooting darts of fire and spears of lightning at the ogre, but all it did was slow them some. Not even a mark was left on the armour, which had me staring. Even enchanted plate would have marks after that, and my heartbeat quickened when I saw the ogre kick Squire in the stomach when Arthur tried to slide behind them.

He'd been moving with Name quickness, unnaturally swift, but his opponent had begun moving the exact moment he did. No one was that fast without a Name, I knew, without leaning on that set of reflexes that came with a martial Role. From the corner of my eye I saw an arrow hit a man in the throat, the spell he'd been halfway through – aimed at Adjutant's back – dying with him, but I looked past the corpse and found that four ogres were covering the last mage's hasty retreat. I moved to the side, climbing over an ogre corpse to get a better vantage, and cursed. The pit where we'd left the ransom gold was now empty. They'd brought a caster that could use High Arcana and shoved all the ingots into a pocket dimension, the tricky fuckers.

As if I'd allow that. I drew on Night.

I heard Arthur Foundling scream as he was smashed into a barricade by a blow, and for a heartbeat I weighed the choice. The gold might keep a lot of my people alive, keep them fed and armed for the war on Keter, and the Squire was still a potential threat to Vivienne in the coming years. If I pursued the last mage instead now... The thought was ugly, but ugly wasn't enough to stay my hand anymore. I needed better than that – *Name*, I thought, mind racing. He was in a fight of Named, one he'd stumbled into through heroic providence. That could be a potent tool, used right. Eye tearing away from the fleeing mage, I broke into a run. Ribbons of lightning struck at the back of the tall ogre with impotent fury, making the enchanted steel glow but little more as I shaped Night into thick tendrils.

The looming ogre raised their mace as the Squire rolled to the side, grasping for his sword. He'd be too slow. The flanged mace came down and the boy's face paled but his fingers closed around the handle of his blade anyway. He'd die trying. Or not die at all, preferably. I struck out, tendrils of shadows layered over my arm like some sort of skeletal armature, and the strength of it was just enough to slap aside the mace before it could crush the boy's skull. I stood between the two of them, Night wafting off me like smoke as I prepared another trick, and cocked an eyebrow.

"So Malicia's picked up a Named," I said. "Which one are you, I wonder?"

Our foe – a woman, I glimpsed through the visor – did not answer. She raised her mace again, drawing back to make space for a swing, but I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"Not Warlock," I mused, "or you would have seen *that* coming."

The Night-smoke I'd had trailing along the ground solidified around her feet as shackles, so when she finished the movement of striking the imbalance tripped her. I stepped to the side as she began to topple forward, tapping the side of my sword against Arthur's flank tell him he should follow suit. An arrow whistled, aimed straight at the gap in the plate between the neck and the helmet, but with unnatural deftness the massive mace swept up to bat the killing blow away just before the ogress hit the ground face first.

"Martial, and not a transitional Name if you have control that fine," I noted.

I raised my sword, calling Night to it even as the ogre grunted with effort and burst through my shackles with brute strength. And yet I was not worried in the slightest. I knew, somehow I just *knew*, that the timing would work out perfectly. I could see

it as if it were written in the air, as if it were inevitable. As if some grinning devils down Below had put their coin on me and their fingers on the scale to match.

I was following my Role, and so the tide of Creation was on my side.

"None of that," I chided my foe, bringing my blade down on her back as she tried to raise.

The Night struck out from the point of my sword like a needle, shattering the backplate, and then like cracks of ice my power went skittering in every direction and shattered the enchanted steel. The ogre was smashed back down into the ground. I heard bones break and froze in surprise. I'd not hit her that hard, not for a Named, and that was the moment it fell into place. My limbs grown strong with the touch of my growing Name, I moved forward and flipped over the gasping ogre. She did not resist, broken. I stripped off her helmet and a single look at those dark eyes was enough to confirm my suspicion: the power in there was fading. Not because I'd killed its wielder, but because I'd damaged the vessel too badly.

"Black Knight," I greeted. "So what's the aspect you're using, I wonder – something like Deputize, Mandate?"

I wrinkled my nose.

"No, you're clearly Legion," I said. "You're using mostly ogres, too, so I'd guess you're Marshal Nim. 'Commission', maybe?"

It clearly wasn't her full strength she'd put in the body, else the kids would be dead twice over. The ogress hacked out a cough, dying, and I sighed. Wouldn't get anything out of her. I sheathed my sword, but halfway through the gesture the almost-corpse suddenly lunged. A single massive hand reached over my shoulder, grasping the Squire's throat behind me, and she began to *squeeze* – I felt horror swell, I wouldn't be quick enough with the Night I was reaching for – she went still. It was not luck that did it, but the eerily silent arrow Archer had loosed that went through her eye. I roughly dragged Arthur away by the scruff of his neck as the body dropped, the boy moaning in pain. As well he should, he was basically a mass of bruises and bloody wounds. He sagged against the ground.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," he got out. "I owe you-"

"Nothing," I cut in, tone sharper than I meant it to be.

I refused to feel guilty. I was long past the luxury of clean choices, and just because today I'd chosen to keep him alive didn't mean that tomorrow would see me make the same decision. The boy looked like I'd slapped him and I sighed again.

"Consider this a wake-up call," I said. "This is what fighting with real Named and not Revenant puppets feels like. The Black Knight on the other side used a single aspect, not even in her real body, and she still nearly pulped you."

"You're not going to tell me it was foolish to fight?" the boy asked.

"It wasn't a foolish fight, you just fought foolishly," I corrected. "You likely saved a lot of soldiers' lives by stepping in, the part that needs work is the one where you almost died doing it. You won't be helping anyone when you're in a grave, maybe keep that in mind."

"Nothing we did got through her defences," Arthur admitted. "Even at our best we were simply holding on."

And in that sentence, in the anger – the unspoken urge to do better next time, the certainty that there would be a next time – I saw an opportunity. A tool. And I was enough of a monster to make use of it, even when I was using a boy barely more than a child.

"So prepare yourself," I challenged. "Train. Make tactics."

He was silent for a moment, exhausted and in pain, but eventually his blue eyes went steely. He nodded, brushing back a black lock stained with sweat and blood.

"I won't lose, next time," Arthur Foundling swore.

And with those words I'd invited, with the weight of them spoken by his lips, I knew I had made myself a sword. Because unless I was wrong, a Squire and a Black Knight had just fought. And the Squire had begun that fledgling, fragile pattern with a defeat.

If I stoked those embers just right, that story would end with my enemy's blood on the floor.

—

In the wee hours of the morning, I sat with Vivienne and Juniper to go over the butcher's bill. The good news was that, as far as dead bodies went, our losses were light.

"Ninety-three dead," the Hellhound said. "Most of them regulars. We can thin some cohorts to make up for it, we still have the numbers to absorb that."

"And we inflicted eighty-two casualties ourselves," Vivienne noted. "Considering it was a surprise attack fielding almost entirely ogres, we made off decently in that regard."

I grunted in agreement. The attacked had escaped, but not without taking losses equivalent to about eight out of ten.

"We'll see if Masego can crack the enchantments on the armours," I said. "It's unlikely there will be enough of those to equip more than a handful of elite units, but that would be troublesome enough on its own."

I got grimaces of agreement. Ogres were bloody difficult to kill, unless you had either magic or munitions to deploy against them. It was a clever decision for Marshal Nim to focus on stripping the sorcery option from us, considering the Army of Callow had been in chronic munition deficit for essentially its entire existence.

"Losses in supplies were not as grave as they could have been," Juniper continued. "We changed the layout of the supply depots compared to standard Legion camp templates-"

She had, actually, making a point of it before we began marching, but my marshal wasn't the boasting type.

"-so our current tallies have the losses mostly in dried meat and grain, about a third of our total stock," she continued. "If our numbers stay roughly the same, Catherine, we're now down to roughly four months of food."

From six to four, huh. Four months for an army that could use the Ways was a very different beast than for an army that couldn't, but this had still been uncomfortably costly. A lot of food had gone up in flame tonight.

"If you had to guess," I said, "were they able to figure out what our total amount of supplies would be?"

She flicked her fangs uneasily.

"It's likely," Juniper admitted. "They might be slightly off, but the quantities were roughly even between depots and there are only so many places in a camp to put those."

Which meant that by morning High Lord Sargon would know that we couldn't afford to siege Wolof if we were going to do anything else this campaign season. There just wasn't enough food in our possession to spend months besieging him and then war elsewhere. In other words, our negotiating position with him had just been dealt a severe blow.

"We'll hit Wolof tomorrow, then," I said. "There's no more time to waste. The moment the Concocter is done with the powder I'll set out."

"It'd be for the best," Juniper agreed.

"Sargon's unlikely to ask for talks when he has the advantage, so in a way this lends us an additional dose of discretion," Vivienne noted. "Yet that brings me to the last of our outstanding issues: the prisoners for Wolof."

"They've been ransomed," I said, though my tone was neutral.

It wasn't a commitment so much as a statement. The High Lord of Wolof had paid the gold I'd asked for, and promptly too.

"We don't have that ransom anymore," Juniper said, "and it was taken by his empress. That's on him too."

It was, I wouldn't disagree with that.

"You want to keep them?" I asked.

"That or hang them," Juniper bluntly said. "We've been taken for a ride, Catherine. Maybe a point needs to be made."

"I don't think Sargon actually has anything to do with this," I admitted. "This has all the telltale marks of a Legion operation and he would have no pull there. This seems like an attack by Marshal Nim on our supplies that got a secondary objective tacked on."

"Malicia *would* gain from our going back on our word here," Vivienne said. "It would make Praesi lords warier of striking bargains with us."

My eyes narrowed as I followed the threads.

"She wins if we give them over too," I spoke through gritted teeth. "Rubies to piglets that ransom gold is going straight back to Sargon's coffers, and very publicly. She'd be proving she can score victories against us *and* that she's still protecting her vassals."

Hells, the way it neatly landed her a win no matter what we did had me more convinced this was a Malicia ploy than anything else I'd heard tonight. It was *exactly* the kind of plot she liked use. I passed a hand through my hair tiredly.

"We release them come dawn, as I promised," I finally said. "I'd rather let her flash her feathers than risk burning bridges we'll need to cross when treaties are made."

For all that I'd come here with an army, it wasn't conquest I was after. And if I started letting Malicia bait me into hanging prisoners, she'd keep doing that until Praesi considered me not worth negotiating with. *Or I'll have to let things go after taking a hard stance the first time and changing tacks will make me look witless.* Fucking Malicia. She really was a devil to deal with, when she had a good general to play off of. I could only

imagine how much worse it would be if she still had Black under her. Angry as I was at how we'd been had, I mastered myself. Fine, she'd stuck a knife in us and it had stung. This was the kind of game she most excelled at and we were in her own backyard.

Tomorrow, we'd do things *my* way.

ruduen

Boost! <http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Ah, it's been a while since we've had a pattern of three. Though with the current White Knight still alive, I do wonder what that means for Arthur's name by the time it reaches a resolution. It's not impossible, but it seems unlikely for Hanno to be gone by the time this particular side journey is complete, and it I'd think that the final encounter for the pattern would be done by then.

7imelock

Perhaps he could have a different name like Knight Errant or whatnot

dadycoool

I'm personally convinced that he'll be the Black Knight to the Black Queen. She'll likely have her own name by then, but I'm pretty sure it was said at one point that Squires typically turn into Black or White Knights. If lesser knights don't need the Squire path, then not only does that justify them being lesser, it also raises the minimum power level, etc. of Black and White Knights. Also, there's only ever one Squire at a time, so it doesn't make sense that every variety of Knight needs to be a squire first.

Pethrai D'arkos

I highly doubt that Black/White Knight actually require that you be the Squire first anymore than Warlock would require you to be the Apprentice first. It's certainly helpful but there's only so many transitory names to go around while Below tends to have claimants fight to the death for the more important names.

Bad@games

We know for a fact hanno was not the Squire at all, so its not required, but just common.

[eleniaturner](#)

We have hard confirmation that they don't require a Squire first, with Nim. She just had to be named Malicia's Black Knight.

Levi Kalden

No I think she was the Black Knight and she made it official at that point

[Casey Glick](#)

Arthur seems like he'll go to a broad Knight name. He is Callowan, but has been fighting against the Dead, and for a new Praes, and probably for the Liesse Accords when they're signed.

Knight of the Realms
Peacekeeper Knight
Knight of the People

Cpt. Obvious

The mechanism behind the name Squire is something of a conundrum. It's a name that can transition into either black or white knight. But those names can also be picked up without ever being the Squire.

Now some acquires the name of Squire directly while others first are Claimant, which is yet another transition name, and has to compete with the other claimants to earn the name of Squire.

Do we know if the Claimants always are evil? It sounds a bit rich to have good claimants murdering each other while it's just another day like any other for the Gods below.

Finally as there's times when claimants are named and it seems unlikely those with a Heroic bend would be OK with participating in a veritable Battle Royal over the name, is it certain that the alignment of the Squire always results in them transitioning into the knight of the same alignment?

Or can a Squire switch alignment before transitioning?

All in all I think it seems like whenever a Squire surfaces the pattern has it aimed at a certain knight position, and none but those of the right alignment need to apply.

Earl of Purple

The Valiant Champion mentions once off-hand that she had to fight Claimants for her Name.

The differences between Cat and Arthur as Squire is most notably that Cat signed up with Below whilst Arthur signed up with Above, and they grant Names differently. Besides which, the Squire Name was handed out to Cat because Amadeus was looking for one- so people who wanted the Name gathered up. Arthur wasn't so formalised, but still he had to do something more heroic (I think) than all the other squires in the Order of the Broken Bells to get the Name.

And the Black and White Knight thing is probably because Amadeus is Praesi; he knows Namelore, but mostly Praesi Namelore. The Squires of the Dread Empire transition to Black Knight; the most notable Squires in Callow become the White Knight. Other Knights may well be available for Squires to transition into, if the right circumstances are met. For example, if there's a White and Black Knight already but the Squire's story carries them to the right pivot.

Sylfa

Note that the current Black Knight never was a Squire. So no, being a squire isn't required.

Nor is there a direct and guaranteed direction that a transitional name have to go.

Zeze didn't become Warlock, Akua became Diabolist, etc. Cat went well off of the beaten path and seems to become Black Queen.

The only thing that seems guaranteed is that transitional names go to young people that are likely to become named if they don't die before that.

shikkarasu

It was clarified that Squires turn into Black/White Knights and Apprentices can likely become any magical Named (leaning heavily toward their teacher's Names), while Heir/esses can become *anything*.

I think there are three 'Tiers' of Name: Transitional Names (Squire, Apprentice, Heir, etc.) Standard Names that can be transitioned to, but do not require it (Knights, Wizards, Diabolists, etc.) and what I am dubbing Capstone Names (King, Queen, Tyrant, Hierarch, et.). The Capstones

are more of an anti-Heir: they are Names that anyone can transition to.

hakureireimu

It didn't mean that Squires can only turn to either of them.

[Liliet](#)

So far people have been talking about Capstone Names as ruler Names

shikkarasu

I think that Saint of Swords is similar. It seems odd to me that someone would *start* their Named career with a title like that, or that Ranger would take an interest in a fresh Named without all of their Aspects (Saint only gained **Listen** after being disembowelled by Ranger). That makes me think she started as something like the Lone Swords(wo)man and transitioned into Saint, something like a ruler Name where the only qualifier is being unfairly good at swords, even by Named standards.

This whole post is, of course, heavy speculation.

Earl of Purple

We have an AMA that stated that Saint of Swords started out with the transitive Name of the Wanderer. We don't know when she transitioned, nor how many Aspects she had at the time- it's possible that Listen was her first Aspect as Saint of Swords, and it was the fight against Ranger that caused her transition.

shikkarasu

I missed that AMA, but thank you! Good to know I wasn't that far off.

...also I want to see young Laurence fight a Colossus, now.

[Liliet](#)

We have WoE her first transitional Name was Wanderer.

Also that Saint at her peak would have had a fifty-fifty chance against Ranger, and in her late years about forty-sixty..

And it was baby Laurence herself who challenged Hye, not the other way around.

Cap'n Smurfy

We see it with Bumbling Conjuror as well, where he could have become Conjuror.

Miley

The Names aren't that rigid. It's all about the Role. The transitional names are so because they describe people whose Role is to learn to be something. A Squire is preparing to take a Knight role, an Apprentice is learning to take their Master's role, an Heir is going to take over the family business and estates, and whatever Roles come with that.

But nothing is forcing anyone to actually take those roles, other than the extra work it takes to change what you do.

Aleksander Ross Møller

That is certainly a possibility. But I don't think that Cat is going to be the Black Queen. She had that exact possibility back when her hand was forced at the Doom of Liesse, and it was averted. Now it's just a title. Whatever name is evolving seems to be broader in scope than something dual like black and white. This leads to my pet theory that Arthur will also differ from the old duality. I'd personally love the Grey Knight, although that name itself might still be too entrenched in the old war between black and white.

ohJohN

I think Arthur becoming the Black Knight is incredibly unlikely, primarily because Black Knight is an Evil and uniquely Praesi Name.

Cat, another Callowan Squire, had a good shot at claiming it, but she was already a villain, a citizen of the Empire (because Conquest), and taught by some of its greatest villains in recent memory, with Amadeus intending for her to inherit his legacy. Before meeting him, she wasn't particularly inclined towards Above and her plans (join the Legions, gain enough power to force change) better fit a villainous mold, and even if the Fourfold Crossing is to be believed and she had the potential to be a hero, she would have been a darker, bloodier type.

With Callow's independence, Arthur no longer has any real claim on Praesi Names. He is learning from a villain, but not a Praesi one, and without the weight of an "official" mentorship. I'll concede that it's an era of great upheaval, so maybe with Callow under the rule of a villainous queen the Name could mutate to fill a Callowan groove – the land *is* famous for its knights and now (at least nominally) on the side of Below, with close historical ties to the Name's birthplace.

But even then I think Arthur is too solidly a hero to be a good fit: I believe it's been shown that he can use Light, he's caught the eye of the Hashmallim (the Penitent's Blade dreams), and in their first meeting Cat notes that he's "almost offensively" heroic in appearance and disposition before he confirms his alignment with an offended "I'm not a *heretic*."

Above has their hooks in deep, and while Vivienne was a much shallower heroine (no Light, no Choir, a criminal Name born from a mostly personal grudge) I'm not sure she ended up fully or deeply on the side of Below after joining the Woe – IMO almost definitely not enough to claim a classically Evil Name as her next, whatever it ends up being. Arthur would have a significantly steeper hill to climb to switch teams, and I don't think being young and impressionable around some moderately Evil influences is anywhere near enough to get him there.

Linnus42

I mean White Knight is not the only Knight Name around. There are a lot of Knight Names one can get. Also Arthur has no particular connection to Hanno and even if he got the Name isn't exactly going to be leading any Heroes. Doesn't have the skills, power is debatable with a new no name, and doesn't have the Trust being closely tied to Cat won't do him many favors in winning any votes.

MixSwitch

Grey Knight? For a new era under the Cardinal and the Accords?

[*Liliet*](#)

There'd been WoE in early books saying that Calernia doesn't have the cultural basis for a Grey Knight. I doubt that'd have changed so fast, especially when the Knight variants are functionally limitless.

Shveiran

To be fair, it has been years, and they have been tumultuous years.

I'm not saying he'll become the Grey Knight, just that there is no guarantee that this particular WoE still applies.

Miley

It seems odd to me that squire has to be either a black or white knight. My money's on a Callowan knight name.

Darkening

There was a conversation at one point that went along the lines of, 'A squire must become a knight, either White or Black, nothing else.' It took Cat eating *an entire faerie court* to break away from that role into something else. Sure, she could have become a ruler name, since everyone seems to be able to do that. But the conversation was basically her asking, "Can I become a different knight while the black and white knights are alive?" As a way of avoiding killing black, and having her hopes shot down.

Deworld

I don't think Arthur will get a new Name out of killing Nim. He's just too young. 16 years old, he's been a Squire for, like, few months at most? At this point Cat still had nothing but lessons with Amadeus. Hero!Cat from Fourfold Reflection fought in rebellion for a couple of years before killing Black and becoming White Knight.

Unless Arthur's pattern takes more than a year (at least) to complete, it would be too early for him to become a Knight. And considering how determined Cat is in removing Malicia, and that she has a strict time limit, I doubt it'll be the case. Squire still has too much to learn.

Juff

Typo Thread:

I recognize her > I recognized her
instead of drew > instead drew
used drove > drove
From the corner (extra space)
blown of my > blown off my
flank tell > flank to tell
attacked > attackers
things ago > things go

Frivolous

Also cord, not chord. Chord is mostly musical in context. Cord is similar to rope.

Very common error in fiction, like using diffuse a situation when it should be defuse. Situations being like bombs; you don't want them to blow up.

Lox

Huh, what you said made sense, but it's new to me. Looking at a dictionary tells me I can still use diffuse for riots though.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Disperse is better, when crowds get violent.

Darkening

Diffuse would be more calming down the rioters, disperse would be violently suppressing the riot.

[pirateddesigns](#)

"Within moments of leaving Twilight I had my eyes on maybe twenty towering silhouettes"

Should be, "I had my eye on..."



Black Spiral Dancer

Not the only phrase that happened, either. There was a bit about her "eyes narrowed" that make no sense with one eye only.

[Mental Mouse](#)

True, but it's her own narration, so her internal speech may not have adapted to her maiming.

therealgridlock

Typo thread!

" to shape Nigh,t in between "

>Obvious comma in incorrect place

Kel the Seer

but I was forced to abandon the working when another ogre *used drove* a javelin like a spear into my flank.

The word **used** may have been left over from an earlier edit
dadycoool

This was a very fun battle. It's so cool to watch Cat lean into her roles like she did there.

Ooh, I've been suspecting that Arthur would become the Black Knight, so this Pattern of Three that Cat just got him to initiate is very exciting to me.

It's always a bad time going up against a Dread Empress/Emperor. That this is one with, what, 40 years of experience only makes it worse. Pro: she doesn't have her real Black Knight, she's acting like an Old Villain, and she's forcing Cat into being the underdog in the middle of her Transition. Con: she's still the Dread Empress with schemes upon schemes, resources to burn, and the ability to put Cat into the underdog position.

Konstantin von Karstein

I don't think Arthur will become the Black Knight. Here we have a young Hero who was attacked by a Villain and saved at the last moment by his definitely-not-mentor. It's more likely he will receive a Heroic Name, not necessarily White Knight.

Snappy

A point can be made for both white and black knights. Cat is the squire's patron and mentor and so he could become her black knight to her something name.

Or Hannon is going through a crisis of faith atm questioning his role and therefore his name. He could become something else and squire then takes his spot.

[Liliet](#)

I doubt he'd be *Black Knight*, but I can easily see him transitioning into a flavor of Paladin, or something like "Royal Knight".

Miley

Arthur literally can't become a black knight. He doesn't have the temperament of a villainous role.

Benjamin

Hmmm. This could have gone far, far worse for Cat. Also, the enemy can use Twilight? Since when? Did I miss something?

[Burlyraven](#)

Anybody living and magically gifted can use Twilight, and some exploratory Names can find gaps in reality. Permanent gates can also be made that only require an offering to open. Those are the only limits on access.

[Liliet](#)

*Anybody not DK's puppet can use it.

Shveiran

Anybody living can walk in it without combusting, but magic (or Names) are required to access the Ways.

Though the Praesi being mostly alive and having a lot of magic around, I suppose it isn't a surprise.

[Liliet](#)

Praesi are the most sorcerous nation on the continent. It's really, really not a surprise.

laguz24

It's not like twilight is something that is a secret, the grand alliance has been using it regularly. Plus malacia has the magical and espionage resources to steal, reverse engineer, or develop a way to use twilight in the time twilight has been active which has been around a few years by this point.

ohJohN

I had this exact same question! I started rereading during the hiatus and I'm getting close to the birth of Twilight, but I definitely remember Book V the least – I had the vague notion that there were some restrictions limiting its use to Grand Alliance members, or something along those lines. In retrospect, it would be incongruously short-sighted of everyone involved to bind access to a new plane of existence to something as fleeting as a wartime coalition of nations 😊.

[Liliet](#)

Also, probably not possible.

aurikdomi

I don't know Liliet that sounds very age of wonders to me, binding great power to something flimsy. (I enjoy the picture of the hell eggs as being like actual eggs, a kid with a stick could mess up the runes keeping the demon contained hence the need to hide them away behind more substantial) or flying fortresses or whatnot.

Liliet

Well, maybe if it was Cordelia giving her crown to shape it, but it was Pilgrim. He's not really so Grand Alliance-y as to be able to bake it into the bones of the realm.

Miley

The only thing that ever stopped people was the danger.

It's a lot safer to travel now that the courts are missing their crowns.

Liliet

Oh no, Arcadia's still full of pointy fae. There's a united court now.

Twilight, now...

Burlyraven

I think this is the most dangerous part of Nim having a Name. The ogres are reclusive normally, but it's very likely they take pride in her status, and Legion recruitment numbers have been on the up lately, if I had to guess.

Sicking Arthur on Nim is both a brilliant and terrible idea. The rule of three basically says that if he can survive, he'll kill her, and get a Name out of it, but it's the aftermath that worries me. Evidence says he's too natural of a Hero to do something like take the Black Knight title for himself, and Hanno's claim on White Knight was already kind of dodgy. I can't say for certain what will happen, but it just feels like Cat's going to be making a shocked Pikachu face when the dust settles on that.

Earl of Purple

Ogres are rare and inbred with fertility issues. I doubt the Hall of Skulls is sending more ogres than usual into the Legions, and whoever rules the ogres would send equal amounts to Sepulchral as well. They stay as neutral as they can, always. It's why Cat had Hune, keep an ogre close to all powers that might end up in the Tower.

Zach

I'm a little confused about people who keep saying Arthur will "get a Name" out of his Rule of Three with Black Knight Nim; as far as I'm aware there's nothing in the story that ever implies that a Rule of Three results in someone getting a Name. Catherine had one and it didn't cause her to change Names from Square.

Burlyraven

He's not getting a Name from the rule of three, he's getting a Name from being a Squire locked in a rule of three with a Knight. Pretty old story.

Adrian V

MMM what if the aspect is Conscript?

And do the 2 kids have any aspects already (and how i laugh at Cat calling them kids, i wish Saint was still around to hear her/ or just notice it).

Malicia doesn't have a handle on Cat personality or capabilities, or rather she has an old one and refuses to acknowledge that she has grown and learned too much, part of it is that she has no way to know about Cat absorbing Bard's instincts but most is still her underestimating her.

Liliet

Malicia has a solid handle on Cat's personality actually, she's missing details but everyone is.

Her problem is she's overconfident in her assessment. It's good but it's not as good as she's acting like it is.

Oshi

I agree Malicia has a solid handle on Cat before the war and certainly before the Underdark. I don't believe she understands all of the changes Cat has gone through since returning or has an accurate assessment of how it shapes her.

Shveiran

I agree with Oshi, especially after the Prologue. Reading people is one of Malicia's best skills, but it looks... off with Cat.

I mean, she thought Catherine would settle down after the Night of Knives, whereas I think Winter Cat was more than a little likely to start dropping lava on Ater if the Everdark was shut on her fingers and she went back to square one. Let alone now, thinking she'd allow her enemy to comfortably harass her supply line...

shikkarasu

I have been waiting for Deputize/Conscript for years. I was expecting it to show up in some Paladin's bag of tricks. Great for desperate last stands. The enemy charge up the hill with their mages and their 10:1 odds and then oops, all Named.

Silverking

Malicia may be Story-blind, but she has honed the skill of “being too costly to mess with” down to a fine edge. So, if the person you were threatening with a siege gets both the hostages AND the gold while knowing your food is running out, how do you flip the script?

...Well, I don't know, but Cat does.

Shveiran

Well, you make the conflict become something other than a siege.

I don't know how she'll do it, but all these considerations about food and gold are only really relevant so long as the Army of Callow is stuck outside the walls. As soon as they can get through, they regain an overwhelming advantage.

The D

She is going to set it on fire, of course. Accidentally.

Konstantin von Karstein

Cat, Indrani and 2 other people are going to infiltrate the city and do... something?

The D

She is going to set it on fire, of course. Accidentally.

Snappy

It was implied that they were going to rob Wolof of their magical libraries.

They are aiming to humiliate malica by weakening her biggest ally. Robbing them of magic, food and money but not actually taking the city cause that would take too long.

This hopefully convinces her other allies to stop supporting her.

Shveiran

How they'll do that without Thief, I do not know.

But I want to find out.

[*Liliet*](#)

Indrani and Cat both have sticky fingers tendencies, and we don't know Vivienne isn't coming with.

Shveiran

It was more about the lack of bag of holding than the fingers.

Aside from the fact that Vivienne doesn't have one anymore, I doubt Cat will bring her along for a dangerous mission in enemy territory. Viv just isn't Band of Five material anymore, it would be an incredible risk for no real gain. She is a human politician (with infiltration training) now, and she is too valuable to risk.

[Liliet](#)

Night functions as a bag of holding for Cat actually. Maybe not sun-sized or river fleet-sized, but

Shveiran

It did, yeah, so maybe that's it. We still don't know how much the scale of her powers was affected.

Miley

You steal all the enemys food before they realize they need to close their gates and then make the enemy ruler eat their own fingers in front of you before selling them a bit of food back for the gold they stole from you.

One thing I think we're forgetting is Cat never intended to siege wolof. The plan was always to misdirect, raid, and move on.

Aston Whiteman

I'm waiting for Cat to allow a technological advancement by the Tower so the gnomes fly in and nuke everywhere.

Just one more letter...

Miley

They'll nuke the whole continent.

[308924810a](#)

Huh, ogres are hard to kill, so garbing them in antimagic/ enhanced durability armor makes them immune to nearly everything but munitions. An interesting addition to my understanding of fantasy tactics in this setting.

I might not entirely agree with the way Twilight is used or with some of the assumptions around the war of the dead, but the tactical scenarios remain interesting.

Konstantin von Karstein

Could you elaborate on the Ways' use and the war North?

[308924810a](#)

My issues with the war north:

The choice to cut a pair of trenches across the length of the continent is of dubious value, even if they have a perfect knowledge of where all the attacking undead are at all times it's still impossible to prevent them from bypassing those forces trying to defend the trench by using their superior numbers and superior in-reality marching speed/endurance to get to places where the defending force isn't present, cross and flank them.

While yes the Romans occasionally dug long trenches to help cover their foraging parties against the raids of hostile foraging parties, that mostly only had a psychological effect on discouraging enemy raiders/reducing the angles cavalry could approach from without dismounting to make a bridge with wood, and it was only possible to achieve any practical combat advantage from these when the area was utterly saturated with troops, and your own force is at least as numerous and fast-marching as the enemy. Similarly they only got to take advantage of trenches that fail to completely surround the defender either when their enemy were acting like overaggressive idiots, or when they were only trying to make attacks from certain directions look less practical to tempt the enemy to fight on a different angle.

You could maybe get some benefit from a pair of trenches cut across the continent by making them close together and cut by further trenches into a series of squares small enough that a patrol could defend one of them, but even then the value is dubious and the Grand Alliance gets the same function out of the wagon fortresses we've been shown them using.

The primary concern when trying to prevent enemy leakers is in detection, which would be achieved through ground scouting, scrying/counterscrying superiority, and flying scouts. If you're willing to intercept them at any point along the length of the front and into either your own, or the enemy's depth, instead of committing yourselves to trying to block them all at a linear point of depth along the front, the strategic repositoning speed advantage of Twilight is easier to bring into play(as opposed to the lesser strategic but greater tactical advantage of undead being able to march double time for days without tiring), and with that advantage and a skilled and quick command loop it becomes possible to drastically outnumber them in every skirmish.

This in turn incentivises concentration again and moves the war away from a linear army structure and back into an atomic

army structure as the enemy stops scattering into groups of a few hundred or thousand like what Raiza Tenjin fought that one time when he lost a relative, and instead the undead concentrate either in forces that are too big to be outnumbered, or behind extensive fortifications, or in tiny groups of probably less than fifty, hoping to escape notice as they infiltrate.

And I know the obvious response to the way I've structured my argument is 'that's exactly what they were trying to prevent with the trenches', but that's my point, it shouldn't work. The trenches aren't enough fortification to allow a present Grand Alliance force to stall much against an equal or superior force, and the ability to stop small enemy patrols and raids should work or fail on information regardless of style of fortification.

That's not to say that trenches have no place. They're very useful for defending fortresses and temporary camps, and alongside tricks like breaking dykes or building dams to flood an area, or cutting down trees and sharpening branches to make Abbatis, they can be used to block the likely lines of advance for large armies and make the enemy slow down and bunch up in front of ranged weapons.

So while leakers should only be blocked by information superiority, large armies should really only be slowed by a mix of repeated obstacles and firing positions along their path of advance. But the firing positions needs to be well-defended enough that random patrols ranging slightly ahead of the advancing army can't just clear them without at all slowing the army (and the firing positions needs to be there covering blockages to prevent random patrols from clearing them/filling the trench in dozens of places every day, only one of which the enemy main army will push through.) In practise this means building something like the lines of Torres Vedas, where you've got a bunch of small forts overlooking likely angles of approach that have been blocked. In PGtE I think the ideal form of tiny cheap fort capable of stalling large enemy forces might be something like a small hill with the edges removed to make a cliff edge by digging, lake-dropping erosion, or a combination of the two, to prevent sheer weight of numbers from overwhelming an undermanned shooting position. A wooden Palisade on top to provide cover in an exchange of missile weapons and advantage against climbers, and a defensible underground barracks and associated tunnels to provide cover against giant monsters and let them pull tricks on hostile Revenants like dropping ceiling slabs on them or trapping them in front of a Balistae in a hallway too narrow to dodge in (bonus points if it's still possible to shoot at the army outside from within the tunnels, more bonus points for the underground section if the

limited number of accesses makes it easier to ward against swarms), wards against swarms, and preferably some sort of hidden tunnel or access to Twilight/dimensional shortcut that allows the fort garrison to evacuate or receive reinforcements after being surrounded(necessary if these places are going to have mages or Priests assigned to them, those are in short supply and hard to replace).

While I think that design would be the cheapest for an army-staller semi-traditional fantasy-style fortresses would still have a role where preexisting or where the terrain is unsuited to just cutting the edges off a hill.

And in any case it's probably too expensive to put more than one(though possibly two or three) of these obstruction/fortress combos along each of the likely paths of an enemy advance.

TLDR: I don't like how fortification is handled, it clashes with my understanding of what fortifications can actually accomplish.

Another issue I have with the war north/Ways use is that it's never mentioned whether them not conducting constant raids into the enemy depth, all the way past the other shore of the lakes to outnumber and crush isolated groups is just because it hasn't occurred to anyone that this should be a priority, or whether it not happening constantly and in great prevalence is a defeat the Dead King has inflicted on the Grand Alliance by constantly keeping the pressure on and preventing them from having the forces to spare/keeping them from getting enough information/scouting opportunities to find his forces. Still it's unclear why a bunch of small armies can't just lurk in areas of Twilight adjacent to enemy territory sending out scouts and pouncing on anything isolated they see, again making the enemy's situation awkward as they're forced to only move around in very large groups.

Cat's explanation of why they can't resupply through Twilight: a need to have mages or Priests, with every caravan eventually taking up all of the mages and priests they need for other things, has too many unresolved logical flaws. Why does there need to be a gate-capable caster with every group? Can't they just keep them with the army and the source of the supply caravans, with the gates with the army opening at predetermined time ranges and locations and the caravan finding them?

If there strictly needs to be a gate-capable caster with every group that goes in for some reason or if Twilight is too chronologically or locationally imprecise for that, what about building twilight-side supply depots ahead of time near the independent path of an offensive, and leaving hidden markers in reality so an army on the march can know where to

cross over to scout around in Twilight and find their supply depot?

Also I feel like removing the Pilgrim's resurrection aspect, not introducing another hero with any similar skill, and failing to acknowledge that the Dead King, as the foremost Necromancer of the age and a guy who should have former healer Named among his Revenants, can probably reconstruct or repair any Revenant that falls in battle, so long as the soul and ravaged body make it back to him, was a wasted opportunity where we could have gotten to examine some of the really fantastical aspects of Named conflict in the setting, in that killing a combatant isn't always permanent.

[308924810a](#)

Edit: I mean we've already examined how people don't always stay dead, ever since the Liesse rebellion arc.

What I'm trying to convey would be interesting is that once you have enough Named organized there should be ways of cheating death that apply to them all and can make average forms of death cheap.

So in response Named would take on even riskier or overtly suicidal actions out of the belief that they are important enough to be brought back from it and their sacrifice would be useful, or become traumatized from repeatedly dying, or be established as being justified in being fearless of death, only to have the enemy deploy a more irreversible form of killing or to capture them alive to torture or cripple them.

Miley

Can't they just keep them with the army and the source of the supply caravans, with the gates with the army opening at predetermined time ranges and locations and the caravan finding them?

This makes me doubt your claims of knowing anything about how military operations work. No, the *supply caravans* would all starve to death with this approach.

[308924810a](#)

I'm not sure how you think the supply caravans moving through Twilight would starve to death. They'd be moving the same distance over the same time as an army traveling through Twilight.

So if armies don't starve to death in transit neither should caravans.

Did you think that the issue is that they wouldn't know where to go to get out of Twilight?

Or do you think the issue is that the army won't open ways

out for them at the scheduled times? I mean sure that could happen if they're under attack or all their gate casters were killed, but at that point either the loss of caster means that the army is soon to be lost to swarms, or the army can open a gate in the scheduled place at an UN-scheduled, later, time and give the pack animals on the other side a way out.

While if none of the ways intended to allow them to join with the army work the supply caravans can just turn back and head for their point of origin(which would presumably be a permanent gate in this scenario).

Maybe with a day or two tacked on to a journey for caravans as it turns out that the army has not reached the intended destinations at the intended times and there is a need to repeatedly have someone with the army pop into Twilight and either scry the caravan or send out a rider to carry a message, and the caravan is repeatedly re-directed to the new planned destination.

Or the caravan reaches the location at the planned time, but the army is a day late and they have to wait for them to catch up and open an interdimensional door.

Or the army is there on time, but someone breaks an axle midway through Twilight and then they're probably stuck unloading what they can on the other carts and leaving broken carts in Twilight in order to make their time window.

violentink

Twilight is definitionally a liminal and transitory realm. So yeah, it's too chronologically and locationally imprecise for any of the stuff you're talking about. I imagine it would reject any permanent colonisation like a supply depot as well.

[Liliet](#)

What trenches?

Konstantin von Karstein

A lot of very good points. Maybe you should sent them to EE so he could maybe try to edit things a bit?:)

Shveiran

Uh.

On one hand, it's so cool to see Cat on the right side of a Pattern of Three for once, that would be a very satisfying reversal.

Also, this is what I was talking about, Nim: you got a neat trick, but you just earned a defeat in a Pattern without even

noticing and for no lasting gain.
You are green, and you're gonna lose.

On the other hand, I'm somewhat miffed that they could shut down the Army's wards.

I mean, sure, Praes, trismegistan magic, yadda yadda.
But these wards were developed by the Arsenal and held up against the Hidden Horror, so the idea the Tower has an artefact that can just shut them down feels... kind of wrong.

Unless of course this is a plot point and Akua sabotaged them as part as the false betrayal, or something like that.

agumentic

I can guarantee you that DK himself could break those wards without even noticing them. They are a mass-produced work aimed at keeping away mass-produced works and normal magicians, the Tower having an artefact to bypass them is not strange at all.

Shveiran

Uh... no? Do you remember the battles in the last book? The wards were the foundation of the Alliance's strategies. If Neshamah could shut them down at will he would have.

Unless you mean in person? Then sure. But if he couldn't by proxy, it feels odd to me that the Tower can do so willy nilly.

[308924810a](#)

I mean, he had a spike that wouldn't just break them, but would catastrophically break them. And is allied to the tower, suppose he shared the design and some Praesi made an improvement on it, or this ward-breaker isn't normal mage-produced modern equipment, but is something produced as a masterwork by a past Named Warlock.

Possibly even Weska, given his specialties. All the Calamities made contingencies against eachother and collaborated in making it possible for the others to stop or kill them if they were subverted(ie, Masego willingly wearing the Goblinfire boobytrap), suppose Weska's counter against himself involved making ward-breaking artefacts and sticking them in the Tower vault.

[Liliet](#)

Wekesa.

And his contingency was entrusted to personally Amadeus, not Malicia, let alone whoever-has-the-Tower. Wekesa and Masego would not have been imprecise about that.

Still, yeah – Malicia has the same advantage Kairos did, which is to say insane variety of insane craftings in the vault.

Shveiran

He did have that spike, but that particular weakness was countered by the Arsenal, so that angle was covered.

The thing is, magic moves forward; it's not quite like science, because a lot of warlocks hoard secrets, but it moves forward. We have it on record that the Principate in the Uncivil Wars used scrying techniques that were "twenty years old" and that was implied to be obsolete.

And the utmost Praesi expert in wards in contemporary years was... well, Wekesa; who until very very late in his career would not have had any reason not to share with his son all he could. And even then, I doubt he gave the Tower something like a "list of ward secrets my son doesn't know".

What I'm saying is, I can buy that the Tower has magical superiority on a lot of things. I have a harder time buying that they have counters to the specific developments the Arsenal focused on (namely, wards and anti-undead spells).

If they have artefacts that can shut that down, I don't really buy they have enough to waste one on something that is not a crippling blow.

Endless active artefacts (summon a demon, bring down the sky, turn an army into a purple tapir commando), sure. But artefacts that interfere with spells designed centuries later? That's like Tesla having a counter for GPS systems.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, they probably have MILLENIA of once-a-generation-genius artefacts stored away. A lead sheet is a counter for GPS systems if you know to use it, and you know what's a better counter? Dynamite. Counters everything.

beleester

The new Black Knight introduced themselves not by crushing people in open battle, but by leading a well-planned commando raid. She definitely learned something from her predecessor.

[boballab](#)

No she didn't. Black would have never fought a Squire unless he knew he was there and had a planned attack that would have had

the Squire fight one of the other Calamities. If Black stumbled onto Squire like Nim did he would have immediately retreated so that a pattern of 3 could not form because he knew it would go against him being a big NAME villian.

[308924810a](#)

Or he would deliberately lose the first encounter between the two of them.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah this is *Malicia's* brilliance showing here, not anything learned from Amadeus.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, the military brilliance is most definitely not Malicia's.

Aduro95

And in that sentence, in the anger – the unspoken urge to do better next time, the certainty that there would be a next time – I saw an opportunity. A tool. And I was enough of a monster to make use of it, even when I was using a boy barely more than a child.

"So prepare yourself," I challenged. "Train. Make tactics."

Anyone else reminded of Ca making her first Pattern of Three?

I could kill him. Right now, right here, I knew deep in my bones that I could kill him. I might not be able to the next time we met, but this once the story's flow was in my favour. It was tempting, but at the edge of my mind I could make out a path. It was a dark one, strewn with ruin and the death of innocents, but hadn't I stopped pretending to be on the side of the Heavens the moment I'd taken the knife?

"Prove it," I rasped. "If you want your way to beat mine, then come at me again. Properly. Earn your Name, hero. Run and hide and muster your armies in the dark. Make deals you'll regret until you have nothing left to bargain with. I'll be waiting for you, on the other side of that battlefield."

Book 1 Chapter 12: Squire

[boballab](#)

Everyone is caught up in the Black Knight/Squire pattern that it doesn't seem anyone noticed Cat's NAME got stronger and her ROLE was shown: she is a coming into something that bends stories like the Bard does. Her boost didn't come into she realized that

Squire was in that spot due to Creation putting him there and she could use it.

[sengachi](#)

Mhmmm. Yeah Cat, you *totally* saved Squire totally for his utility in killing Nim. And for no other reason.

[308924810a](#)

What I question is why the exchange of prisoners and hold didn't happen simultaneously, as should be expected between parties who don't trust each other.

Was it a display of largesse by Sargon?(to be willing to instantly spend gold at even the chance of saving his people, though I'd think Praesi would view that as sign of gullibility or weakness)

Or was Sargon in on this attempt to score political points off of Catherine from the beginning, contributing to the plan to set up situations where she has to choose between looking weak or dishonorable?(and letting Malicia test which of her weird dichotomy of views of Catherine her perceptions and advisors have been feeding her is correct. She's been hearing people assuming that there's something sick or insane in Catherine, and that she might start dropping lakes on Praesi cities, and has been countering that view with her own assumptions that Catherine is willing to make a deal, neither of which is strictly accurate.)

[308924810a](#)

Edit: prisoners and GOLD

Miley

Exchanges between parties who don't trust each other are only simultaneous in bad Hollywood scenarios.

postal.pacifist@gmail.com

In reality, exchanges between parties who don't trust each other are kept to small sums, but not simultaneous unless it's just more convenient that way.

miles

Gods damn it ee please help.

[Liliet](#)

Because Sargon has a lot to gain from booby-trapping gold / raiding to get it back immediately, while the value of his soldiers to Catherine is ONLY the ransom / reputational effects

she can milk the situation for. There's every reason for HER to not trust HIM, but no basis for the reverse, and implying otherwise could be taken as a separate offense she'd make him pay for.

[sengachi](#)

I love how amazingly this chapter showcases the blind spot which will get Malicia killed while still making her be an incredibly competent and scary opponent.

She just organized, on basically no notice, a Named strike into an enemy camp with a hundred artifact-aided ogre heavies and mages using an incredibly modern and recent form of transportation. The raid took heavy losses but this is Praes, so par for the course. Given the degree of opposition they accomplished all goals to the greatest anticipatable degree, crippling Cat's ability to lay siege to Wolof (through information gained), limiting her operations capacity, striking an economic blow, and putting Cat in a terrible political position to boot. All of which required detailed military intelligence to pull off and was probably put into motion the moment Cat set foot outside Wolof, given how quickly it was pulled off.

That's terrifying. That's just *terrifying*.

If this were any other magical war fantasy story this whole thing would be an unequivocal disaster for Cat and the prospect of facing more strikes like that in the future would be terrifying.

But in this story there are Heroic roles and stories which Malicia is just not as good at Amadeus at predicting. And so she is screwed. She basically signed her Black Knight's death warrant, sending her (even through a half-power proxy) to raid a camp the young Squire was in.

To use a chess metaphor, Malicia traded some unimportant pawns of her own for some of Cat's strategically important pawns. But without realizing it, because she doesn't full understand the rules of Heroic warfare, she put a timer on her queen which ensures it'll just fall over at the *worst* possible moment for her.

[benthelynx](#)

There is a groove in stories where the one who tells the hero to 'train so next time you can win' dies. It's got mentor crossover. I hope something comes of that little slip :p

[Liliet](#)

Especially when the mentor is a reluctant one who keeps insisting they are doing things NOT out of attachment to their student but for completely unrelated pragmatic reasons, but secretly has a heart of gold.

Denial kills villains, Catherine. Please, please stop.

Shveiran

Yeah, but that trope is part of the student's story. The Squire just doesn't have enough weight to drag the Black Queen into it unless she makes the Squire pivotal to her own.

Things are just... so much larger than Arthur Foundling. And so long as they stay that way, Catherine is safe.

[Liliet](#)

Unfortunately this trope centers on the Mentor's personal internal journey from denial to acceptance and eventual self-sacrifice.

Also, Arthur Foundling has HELLA weight. He's Callow's first hero since the Liesse Rebellion, and visibly following in Catherine's footsteps as a Laure Foundling Squire. There's that sword, too. Creation is paying him plenty of attention.

Shveiran

Compared to the average squire, sure! That is simply not enough weight to compare.

Take Hainaut as an example. It was a pivotal moment for the largest war on the continent since time immemorial, and the Squire (a martial Name) was present. His contribution was killing a nameless Ravenant.

Do you see what I mean?

He is a scrappy orphan with a tragic background and lots of ideals and YES, that means a lot of potential, but he is coming late to the party.

If he survives, he'll be the veteran in whatever band he'll lead after the colossal war, but he doesn't have enough weight to be important DURING the war.

There are too many stories here, and he is bound to none. You know who is bound to most? Catherine Foundling.

Now, maybe, in time, Arthur may acquire bonds to more stories. Of course. But that won't happen unless Catherine starts referring to him as "the son I never had" because the only way that can happen in time for him to matter in the war is through her.

Which is why she's being careful.

Of course Creation is paying him attention! It just takes time for that to amount to shit. One day, maybe he'll grab that blade and cut down the Black Queen in a tragic showdown filled with "I-can't-and-yet-I-must", but that won't happen for years yet, for the same reasons why Warlock one-shot the Bumbling Conjuror. There is such a thing as playing out of your league.

[Liliet](#)

There is such a thing as... uh... like, you know how Harry Potter was a baby when he killed Voldemort? He didn't actually DO anything, he just was there and Voldemort killed himself against him because of his own character flaws.

That's what would happen to Cat if she ends up denying that she cares about the Squire until she sacrifices herself to save him because n000000!

[boballab](#)

Cat is trying to walk the line that Black did for her...without actually setting up one of her friends in her place. That is what happened to Black, he used Saba for most of Cat's training and thought he was the Story driven death coming and the Bard exploited that.

[Liliet](#)

Black didn't really do that. Sabah trained Cat some, but she didn't die as Cat's mentor. She died as the person who was best loved by everyone involved, in the "beginning of the end" way.

ninegardens

The "Sacrificial Lion" as it were... which just works even better with her in Beast mode.

Chapter 6: Retaliation

"And so a great host came to stand before the Sererian Walls, led by four kings and three queens who meant to raise Aslam Isbili as king over Wolof. Their envoys were scorned by High Lady Akua of the Sahelians, and so in great anger did they storm her walls. Seven times and

one was the army driven back, broken by sorcery until corpses stood tall as hills. Only then did High Lady Akua answer the envoys, speaking thus: 'Have you come to win a crown, or lose seven?'"

– Extract from the Scroll of Ruin, twenty-fifth of the Secret Histories of Praes

There were eleven different secret passages into the city of Wolof and all of them were traps.

Akua had told me that one of her distant ancestors, after discovering several made by disloyal vassals aiming to overthrow the Sahelians, had decided instead of walling them up to make several more. High Lord Kofi had then seeded rumours about their existence, fake traitors and secret scrolls, and sat back waiting for all his enemies to come at him by where he'd see them coming. The number of passages had grown over the years as people outwitted Sahelians for a time, but in the wake of those victories the family always reclaimed the fresh weakness and added it to their centuries-old ploy. I'd been halfway to admiring High Lord Kofi, until Akua noted he was also famous for his habit of throwing one of his cousins in a maze every summer solstice. Along with starved lions. It kept everyone on their toes, he'd claimed.

Praesi.

If there were no secret passages to use and storming the walls was too costly for us, then that left us few options to enter the city. Sneaking in as part of a delegation had been considered, but we'd be watched like hawks and likely kept under wards the whole time. Assuming we weren't just betrayed. Pickler had narrowed in on the aqueduct that fed the city as our way in, but her suggestion had been... overly bold. She'd wanted us to cut the water and send in goblins with munitions through the stone channel. They'd blow their way through the wards at the end and we'd funnel troops into that foothold by the dry aqueduct, taking enough of the city by surprise that Sargon was forced to either negotiate or suffer a sack. Problem was, I had my doubts that we *could* secure that foothold.

The aqueduct whose source was deep in the Jinon Hills was squatted over by the fortress of the same name, then whipped across the valley in straight line, but welcoming it into Wolof was yet another set of fortifications. The Sahelians weren't fools, they'd known the running water was the weakness in their wards. The place was fortified thoroughly and garrisoned through day and night: even if we *did* take the soldiers there by surprise, I figured it was a toss up whether we'd win the fight. And if we lost it, well, that'd get *bloody*. So a somewhat quieter way in was needed, which had led me to our current scheme. Namely, my old Everdark crew resurrected for one more jaunt: a

more subtle infiltration of the city through the same weakness Pickler had identified.

I'd needed the Concocter to make it feasible, since without the ability to breathe in water that was a very long swim, but those vials and ransacking through the remains of the old Sudden Abjuration project had gotten me the right tools. Cordelia had been the one to most benefit from the emptying of the Arsenal, since she'd been able to take all the half-finished projects and throw them at the Dead King on various fronts, but taking the Concocter east had paid dividends for me. I knew the First Prince appreciated me not drawing too heavy on the pool of heavy hitters among Named, too. She'd not be so grateful if she knew I'd not shortchanged myself in the slightest, simply picking mine for stories instead of raw war potential. The Barrow Sword so that I could tie him up with the Blood, all of Ranger's surviving pupils for when it inevitably came to blows with her, two kids approaching the time of their transition into a more settled Named – hanging swords I could bring down, pulling at the right strings. It was a pretty little arsenal, though it would not be of use here in Wolof.

No, here it was an older company that'd be taking the field again.

"I'd always imagined that if I crossed the Sererian Walls again it would either be as Empress or as bones," Akua said, eyeing the shape of the city in the distance.

"Well, you're slightly bones," Indrani mused. "You know, in a poetic sense."

"Ah, bones," the woman who had once been the heiress to Wolof drawled. "Those famously incorporeal body parts."

She made her shape turn shadowy for a moment to hammer the point home before returning to her usual guise.

"Poetry's all about metaphors, Heirloom Haunt," Indrani sneered. "It's a mark of your inferior education you don't know that."

Akua's face creased with what appeared to be genuine outrage.

"You were raised in the *woods*," she replied.

"I guess it must just be the gap between our natural talents, then," Indrani airily replied.

"There was a time where I would have had had you drowned for that sentence," Akua noted.

"Well," Indrani said, eyeing the aqueduct. "Day's young. Give it a shot."

Idly, I wondered if it was too late to replace one of them by Hakram. Sure, given how much metal he wore these days he'd swim about as well as a rock but I was having to weigh the prospect of dragging him along the bottom the whole time against at least a day of this.

Convenience *narrowly* won out.

"All right, let's get this going," I said. "The timing will get tricky if we linger."

I got a mocking salute from Archer and a graceful nod of acknowledgement from Akua, sparing one last look for the distant shape of Wolof before I left. The ramparts up here did have an amazing view during the day. We headed down into the belly of the beast, and I split from them to have a short conversation with the commander leading the garrison. He confirmed that Hierophant was already getting started on his ritual, which meant we needed to get going. I ordered him to get the gears moving and followed my companions below, to the source feeding the aqueduct.

It was bare-bones, for such a crucial location, a cube of stone split in the middle by a rectangular 'river' that fed into the channel that would lead all the way to Wolof. The water actually came from further out, an underground spring deep in the hills, and this room had been raised for maintenance purposes. The stone conduct on raised steles – Pickler had commented unkindly on the way the Sahelians had been forced to fortify the stone with enchantments to compensate for not using arches the way the Miezens had – was dotted with warded "hatches" on the ceiling through which mages-engineers could enter to have a look at any blockage or foulness, but it wouldn't help the three of us: there wasn't enough space between the top of the channel and the water for anyone to be able to breathe reliably.

I would have been able to get around that with Night, probably by making a bubble around myself that let in air but not water, but the garrison would have seen us coming if we did. It would have tripped half a dozen wards on the aqueduct and destroying *those* would have tripped further defences. No, to go in quietly the solution was the water breathing potion. The three of us did a last check on our equipment before going into the water, professionalism finally shining through. Archer had been forced to abandon her usual bow, as it would be too large as well as enchanted, so she had a simple waxed shortbow with the backup strings stashed in a watertight bag along with her arrows. I'd shed the Mantle of Woe for this, settling for a simple grey cloak over my usual sword and armour.

Akua's clothes were sedate, and what she carried was not equipment meant for herself. The Concocter had finished the last of the ten bags of evanescent powder I'd requested half a bell ago, and they'd been brought straight here. The shade had them

all, held in segmented bags held by complicated knots. One pull at the right place and they'd spread out while the bags opened, which was our way in. Sudden Abjuration had been the Arsenal project to create an alchemical substance capable of mimicking the effects of holy water. We'd never managed to make one that'd make it affordable to go through with the plan behind the project, turning all the lakes between us and the Dead King into holy water, but we'd had some successes nonetheless.

The evanescent powder, for one, would wash out active sorcery on contact. Like wards and enchantments trying to keep us out of Wolof.

"Everyone ready?" I asked.

"Bit of a swim without the potion, Cat," Archer grinned.

I rolled my eye, then glanced at Akua.

"At your disposal, my heart," she said.

"You should be more like her," I told Indrani.

She let a deeply insulted gasp, as I'd known she would, and I shoved a small glass vial into her hand. I'd thought about throwing it, but I was not going to roll the dice on this entire operation just to be flippant. It'd taken the Concocter long enough to make four doses – two to enter, two to leave – that I was not going to risk it all just before we left. I took out my own vial, glancing at the pale blue liquid inside. It looked almost milk-like, which was not appetizing in the slightest given the hue. I uncorked it and raised the vial in a toast that Indrani met, and it was bottoms up for the both of us. The entire thing tasted foul, like chalk cut with refuse, but I forced myself to swallow. I breathed in a few times, trying to get myself used to it.

On the surface it didn't feel like anything changed, but my lungs felt... heavier. Like something had grown.

"We only have an hour," I said. "Let's not waste it."

I went first, even though I wasn't the strongest swimmer – Indrani – as I saw best in the dark. And it was only moments before it was all pitch black, all the worst parts of swimming and crawling in a tunnel put together. A few strokes forward and already my lungs were burning, and I find myself fighting breathing in the water even though in principle I knew that I'd survive it. I ended up swallowing it all in a gulp, but the water didn't go any further than my mouth: a thin membrane had sprouted and it served as a filter, letting through air and not water. It was uncomfortable, unnatural even, but it worked so I grit my

teeth and kept swimming forward. I could feel Akua right behind me, patiently waiting.

Shades didn't need to breathe, which at the moment I felt to be somewhat unfair.

Like most adventures, it didn't feel all that exciting as we did it. It was work, tiresome swimming through a tunnel-like channel of fresh water. I was wet and cold and my arms quickly grew tired. Now and then we encountered small lights as we passed under maintenance hatches in the stone, which were warded instead of sealed tight, but aside from that it was swimming forward in a gentle, almost unnoticeable slope. It was hard to tell how long it took us. We'd estimated half an hour at a brisk pace, maybe three quarters of an hour in practice, and my finely detailed sixth sense telling me how close I was to dawn and dusk helped measure how long we were taking.

We were slower than anticipated, so we had about a quarter hour left before the potion ran when we finally arrived at the gatehouse. I gestured for the other two to stop, studying the steel grid in front of us. The builders of this gatehouse had been faced with a problem when raising it, namely that you couldn't actually raise wards over running water. There were wards on both sides of the channel I could see going into the gatehouse, a large stone room where I could glimpse torchlight through the water's surface. In the water itself, though, the Sahelians had been forced to instead use three enchanted metal grids to prevent infiltrators going through.

That was our opening, actually. As with all fortresses, its true weakness was not in the walls or the gates but in the petty demands of maintenance. In this case, should debris large enough to go through the bars of one grid got stuck on the bars of another grid there needed to actually be a way for someone to *get it out*. Preferably without, you know, this turning into a major undertaking involving knocking down walls or parts of the aqueduct. So the builders had put 'doors' in the grids, large enough for a small person to swim through if they held themselves horizontally. Those doors were held fast with very physical steel padlocks and more eldritch keyed enchantments, and they were our way into the city of Wolof.

Archer swam forward, elbowing me in our narrow confines, and had a close look at the pair of padlocks on the door. She offered me a nod, which was a relief. She believed she'd be physically strong to pry those open using her Name, then. Tempting as it would have been for her to try it, we couldn't afford to right now: the damn things were enchanted to glow if anyone touched them. Sahelian paranoia was truly inspiring. The two of us awkwardly made room for Akua to swim past us, which she did with unearthly elegance in the middle of this cramped hellhole, and

golden eyes met mine to ask for the permission to begin. I nodded and the shade turned her back to the grids before pulling at the right rope, releasing all the knots holding closed the bags of evanescent powder.

It wasn't all that flashy a sight: the pale powders spread out in great clouds that faded quickly, and then the only sign they'd been used was that the water looked slightly thicker. The current guided it down, past all three grids and then beyond. Akua withdrew without a word, making room for Archer, and I clenched my fists as I watched her dart forward. After an agonizing moment she closed her fingers around the padlock and nothing happened at all. No glow, no alarm. I grinned. It'd worked. Indrani ripped open the padlocks methodically and swam through the door to get working on the second grid. Even after the unpleasantly long swim, I now felt full of energy: I took my sword off my belt, pulling it close so it wouldn't get in my way when I swam through.

Ahead, Indrani broke the last padlocks and I was gesturing for Akua to go ahead when I caught sight of shapes moving above the water. Hissing in dismay I flattened myself against the side of the channel, Akua doing the same behind me, but it was Archer in danger of being discovered. If she'd been in the dark she would have been fine, but moments later a long wooden staff was plunged into the waters and I saw that at its head was a stone enchanted to glow with light. Indrani had moved before she could be seen, hiding on the side of the wall in the dead angle, but the grid... I started with surprise. Oh, that canny wench. While I'd been panicking, she'd put the padlocks she'd broken on the last door back. They were still busted, but she'd hung them at an angle where it was hard to see.

There was the indistinct sound of people talking, at least three voices, and one seemed to be mocking another. The staff was suddenly withdrawn and I sagged in relief. If it'd come to a fight *here*, it might have gotten ugly. We waited as long as I dared, far after the voices had gotten distant. Our last quarter hour was thinning out dangerously and there was still more swimming ahead of us, so reluctantly I gave the signal again. Archer opened us the path through and we got moving, myself last and hanging the padlocks behind me as I closed the doors so that it would be hard to tell we'd passed. We had an even better cover for our tracks coming, but best not to get sloppy.

Hugging the bottom of the channel we went past the open channel in the torchlit room, into a squeezing tight tunnel that dropped downwards precipitously. Barely swimming at that point, I let myself be dragged forward and then swam up when we ended up where we'd meant to: the first of the three great reservoirs where the water from the aqueduct would be kept before going out into the city itself. The reservoir, little more than a large cistern,

wasn't entirely full: I breached the surface to moist air, finding Akua and Archer already climbing up towards the hatch at the top.

"Fuck me," I muttered, "it actually-"

I bit my tongue at the last moment. I refused to tempt Fate like that.

"You'll be all right climbing?" Archer asked in a murmur.

I glanced at the handholds they were using, little more than indents into the side of the wall – people had to be able to come down to check for leaks or trash – and grimaced before I nodded. The herbs I'd taken for the pain in my leg were beginning to fade, but I'd make it up. It just wouldn't be pleasant, during or after. Indrani tried to push open the stone hatch but it didn't move. I cursed under my breath. Breaking that open wouldn't go unnoticed. Akua, however, had a solution. Her arm turning to mist, it slithered through a crack and I heard her work on the hatch from the outside. Moments later it was hoisted open, Archer catching it and popping her head out to look.

She gave us a nod and a grin: the way was clear.

Indrani went out first, leaping down soundlessly, and Akua followed as I climbed up. My bad leg was burning, but only dimly. I closed the hatch behind us, twisting it into some sort of rough lock, and just like that we were in the city. Well, a fortress *within* Wolof anyway, but as far as I was concerned it counted. We were dripping all over the floor, save for Akua, who covered our tracks: she passed a mist-like hand over us and we found ourselves mostly dry. She pulled the same trick with the trails of wetness we'd left, and though we were still damp at least we wouldn't be leaving tracks.

"You remember the way out from here?" I softly asked.

"I've never been in this part of the fortress," Akua admitted, "but I have memorized the plans, same as you. It will be enough."

I nodded. It'd have to be. We were in a closed off section inside the fortress, but one that was relatively close to a way out. There ought to be a hall outside the reservoir room that'd go straight to a crossroads. Taking a left there would lead us straight to a bastion, and from there it was possible for us to leap down three levels into a large courtyard whose gate would lead us out in the city streets. The issue was that we hadn't known the guard schedules, so there was no telling if there were people in that bastion or not. And we couldn't afford to take our time here, because soon the Army of Callow was going to 'attack' the city.

"Take the lead, then," I ordered.

She nodded, her form rippling into that of a young Soninke soldier in Sahelian livery. Archer and I wouldn't be half as inconspicuous, unfortunately, so she'd be going ahead alone. The two of us hid behind the reservoirs, waiting for what seemed like an hour. She returned, footsteps silent and with a grave expression on her face.

"Only three in the bastion, but one is a mage," Akua said. "I would like Archer to kill him, I am at... risk otherwise. If he's a skilled enough caster, he could tap into the fortress wards."

"Indrani, you're up," I said.

"Ah, that ought to be bracing," she grinned. "See you in a bit, Your Graceful Regaliness."

"I hope you get caught," I sweetly replied, "so I can *consciously* choose to leave you behind."

She flipped me off, a sure sign of surrender if I'd ever seen one. The two of them disappeared into the hallway, eerily silent, and I was left to bite my thumbs. It'd been a while since I'd had to rely on others to do the dirty work, hadn't it? In Wolof, though, I would have to. In the city proper I'd be able to use Night again, in small doses, but in the heavily warded parts like the fortress it'd be like sending up a flare. I'd forgotten how boring actually doing things the right way tended to be, I thought with half a smile. I was considering how to dispose of the corpses – if we dragged them out of the wards, we could stash them in my shadow – when I heard the sound.

Someone was tuning a lute.

My hand dropped to the grip of my sword. The sounds of strings being plucked at methodically continued to echo in the room, and though I was tempted to remain hidden there was no point to it. The Intercessor already knew I was here, else why would *she* be? Pushing off the wall of the reservoir I'd been hiding behind, I loosened my cloak around my shoulders and took my hand off my sword. What would a blade do against the likes of the Wandering Bard? Putting a lazy smile on my face, forcing the tension out of my shoulders, I strolled out of hiding. She was not difficult to find. The Intercessor was seated on top of a reservoir, legs dangling as she finished tuning that shoddy lute. Fair-haired, this time, with deeply tanned skin and starry blue eyes. She was barely taller than I was, if at all, though she had curves I could only envy. And when I came out she raised a finger, putting that old silver flask to her lips and drinking deep. I waited, but the finger stayed up and she kept drinking. I cocked an eyebrow.

After an insulting amount of time, she pulled away the flask and smacked her lips before letting out a pleased sigh.

"Alavan pear brandy, Catherine," the Intercessor revealed. "Gotta drink while it's still the good stuff, you get me?"

"Never took to brandy," I idly replied. "Though I once knew a man more than passingly fond of that particular drink."

It'd been a barb, a test, and for it I got a pained grimace.

"I actually thought of him as a friend, you know," the Intercessor said. "Tariq was one in a thousand, even for Named. Even when every part of him was worn down to the bone, he never lost that *thing*. The spark. The part that makes a man take the lash so someone else doesn't have to. I don't think any of you ever appreciated how staggeringly rare that is."

"He probably would have kept kicking around a few years more, if you hadn't given our plans in Hainaut to the Dead King," I harshly said. "How many graveyards' worth of friends have you buried, Intercessor?"

She pulled at a string, smiling at the broken side.

"More than you've had meals, Catherine Foundling," the Intercessor said, not denying or admitting a thing.

And the horror of it was that I believed her, believed her with bone-deep certainty. How many people you loved could you bury, before the only human thing about you was the guise you were? A hundred, a thousand, ten thousand? In that smiling woman's shadow was an empire's worth of graves.

"I'm a little disappointed the Arsenal only bought me a year without you," I said.

More or less, leaning on less.

"Praes is where the fun's at, these days," the Intercessor shrugged. "All those fires full of irons, all those old wounds never closed. It's in the air here, you know? The... *sincerity*. The Tower's the closest thing Below has to a smile. If you wanted me out of your hair, you should have kept away."

"Had a thing or two to get done hereabouts," I replied. "What – actually, have you got a name for me to use nowadays?"

She plucked at a string.

"Yara," the Intercessor smiled.

"Of?" I pressed.

"Oh," she shrugged, "nowhere in particular."

Well, wasn't that just fucking ominous.

"So what are you dropping in for, Yara?" I asked. "You got a horse in this race?"

For a moment her face was split between wonder and surprise. I hid my confusion, and like a firefly's flicker in the night her expression was wiped clean. Almost quick enough to make me wonder if I'd really seen anything at all.

"Eh, you could say that," the Intercessor said.

"Malicia or Sepulchral?" I asked, tone forcefully nonchalant.

It wouldn't be my father, if he became Dread Emperor he'd put an entire division of mages on figuring out how to permanently kill her. Captain's death was not something he would ever forgive.

"Oh," the Bard smiled. "That's cute. You think I give a shit about who's screaming their lungs out from the top of the Tower. I really, really don't."

"Come for the weather?" I drawled. "I suppose they do have a bit of everything, if you stand in the Wasteland long enough."

"You know, this is usually where I get cryptic," the Intercessor mused. "Give out a few hints – most of them lies, just enough truth I don't get bitten for it – and send you chasing ghosts while I line up the knife."

"But not this time?" I pressed.

"There's really no point," the Wandering Bard smiled, strumming the lute. "See, when you drop two starving hounds in a pit the time for *subtlety* is past. Now is the hour of tooth and claw."

"I killed you last year," I said. "Crows be my witness, next time I'll make it *stick*."

"That's the stuff," Yara of Nowhere laughed. "Come at me, Foundling. You want to know why I dragged my carcass to Praes?"

My answer was the whisper of my sword leaving its scabbard. Lute tuned at last, the Wandering Bard played the first few notes of an air I recognized, the beginning of 'Stars From the Sky'.

"The only reason I'm here is to kill you, Catherine Foundling," the Intercessor grinned. "We're done fucking around, now. There's no more room in this game for the likes of you."

And though I had never seen her wield a blade, never seen her do a single thing other than speak words and drink, in that moment I

felt a shiver go up my spine. She had always been my foe, but this was... different. This was war, without pretence otherwise. Yet I would not be cowed, not today and not by the likes of her. I met her eyes, brown to blue.

"Take a swing," I smiled back, all teeth and malice. "*See where it gets you.*"

She laughed, loudly, and then swept into a drunken bow. She fell forward, off the reservoir, and as she did she screamed out at the top of her lungs. I struck out at her, blade aimed for the neck, but before she could touch the ground she was gone.

A heartbeat later, the alarm wards triggered with a loud screech.

SpeckofStardust

At least theirs someone whose good at stories up against cat her otherwise it be very 1 sided.

[Liliet](#)

[BOOST PGTE ON TOPWEBFICTION REMINDER!](#) (sorry for piggybacking)

[TheCelestialEquation](#)

Sorry but.. there's. Theirs is possessive

laguz24

Oh, Crap. I needed this. Although, this implies that her usual modus operandum isn't what the gods want. But now, we get to see some good old Woe action.

Darkening

The **Bard's** M0? Because our last sight of her was her being super pissed she wasn't dead and declaring she was going to go to extremes over it. I suspect she's going off script here. If you mean the gods disapprove of **Cat's** M0, well, again, the bard is going off script.

[308924810a](#)

I'm no longer convinced that we read that scene correctly. I think she might have been super pissed that Catherine didn't fall into a rivalry story with her, despite her playing everything correctly. Even right up until knifing her Cat was still pursuing

conflict with the bard, and though interrupting their proxy conflict to knife her was an attempt at winning despite the rules rather than within them, Cat was still acting like she was an opponent and opposite of the Bard. Yet no connection or pattern formed.

[Liliet](#)

For ease of discussion:

> She breathed out and opened her eyes, a starry sky sprawled above her.
>
> In and out, slowly. Unmistakably. She was still alive, though no longer Marguerite de Baillons. The Wandering Bard, the Keeper of Stories, closed her eyes and repressed the urge to scream until her voice went hoarse.
>
> "I did it all right," she said. "And still? Still?"
>
> Her nails dug into her palms until they bled.
>
> "Fine," she whispered. "Fine. The hard way it is, then, and on your heads be it."

I'd say the immediate sequence of "She was still alive, though no longer Marguerite de Baillons. The Wandering Bard, the Keeper of Stories, closed her eyes and repressed the urge to scream until her voice went hoarse." is pretty expressive

Crash

Still think Bard's only personal objective is to actually die. She does the rest of it because it's her Role and her job but she doesn't care, I don't think.

Always read her talks with Cat in the Arsenal as her being optimistic. Maybe she could be free, one last chance.

Now she's just dropped right back into hopelessness and anger, cause not only is Catherine Foundling not a part of her plans she couldn't even grant her the mercy of freedom.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah we don't know anything about what Gods want. Not only is it not connected to what Bard wants, Bard is likely lying, too.

[308924810a](#)

Her entire shtick is telling stories, and I suspect that she was stringing them along when she had a conversation with the

drow twins as well. Honestly at this point I'm paranoidly worried that everything she says is a lie. And worried that she's done things like being the one to write the two hundred heroic axioms or the book of all things.

[Liliet](#)

Oh I doubt any of the three of that.

Shveiran

Well, now I am too.

Congratulations on making me scared, you meanie.

ninegardens

Ohhhh boy. Intercessor is a scary lady.

... and here I was hoping that she'd claim her horse in the race was Cat.

Nope. Nope. Quiet the opposite.

dadycoool

Cat's the horse she's trying to shoot from the stands.

RoflCat

More like the horse she's loudly taunting while intentionally standing next to the track in hope of getting it to kick her dead.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, this doesn't work if she is just trying to comit suicide. That's a surefire way to get a "cursed to live" kind of bad end. No, she's gotta actually be trying to have any chance of being taken down. But what she is doing is bringing out the big guns. She's being as active as she can, which is still passive but not comparatively. And that leaves her vulnerable. The boss is strongest in it's final form, but that's the form you have to get it in to kill it.

[Liliet](#)

Two thoughts:

> "Tariq was one in a thousand, even for Named. Even when every part of him was worn down to the bone, he never lost that thing. The spark. The part that makes a man take the lash so someone else doesn't have to. I don't think any of you ever appreciated how staggeringly rare that is."

LOL LMAO LMFAO ROFL

I wonder why personally Catherine and people who know her would underappreciate that about a person.

I really do!

Aaaand...

So, here's the thing: Bard lies as she breathes. She also tells the truth a lot – I bet all the small talk facts were true – but what she said about why she was here? Well.

The thing is, there's one specific way in which words can't be lies: namely, when they are actually actions. You cannot lie "please come over here" and you cannot lie "fuck you sideways". These things aren't statements with truth value, they're direct levers on reality. They might imply things in context and be lies in that way, same way any action can, but there's a core to them that just... can't be a lie because it's not a truth statement.

What Bard did here is actually one of those. Oh there was also a statement there, but what she DID was declare war on Catherine.

This is the truth of it: what Bard did was show up and challenge Catherine to a fight to the death.

(Instead, notably, of setting up an assassination behind the scenes. Arthur is RIGHT THERE and Cat with her tsundere mentor shtick is this close to offing herself against him.)

Unless there are some obscure chivalry-style story requirements that we don't know of, "Bard kills Catherine" is not the outcome that is made *more* likely by Bard declaring war to Catherine's face. "Catherine kills Bard" is.

dadycoool

Considering she's been trying to die since, maybe even before she met Nessie, it could be that she's pounding the Start button for that as hard as she possibly can, having found someone who might possibly do it. Cat doesn't see her as a Worthy Opponent, nor does she see her as a nuisance, or necessarily as a danger, and certainly not as a friend/frenemy. She sees the Bard as someone who Needs to die. Bard went and found someone with the strength and will to kill her, even in cold blood, put a gun in her hand, put her forehead against it, and is saying "kill me" in a very obscure way, hoping beyond all hope that this bullet will pierce.

[Liliet](#)

And when it didn't work the first time, she went to get an AK-42!

[Tek](#)

What if a serial killer aims a gun at you and says "If you don't say "Please come over here" I'll kill you and your entire family"? The, ugh, point is, yes, even something like "Please come over here" or "Fuck you sideways" can be a lie, if it's against your intentions and is forced on you against your will. Unless, of course, you want to argue that saying something like this out of fear makes it true.

[Liliet](#)

You are reading it as a statement of "I want you to come here", but I'm just talking about it as an operant – a button that does something to reality.

The truth or falsity of your intentions is not the truth or falsity of the statement. The true fact is that you have said it. The reason may be implied and the implication might be false, but it's not a part of the actual statement.

ohJohN

I think you're slightly missing the point: "please come here" *has no truth value*, regardless of whether the words are voluntary or coerced, because it's not a statement of fact, it's a command. Same with questions: it's meaningless to say that "how are you?" is true or false, because there's no explicit assertion about the state of the world.

Sure, the related statement "I want you to come over here" can have a truth value, and thus being coerced into saying it when it's not true would qualify as a lie. You could argue the statement is *implied* by the command, even. But the defining feature of a lie is that it's a false statement, not something you don't want to/are forced to do.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, this exactly.

You can't lie "Alexa, play Despacito", you can't lie "BOO!" to someone's ear,

shikkarasu

While I agree 100% with your actual point and I love your example, my first thought is of Bard saying "Boo, villains, boo" when she was in fact hoping for Akua to succeed against Cat. The irony is tickling me.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, that moment was GREAT.

Was she, though? Was she really hoping for that? I know that's what she told William but, like,

Insanenoodlyguy

I said this a bit above, but it only works if it's real though. It's the gamble Bard is normally too smart to take: this active intent gives her a lot more latitude to act than she usually has... but it also leaves her more vulnerable. Oh, if Cat misses a step she's dead. But that's the "final form" Bard takes, using her full power but also is likely going to actually die if she reaches 0 HP this time (

[Liliet](#)

or negative 10...

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I hope Cat has a "... And Stay Dead!" Card to play.

Kage Lupus

Catherine asks the Bard why she is there, and the Bard is genuinely surprised for a second. Why? Because she sees Catherine as an actual rival, someone who could potentially take over her Role in creation as the story-savvy Named who directs people on a meta level.

That is why she is able to directly interfere with Cat right now even though there aren't any other Named directly involved. Normally the Wandering Bard only gets to act around other Named, nudging stories and pushing people into specific narratives that advance her unknown goals. Cat isn't in a direct fight with Named right now, and WB has already said that she doesn't care about the fight for the Tower. So the only reason she can act is because Cat is actually in conflict with the Bard herself.

Something about Cat's blooming Name is enough of a threat to Wandering Bard that WB is allowed to interfere with her directly. Which makes sense, since we know that Cat's new Name is something related to authority over other Named, to the point that she was able to affect the Grey Pilgrim and White Knight when Speaking. The Bard is surprised that Cat doesn't catch on because she is normally so aware of things on a meta level that I think the Bard assumed Cat was actively working to replace her. If Cat is doing it on accident, or even subconsciously, then it is both more impressive and harder to counter.

Darkening

Ehhhh. Malicia's got a proxy in town and this entire struggle is between her and Cat. Bard showed up to talk to Saint a couple times when there was no imminent conflict with a specific named, too. She's not as restricted as you seem to think, I'm sure she could show up to put her thumb on the scale between Cat and Malicia in this fight with zero issues even if it wasn't for Cat being a rival to Bard.

[Liliet](#)

And that provokes WONDER? The word means a positive emotion. It means Bard loves something about what Catheirne said.

"She's kind of not catching on" really doesn't qualify for the kind of wonder Bard'd actually let slip onto her face.

[Liliet](#)

Also, Cat explicitly said she didn't want a Role similar or parallel or opposed to Bard's at Arsenal.

[308924810a](#)

I think she was surprised at the "do you have a horse in this race?" comment. Because for a second there she thought that Cat had figured out that the conflict for who was going to end up Warlock was taking place here, and she didn't know how Cat could have learned that.

This is an important hint to the easiest path to defeating the Bard here. The bard intends to repeatedly trip up Cat's plan right as she's at the most delicate points, using Sargon's forces/the warlock to kill her.

But 'those who prefer soft power are weak to direct confrontation' according to Black, so if Cat wants to halt the Bard all she needs to do is repeatedly enact plans that will put her in vulnerable situations to bait the bard out, kill her three times, then commit to her actual plan to achieve her actual goal, this time without the bard present to interfere, and hopefully without Sargon or Malicia realizing what her actual goal is before the bard is removed.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's because it's the first time in forever anybody has called her by her real name.

Benjamin Huang

"For the enemy is clever and sly, and to her a thousand years is like the blink of an eye."

Intercessor dies in book 6 confirmed lol.

Justin Cohen

"Someone was tuning a lute."

nick012000

>"How many graveyards' worth of friends have you buried, Intercessor?"

>She pulled at a string, smiling at the broken side.

>"More than you've had meals, Catherine Foundling," the Intercessor said, not denying or admitting a thing.

Is this a Jojo reference? I know people asking that's a bit of a meme in its own right, but the Bard's line there is very similar to a famous one by the vampire Dio Brando.

As for the twist at the end, well, villains are only guaranteed to have the first step of their plan successful. Let's see how Cat manages to improvise from here!

beleester

"More than you've had hot dinners" is a fairly common figure of speech.

Lord Haart

I had totally forgotten the whole "first stage of a villains plan is guaranteed to succeed"... By making this the case here, is Bard trying to push Cat back into a clear Villain role vs. the greyish one she's been adopting?

ArkhonIX

First things first, longtime reader first time commenter. Hi! Hello! How do you do?

Second thing. My main comment:

I know we have a well justified hatred of the Intercessor, but the fact that she's finally declaring her goal of killing Catherine exposes what I think is at the core of the Bard's character. She is literally the good equivalent of the Dead King. Not just because they are as old as they are, and have played such a long time role, but because, at the core, the deepest part of their being, both of them are motivated by the fact that they DO NOT WANT TO DIE. They don't care about the consequences, they just care that they keep existing.

Now, Bard differs from the Dead king in that she does die, but the thing with the bard is that she also always comes back. She's been Aidee of Nicae, Marguerite of Bailions, and numerous other

"Names" from "Places". She destroys some poor persons life, like most "good" things do in this universe, and that has always been her M.O.. But now we maybe see the pattern broken, as we meet the newest? Incarnation of the Bard, Yalda of Nowhere. What's changed? Why is this time different?

My personal theory as to why Bard has popped up as "Yalda of Nowhere" is this is her original form. This is the anchor that she uses to keep reincarnating. Why has she exposed herself like this then? Simplest answer is probably that this is her at her most powerful form. But why break out the big guns? Because Catherine is heralding the end of an age, and that threatens the Bard's immortality. Now, this might be because of Catherine's burgeoning name. It might be because she is the closest to killing the dead king. It might be because of what Catherine can build. It may be what she can destroy. Whatever it is that Catherine is on the cusp of doing, that will be what kills the Bard. Not the war that the Bard has started. If anything, that is the Bard's biggest weapon against Catherine. The war between Cat and the Bard is what the Intercessor is using as a weapon, because the bard knows that Catherine hates her, and that this is the easiest way to distract her and prevent her from becoming what she will become.

Again, some of this is fairly obvious. I doubt I'm reinventing the wheel with my analysis, but I wanted to put my idea out there and see what response I got. If people thought I was way off base, or if maybe I could be on to something. Who knows? I sure don't. But I look forward to finding out.

agumentic

>both of them are motivated by the fact that they DO NOT WANT TO DIE

What? Bard was literally on the verge of screaming herself hoarse because she didn't die last book. "Does not want to die" can't be further from her motivation if you tried.

[Tek](#)

To be fair, all we got is a vague "Why didn't IT work", everything else is just a theory. And while that's a nice theory, there is no direct evidence for it. Maybe she was screaming at heavens because her cake was burned in the oven, AGAIN.

agumentic

True enough, we didn't get an explicit statement. But "She was still alive, [The Bard] closed her eyes and repressed the urge to scream until her voice went hoarse." after that whole series of Interludes is rather indicative.

[TeK](#)

It's, ugh, Yara. And yeah, it's pretty obvious it's her true name, if not her true form. But I don't think it has anything to do with power or anything like that. It's not a bloody Dragon Ball. I think it's a human thing. The story is coming to a climax, and out of dust only one will climb. The herald of an age past, or a harbinger of new. And whatever the outcome is, this one time, WB wants to face it without masks and lies, but as who she truly is.

Also, of her plan is to actually kill herself, throwing out her true name in the ring raises the stakes. It brings the feeling of finality, the feeling of an ending being near. The Villain takes off his masks and fights the Hero, it's a classic stuff, and there is no walking back from that.

[Liliet](#)

She doesn't get to pick her faces. Though I guess there IS nothing stopping her from saying her real name regardless of what her face is... but really, I think the "she was really fucking short" thing is a hint that it's her very old real body (through the "people were shorter earlier in history" association) and it's just a sign of what the story is this time.

[Liliet](#)

Bard was deeply disappointed to not get killed by Cat last time Cat tried (in the Arsenal). And formally issuing your opponent a challenge is a means of getting THEM to attack YOU, not a means of attacking them.

That Bard is trying to die actually and has been antagonizing Catherine targetedly for that purpose is the most common theory right now.

Come to discord and theorize with us!!!!

[Casey Glick](#)

Don't forget that whole thing about how she must flee her greatest desire. The only thing we've seen that makes the Bard go away is a murder attempt. I think it is a curse for her that she cannot allow herself to die. But if she sets up exactly the story beats that end in a True Rival killing her, well, it's not like she is able to stop that death.

[Liliet](#)

yeah exactly

she flees her greatest desire AND promised death tho dont forget

(that does imply they arent the same thing, intrestingly)

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Link?

[Liliet](#)

> She breathed out and opened her eyes, a starry sky sprawled above her.
>
> In and out, slowly. Unmistakably. She was still alive, though no longer Marguerite de Baillons. The Wandering Bard, the Keeper of Stories, closed her eyes and repressed the urge to scream until her voice went hoarse.
>
> "I did it all right," she said. "And still? Still?"
>
> Her nails dug into her palms until they bled.
>
> "Fine," she whispered. "Fine. The hard way it is, then, and on your heads be it."

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/04/24/interlude-knock-them-down/>

[knockoffnikolai](#)

I meant to the Discord lol, I couldn't find it in the sidebar. But I see it was posted later in the chat, so that works too. 😊

[Liliet](#)

yea

ArkhnIX

If you give me the link, I'd love to!

[Liliet](#)

P sure it's in the sidebar but here you are anyway: <https://discord.gg/HKRYjJAf>

Insanenoodlyguy

No, we are meeting the OLDEST. This time she's using the name she was born with. her actual out of a human birth, not the reincarnations.

[TeK](#)

Oh? You're approaching me, Catherine?

Insanenoodlyguy

I have to get closer to kick your... er, slit your throat!

Soronel Haetir

I have a lot of problems with Bard being able to do anything direct like this chapter provides (tripping wards). Everything we've seen of her leading up to this says that she doesn't have a lot of choice about where she appears and when she isn't in Creation she simply doesn't exist.

Actually, I'm surprised that just her coming into existence wasn't enough to trip the wards (given that apparently drawing on Night would do it, yet that is a power the Sahelians should not have practice against).

[TeK](#)

Maybe her appearing works in a way that "she has always been there". So her appearance would not trigger the wards, but drawing on some other aspect (or just leaving) may, which is how she triggers the wards.

[Liliet](#)

She triggered the wards with a loud noise (screaming)

jamesc9

Or she negotiated Cat into triggering the wards for her by swinging a sword near the reservoir.

[Liliet](#)

Also possible, I guess.

[Liliet](#)

Bard coming into existence is not a... ripple of power. She just pops up. It's not sorcery, it's not Light or Night or anything in that vein. It's undetectable because it doesn't play by those rules.

And I figure screaming to trip the wards counts as a subtle touch here because in theory it could have been someone local stumbling onto Cat, too. It's not IMPLAUSIBLE without her there.

shikkarasu

It definitely isn't as much interference as, say, coaching a Hero on how to kill a certain villain, warning a hero not to drink that poison, or giving detailed instructions to a Fae. I think it's less about subtlety (although that probably helps) and more about being indirect. She would be well within her rights to just walk up to any Named on Wolof's side and flat out say "Cat's in the Aqueduct, have fun," but she wanted to declare war.

Bard is Named and no matter how savvy she is, she plays by Name rules. If she's going to take the gloves off? She has to do it *loud*.

ohJohN

I took it as "literally all she is allowed to do is drink and talk, and screaming is a kind of talking, so screaming to trigger noise-sensitive wards is technically allowed."

Shveiran

I read it simply as "she screamed, someone heard, and they sounded the alarm. Because of course the alarm is a ward."

[Liliet](#)

Or the ward is tuned to raise the alarm at someone screaming. Sounds like the reasonable thing to automate.

nick012000

Until your alarm ward gets triggered by a couple of of your guards deciding to have some kinky fun. 😊

[Liliet](#)

That's how you know which guards to publicly execute to raise morale!

Shveiran

Maybe it's just me, and I've never been a Praesi guard, but I reckon if I worked in an execution-including environment, I'd probably figure life is too short not to have a tryst, so executing the co-workers that are up for it would bring my morale down.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, time and place?

Tenthyr

The Bard isn't using magic to move about. It's her Name. Names work literally by bending the nature of reality itself. Normal wards won't cut it.

And the bard just explained why this happened: she wants to kill Catherine. She isn't playing the old game anymore, this is direct war. The Bard has almost definitely been limiting the nature of her interactions with Named and scenarios specifically to choose a useful moment to 'break' her rules.

Insanenoodlyguy

That's because this is her "final/true form." She can do things she normally can't because she's actually being Yara for once. Who is almost certainly the original name she had in her very first life. More vulnerability (which she's counting on) but also more oomph in the meantime.

[Liliet](#)

Also, she has interfered with Named fights before – as distraction, as advice-giver, pretty directly.

Insanenoodlyguy

Between named. Only one named side here, the other has mundanes she just called in to do her dirty work. that's a new one for her.

[Liliet](#)

I guess technically? She didn't exactly call them in tho. She just tripped an alarm on purpose.

edrey

that is a lie or a half true at least, the bard is going for her but that means cat would be focusing on her and not the tower, to make her see the wrong fires and make her too paranoid in the wrong way. it will end with a draw, and to finish the pattern of three in Keter. a draw is the true reason i believe. after all, the bard should know the Dk must be prepared for face that angel as worst case scenario. so her plan shouldnt be so simple.

Juff

Typo Thread:

let a deeply > let out a deeply
I find myself > I found myself
potion ran when > potion ran out when
got stuck > get stuck
she'd bee physically > she'd be physically

Archer in danger > Archer who was in danger
out tracks > our tracks

therealgridlock

Typo thread!

"I want first, even though I wasn't the strongest swimmer"

>"I went first"

"out in the city streets"

>"Out into the"

RoflCat

As much as the chapter ended on a 'crisis', considering the chapter's epigraph (and main character plot armor) we know Akua is going to be instated as High Lady or there's ANOTHER Akua in the past...

But the way she said that line definitely had a touch of this Akua to it...

Which would make that Scroll of Ruin possibly something containing more future events...

ohJohn

Seeing as how the entire Isbili line was recently wiped from the face of Creation, I'm assuming the epigraph is about some ancient Sahelian ancestor Akua was named for, in the time after Triumphant's fall when Praes was divvied up and ruled as crusader kingdoms (except, notably, Wolof).

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Akua is just not a unique name, and this was from the first three Crusades.

Earl of Purple

I wonder what alerted the chaps with the magic glowstick to check the gates. The alchemical holy water should have thwarted any alarm enchantments, so unless they have to check every hour or something they shouldn't have known to stick it in.

therealgridlock

My guess is that the "destroys all magic" dust also destroyed the magic flow-meter, or some magically mundane monitoring equipment, so the lackey that reads the meter saw the flow go to "0" or some magical equivalent, freaked out, and got his

boss or buddy to check it with him, in case something is trying to get in.

That's the trope in heist movies, it's not the sophisticated laser grid that goes off, it's the mundane voltage regulator that suddenly is drawing no power and some guard happens to notice the lasers aren't drawing power any more.

But, conveniently Indrani put the lock back in a way that lets them think "must be nothing" and go back to regular AI patterns, and it also fulfils that heist trope as well, the guard checks it, sees the lasers operating normally (because the sneaky heisters turned it back on after they got inside) and assumes the meter was wrong or they're wrong.

It's one of those things where it's impossible to have a trope discussion about a world with trope magic without immediately becoming meta about them all.

The drow were almost the inverse ninja, but not quite, though we do have quite a few other tropes.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'd assumed Cat would get her name dealing with Malicia, but it looks like she's going to get it taking down Bard.

Darkening

I dunno about that, last chapter while directing the encounter against the Black Knight her name was quite active and making noise, while we didn't get a single offhand mention of it this chapter. Sure, maybe it'll crop up in the moment that she delivers Bard the Final Death, but her story's always been about Praes and Callow, and the Bard's just butting in.

Lord Haart

TBF, as Black had discovered, the issues with Praes and Callow go back to at least the Titans, so she at least has to go to the lower 'g' god level to fully rectify things.

I wonder if the Titan messups and the Drakoi predated Bard or if she's bigger than just an Age of Wonders thing. There seems to be some parallel between the Upper case Gods and human development here – playing with dragons and giants (young kids just want special effects), then with simple, patternistic stories, and now Cat's way, which seems more intricate if possibly also more boring. I think maybe Kairos paved the way here though that politics and trope reversals can be very entertaining indeed, so Cat might have that going for her.

jamesc9

So Cat wins if the gods above and below are amused with her?

Massego should be able to confirm that.

beleester

Cat's plan doesn't rely on them going undetected for the whole operation, right? I mean, she must have known that wasn't going to happen if she was participating.

Darkening

Thankfully, Cat's been more into contingencies than improvising these days, so she definitely has a plan for what to do if the alarm gets raised. Not necessarily a **good** plan, but she's got an idea of what to do about it at least.

That Other Guy

Cat's plan probably runs along the lines of "punch them in the face". At least that's how it starts. As she's currently toting a satchel of goblin munitions things don't bode well for the local garrison.

Or the building they're in.

[308924810a](#)

I don't think they're leaving this city without Akua somehow ending up as High Lady again.

Sinead

I wonder if she could possess/inhabit Sargon and ward him against soulbox incantations? It could easily be a bargain of Sargon pitching in to be 'on the ground floor' of Cardinal's school of magic and to get protection from Malicia. It's not like Akua has no practice at this (see Battle of the Camps).

Especially since I suspect that conservation of detail means that Sargon is the Warlock claimant.

Shveiran

So, you know how I was all "Malicia is screwed because she has no Named powerhouse and no story-fu so Cat is going to play her like a fiddle?"

Well, admittedly, with the Bard to stab her in the story and the Emerald Blades around as possible powerhouses for Yara to redirect... yeah, this is an actual fight.

Catherine vs the Bard, Malicia and the Elves seems kind of fair.

And isn't it funny how the High Lords have been just background noise ever since book 3?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also Malicia now has a Black Knight, who was a world-class general even before her Naming.

That Other Guy

WB's plans around Cat keep unravelling because Cat isn't taking her assigned role. Sometimes it's been deliberate, but clearly WB was hoping for a grand declaration of undying enmity 'to the pain' or some such.

When someone doesn't assume their role in a story, the story loses impetus and fizzles out.

Maybe that's what happens Below. You're forced to live out the stories you were supposed to be in but failed out of

Chapter 7: Expatriate

"A journey ends with two strangers: time changes the hearth no less than the traveller."

– King Richard the Elder of Callow

What else could I do but run?

I shot out of the reservoir room, sword in hand, and into the hallway beyond. A dozen strides had me at the crossroads I'd spied on the fortress plans, where I slowed for a heartbeat as my cloak swirled around me. A squad of armed guards – *good mail and helmets, longswords*, the calm part of me assessed – was hurrying towards me from the right side, blades bare. I was already pivoting towards the left, though, down another hall that ought to be bring me to the bastion that was our way out. The door to it was open and it looked empty, not a single rack of spears disturbed or table toppled. Archer's head popped out with a wary look on it a heartbeat later, which at least told me the two of them had won their scrap inside.

"Bard's here," I hissed, rushing through the doorway.

Three corpses, cleanly killed, waited for me inside along my two companions. Archer began stringing her shortbow, a grim look on her face. Akua was leaning over the edge of a bare stone window overlooking the courtyard, the rope end of a fastened grappling hook in hand. She withdrew, cocking a questioning eyebrow at me.

"Bard," I simply repeated. "Courtyard?"

"Unfortunate," she said. "Seven guards. There were more but the alarm ward drew them in."

That was a sort of silver lining, I supposed. I hesitated for a beat. Keeping the corpses in my shadow was now meaningless, since the defenders already knew there'd been intruders. Discretion was out. This could still be salvaged if we got into the streets and hit the ground running, though. Wolof was a big city and Sargon's people couldn't be everywhere. Besides, our arranged distraction should be starting any moment now.

"We punch through," I ordered. "Leave the bodies."

Akua nodded.

"Two mages," she said, glancing at Archer.

"Got it," Indrani easily replied.

She took the rope Akua offered her and hoisted herself atop the windowsill before dropping down.

"I'll go after," I said, idly closing the door into the bastion behind me. "Bring the rope when you follow, would you?"

"How very frugal of you," she replied, eyes amused.

I toppled a table, shoving it in the way of the door, and rolled my eye at her. What, did she think this stuff grew on trees? Good rope was *expensive*. I sheathed my sword, hearing the sound of hurrying soldiers catching up, and headed to the window. I got to the edge just in time to see Archer leap out of a smooth slide down the rope, an arrow nocked and loosed before anyone could notice. By the time I'd begun climbing down she'd landed smoothly on the ground, having loosed a second and killed twice. There was shouting from the rest of the guards. Without the mages in the way, though, Akua could move freely. I let myself go into a controlled slide that burned at the palms of my hand, hearing the door burst open when I was barely halfway through.

Swearing, I looked up and saw Akua flow over the edge of the window. She dislodged the hook, narrowly dodging a sword blow, and I swore even louder as my slide turned into a freefall. I pulled at motes of Night, whispering a curt prayer – *grant me at least a beggar's miracle, you stingy carrion sisters* – and

dragging the slightest bit to me. I shaped a thin downwards panel of darkness and angled my fall, tumbling down atop it into a disastrous roll that scraped my trouser against stone. It'd shaken and almost broken: the fortress wards were disrupting it, making it unstable. I rose to my feet, bad leg burning, and even as the Night-working evaporated behind me I was forced to hurriedly unsheathe my sword.

I caught the blow at a weak angle, the side of my own blade almost biting into my shoulder, but I spun as I took a small step to the side. The pressure from the taller and larger dark-skinned soldier trying to hack at me was turned against him, making him stumble, and I finished it with a manoeuvre I must have practiced a thousand times. As he stumbled forward I finished my spin and withdrew my sword, so that when the soldier steadied his footing and began to turn I was already hacking into the exposed side of his neck. It was a quick blow, and quite lethal. Without batting an eye I moved on. Archer had killed two more before a survivor got close enough to make her drop her bow and unsheathed her longknives, I saw, and the last one was coming for me.

Brave of him not to run, I thought, but not particularly wise.

Akua landed behind me, the soft noise of it entirely on purpose, and in the moment that drew his attention I struck. He was a big man, muscled, but clearly used to fighting with a shield he didn't currently have. When I feigned at his left he overcommitted, hacking at a blow that didn't come, and instead I quickly stepped into his guard and slammed the side of his chin two-handed with the pommel of my sword. He dropped, stunned but still conscious. From the corner of my eye I saw movement at the window above, but the arrow that was fire was knocked off-course by the one Archer loose in answer. Too quick to even be able to tell who they'd been aiming at. Time to go.

I glanced down at the soldier below, saw the fear in his eyes and hardened my heart. No witnesses: the guards above hadn't seen us up close and we wore cloaks, but this one would have descriptions. My arm rose, but a soft hand laid against it. I looked at Akua with surprise.

"There would be no point," she spoke in Kharsum. "Sargon will have the corpses upstairs raised to interrogate them."

I hid my startlement. It was not so rare a thing for her to preach mercy, not compared to the way she'd been when we were younger, but I'd not expected it here and now. I looked at the soldier, lowering my arm.

"Looks like it's your lucky day," I said in Mthethwa.

He grimaced, mouth bloody from my blow.

"I traded for this shift," he replied. "So not *that* lucky."

I grinned, brushing past him, and overheard him whispering something to Akua as he inclined his head. *Miyetham Sahelian*, or something close to it. No idea what it meant, aside the fact it looked like he'd guessed Akua's identity even through her disguise appearance. People spoke Mthethwa differently here than they did in Ater and among the Legions, I sometimes had trouble with their pronunciation. She did not answer and we wasted no time fleeing into the street before the archer up in the bastion could start shooting at us again. The street outside the bastion was board, almost an avenue, but mostly empty of people. The two young girls carrying urns of water made themselves scarce when we came out, Akua wordlessly taking the lead.

We'd barely run ten feet when lights began pulsing in the sky above the fortress. I almost grinned. The timing was a little off, but it looked like our distraction was finally happening. Hierophant would be hammering at the city through a ritual using the waters of the aqueduct as a battering ram to smash the inside of the fortress, even as troops began emerging from the Ways in a position to capitalize on the breach should it happen. The plan was for the Wolofites to repulse the assault and blame any damage on the aqueduct grids we'd nipped coming in on Masego's assault, but we'd strayed off path some. Still, the threat of an outright attack ought to bump us down Sargon's priority list a bit.

At the very least we'd have fewer pursuers, since the commander there would want to avoid thinning their garrison.

Pursuit still poured out of the same gate we'd used before we'd even turned the corner. I wasn't much of a runner these days, but I grit my teeth and pushed through the pain as we followed Akua into the neat labyrinth that was the streets of Wolof. Our enemies weren't any slower than we were, but we could take shortcuts they couldn't – three brave souls followed even when Archer took me by the waist and leapt atop a wall, climbing as quick as they could, but we lost them three streets down when we got to a rooftop. It was one of those gardens I'd seen from afar, a lovely little shaded enclave where flowers and cabbage grew, and the three people in it when we intruded froze.

The oldest among them, a white-haired old man, deliberately looked away from us and began to speak of the weather with the younger pair. I snorted, taking it as the tacit invitation to move on that it was. The old man ignored Archer's friendly wave, stubbornly looking away, and Akua guided us southwards through rooftops and streets until we found a deserted corner. We paused there, catching our breaths and allowing our heartbeats to slow.

"We are near a bazaar, unless Sargon change the trade-rights for this district," Akua said. "The two of you will be able to change clothes there."

"You could go buy them for us," I suggested. "It'd draw less attention."

She shook her head.

"There are city guards at the bazaar," she said, "and it is only a matter of time before the fortress garrison sends warning to all companies, if they haven't already. There are scrying posts at regular intervals in the city, all with runners at hand. They will begin looking around soon, and this is not a true hiding place."

I felt a sliver of envy at the system described. Laure was nowhere as well-organized. It wasn't that we didn't have the ability, at least not in principle – we had the people and the magic. Callow just didn't have the coin to spare for something that sophisticated, not when there were a hundred other things being neglected that were arguably more important.

"I'm not keen on splitting up," Archer said, "but in that little description you did mention that there were guards at that bazaar you want us headed to."

"Only entrances and exits, most likely," I noted. "She thinks it'll be easy to disappear into the crowd and come out less conspicuously dressed."

"My very thoughts," Akua smiled.

It always startled me how easy it was to understand her, to think along the same lines. Hakram probably knew me better, but sometimes I wondered if I didn't understand *her* better than I did him. It made him a better right hand, of course – his ability to think differently than I did, to see what I didn't, was a priceless asset – but the ease with which I could follow Akua Sahelian's thoughts felt oddly intimate. It made it dangerously easy to feel close to her.

"It's boring when you two agree," Indrani complained, then turned serious. "Let me have a look at that entrance, at least. I want to be sure they're not already looking for us."

"Good idea," I admitted.

Akua offered no objection, and after she gave a brisk description of the easiest path to the bazaar Archer was gone. I leaned against a rough brick wall, earning a raised eyebrow for it. Even when it wasn't her face it was still her mannerisms, which made it a little uncanny to look at.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Just curious," I grunted. "The guard we spared, what was it he said? I don't know what 'miyetham' means."

"It is an archaic form of the words," Akua said. "What he said was 'mile thaman'."

My brow creased.

"Always good?" I hazarded.

"Ever worthy," she corrected, then hesitated. "It is a turn of phrase here in Wolof. It is... praise for my family, in a way."

Ever worthy, Sahelian, I mentally completed. That was what the man had said. Considering she'd likely saved his life I wasn't inclined to argue.

"I sometimes forget your High Seats are actually liked by the people here," I admitted. "I'm so used to seeing them as the enemy that it's hard to conceive of anyone looking up to them as protectors."

"We know better than to be devils to our own, Catherine," Akua smiled, almost ruefully. "It is why we do best with enemies. That we may pour the venom outwards, while the wonders we bring back to our homes."

"Dragons risible

Our claws, swords

Stealing miracles

To better hoard," I quoted, the Taghrebi stiff on my tongue for lack of practice.

Something like delight flicked across her face, gone in a wink.

"One of Sherehazad's," she said, approving. "Not without reason was she titled the Seer."

A moment of comfortable silence passed.

"You ever miss it, this place?" I asked, half on a whim.

Her expression was hard to read, and not for the shade of the alley.

"Sometimes," Akua quietly said. "Parts of it. Others I am not so sure I could suffer now that I have known the world beyond the Sererian Walls."

I slowly nodded.

"And you?" she smiled. "Do you miss Laure?"

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"No," I admitted. "Laure's just a different fight to me, now. It's the court and trying to keep Callow whole. I miss the parts I loved when I was a kid, but the city? No."

It hadn't been home in a long time, though it galled me to admit it even in the privacy of my own mind. I'd never felt as more than a guest in the old palace of the Fairfaxes, a child putting on adult's clothing, and these days what I loved most in the world was condensed into the shape of a few people. I was still fond of the city, it had been my home once, but I would not weep to leave it after the war ended. The conversation ended with Archer's sudden return, but to me it felt only half-done. Like we'd left bits of it still hanging in the air. Now was not the time, though, so when Indrani informed us that the handful of guards at the bazaar entrance looked too bored to have been warned I went with the flow.

We were waved through nonchalantly by the pair of guards standing in the shadow of the arch leading into the marketplace, neither bothering to look if we were armed. Akua noticed my surprise as we entered the bazaar and leaned close for an explanation.

"Our clothes are of fine make," she explained. "It is expected of us to bear weapons."

"They thought we were highborn?" I asked.

"Not *that* fine a make," she laughed. "They believed us mfuasa, likely. Some lord's retainers."

I nodded and followed her, letting the noises of the bazaar wash over me. I'd thought it would be a strange and exotic place, somewhere out of a dream, but I found the reality of it rather more sedate. The stands were a great deal more colourful than back home, and often made with only bare bones of wood while walls and roofs were dyed cloth, but aside from that it was mostly the goods sold that made a difference. There was no food to be bought here, as sale of such goods was strictly regulated in Wolof and contained to specific markets in every district, but there were enough spices on display to make a Callowan merchant weep for the wealth.

Jewelry was terrifyingly common too, copper and silver most of all but some gold and precious stones as well. Everyone seemed able to afford it. Clothes and cloth hung everywhere, small glassworks and the kind of petty trinkets that every market in the world must sell. The other great surprise was the sale of enchanted goods, and I wasn't talking about magic swords. For every glinting dagger there were a dozen ever-sharp kitchen

knives. I saw stone coldboxes engraved with runes, prettily sculpted magelights and even alchemical brews. They were bartered over like cabbage in swift-spoken Mthethwa, like it was the most natural thing in the world to have a cure for the cold bottled in a bazaar stand. Maybe it was, I thought. There were no priests here – where else were people meant to go, when they were sick or wounded? It was still surreal, to see magic taken as something so... common. Nine in ten of those people wouldn't be mages either, it was just that magic was utterly mundane to them.

Perhaps the bazaar was a strange place after all, under that veneer of familiarity.

Akua took the initiative to buy us clothes and cloak and I was disinclined to argue. Or particularly surprised she did not even need to press clothes against me to know whether or not they'd fit. We paid in Imperial coinage, silver denarii that Malicia herself had pushed into Callow some years past in a bid to bind us more closely to the Tower, and Akua got us bags for our old clothing too. I left in a burnished yellow cloak and matching tunic, keeping only my boots and trousers, while Indrani ended up in a nice pale green. I got the impression from some of the looks the merchant gave us that he believed us to be, uh, *consorts* that that a young noblewoman was dressing more to her tastes. We picked up a few tricks to hide our appearance too, cosmetics that were quickly applied.

We slipped out of the market through another entrance and took to the streets, the two of them already knowing where we needed to go without my saying: we'd come to steal two things, after all, and one would be easier to get at than the other.

—

Within moments of having a good look at the granaries, it was plain we weren't getting into them today.

The Sahelians had their own private reserves near the palaces, according to Akua, but the 'city' granaries were a set of seven large interlocking warehouses surrounded by a low stone wall. There were three large avenues leading out, each large enough for two wagons to pass on them simultaneously, and a handful of smaller doors. The whole place was warded up to its neck, though it wasn't all about keeping people out. A lot of it was mundane utility: wards against vermin, or to keep the warehouses dry and cool. The thresholds weren't too strong, considering wagons had to be able to come in and out easily for distribution, but the walls were anchors for some pretty nasty stuff even by Praesi standards.

Still, we'd planned for this. The granary was one of the few places that'd been kept entirely intact during the mess that saw Sargon replace High Lady Tasia, so the wards there hadn't changed

in the slightest since Akua had last seen them. We'd schemed a way in a weakness, as with use of the right magical trinket we believed we could trigger the ward in very specific manner and cross before it reset, and even prepared an escape plan. It was all useless now. The entire district was on high alert, even a fool could have seen it. Hundreds of household guards had come to reinforce the garrison and what must be a staggering amount of mages with them: there were balls of light hovering ten feet above the wall, at least a hundred of them, and the spell was one known to Akua.

"The colour will change if there is movement where the light extends," she said. "It should last for at least an hour, and if they've any sense they will have staggered putting the spells up so that they can be smoothly replaced."

High Lord Sargon had been distastefully competent so far, so I'd go ahead and assume they had. I still sent out Archer to have a closer look. Even if I had my doubts she'd find a blind spot, learning more about the defences in place couldn't hurt. There was no way to tell how long Sargon would keep the reinforcements there and we could only risk staying in the city for so long. Our foes were looking for us, and eventually our luck would run out. Archer came back after half an hour, looking displeased.

"The place is sealed up tighter than a tomb," Indrani reported. "They've actually closed up all the small access doors, the only way's in through the big gates now."

"That's a problem," I admitted.

We simply did not have the strength to smash our way through here.

"Did you get close enough to eavesdrop?" Akua asked.

Archer nodded.

"Nothing too exciting, the usual whining and a bit of fear at the notion of facing us," Indrani said. "I think I've figured out why the bazaar guards hadn't been warned yet: a lot of them complained about being yanked away from other assignments in the city and sent here in a hurry. I'm thinking Sargon put his scrying stations to work sending people to this place instead of looking for us."

My lips thinned. I did hate fighting clever opponents, they were always such a pain. Akua's cousin was proving to be one of that breed, having correctly deduced what we'd come here for and that it was a better bet to protect it than comb through half the city looking for us.

"We're not going to make it in there," I finally said. "And I'm betting he's going to be willing to keep his people here as long as it takes while he's looking for us."

If we were threatening an assault on his walls it might force him to pull away people, but we both knew the Army of Callow wasn't going to try anything of the sort. He could afford to keep his mages here instead of manning the ramparts, the tricky fucker.

"He will have the treasury vaults under reinforced guard as well," Akua quietly said. "This is something of a setback."

It was. We'd come here for grain and gold, and now it was looking like we were going to have to leave without either. Considering Marshal Nim had torched a third of our supplies, coming out of here empty-handed was going to be a blow. Not necessarily the end of our campaign, but it'd stiffen odds that were already against us. Even aside from simple logistics, running away from Wolof with our tail tucked after we'd swaggered wasn't going to be a good luck when we were courting allies. Some of the Clans might reconsider raiding, if it looked like Malicia was winning this war, and I needed the orcs south for more reasons than I'd admitted. I bit my lip, mind spinning in circles. I couldn't see another way, much as retreat would be a bitter pill to swallow.

"We shouldn't stay here," Archer said. "Let's find a place to settle for the day, yeah? We can figure out our next move then."

I nodded, silent, and followed them deeper into the city. There had to be a way, right? I tried to put together another plan, another trick, yet all I could think of was the sound of an old monster tuning a lute.

—

The search was spreading out.

There were parties on the streets now, squads of twenty with two mages. The caster regularly stopped and cast a spell with no visible manifestation save a spinning circle of golden light, and it was magic none of us knew. Archer wandered close once or twice as we headed towards the southwest of the city, but she got nothing out of idle chatter.

"I'd wager the circle is a focus mark, not unlike a rune," Akua mused. "The purpose remains rather more elusive."

"It's got to be a detection spell of some sort," I said. "Sargon has to know finding us in a city this large will be Hells otherwise, especially when we have you guiding us around."

"What it might detect is the question, then," Akua said.

We had no answer, so steering clear was the best move. We were nearly at our destination anyhow. When I'd first been told that Wolof did not have slums, I'd naturally been pretty skeptical. All cities had slums, even walled ones, it was just a matter of how large they got. Wolof wasn't as much of an exception as Akua believed it to be, but she'd not been entirely *wrong* either – even Scribe had agreed. The Sahelians had a pair of districts called the Yumban in the southeast of the city, where people who'd usually end up on the streets or in slums were assigned to live. Accommodations were provided, if very basic ones, and food from the city granaries regularly doled out. It all sounded very charitable, which naturally meant it wasn't the whole story.

Any people who lived there were essentially at the mercy of the Sahelians. By law they could not refuse military service if called on, or a servant's station, and they could even be traded to other lords so long as work was guaranteed by the receiving lord. People regularly made it out of the Yumban into higher station – mages in particular – and Wolofites were proud of such success stories, but the truth was most people didn't. By design, presumably, so that if the Sahelians ever had an urgent need of manpower they had a source at hand that drawing on would not cause unrest. Conscription in the city would be taken badly, but who would object to the Yumban being emptied? It was clever, in a heinous sort of way, which I was coming to learn was the mark of the most successful nobles of Praes.

Most of the people in the Yumban *now* weren't actually from Wolof, though. I caught the difference as we crossed into the edge of the districts. They favoured greens and dark oranges over the yellows and reds I'd seen earlier, the cadence and wording in Mthethwa was different – easier to understand for me, it was closer to the Ater-and-Legion standard I'd learned – and there were almost no weapons anywhere. Sargon had taken to raiding the northern hinterlands of Aksum on Malicia's behalf as part of his support in the civil war, and I was looking at part of the loot he'd carried back with him: people. It wasn't just Aksumites, of course, that was a riot waiting to happen. But I'd wager that we were looking for the 'prizes' who'd not had a trade he could offer them a shop for

Day labourers, farmhands, those whose trade was not lacking in Wolof.

They were not mistreated and I saw little resentment, not the kind you saw back home when a town despised their lord, but I could almost feel it from the air that Sargon Sahelian's authority ran thinner here. Perhaps not much hatred, but not much love either. Their abductor had not delivered them unto a paradise. There was a lot of room, at least, since entire streets of the Yumban were still empty. The city had not entirely required from the brutalities of Tasia's fall. Akua guided us

carefully, keeping out of sight where we could as she explained what she was looking for.

"We'll pick a place near a *kufuna*," she said.

I knew the word, though I'd never seen one myself. Black had mentioned that sometimes people from them had trouble adapting at the War College, where the ways were rather different.

"Those are the noble-backed schools, right?" I asked.

The Tower had 'free' schools of its own, where people could be attend in exchange for sworn years of service – it was how Tyrants could recruit mages without asking them of High Lords or drawing on Ater – but *kufuna* belonged to noble houses, without anyone else having a say in their running or what they taught.

"It is more nuanced than that," Akua murmured. "But you are not incorrect. People in those streets will be used to strangers coming and going, less likely to pay it attention."

"Never did get to see one of those," Archer mused. "We should have a look."

She demurred, but I was curious myself. We settled on studying one from a distance, but it turned out to be even easier than that. Such a 'school' was in session on large paved open grounds between two sets of houses and we found good lodgings in a second-story place that had a window looking down over the lesson. It was little more than a large room meant for eating and two adjoining smaller nooks for people to sleep in, but the narrow stairs to the rooftops had us sold. Building were smaller in the Yumban than in the districts around it – I felt, impossibly that the rest of the city was somehow looking down on us – but within the districts themselves it'd be a good way to get around. After dark, anyway.

We dropped our packs and settled in, quickly figuring out why both stories of the building were still empty even though the convenience of closeness to the *kufuna* must have made it in demand: one of the nooks had been fouled by an animal pretty disgustingly. That could have been cleaned, even if it hadn't been, but the way the light pit in the middle of the combined house had a wooden cover that moved in the wind and slammed with a bam-bam-bam sound out of nowhere sometimes would have been trickier to handle. I could already tell it was going to get on my nerves. I went into the clean nook, which had the overlooking window, and cast a curious look.

It wasn't that large a window, so when Indrani and Akua came too we had to squeeze pretty tight.

They were doing mathematics, the poor fuckers. Maybe thirty 'students' whose ages looked to vary between eight-ish to fourteen were sitting on the ground, using nice writing slates and chalk. The teacher was an old woman at least into her sixties, who leaned on a cane – lucky her, hadn't been able to bring my staff – and had cataracts in her eyes but looked pretty spry otherwise. She guided her students through the end of a lesson on multiplication, and it was when students were called on to answer questions that the difference to what I was used to came in.

"The only a kid handling with the black stone can answer," I muttered. "Why?"

It wasn't always the same, either. Sometimes children answered two questions in a row before passing to another, sometimes it was immediate but never once did the teacher actually order it passed.

"It is because of *jino-waza*," Akua said. "I am not surprised the rules are unclear to you."

I frowned. It was familiar, the words. I'd read them before, if only in passing.

"The clear-eyes," Indrani snorted. "The Lady talked about it. It's a little like the way we did thing in Refuge."

"I can't see them keeping score over anything," I said. "What's it do?"

"It is not a game, not exactly," Akua hesitated. "It is philosophy, at least in part. To display your skills, your knowledge. To assess where you stand in regard to your peers. The stone and questions are just a tool to ease this."

I studied the students, eyes narrowed.

"They're all eager to answer," I said.

Which was not my experience with studies. The tutors the orphanage made us sit in front of were used to squirming pupils wanting to be elsewhere, and they used questions as a way to keep us in line. Listen, learn, or you'll look like an idiot in front of the others.

"So they win something by doing it," I said. "Esteem, maybe? They can't trade that for something useful, though, and it's a little abstract for kids."

"It is training for the world beyond the lessons," Akua said. "The teacher, she will remember the one who distinguish themselves. What they are good at. And when my family – or

someone with a trade and no children – sends someone, wanting a candidate for a scribe's apprentice or kitchen attendant, she will give those names. She holds opportunities."

I chewed my lip.

"So the stone, it's part of the test too," I finally said. "*Jino-waza*. Sure, a clever kid could keep it for a long while – but then you hog the opportunity, and no one will ever pass you the stone. They're trading it like adults would trade favours."

"Exactly," Akua grinned. "A student who oversteps might even find themselves sabotaged, as it often is with those who act in such ways in higher stations. It teaches balance, to take opportunity without making enemies."

"Teaches who's worth making allies with, too," Archer quietly said. "Not everyone's good at the same things, you can scratch each other's back in a way that everyone wins."

She had a strange, almost fragile look on her face as she looked at the kids. Was she thinking of Refuge? I spoke up to move the conversation along, even knowing that Akua was unlikely to ever be so uncouth as to comment on the look that'd seized our friend's face.

"Everyone you're allied with, at least," I scoffed. "It's not without sense, but it's a very Praesi way of doing things."

"I have seen the schools of your people, dearest, what few you have," Akua reminded me. "They are as menageries. Kufuna are a better way. Your nobles have their tutors, as we do, but learning is simply not prized west the Wasaliti the way that it should be."

"I came out of my schooling just fine," I replied, a tad defensive. "And orphanages gave educations even before Black stepped in, he just ensured they were *good* ones."

He'd also raised the number of them tenfold, but that was another discussion entirely. It wouldn't do to forget that my father had *made* a lot of Callowan orphans along with those orphanages.

"Come off it, Cat," Indrani snorted. "How much of what you came out having learned you learned in classes? You're like a truffle pig, you just dig into books about the stuff that you want to learn about and ignore the rest. You barely even had help when you learned Chantant."

"Thank you for the description, woman I will never sleep with again," I drily replied as she stuck out her tongue at me. "And I could have gotten more out of those classes if I'd cared about them. It was my choice not to gain, because I thought it was

pointless – it'd be the War College that was make or break for me."

"Failure to motivate your student to learn is very much failure," Akua replied. "*Jino-waza* ensures that every student knows the worth of their lessons."

"It also teaches your kids to always compete with each other," I flatly said. "That they'll need to squabble with each other to gain the attention of the highborn, that it's the only way up. It sets in the bone that you swing at the people around you, not upwards. It teaches skills, too, I won't pretend otherwise. But I'm not exactly surprised those schools are backed by *nobles*."

"You do not understand," Akua gently said. "*Jino-waza* goes beyond the schools. It is everywhere, applies to everything. The lack of a stone does mean it ceases, the stone is a *teaching* tool. It is how a family knows which of them should benefit if a favour is called in, whose marriage should have the most coin spent on to arrange, who gets to eat the most when the months are lean."

"*Parents* do this?" I replied, aghast.

"Well, yeah," Indrani said, brow creased. "Makes sense, I'm not sure why you're so offended. If you get a windfall, you don't waste it on someone who won't do shit with it. Even parents can tell who's going places, Cat."

"You're not supposed to play favorites," I bit out. "Everyone gets a fair shot, that's how people who aren't obviously good at things get their chance to shine."

Did they not realize that what they were describing, it only ever benefitted the slightest bit of the people involved? Talented people would band together and help each other up while having all the incentive to kick everyone else down. And above those games you had the highborn, playing an even more lethal take on it with each other – and the ingrained notion that they should never, ever let anyone below them come up. It could only be at their own expense.

"That's nonsense," Indrani bluntly replied.

"She is Callowan, Indrani," Akua said, and when I turned on her a thunderous scowl she raised a hand in appeasement. "I mean no insult. I am only saying that it is because you come from a land of *plenty* that think this way, dearest."

I blinked at her. A land of plenty? Had she *seen* what they sold in the bazaar. Not even the enchanted stuff, just the spices and dyes would – I stopped, elbowing aside the sharp irritation and forced myself to look at it from the Wasteland's eyes. Food, I got almost immediately. She meant food.

"It wasn't your nobles that made this," I finally said. "It's a survival teaching."

"When is the last time Callow had a major famine?" Akua asked. "It is different here. We kill to eat, to drink – the Taghreb fight wars to steal clouds from each other and make them into water! You come from a place that has the luxury of fairness, but Wolof does not. Few parts of Praes do."

"That's not the way to do it, though," I said. "You don't claw at each other, there's no winning that when it starts. You sit and figure it out together. Ration, share. Something like a famine, you're all in it together."

Splashing the mud on the others so they were deeper in wouldn't actually get you out of the pit.

"It a pleasant sentiment," Akua replied, "but it does not help to choose which belly should be filled by the rice bowl. Jino-waza does. It lets you make the decision with clear eyes – and they will have to make it in their lifetime, Catherine. Everyone in this city older than forty, before Callowan grain was brought in, has known hunger."

"Not the nobles," I sharply smiled.

"Not my kin, the Sahelians are too wealthy for it," she agreed. "But lesser lords, ruling over poorer lands? It is not as uncommon as you think. The fields feed everyone, Catherine, and no granary lasts forever. We make many wonders, but not even we can make wheat sprout out of rock."

It would have been a better use of their skills in magic to learn that rather than fucking diabolism, I thought, but that was unfair. Destructive magic was easier. You needed to know a lot less to toss a fireball than, say, heal a broken bone. I could see it writ in the long of history, how it would have gone: the people and places inclined to the peaceful solution, to make wheat sprout from rock, they wouldn't last. Not when a less scrupulous rival could come in, throw a few fireballs and take everything. It wasn't as easy as raising castle walls with this. Magic was *expensive*, and Praesi were rich but not with bottomless purses.

So you got better at the magics that could protect you and destroy your rivals, and then maybe if you rose high enough that you were beyond most threats you could afford to go looking for wonders. Answers beyond eating the other crabs in the bucket. It was not happenstance, I thought, that the Sahelians had the finest field rituals in Praes. But by the time you got safe enough to look for those wonders, were you still the same people who'd wanted them in the first place? I felt an unpleasant shiver

of sympathy at the thought. I was not an unfamiliar tale I was spinning there.

"It doesn't need to stay like this," I said. "Older than forty, you said. We had two decades of peace and trade, and that changed things."

"It did," Akua murmured. "Mother used to think it softened us, made us lose our edge, but I disagree. It freed us to pursue different things. To consider beyond the immediate."

I cast a long look at the kids below, fingers tight against the windowsill. The teacher had move on from mathematics, she was speaking of early Praesi history – the campaigns that brought the Grey Eyries into Praes not so long after its founding – as she regularly stopped for questions and jino-waza considered to unfold before my eyes. I couldn't have fixed this place even if I thought it was my duty to do it, I admitted to myself. There was so much of Praes that was still unknown to me. Parts of I knew like the back of my hand, the Legions and the lore and bloody embrace with my own home, but it wasn't enough. Akua had thought I might be Dread Empress once, climb the Tower, but it would have been madness.

I was glad I had not heard the song in years.

No, what I was meant to do out east was not put on some saviour's cloak and pretend I had the answers. I was here to bind the Dread Empire to the Liesse Accords, to the war against Keter, and to topple the empress who'd been such a thorn in our sides. Beyond that, I must remember restraint. It was not my land here, and in some ways I just... thought differently. And did not quite understand how they did. There was more to the differences between Callow and Praes than weather and colours. I shook my head, shaking off the thoughts.

"We should plan out our next move," I finally said, pushing away from the window. "We'll want to move under cover of dark."

"A shame I cannot use the family library," Akua said. "Half an hour there and I would know the nature of the spell the patrols are using to hunt us."

Indrani snorted.

"Yeah well, if we were in there we could just stroll up to the gold and take it," she said.

I smiled, only half-listening.

"The library is in an entirely different wing than the treasury vaults," Akua chided. "It is much too-"

I turned to look at her so quickly my neck almost cracked.

"Wait," I interrupted. "The library, you told me it was over the vaults."

"The artefact vaults, yes," the shade said. "The treasury is nowhere near these. It is not the cleverest of notions to keep demons near one's coinage."

Oh, I thought. *Oh*. Sargon thought we were going for the grain and the treasury, so that was the parts he was protecting. But he had to be stretched tight with people, going all out on the defence of those two places and looking for us in the streets with yet more mages. He couldn't cover everything, so he'd focused on guarding what we were after. That meant thinning the defences elsewhere. And though we could get to neither the granaries nor the treasury, what was more important than either of those things to the enduring power of the Sahelians? I met their gazes with my eye, grinning wide.

"I have a plan," I said.

Well, I could have done without the groaning.

ruduen

"'Books, Catherine?' he said, sounding agonized. 'Castles, armies, ancient architectural wonders, I can make my peace with them all. But books, Catherine? A line has to be drawn somewhere.'"

Also, go boost!

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

jamesc9

I assumed that you were quoting Masego, but it's actually from Roland:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/03/24/chapter-20-hook/>

[*boballab*](#)

Oh no Cat, you already got the reputation of burning things especially cities, do you really need to get one for burning libraries now.

[*Liliet*](#)

I do assume they're there to steal shit, not just to torch it.

ruduen

I imagine that's the intent – grab and shove whatever they can into the Night, the same way they were stolen from. I'd wager they could trade or threaten to burn them from there.

Noted, with Cat's luck, there will be a fire anyway.

therealgridlock

There was a firefight!

Crash

She said she has a plan, the fire is inevitable. That's equivalent to saying "what could go wrong?"

[boballab](#)

They are there for the grain and the gold not the magical library. So how do you get all the guards pulled from the granary and the treasure vault? Why you set the library full of books and scrolls of magic on fire! You know the same library that Akua told her was the source of her family's power and was even respected by Masego. Light that puppy on fire and everyone is going to be sent there to try and save it, especially since it also sits over the Artifact Vault and who wants demons running through Wolof distracting everyone...

ninegardens

Hilarious... but also, one of the people who DOESN'T want demons running around is Cat. 😊

[boballab](#)

That is why she sets the Library on fire and not the vault itself, it forces the other side to respond. If the other side doesn't pull those guards from the places Cat wants to rob, they get demons everywhere as well as losing what keeps the family in power.

Sylfa

I'm fairly sure your plan would backfire, pun intended. Why would they pull the armoured and armed guards away from the clear objective when you have all sorts of non fighting people that knows enough magic to trigger a quenching artifact?

Yes it would distract, but not enough. Especially not when the risk is dying in the city. Stealing all the

stuff that they need to maintain power though? And then trade it nicely for the cheap cheap price of some basic porridge ingredients and some heavy, easy to bend metal? It's the deal of a lifetime!

shikkarasu

Nah, I'm with Liliet. Cat is going to go to the Library, dig into the Artefact room, and grab all the best things that can possibly coexist in her shadow. Then she can just *walk out whistling*. Who's going to stop her? Are you going to mess with someone carrying three demons and Sisters knows what else around? With the Crows-damned Diabolist following at her heel? I'm not.

Cat then holds the city ransom from within. Possibly walks up to Sargon and barter in person with an entire arsenal at her fingertips.

antlan87

Only problem with that is that Masego would give her an earful if she tried to burn it. Besides, giving him access to all that knowledge would make him more dangerous to their enemies.

RoflCat

Wouldn't be her first one anyway (Arsenal's, albeit that was in disguise)

Taelel

She set fire to the archive/library in the arsenal didn't she?

Sinead

Yes, but she set fire to the least useful part of the library.

She isn't entirely without morals.

DustHurricane

God damn. I love this story.

therealgridlock

Hah, now i know why AUT is taking so long!

dadycoool

Ugh, culture shock. It's why rises to leadership ought to be vertical, not horizontal, as Cat just touched on. People from

different demographics simply don't GET each other, especially when there's such contrast between so many aspects. It's also part of the reason why the Callowan Nobles prefer Vivienne so much over Cat.

laguz24

It's also why people need to be surrounded by different demographics, otherwise no one understands each other and there is needless conflict.

therealgridlock

Now if only we could convince the democrats that farmers are people too, next we could solve world hunger.

John Doe

Really? Grow up.

Daniel Ball

ahahahahahaha...

that's not happening. Don't you know that Food appears in Stores by the will of The Party expressed via demanding statement and the threat of protest? Ask the Kanenas.

juststuff

What farmers the big five our you know family farms. Because republicans are not looking out for the latter. I just don't see how giving tax breaks to multi billion dollar faming conglomerates is helping people unless you buy into the whole corporations are people to thing.

<https://www.farmaid.org/issues/corporate-power/corporate-power-in-ag/>

AbraKadabra

Nah, my boy. That is a false argument. The line about vertical and horizontal refers to the fact that empires are inevitably oppresing people because the leader in charge can only really understand his own people. And other people will be sidelined.

Which means that those dreams about an united world under one leadership will be a nightmare.

A boot on a human face forever.

What you just said is the empire builders argument. Sadly.

laguz24

This level of worldbuilding is why I love the guide, this lesson explains how famine shaped praes and why it is the nation that tries to conquer callow rather than trade. Stories have deeper roots than even she knows and I also see how it shapes Amadeus, having grown up in the breadbasket of the empire he doesn't have that level of competition. Agriculture really is everything, however, I'm surprised that callow and praes didn't trade more often. Even by smugglers.

Razorfloss razor

If I had to guess it probably started that way but years of war between the two have probably shattered any plans of trade smuggled or not. It's really hard to trade with a country that has been at war with yours since it has existed. Not helping matters is if you get caught you are probably going to be killed or exiled by just about everyone in your life. Remember vengeance and spite are the very things that kept callow together in face of the terrible things parsei would do in the name of conquest.

Earl of Purple

It's hard to smuggle enough grain to feed a nation, especially through a border patrolled to dissuade raiding and invasion. It's why the Smugglers Guild that Ratface had contacts in preferred Praesi jewellery and enchanted goods.

caoimhinh

They did.

Procer and Callow traded with Praes all the time, but used intermediaries and "indirect" means such as going through Mercantis because of realpolitik and because they liked to pretend they weren't doing such trade, for reasons such as the hatred between the nations and because Good nations wanted to claim that they had no connections and no trades with Evil nations.

Taichi22

That's what I love so much about PGTE, is that there's such an intricate level of geopolitical understanding that went into the worldbuilding and writing; the theory that nations' paths, culture, and consciousness are formed by the resources available to them is not a new idea, but only passingly rarely do I ever see it in fiction.

[Poetically Psychotic](#)

I wonder how many books and artifacts she can cram into her Night pockets...

shadw21

I's bet Cat asks/says a prayer to Sve Noc and they reply "Yes."

ninegardens

The goddess of Theft in Victory.... yeah, I can see that working...

Sinead

I realize that it won't happen, but I just got the mental image of Cat trying to take a book back out to get a response along the lines of "Not now, I'm reading that one."

Insanenoodlyguy

Whelp, I'm back to thinking she's considering making Akua Empress and/or Chancellor again. It can't be one of hers, and lets face it, Amadeus is a horrible choice if he actually has to run it by himself. Akua, for all of her Akua-ness, seems like the person who'd do the best job.

dadycoool

The once-Heiress, laid low, only to rise higher than ever before?

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus probably has a plan for reform and for who should be running it. He was a horrible choice when he was twenty-something, he's a little bit older and more experienced than that by now. He ran Callow for twenty years!

shikkarasu

Poorly. I love Amadeus, but he spent 20 years keeping Callow just shy of rebellion and did so by way of murdering his opposition. I really *really* want to find out that the Dread Emperor Benevolent quotes are Amadeus having learned from his mistakes, but I don't think he grew out of Leading via Conquer, and Destroy the way Catherine grew beyond Learn, Struggle and Seek; or even just Taking and Breaking.

It's very Praesi, and he would make a fine Dread Emperor, but one for the History books rather than the Age of Order.

...just don't tell him I said that, I would not survive the bell.

Shveiran

Really? I mean...

Even leaving aside all else, the man is all about reforms. At a guess, he is fully on board with anything that makes the world more orderly.

He is the closest thing I can picture a Dread Empire being to resemble Cordelia Hasenbach, and that makes him rather close to the fledgling Age of Order.

ninegardens

He's closer to Tariq. Or Yolanda the Wicked. Cordelia hasenbach KNOWS how to handle nobility. She accepts compromises. She is very much a mirror to Malicia. Black has none of that.

He has Grey Pilgrims charisma and idealism, and if he were in a kingdom that could support that (Callow), he might do well (note how well Cat does in Callow, using a similar mindset).

But he is a terrible terrible Dread Emperor, for any age.

[Liliet](#)

Praes does not NEED Dread Emperors if it can get a steady supply of food. That system is outdated with the change in material conditions.

caoimhinh

Not exactly.

Remember that the standard of living in Callow was *higher* during the Praesi occupation after the Conquest than before that. Catherine stated that several times along the books.

Callow wasn't "just shy from rebellion", they were living well thanks to all the reforms Amadeus implemented, the only problem they really had was the Imperial Governors acting out of line and harming the populace, and they got executed when caught (and when Malicia didn't protect them, such as with Mazus in Book 1, it's implied Amadeus had been wanting to execute him long before, but Mazus's father used his influence and thus Malicia kept holding Black back).

When the Heroes rose the banner of rebellion, they didn't find as much help as they would like, and the only backing they got was from old veterans and a few nobles. The common populace and the younger generation had no interest in fighting for the Kingdom, and were living comfortable lives even if not full of luxuries.

Amadeus is a reformist at his core, and he is a selfless patriot, he is nothing like the Dread Emperors of Old, who were selfish, self-centered fascists who wanted to stand at

the top of the Tower (and the world) or wanted to sow chaos and laugh at the flames of Calernia. Amadeus wants Praes to be better, regardless of whether or not he is in it.

All the way from the methods he implements to his intentions, and the perspective and sheer mindset he has, Amadeus is very different from how someone like Akua or Malicia is, as they both glorify the madness and cruelty of the Tyrants, simply thinking themselves as better versions of Dread Empresses than any before.

Even his ruthlessness is more similar to that of Heroes doing things for the greater good than the cruelty of the Old School Villains.

His problem is that he has little tolerance for political bullshit and Praesi Nobility is ruled by that as much as it is by cruelty and ceaseless scheming.

[Liliet](#)

(Note: I'm p sure Amadeus is not the first to be motivated by actual patriotism and be reasonable. Terribilises are known for reforms and prosperity, too, and there has been a string of DEs Amadeus referenced as having tried to fix Praes's food issue from the "overpopulation" angle, and not all of them were horribly dystopian)

Lord Haart

"Terribilises"... I wonder if some Isbili blood *did* make its way to the Tower at some point and yielded these, there's some potential etymology link there, so maybe?

[Liliet](#)

Counterargument: the origin of "Terribilis" is clear, the origin of Isbili well personally *I* don't know.

So... if there's a link...

[Liliet](#)

I'm... seriously? Benevolent? THAT crack is still going around?

Anyway, Amadeus spent 20 years keeping Callow from rebelling against abusive governors Alaya gave these position as political favors by way of smart governance, keeping the military from abusing the populace in any way, funding orphanages and changing administrative institutions.

And before then, he spent 20 years overseeing the Reforms in Praes proper. Remember how wide-reaching those were?

ninegardens

See, my issue here is that Black is... kind of... Callowan.

There's a REASON that Malicia said to him "You can't conquer your way to a new homeland". There's a reason the girl he trained is such a perfect fit for Callow.

Black loves long prices. Black HATE'S slimy politics. Black is the Farmer's tyrant, and in a land of farmers he does... reasonably well. He can get the popular vote, and murder the visiting Praes nobility as needed (Malicia cleans up the mess).

Black would make a pretty reasonable king IN CALLOW.

But that doesn't really work in Praes. It's not actually governance, its autocracy, and it won't work in Praes, because the power differential between the Tower and the Nobility is actually *much smaller* than the power differential between the Black Knight (representative of the Empire), and some random governess.

Black is still a general, not a politician. And (from what we've seen) large swathes of Praes LIKE their nobility.

I don't think he has the skills to wrangle the noble families, and I don't think he has the firepower to burn them out without destroying half the continent, and even if he did, you can't just re-write a culture overnight. Everything Malicia told him when they split ways still holds true. Her response sucked, but she was right to say he was the wrong person for the throne.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus is not Callowan. Remember when we got his young self's inner monologue on how he's not a *Callowan heretic* to worship Gods Above? Remember where he spent his years being Named? Remember how he RAISED AN ARMY TO FIGHT A CIVIL WAR, AN ARMY OF PRAESI, IN PRAES?

People are seriously missing the part where Amadeus is a *leader*. He didn't get handed an army, he MADE one. He is not a politician but he IS an administrator and a reformer. HE HAS BEEN OVERSEEING IMPLEMENTATION OF HIS REFORMS FOR **FORTY** YEARS. In this nation! Not any other!

(Twenty of these years he spent mostly overseeing Callow, sure. But the previous twenty were IN PRAES, and he hadn't fought a single full-scale war in that time. It was ALL administration, and probably border skirmishes)

Alaya is biased badly in this: she has clear blind spots for anything that is not, uh, PRAESI COURT. Which has been weakened in power and influence to the point of bare relevance over the course of their shared reign, as had been their plan since the events of Seed. (And yes, they were co-rulers factually)

Shveiran

Yeah. Just... yeah, this.

[Liliet](#)

> Amadeus of the Green Stretch was the son of corpses now buried, born of a land tread by soldiers under different banners with every season. Duni, he was, his skin the pale shame of old defeats that Praes had deemed filth even in name, and never did he forget it. It was not the Tower's promises that whispered in his sleep but the footsteps of his youth, the wheel of unending defeats seen from the side with cold eyes. In indignation he had become squire, and so sharp a blade found it that it slew his rivals and knighted him in black. To the banner he'd raised the disgraces of the Wasteland had flocked, be they green of skin and red of hand, Named hunted from above or every sharp mind and soul of steel that knew contempt but no captain. His was a company of the hungry and the lost, sworn to bleed for those unworthy of that blood. And so Amadeus of the Green Stretch asserted this: Praes is a mould that must be broken.

So Callowan of him, huh.

aurikdomi

I think he meant he is Callowan metaphorically, and he said only kind of. He is kind of Callowan in his desire to break the mould of Praes as a long price for more than just himself but for all of Praes and he is kind of Praes'n (Praesian?) in all that qualified him to become the Black Knight.

[Liliet](#)

Praesi. He's Praesi.

And he's not "kind of" Callowan. His is the people's revolution, not the foreign invasion, and those are very very different things. He's not "extracting the long price", he's trying to *fix up the place*.

Abrakadabra

Akua becoming Chancellor makes sense. She cannot become Epress because she is dead, therefore she cannot betray the emperor.

[Liliet](#)

She... can? It's super easy to betray people in ways other than taking over their position directly.

RoflCat

There's a law that prevent undead to become Dread Emperor/ Empress, so unless Akua can get herself a resurrection then she can't become one.

Black though

Shveiran

It has been pointed out by others that both were soul-bound before their body died, so both don't count as dead according to Praesi laws.

The whole blackmail in Book 2 was organized according to that principle: an heir soul, later placed in a body in Black's control, would have had a claim on the High Seat.

So both Black and Akua count as "people" according to Praesi inheritance laws, and not undead.

Alexander

Akua doesn't need a resurrection as she's technically not (completely) dead. She just needs a body.

Shveiran

Precisely.

And Black just took off his body for a while in order to give it a good wash. Which is how his hair lost color.

That Other Guy

She's not dead yet, just very badly hurt...

[Burlyraven](#)

I'm wondering if Akua is intentionally angling for a prodigal daughter/returning savior story, or if it's just kind of happening in that way that god-touched fates do in this 'verse. It'd be a heroic story still in keeping with her personality.

edrey

And that is why Black and the legions won in that civil war 40 years ago, the versatile fireball of dozens of average mages against the great cabals of the great lines, why the great Named of now focused on institutions and not just swinging a sword. Praes is rich but didn't want to make trade with Ashur before malicia and just wanted to take everything by force. The lack of food is their fault. Archer on the other hand just can't accept the words of concoter. They didn't need to fight. That named are not more special than the people in general. On side note i don't think ranger would be able to live in calernia after the accords, she think her blade is beyond mortal problems after all.

Liliet

> Praes is rich but didn't want to make trade with Ashur

Don't forget Ashur imports food, too. There was this whole thing with Nicaean fleet blocading them into starvation.

They buy food through Mercantis.

edrey

True but Ashur ships can go to any port in the continent and Praes can't

308924810a

The reason why Praes can't do that is because of Ashur.

Honestly I'd be in favor of an actually successfully expanding Praes trying to cut a deal with the Bard and get in on a rivalry with Ashur, because if they're occupied with that they can't disrupt the Bard's encirclement of the Dead King, same way them being occupied with Callow prevented them from disrupting the encirclement of the Dead King.

The issue is that it's a much more fragile situation, easily changed by any Praesi emperor getting the idea to invade Procer or the Golden Bloom. And it potentially disrupts whatever tenuous situation the Bard is working towards with the stories of the continent/her own private goals.

308924810a

Edit:by 'that' I mean sending out their own trading missions.

Wonder

How many times over the years ,has She met their gazes with her eye, grinning widely and saying "I have a plan,"?

I love it when she gets that grin!!

That prayer to the Stingy Crow Sisters , If only Drow could hear the prayers their esteemed First offers.

RoflCat

>I love it when she gets that grin!!

You mean, she's making 'that' face.

-“You do that thing where you almost smile and you show a little teeth,” Juniper told me frankly. “It looks really creepy on a human.” – Book 2: Aplomb

Though I keep imagine it as the Grinch's grin.

shikkarasu

>If only Drow could hear the prayers their esteemed First offers.

Well, her holy book *is* considered heresy in the future, according to one of the intro quotes. Honestly I'm surprised no Drow tried to kill her and harvest her Night in the first year or so of her 'reign'. Even the Barrow Sword gave it an honest effort.

Shveiran

Oh, I expect one tried... but considering RUMENA never managed to creep up on Cat using the Night, I doubt any second stinger got close...

Darkening

I mean, one tried to challenge her authority at one point and she just used her connection to the goddesses to strip him of the ability to use Night to the point that he lost toes to frostbite after suddenly being mortal again. Unless they murdered her in her sleep they weren't killing her, and there's no possible way Cat would sleep in the center of a band of cutthroats to rival goblins without warding her tent.

Juff

Typo Thread:

be bring me > be bringing me
along my > along with my
feigned > feinted
was fire was > was fired was
Archer loose > Archer loosed
form my blow > from my blow
disguise appearance > disguise
was board, > was broad,

Sargon change > Sargon changed
In don't > I don't
follower her > followed her
that that > that
way in a weakness > way in – a weakness
in very specific > in a very specific
a good luck > a good look
shop for > shop for.
entirely required > entirely recovered
could be attend > could attend
impossibly that > impossibly, that
The only a kid handling with > Only the kid handling
west the Wasaliti > west of the Wasaliti
her a thunderous scowl > her with a thunderous scowl
that think > that you think
in the bazaar. > in the bazaar?
I was not an > It was not an

therealgridlock

God that's a lot.

Doing the lord's work.

"Archer had killed two more before a survivor got close enough to make her drop her bow and unsheathed her longknives, I saw, and the last one was coming for me."

The word "unsheathed" here is in the wrong tense. It should be "make her drop her bow and unsheath her longknives" or "make her drop her bow, and she unsheathed her longknives" or even "make her drop her bow. She unsheathed" or possibly could probably drop the "i saw" or change it to the beginning of a second sentence "i saw that the last one was coming for me"

I realize this is an *editing* critique, but sometimes you just have some complicated sentences, and i know english isn't your first language, but that's why we care enough to correct you.

It's either fine but klunky the way it is, or accept that it's the wrong tense and change it somehow.

therealgridlock

Ah! I have a real one,

"Sherehazad"

Swapped the r and the h, it's technically "scheherazade" but even in the fantasy anglicization, the h and the r ended up in the wrong place.

>"Sheherazad"

Although it's also entirely possible it's been spelled the other way the entire length of the book and my dyslexic ass only just now noticed.

Darkening

I **think** it has actually been that way since we first saw the name, but it's entirely possible I'm wrong.

hue hue

Fire time?

That Other Guy

5 utils says Cat fills the eau de parfum bottle of one of Sargon's closest aides with goblinfire.

Or she could keep it simple and steal all of his magic artefacts, offering to trade a selection back (with the emprisoned demons still in place) in exchange for gold and vittles – and maybe a couple of enchanted cold boxes for her wine.

Darkening

Gotta admit, **I** wouldn't be willing to crack open a globe of goblinfire to pour it out into some other container. I'm not actually sure how they keep it from igniting in the container in retrospect. Probably either the goblinfire mixture needs oxygen to start burning or there's some kind of alchemy applied to their containers.

shikkarasu

I always assumed it was some sort of flint-in-the-clay situation. Like the whole container is one big firing cap just waiting for a solid thump. And if all else fails, just make a syphon out of Night.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I figured it had magnesium or a majickal mystery mass with similar properties, I.e. it catches fire when exposed to O₂.

Lord Haart

It's been hinted they are demonic in nature, so I imagine goblinfire munitions as fist sized hell eggs.

jamesc9

Refreshing my high-school chemistry, I think I'm satisfied that Magnesium won't auto-ignite. Wikipedia tells me that Caesium will.

Wabbitking

With of course the implied threat that the demons might be let loose somewhere important if she doesn't get the food and gold.

Xinci

Mm, there is a silver lining here for possible reform. The Accords, or more specifically institutions like Cardinals that it would introduce, could mold the praesi into a more cooperative framework with others. Jino-waza is a philosophy of how to extrude and accumulate resources in scarcity, if one gives more avenues for cooperative accumulation over a broader group of methodologies, one could slowly mould a wider base of what is considered acceptable within Praes and form a more unified cultural base while one did so. It is quite similar in the end to what Cat wanted to do with Named. Jino-waza as a philosophy has points, it just needs to be subsumed to a larger purpose to mitigate Praes being a bad actor long term.

Liliet

Yeah I'm pretty sure jino-waza is outdated in a non-scarcity situation.

Which, considering Cat came to the city specifically to steal all of their food, is not there yet.

Darkening

Maybe Calernia can get a year without someone torching half the farmland on the continent or killing large swaths of peasant farmers in the next decade. That'd be nice.

panic

I would like to call Chekovs gun.

Previously three demons unbound and contained within Artefacts where mentioned. These should now be in the wall. I call shenanigans

ninegardens

So, a few things that stick out with this chapter:

Cat should be trying to sell the Accords to Wolof. She should be trying to sell them to Sargon, she should be trying to sell them to the populous, she should be trying to sell them to the other nobles.

This city has so much to lose, and so much to gain, depending on the wording of the accords.

As in... Cat should get up there on stage and say
"You are a city of wonders. Wonders I scarcely believed possible.
And seeing this city, I can understand your pride. Right now,
Callow's graininess are busy feeding the armies in the war to the
north... and can not lightly be sold elsewhere... but the moment that
war is finished, we would gladly trade them for a taste of even
your cheapest wonders. You know that. You know you like in a city
of marvels. Sign the Liesse accords, make peace with Callow, and
this city need never go hungry again."

At the same time... Cardinal is a threat. Cardinal threatens to
eclipse the importance of Wolof as a center for magical learning,
and that... that would destroy this city.
So... there needs to be arrangements made. A place for Wolof in the
new world order she is trying to build. Perhaps as a distance
campus, or perhaps the promise that great teachers from Cardinal
would ALSO be expected to visit here.

More than anything, she needs to sell the accords, say "This is
coming. Here's the first draft. Now tell me... what would Wolof
need in the next draft in order to support this?"

Which brings me to my next point:

I don't know how she can get rid of Malicia. There is no viable
candidate to replace her. No, Black is not a viable candidate,
because with him on the throne, he would NOT be able to wrangle
the various nobilities and city states to agree to the Accords.
Malicia would do it with ease. And while Cat may have PERSONAL
disagreements with Malicia... getting the Praes nobility aboard
with the Accords is exactly Malicia's skillset.

Cat is offering Malicia a way out. She can offer Malicia pretty
much everything she's ever dreamed of. Their goals are
ridiculously well aligned here, as are their respective
skillsets.

It's all good for Cat to bully Praes a little first, to get
herself a *good* negotiating position... but Alaya is just too
useful to shunt off the board, and right now, I'm not convinced
theirs any point.

[Liliet](#)

Cat needs to be selling the Accords to whom, now?

Wolof is not in any way, shape or form a democracy. Their
kindly ruler distributing food to the dispossessed means their
kindly ruler OWNS them.

And Cat has just confirmed that their kindly ruler is in no way
willing to go against Malicia.

As for Malicia herself, I'm really, really not sure Cat is there to shunt her off the board right there and then. But... she is an unreliable actor. She has proven unreliable to the guy who knows her best, who literally put her on the throne, who trusted her fully and did basically everything she asked for – she had all that, and she pissed it away by going behind his back to do the one (1) thing she knew he wouldn't let her do.

Catherine cannot rely on Malicia in any way, shape or form. This is the main problem at play.

ninegardens

The Fact that Sargon NEEDS to distribute food, means that he NEEDS to have a supply of it in order to own them. It ain't a democracy, but power isn't absolute, and finding ways to sell as many people as possible on the deal is going to make the Accords easier going forward.

She wants the public interest to be high enough that Sargon will look at the accords, and really, she wants a Preas pair of eyes (or five) looking at the Accords and figuring out what edits they'd suggest ASAP.

If she decides to roll Malicia, then the fact that Sargon is owned by her isn't a problem, and if Cat decides to keep Malicia, then she'll want Malicia on board with the Accords, so talking to Sargon is a good opening move.

You raise a VERY good point about Malicia proving unreliable in the past... and I ain't gonna discount it, its concerning... But at the same time, that was when she was facing down the threat of a Crusade. She got desperate. Same way Hasenbach is getting desperate in the face of the DK, and may well activate and angel weapon.

We don't go around saying Hasenbach can't be negotiated with, and the circumstances are largely similar.

If you gave Malicia a deal where she DIDN'T need to face down a Crusade, she would take it... and be much loathed to fuck it up again later (she still might of course. She's a bit of a train wreck some days).

And... that brings back to the point of Selling the Accords to Wolof:

Whoever takes the tower...(or whatever ruleship remains after the tower falls)... that person will eventually die. They'll have a successor. And that person in turn will have a successor.

That Accords will FAIL if the only thing keeping them in place in Preas is the will of the person at the top. You need to nobility to be keen on it. To GET something out of it. And if you want the nobility to stay keen on it, then well

one way to achieve that is to get the Merchants in on it (you know, the ones who pay taxes and all).
It's not a democracy, but it is a pyramid, and things at the bottom of the pyramid CAN filter up.
(tbh, I think talking to Sargon directly, as opposed to the populous is probably a more plausible idea, but both are possible)

Liliet

Things at the bottom of the pyramid filtering up need a lot more saturation than "a foreign queen talked to us and made a good point"

Insanenoodlyguy

Wolof won't care as much if Cardinal is half-staffed by hired Wolof. Becomes the point of pride of the city, even. "Cardinal is the place for the best magic... and when they need more Magicians, they come HERE." I imagine a lot of that exists now, but replace Cardinal with "the tower" and the like. Black even said she's going to need to fill Cardinal up with Praesi, and this chapter proved his point.

James, Mostly Harmless

"Mile thaman, Sahelian" (Ever worthy, Sahelian) reminds me of "Shai Dorsai" (true Dorsai).

Frivolous

Jino-waza is an interesting and ethical alternative to the mores I've seen in other fiction about cultures with endemic scarcity and starvation.

Courtship Rite by Donald Kingsbury stands out in my memory as an extreme counter-example, a world that has nothing like jino-waza. The planet Geta practices cannibalism, even.

Speaking of which, I wonder if the Praesi ever bothered with cannibalism. I'm guessing not. Maybe they felt it was too close to greenskin practice.

Xinci

Well Amadeus did warn Cat about eating meat from the street markets in Ater

ninegardens

I'm guessing, when you can sacrifice someone as part of a field ritual, Canabalism probably falls out of favour. It's probably less efficient than just using the person for magical

hyperpowered compost (even if, in real world, eating more directly is more efficient.)

There's also the fact that "Human-> Soil -> crops- > food" is better than "Human-> Meat" at avoiding diseases.

Frivolous

Did we ever find out what happens to the bodies of those sacrificed in the field rituals? Because if the ritualists just cut the throat open, the meat might be left behind undamaged.

I guess the Praesi could also just feed the corpses of the sacrificees to pigs. Probably safer and it removes the stigma of direct cannibalism. Though magical healing should remove most, if not all, of the medical consequences thereof.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure during times of starvation no Praesi will leave a dead body just, like, *lying* there.

jamesc9

I'm used to Malthus, and the population rising until food is scarce again. If pre-conquest Callow was a land of plenty, how was the birth-rate regulated?

[Liliet](#)

It's not the birth-rate, it's the death-rate, of reasons other than starvation 😊

naturalnuke

Steal the books and hold them for ransom!

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Stab them and take their stuff!

ninegardens

Unrelated to story, but just wanted to say, your profile pic is fabulous

Silverking

...I think this discussion is a big factor of why Hakram needed to convince Vivienne that "she was worth a hand" back when they were running Callow while Cat was hunting the Drow. Because for all of his skill in administration and Juniper's skill in martial matters, the simple fact was that Callow is made up of a hundred

little songs that they didn't know the words to. They could set up any number of policies that would seem perfectly beneficial, but they could also trip up on some custom or reasoning that would feel obtuse to them but perfectly natural to Vivienne. I believe the saying goes, "Culture is the thing you don't realize you have until you go somewhere else and realize they do something differently."

Pyrdwein

Please bring back the recent chapter list at the bottom of the page rather than just the latest chapter link. I have followed this work religiously for years but it's hard to keep my place without accidentally skipping ahead with the new system.

I don't want to sound ungrateful because I genuinely love your writing, and if you ever decide to publish I will be buying copies for myself and my brothers just to spread the love. They won't read serial novels, despite the fact you have completed several books already and it drives me nuts because both absolutely love this kind of writing.

Either way, I just miss the easy access to the most recent chapters.

Chapter 8: Access

"Note: Cousin Onoko's assertion that 'blood is thicker than water' was in fact correct, despite my initial assumption otherwise. Add in the silence that followed the experiment, and it can be considered an unequivocal success."

– Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

The ruling seat of the Sahelians was called the Empyrean Palace. Pretentious fucking name really, even if it was probably as fancy as it sounded, but no one had asked me. Not that it'd ever stopped me from sharing my thoughts before, or in this particular case. Strangely enough, Akua disagreed with me. The palace's foundations were the oldest in the city, and though it'd begun small over the centuries it had turned into a real behemoth of a place. That was an advantage in the sense that it was difficult to entirely prevent entry into it, as there were simply too many entrances and too many people using them, but the rulers of Wolof had seen to their defences with characteristic thoroughness. Akua

drew at knifepoint in the dirt of our quarters' floor, first outlining three squares in a loose but noticeable curve.

"The Emyrean Palace is divided into seven different wings," she said. "These three are the outer section, the easiest to access. The central wing contains greeting halls, but the rest is places of little importance – servant quarters and stables, courtyards and gardens."

"We'd planned to go through the eastern wing, right?" Archer asked, crouched over the drawing.

With her unstrung bow kept on top of her knees, she looked like she was crouching by a campfire instead of a loose plan.

"We did," I agreed. "And odds are we still will. It's heavy on gardens, so it'll be easier to sneak through."

"The difficulty begins when we are inside the western wing," Akua said.

She drew small lines connecting the three squares, standing for open paths and halls.

"Getting into any of these wings from the outside is achievable, but movement between the wings is strictly limited," Akua elaborated. "Each of them has its own largely independent staff, largely to prevent infiltrations like ours – unknown faces are simply not allowed through. Which leaves us only one direction to go in."

She drew a rectangle vertically, nestled against the squares like a hammer's handle, and the deftly connected the three squares to it by single strokes.

"This is the Grand Gallery," the golden-eyed woman said. "It is the sift through which sneaks and agents are removed before they can reach the vital sections of the palace. It bears the great hall where formal banquet are held. Adjoining it are both the public kitchens and a set of private parlours. No guard or servant can enter the Gallery without holding an enchanted token, given out by the steward of another wing. Being caught without one means arrest if you are lucky, but most often summary execution."

I went fishing through the bag where the last two vials of the water breathing potion were and produced three small copper amulets. Detailed engravings were around the rim, and at the centre a single pearl bore a small enchantment. I set them down besides the plan.

"Scribe obtained these tokens for us," I said. "They're imitations, but very good ones. Eyes of the Empire have used them with success in the past."

The enchantments usually changed every few months, I'd been told, and Sargon had kept to that pattern. In the wake of his chaotic ascension to power, however, the Eyes had been able to subvert people in a few key mage cadres. The fakes were current, as even though Scribe had lost control of the spy network in Praes to Lady Ime she still had... contacts. Favours for call in that she'd kept for a rain day.

"That gets us into the Gallery," Akua agreed. "But not forward. To leave the Grand Gallery and move deeper into the palace, one must pass through one of the three threshold-gates. Each is warded, and there is no enchanted ward key: the only way not to be affected is to be keyed in with blood at the appropriate ward stone well beyond the corresponding gate."

She drew three small arcing slices above the rectangle, then a square facing each. The moment she finished, she cut through the left square with a decisive stroke.

"Issa's Garden has served as the personal quarters to the ruling Sahelian and their direct family for the last century and a half, but it was where my mother made her death-grounds," Akua calmly said. "Even after years of ritual purging, there are still motes of taint and so the ruins remain unused."

She drew a stroke through the centre square.

"The Empyrean Hall is the heart of the palace," she continued. "It holds many of the wonders my kin have accumulated over the years, including the enchanted ceiling for which the palace is named. Sargon will be using the old formal living quarters that were raised there and it is also where the treasury vault."

"We had an in there," I said. "I have a bottle of blood from a servant who is keyed into the wards, and I've learned a Night-trick that could exploit that to sneak us in with a little help from my patronesses. The trouble is that right now that place will be fucking packed to the gills. Forget the wards, it's the guards that would be a problem."

Akua withdrew her dagger, smoothly rising to her feet. As if to distance herself from the entire mess, she even took a step back to lean against the wall and arc an eyebrow at me.

"So you want us to hit the last wing," Archer nodded, looking at me.

"The Vaults," I said. "It's partially a mage village, partially a large library and underneath are all the artefacts the Sahelians believe too precious to see the light of day."

"Or too dangerous," Akua pointedly said. "If Sargon succeeded at binding Insipientia again, its artefact-prison will be there. The Weeping Snares he used when he came to parley are kept in a vault there, and so are over a dozen other makings in the same league."

"So we what, release all these beasties into the library?" Indrani asked, frowning. "I guess it'd be a kick in the guts – Hells, if they get loose it'll bring the city to its knees – but it doesn't sound like your usual plans. Gonna be a lot of dead servants to go with the dead soldiers and the dead mages."

A lot worse than that, should a demon be loosed in the city once more.

"No," I said. "We're going to steal the library, Indrani. All of it. And then, to make it clear I'm in a foul mood, we're going to rob the artefact vaults too."

Indrani laughed, openly delighted, but this was a more calculated move than she might think. I'd be holding two knives at High Lord Sargon's throat by clearing those out, though he wouldn't realize quite how bad it was until we sat at the negotiating table again. Akua cleared her throat.

"I have no opposition to such a plan in principle," she said. "But in practice, I have a question: how are we going to get past the ward?"

She pointed at the threshold-gate leading into the Vaults. You know, that gate we didn't have a handy blood vial for that'd maybe allow us to trick the wards. Servants never got keyed into two wardstones, presumably in case of this very sort of situation.

"I don't have a way to get us past the ward," I bluntly said.

The admission took them both aback.

"But," I continued, "I know some people who *can* get past them."

The Eyes of the Empire had people in the mage cadres that enchanted the tokens for the outer palace, and those mage cadres lived in the Vaults. Meaning that the Eyes had an in. And, as it happened, we knew where their safehouses in Wolof were – it paid to have the woman who'd first set them up in your service.

"And how are you going to get them to help us?" Akua skeptically asked.

"I am going to use," I toothily grinned, "tact and diplomacy."

—

Night sunk deep into the wood, spreading out in wavy cracks, and a heartbeat later the floor shattered.

We dropped down in a rain of shards and broken floorboards, landing in the middle of what looked more like some tavern's common room than the spy hideout it was. I landed on the table, swallowing a moan of pain — Gods but I wished I could have brought my staff into Wolof — while Archer threw herself on a surprised man and knocked him down. Akua already had a knife at the throat of a second when I checked, which left me the two seated at the table on which I now stood. Wait, no, only one. The woman in the dress had been knocked unconscious by a falling floorboard. That left only the bearded man in front of me, who was currently gaping and bleeding from the face where a wood shard had flown into his cheek.

"Good evening, Eyes of the Empire," I cheerfully said. "Who's in charge here?"

The young woman — barely more than a teenager — that Akua had a knife on began tearing up. She was shaking, obviously terrified.

"Please don't hurt us," she hurried out. "We'll be Eyes if you want us to, I'm sure you're right."

"*I curse you to be silent,*" I spoke in Crepuscular, and Night flared.

Her mouth kept moving, but not a sound followed. The flash of horror in her eyes then was significantly more genuine than the previous theatrics. The man at my feet had his hand on the handle of a knife, but he stopped short of unsheathing it when he saw I'd caught him.

"So not her," I said, cocking an eyebrow. "Did she seriously think that would work?"

It wasn't like we'd picked this place out of a hat.

"She is young," the bearded man sighed. "Good evening, Your Majesty. For the sake of this conversation, you may consider me to be in charge."

Meaning he likely wasn't. I glanced at the unconscious woman to his left and then at the poor bastard that Archer had in an absent-minded stranglehold, then decided there was no point in pushing for someone else to speak.

"Name?" I asked.

"I am Ekon, Your Majesty," he said.

I met his eyes with mine.

"If I have you a choice between doing me a favour and having your soul fed to Sve Noc, Ekon," I said. "Which would you end up leaning, d'you think?"

He swallowed drily, but his face remained admirably calm. He must have been his forties, I thought, but his age was not wearing hard on him. Spying must pay well.

"All things considered, Your Majesty," he said, "I would be inclined to the favour."

"Good man," I smiled, and moved to ease myself down the table.

I dropped down the floor by the unconscious woman, studying her in passing just to be sure she wasn't faking. No, it looked quite genuine: her head was swelling where she'd been struck, which would be very difficult to fake, and her hand was not clutching a knife but a... pipe? I leaned in close and sniffed. Well, I'd be damned. For the what, probably the third time now? Still, Below was smiling on me tonight. I snatched up the pipe, which was already filled with wakeleaf, and offered my good friend Ekon a smile.

"Don't worry about it, I'm not asking you to turn on Malicia," I said. "Nothing quite so troublesome."

"I am glad to hear it," the man cautiously ventured.

I passed a hand over the pipe, fire flickering in its wake, and grinned around the mouth of my pipe as I breathed in deep of my vice. Ah, that hit the spot.

"Now," I said, "let's talk about how you're going to get us into the Vaults."

Huh, I'd never seen a spy freeze in horror before. That was probably a good sign, right?

—

Ekon had been most helpful, for a man who was going to betray us before this was over.

Under cover of dusk we crept through the gardens, weaving through pools and flowerbeds laid out intricately under the shade of old, twisting trees. Stretches of lilies in pink and pale, delicate orchids in beds whose every rock was sculpted, hibiscus and hyacinth and candelabra flowers. Among them were more... exotic breeds, flowers whose petals slowly changed colours or who moved without need for the breeze. Some even had veins of light, or sweated droplet of mist-like purple instead of dew. We steered clear of the menagerie, for it was well-guarded and there were

creatures within that even we should stay wary of, and past a curving pool whose waters were full of nenuphars we took a servant's entrance into the western wing.

The pair of guards by the door studied us as we came in but said nothing. We wore servant's livery, after all. I had discarded my eyecloth in favour of a painted stone replacement from the bazaar for my missing eye, knowing it might get me recognized otherwise, and a touch of cosmetics had seen Indrani and I pass as vaguely Taghreb. The days out in the sun had tanned my skin deeper than usual, it was more the cheekbones than the colour that gave me away as being of Deoraithe extraction.

Once we were inside the western wing proper, not the outside part, we hugged the length of the servant quarters as we headed deeper in. At this time of the evening they were mostly empty, save for the children and the kinsmen raising them, so simply looking like we had a purpose was enough for the few servants we encountered to steer clear of us. Twice we encountered patrols, a handful of soldiers in Sahelian livery who lost interest in us immediately the moment Akua showed them a fake token. I was too on my guard to truly allow my gaze to drift around, but I did get glimpses of our surroundings. Tapestries were common and colourful, with complicated patterns whose motif changed from corridor to corridor. Painted wood was used as a sort of gilding along walls, and we had yet to encounter a single torch: it was all magelights.

It was almost bafflingly easy to make it into the Grand Gallery. We showed our tokens to the guards manning the hallway leading to it, faked smiles when a young man tried a joke about our 'coming here often' – he was eyeing Indrani pretty hard, but it wasn't exactly the kind of inspection we should be worried about – and were sent in. Within half an hour of having set foot in the Emyrean Palace, we we'd reached the Gallery. Akua had only described it in passing as having statues of her ancestors, but she'd undersold it significantly. The Grand Gallery was at least half a mile long and maybe half that in length? More than that, the 'statues' were in full armour and almost eerily lifelike. They were on tall pedestals, and a quick glance at the names under them told me what I was looking at: former High Lords and Ladies of Wolof.

I didn't dare linger, moving across the white and pink marble floor as quickly as I could without drawing attention. There were more people here, but the Gallery itself wasn't really bustling: it was the side parlours and the kitchens that were alive, swarming with people. I leaned closer to Akua, eyeing one of the statues wearing colourful scale and a short sword that looked like a decent fit for me.

"Think we could grab from those before we head into the Vaults?" I murmured.

We'd had to leave behind arms and armour, which had me feeling very naked at the moment. The servant livery was pretty nice, red and white cloth with black accents, but it wouldn't stop so much as a kitchen knife – much less good steel.

"It is all cursed," Akua replied in a murmur of her own. "Every single piece. It is a rite of passage for any Sahelian capable of magic to devise a curse of their own and replace one of the fading ones when they are fifteen."

Of course it was all fucking cursed, I sighed. Mildly curious, I cast a look around.

"So who'd you curse up?" I asked.

"One of my namesakes," she smiled. "The third of that name, and most distinguished – she held Wolof against foreign armies in the wake of First Crusade."

"So what'd you put in?" Indrani asked, looking enthused. "Is it rot? It's always rot with you Praesi types."

"Partial bone liquefaction," Akua replied, sounding proud. "And I tweaked the curse so that the most common counter-spells would work, but then trigger a second curse that liquefies the skin instead."

I wrinkled my nose even as Archer let out an impressed noise. Nasty stuff. Definitely a no on nabbing weapons. We got stopped five times. The first was a simple token check, the second a warning by a pair of guards to avoid the Green Parlour – noble guests were using it – but the third almost outed us. Not because of an interrogation, but because an older servant ordered us to help him and another man carry a large wooden table into a parlour. The weight on my bad leg was atrocious, and though I kept the pain from my face the older man complained of our slow pace several times. Akua begged us off as needing to report to the Master of Ceremonies as soon as she could and we made a getaway.

Twice more we were asked to show tokens, and I noticed we were being asked more frequently than the people coming and going. I pointed out as much to Akua, who nodded.

"Our guards are trained to ask the token the moment they do not recognize a face," she explained.

Made sense, and so far the deception had held. We could only hope it'd continue to. It was near the end of the corridor, by the statue of High Lord Nassor, that we waited. Archer asked, and so

we learned that the man was Akua's great grand uncle, whose daughter had been assassinated and usurped by Akua's own grandfather. Amusingly enough, Sargon was related to the man through his own mother and so it could be considered that their branch had somewhat returned to power. Sahelian family politics were like a rolling wheel of murder, it sounded like. I caught sight of someone passing through the threshold-gate to the Vaults from the corner of my eye and stiffened.

"That's her," I said. "Green stone necklace and grey robes, like our friend said."

Taiwo Bauna was a stout and respectable-looking woman into her middle age, with pale brown eyes that often saw her taken as more highborn than she actually was. By all reports, she was a fairly skilled enchanter with a good position among the enchanting cadres of the Sahelian vassal mages. She also liked losing a dice games and racking up debt doing it, apparently, which had been how the Eyes got to her. There were two guards by the door, and neither spoke a word as she passed them. She found us without difficulty, having been told of where we would be waiting. Her face was blank as she took us in, not bothering with greetings.

"You'll be bringing treats the kitchen I ordered," she said. "Honeybread, which they don't make in our own. Follow and be silent. I can only buzz the wards for three heartbeats before it triggers one of the deeper alarms, so you'll have to cross quickly."

"Understood," I simply replied.

It must not have been the first time she did this, I thought, for the wrapped and warm honeybread was waiting for us when we arrived in the kitchen. My leg complained of having to double back halfway through the Grand Gallery, but I kept myself under control. We were close, now was not the time to whine. She led the way as we returned to the threshold-gate, where we slowed. Moments before she crossed the gate, colourful lights began to swirl in the open air. The guards glanced at each other, then her. Taiwo sighed.

"I'll talk to Lord Luba," she told them. "It's been happening too often for it to be happenstance, the anchor patch must have been flawed."

"Please do," a tall man said, voice smooth. "I apologize for the delay, but you will have to wait until the lights fade before crossing."

None of us argued, and moments after the last splash of colour faded we followed Taiwo past the threshold. There was no smell of ozone, no movement of power, not a damned thing. We were *in*. We walked quickly, hurrying down an ornate hallway until we'd

reached a great antechamber that Akua had described as the beginning of the Vaults. Taiwo turned towards us, snatching the wrapped honeybread out of Archer's hands.

"Tell Alazi that this settles the debt," she said. "And if she hasn't arranged someone to take the fall, I'll be selling you all out before I'm even thrown in a cell."

"Of course," I replied. "She'll be in touch."

"She better not," Taiwo Bauna darkly said, and walked away.

Well, I thought, it was a good thing we already had someone who knew her way around here. I unwrapped the honeybread, biting into the warm loaf and feeling it crunch under my teeth pleasantly. I grimaced a heartbeat later, though: way too much cinnamon and honey. Too sweet for me. I passed it to Archer, who took a bite of her own and let out a little moan of pleasure. We hadn't had time to eat, so I really wished Taiwo had picked up bowls of stew or something instead.

"Let's get moving," I said. "Akua, you know the way to the library?"

"In my sleep," she drily replied.

Not exactly a surprise. Much like Masego she was a natural talent in matters of magic, but talent wasn't enough – to become as good as she had been, when she'd still had magic, you needed to *work*. We followed her. Archer ate the entire honeybread, purely to avoid question being asked she assured us, and I let my gaze wander through the empty halls of the Vaults. Most of the mages would be eating around now, or out on duty: it was some time before we encountered another soul, and even then it was another servant.

There were no tapestries here, the walls adorned instead with mosaics and steles in a style I did not recognize – it wasn't from the Free Cities, there was no paint, but it was strikingly vivid anyway – while the ceiling above us arced gently into what appeared to be the night sky. It was a lesser form of the enchantment covering the ceiling of the Empyrean Hall, Akua told us, one that changed only between night and day. It was used by younger mages as a practice before they were allowed to work on the real masterwork. How long was it before we reached the library? I wasn't quite sure, I was tense enough time was hard to parse without focusing. Whatever the truth, we eventually came to stand before great iron gates. Twice as tall and tall as a man, they were sculpted with the figures of twisting devils offering knowledge to men and later being made to kneel to them. I remained at a wary distance, remembering how I'd once nearly gotten myself killed by mouthing off at the Tower's front door.

"And our way in?" Indrani asked. "I'm not seeing knockers or a lock."

"It requires a spell," Akua said. "A variation on a formula taught to all who have the right to enter this hall, and which changes twice a day. Fortunately, there is a trick to it."

She laid a ghostly hand against the iron door, near a grinning devil's face, and closed her eyes. Her arm became as dark fog, flowing gently along the iron. The fog narrowed into small tendrils that went along certain lines of the sculpture – a face there, a staff or horns or a tower – and after a long time she breathed out.

"There," Akua Sahelian said, smirking a moment before a small click was heard at the gates unlatched.

I breathed out, rolled my shoulder.

"All right," I said. "Archer, you know what your job is."

"Clean-up," she grinned.

That was one way to put it.

"Akua, with me," I said. "I can't hold the entire thing in the Night, and there'd be no point. It's not the common works we're after, it's those that aren't in anyone else's library."

"I know the sections," she agreed.

And their defences too, which would be important. There was simply no way that the gates were the entire set of protections on something as essential to the Sahelians as this library. I'd bet they even encouraged young mages to sneak it past this door to sharpen them up a bit. The good stuff, though, would be kept away from where people could easily get at it.

"Then let's go," I ordered.

Archer took the lead, opening the door just enough we were able to slip through. I wasted half a heartbeat to the wonder of what I was looking at – this was large as a cathedral, and most of it books! – before focusing on the immediate. Which was a handful of white-robed scholars congregating around a great table near the entrance and paying us no attention, while a squadron of twenty guards kept watch from a raised platform to our right. Those did notice us, but the initial alarm at the sight of us somewhat faded at the sight of Akua following us in: she had changed her appearance to be matching the white robes of the scholars here. We still got a pair of guards coming down our way, frowning.

Akua and I moved towards the scholars and Indrani towards the pair, pace brisk. I scanned the room around us, taking in the

tower stacks in the middle of the great hall and the upwards layers on the walls – almost like the inside of a ship – but I found no one looking at us from there. So far our only witnesses were the people I'd seen. Four scholars, I saw, and as we approached one of them turned to us with a cocked eyebrow. He was looking at Akua, trying to place her face and failing. I was, meanwhile, looking at the table. Not the books but the rest. I found something suitable, a paring knife for quills next to an inkwell. Less than a dozen feet between us and the scholars now. From the corner of my eye I saw Indrani pass behind tall stacks, the guards catching up to her there. There wasn't a sound, but a few heartbeats later she moved out quickly and with a sword in hand. The guards above hadn't noticed a thing, and likely wouldn't until it was too late. Only a few feet away from the scholars now, and another one was looking at us with similar confusion.

"My apologies," the first man said, "but why did you bring a servant here? You ought to know they are not allowed, save with a Sahelian. What is your name?"

Ah, the poor fucker. He'd handed her a line and not even known it. Akua met his eyes and smiled, that pretty little number she liked to pull out when she was about to ruin someone's day.

"Akua," she said, hand coming to rest on the neck of a scholar with her back to us, "Sahelian."

Fear flooded the man's face, even as the shade idly snapped the scholar's neck. Calmly, I snatched the paring knife and flicked my wrist after taking a heartbeat to aim – it went right into the man's eye, and he fell down twitching. Well, at least it'd spare him the embarrassment of admitting that Akua had technically been allowed to bring us here. Talk about awkward. One of the survivors squawked in terror, the other one tipping as he backed away from the table hastily, but we were already moving. Akua flowed over the table smoothly, dropping down on the one who'd tripped, while I claimed a silver inkwell and smashed it into the side of the squawker's head.

He tried to ward me off with raised hands, but a jab in the stomach had him dropping his guard and I finished the job with another blow on the temple. He was unconscious, not dead, so I went to get the paring knife and finished the man off with it while Akua strangled the last one. I allowed myself one breath of relief after it was done, only then turning to look at the platform above. There'd been no alarm raised while we killed the scholars, which was a good sign. As if prompted, Archer appeared at the edge of the platform with a sword in hand – and going through a guard's stomach. The man slumped and tumbled over the railing, falling below with a dull metallic bang. I winced at the noise.

"Go hunting," I said. "We can't afford being caught too early."

I was not yelling, but she was Named: she'd be able to hear me anyway. She nodded, vanishing behind stacks.

"Can you hide the bodies?" I asked Akua.

"I suppose," she said, wrinkling her nose. "I've never had to dispose of my own kills before, dearest, much less someone else's."

I rolled my eye at her.

"I'm sure you'll manage somehow," I said.

"And people wonder why we build tiger pits," Akua muttered.

I hid my amusement, instead closing my eyes and finding my calm. I began murmuring prayer in Crepuscular, Night flowing freely through my veins. I could feel the attention of the Sisters, their eagerness and their hunger. Good.

Now it was time to rob this place blind.

ruduen

Ah, the poor fucker. He'd handed her a line and not even thrown the word 'boost' in it.

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

therealgridlock

Typo thread!

"If I have you a choice between doing me a favour"

>"Gave you"

" I smiled, and moved to easy myself down the table."

>"Ease myself down from the table"

In conjunction with

"I dropped down the floor by the unconscious woman,"

>"Dropped down to the floor"

"Some even had veins of light, or sweated droplet of mist-like purple instead of dew."

>"Sweat droplets of mist-like purple liquid instead of dew"

Unless they sweat a gas? Lol

"We steered clear of the menagerie, for it was well-guarded and there were creatures within that even we should stay wary of, and past a curving pool whose waters were full of nenuphars we took a servant's entrance into the western wing."

This is a terrible run-on sentence, coupled with what the heck is a nenuphar? Would be easier to say "past a curving nenuphar-filled pool we took" because "filled with nenuphars" is describing the pool, in English adjectives normally come before nouns. Red dress.

"She also liked losing a dice games and racking up debt doing it,"

>"At dice games"

"You'll be bringing treats the kitchen I ordered,"

>I believe it's missing a from. "From the kitchen I ordered"

"purely to avoid question being asked she assured us"

>"Questions being asked"

"Twice as tall and tall as a man,"

>Twice as wide? Twice as tall as a man, and half as wide? I don't know what size this is. Twice or one time as tall as a man?

"I'd bet they even encouraged young mages to sneak it past this door"

>"Sneak in past"

"the other one tipping as he backed away"

>Likely "tripping as he backed away" unless literally tipping somehow, and he is described as having tripped a sentence later

"I began murmuring prayer in Crepuscular,"

>"A prayer" or "prayers"

Juff

drew at knifepoint > drew with knifepoint
the deftly > then deftly

sift > sieve
Favours for call in > Favours to call in
where the treasury vault. > where the treasury vault is.
with tact > tact
been his forties > been in his forties
half that in length > half that in breadth
cursed, I sighed > cursed. I sighed
wake of First > wake of the First
they don't make in our own (either they > we or our > their)
heard at the gates > heard as the gates

[TeK](#)

I find it funnier to assume Aqua was threatened by the knife to draw.

[sengachi](#)

Gods I love the plan coming together moments of this story.

devildragon777

Theft! The Crows are in a happy place right now, I bet.

Countdown until the place catches on fire? I'm going for 2 chapters from now.

edrey

two, no, at the end of the next chapter. i bet the bard set a little trap in the artifact vault. three demons at least.

Crash

Good odds next chapter ends with "and that is when the smell of smoke hit my nose" possibly as a distraction so they can leave.

dadycoool

Leaning on the echoes of Take with the Night, which is a street urchin's magic? I somehow doubt that the "Robbing the place blind" part is what's going to go wrong.

Darkening

I mean, she already said the Eye was gonna betray them and Malicia's got a double in the city he could go report to. I imagine there'll be a trap on the way out.

caoimhinh

Not to mention, there's supposed to be someone in Wolof that Malicia is thinking to put in her council to fill Wekesa's

place, which hints at that person being a claimant to the Warlock Name.

Darkening

Huh, I've seen that in the comments a bit, but I don't think I noticed that in the story, where did that come up?

RoflCat

From the prologue of this book:

Dread Empress Malicia went still. Wolof, which was on the other side of the empire from any sort of ally of Callow's. Wolof, whose high lord she held in her thrall. Wolof, where Malicia had laid seeds for a great victory – the filling of a fourth seat at this very table.

caoimhinh

Malicia mentally monologued about it right at the end of the Prologue of this Book.

[Burlyraven](#)

Well, Masego's going to be orgasmic when they get back with these spoils.

Biggest flaw I can see with this plan is that it's very likely that the whole palace can be put into lockdown if something like this does happen. Getting in was probably the easy part, and as often as the ceiling was mentioned, it probably plays a significant role in getting out.

[TeK](#)

Oh Gods, not the lockdown.

therealgridlock

At least it's not dread emperor Cuomo in charge of it.

nimelennar

"Ekon had been most helpful, for a man who was going to betray us before this was over."

I can't remember... is there enough Winter left in the Night (and enough Night left in Cat) to make that a very, very bad idea?

[TeK](#)

To be fair, having more Winter will not make betrayal less likely.

Darkening

I think they're referring to the ability Cat had to make binding oaths that horribly murder people that break them by putting a piece of Winter into them. Even leaving aside that, there's all sorts of magic oaths in the setting that get used surprisingly rarely. The blood oath she used with Akua that one time would probably work. Though if anyone can free someone from a magic oath it'd be Malicia/Wolof's mages.

mamm0nn

What's more, breaking oaths to the Fey has a more eldritch and absolute consequence to it as well beyond just curses and ire. It's like bad mojo providence, the act of breaking the oath itself holds power even if the Fey doesn't invest any contingencies themselves.

Darkening

Yeah, I think with regular fey it was mostly just that it let them cross into creation full powered to collect, but it's definitely got some providence/story weight to it as well.

[*TeK*](#)

I was somehow tense, waiting for another shoe to drop all the time. But I suppose they are owed some degree of success before everything goes terribly wrong.

Halinn

This is the first part of a plan, it's guaranteed to succeed.

[*marillius*](#)

I mean, this is the backup plan they made after their first plan went horribly wrong. There's definitely going to be drama here but I don't think it's 'shoe drop' bad. Too many of those in a single narrative can get tiring and we already had the Bard show up.

[*Liliet*](#)

Really, Akua is basically back to her roots here, rich family tradition and all

Crash

She's having a great time!

edrey

the plan has really go well, too well and the bard is there looking for a opening, we know what happens next, lets see how much of Wolof is left after this.

Halinn

You're forgetting that the first part of a villainous plan always succeeds. It's not suspicious that it has worked well so far.

[taborask](#)

One could argue that the first step was infiltrating the city quietly, which failed because of the Bard. Makes one wonder if she did that on purpose to ensure that the second part would succeed

Lord Haart

Yeah Kairos kept winning by constantly changing plans so the first part would always work. Cat seemed to learn from this but it feels like she forgot it with the DK. Now with Bard in the picture she's on her toes again.

Xinci

Hm, perhaps this will be good. The Praesi probably have some good structures for the Night to steal from, which depending on if Ruin cut away access to knowledge in a permeant or simply laborious maner, may mean they can restructure some parts in ways that are more efficient. Though on matters of scale it could be just as inefficient as the last time, given it would be tailored for Praesi individuals to cadres rather than a entire race. Then again given the Night seems to have had perfect informational transcription for what it had, they could probably get around the individualistic aspects due to the Night being in every Drow.

Its always good to see the varied ways plants and art can develop in Praes.

mamm0nn

Meanwhile, back at the camp Vivienne isn't sure why she's so sad and being left out, but she can feel like she as the former Thief should be invited for something.

Sinead

It would be nice if she stole something from Praes.

I think it would be funny if Vivienne serves as the diplomatic anchor that frees this crew from the 'final bind' from this mission, since it won't go off without a hitch.

Thus in a way stealing a victory.

It's not as nice as her stealing all the gold, but it still may be worth something.

mamm0nn

Or better yet, Vivienne steals the crew.

Earl of Purple

I don't know the things in the fountain, are they fish or decorative sculpture? The nenuphars.

Christian Oaks

Neither they are water lilies

[Mental Mouse](#)

Though given that this is Praes, they probably drink blood or something.

beleester

Dang, Archer took down twenty guards without being noticed? She's gunning for Assassin's name.

lordcirth

The guards are mooks; any combat Named can kill 20 of them offscreen, and any stealthy one can do it silently unless the story is really out to get them.

[308924810a](#)

The Bard is going to show up at the exact moment where the most forces are available to mess with Cat.

aurikdomi

I see a lot of people commenting on Bard showing up again which I am sure she will, but doesn't she have some sort of cool down after death? Can someone remember what chapter that might be discussed in?

[Liliet](#)

Bard cannot appear again in a scene after dying three times. Cat only got her once.

aurikdomi

that's what it is. ty ty

Tom

Insipientia -> Latin to English -> "The Folly"

Nice...

Clmineith

Are we sure Bard actually is the foe here?

I know, she was before, and Cat and co. hate her, and she said she wanted to kill Cat.

But... I wonder.

Bard wants to be freed from her Name/Role/whatever, right? It was why she was so angry when her so-carefully-scenarised death didn't stick.

So, hypothesis: what if she intend to break her Role as the garant of the Good vs Evil game? It's, sorta, what Cat want, too. Of course, Cat hates her, and doesn't trust her, and Bard is not the sort to speaks clearly, but she could be manipulating events for Cat behalf.

If you consider that the trio was aiming for food and gold, and because of Bard will instead get the Vault...

[Liliet](#)

I've been saying this since... the break between books 4 and 5, I think.

Lord Haart

It fits even better knowing that she has the upper case G Gods on her shoulder watching her just like Cat has with Sve Nov, so she really has to talk like she hates Cat. Which makes this a very elegant form of self-sabotage, really.

With that said, it's also possible that she really doesn't like Cat at all and is just trying to up the stakes because dying of killing Cat world both feel like wins to her. Cat is a Villain and without her story odds are the DK might still be stuck in Keter and possibly millions or at least many thousands of deaths and sufferings would have been avoided.

Though maybe the crusade would have happened anyway and led to just as much death, and who knows what Akua's plans would have resulted in without Cat around.

[Liliet](#)

> With that said, it's also possible that she really doesn't like Cat at all and is just trying to up the stakes because dying of killing Cat world both feel like wins to her.

Valid reading yeah

Storm

I assume the Night can feed and absorb the knowledge in the books?

Chapter 9: Vault

"Eighty-seven: the secret passage your nemesis will use to escape the fortress can be used to enter that same fortress. They never consider that, for some reason."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

I kept my arms open wide and my hands flat, as if I were holding open a bag, but all that lay in between my fingers was shadow.

Akua stood slightly ahead of me, dropping one book after another into the dark. Without a sound they disappeared into the hungry maws of my patronesses, the two of us clearing out row after row as quickly as we could. We'd gone for the restricted sections, the forbidden ones: there was no point in my taking books that'd be in every other great Praesi library. Those sections were all trapped and warded, but I was being guided by someone who knew those traps and wards intimately. We'd been at it less than half an hour, as Archer hunted for anyone we might have missed out in the stacks, but already I'd sent hundreds and hundreds of tomes into the embrace of Sve Noc. Akua almost reverently dropped into the dark what looked like the handwritten notes of someone called Olowe, emptying the last of the shelf, and we stopped.

I looked back at rows and rows of empty shelves behind us, what had once been a section on dimensional mechanics and the technicalities of making a Breach. Not a book left, same as we'd done with necromancy, curses, High Arcana conjuration, three sections on diabolism and a dozen more branches of sorcery. It would have been missing the point to say we'd taken a fortune in books, because what we'd stolen was essentially priceless. There was no replacing any of this for the Sahelians.

"That is the last of the sections I would consider essential," Akua noted. "Unless you want to acquire more common tomes, we are finished."

"That was it?" I asked, skeptical.

"My family has a personal library, naturally," she dismissed. "And the most dangerous volumes will be down in the hidden vaults. Yet for the library, I would consider nothing else here irreplaceable."

I supposed it would have been greedy to ask for a thousand priceless books instead of just a few hundred, I mused, not that it was stopping me. I folded my arms, left over right, and brought them to my chest as I slowly eased my grip on the Night and the darkness faded. The working hadn't been all that strenuous to maintain, but it had taken concentration: I was glad it was done.

"I'll take your word on it," I replied.

If we'd had more time I would have considered emptying the entire place just to make a point, but we didn't. I was, to be frank, surprised the Eyes hadn't betrayed us yet. My bet was on there being another game at play here, one I hadn't quite figured out yet. That tended to be a safe bet when the Intercessor was around. Regardless, we needed to get a move on if we wanted to clear out the artefact vaults as well before this all came down on our heads. We took the stairs down and I cursed every few steps the absence of my staff and the apparently deep and abiding hatred Praesi architects had for handrails. Seriously, would it kill whoever kept building these ridiculous places to throw up a few of those? Take out two of the fucking egg-sized rubies encrusted into one of the wall frescoes and you could pay for those to be done for the entire damned palace. Some of my thoughts came out as grumbling under my breath, I figured, since Akua looked highly amused and offered me her arm for the last few steps. I took it with ill-grace, looking away. I got cackled at for that immediately, Archer popping out from behind stacks with a grin.

"Aw, isn't that cute," Indrani grinned. "If we get to robbing the Tower, is it going to make you hold hands?"

She smelled faintly of blood, I noticed. I cocked an eyebrow at her and she threw me a sheathed short sword about my size.

"Lots of stragglers?" I asked, ignoring the jibe.

I drew the blade, testing the weight, and found it good enough. Not as good as something fitted for me, but it'd do. As I fitted the sheath at my belt, Indrani passed a blade at Akua who nodded thanks in return and got a smile for it.

"Five," Archer replied, "but one of them was a mage. I had to get tricky."

The edge of one of her sleeves was slightly singed, I found with closer study.

"Good work," I simply said. "We're hitting the hidden vaults now. You good to fight?"

"I was promised horrors, Foundling," Indrani grinned. "Hells, why do you think I'm even here?"

Ugh, I bet that pun was even intentional. I truly did have terrible taste in women.

"I'd assumed because you were dared while drunk," Akua drily replied.

"Hey," Indrani replied, offended. "That only works like, a third of a time."

I loudly coughed.

"Fine, maybe closer to half," Archer conceded.

Immediately after she turned to Akua with a scowl, jabbing a finger at her.

"And don't you dare cough too, Petty Poltergeist," she growled. "Half is all I'll go up to."

"I would never dare," Akua lied, smiling prettily.

It was in a better mood that the three of us moved out towards the back of the great library, where the returned once-heiress to Wolof told us that the easiest path into the hidden vaults lay. I'd expected some sort of archway full of damned souls or a corridor swarming with enchantment, but what our quick march there revealed was actually just a set of tall golden doors. Nicely sculpted, if a little heavy on the Wolof-and-particularly-the-Sahelians-are-the-best-look-at-all-these-fools-we-crushed slant. To my admitted bewilderment, Akua then simply grabbed one of the large iron rings on the doors and pulled one open. It revealed a short hallway of bare stone, leading to a steel grate.

"Wait, is that it?" Indrani asked.

She sounded a little cheated.

"That's got to be a trap, right?" I asked, cocking my head to the side.

"Oh, it is," Akua flatly agreed. "There is a secret entrance thirty feet to our left that would allow us to avoid the first two killing rooms, but it would require us to pass through the terror room – and without the proper protective amulets, that would be... unwise."

"Terror room, you say?" Archer idly repeated, sounding dangerous interested.

Of course she would be.

"Magical terror," Akua specified. "As close to the demonic emanation as my forebears could manage. Most people die of a stalling heart within the first ten heartbeats. No, the front path is best suited to our needs."

I considered the stone hall for a moment, humming.

"Floor trap?" I guessed.

"Hand me a book," Akua asked.

Snorting, I grabbed what looked like a primer on the classical elements – *could have used you a few years back, buddy*, I thought – and began to pass it to her before pausing and glancing at Archer.

"Don't tell Zeze," I said.

"I'd be counted as an accessory," Indrani solemnly replied.

The book went to Akua's hand as she rolled her eyes, tossing it carelessly into the hallway. I glimpsed iron spikes emerging from the walls before the golden door shut. Huh. Akua, looking somewhat aggravated, wrenched open the door again and I stood there to watch as the spiked walls slowly closed in on the middle of the room. Door probably couldn't be opened from the inside, I decided. We stood for a while longer, waiting. Sometimes the walls quickly lurched forward for an inch or two, but most of the time they just... slowly advanced.

"Now that's just *asking* for a hero to find a way out," I sadly said.

"The mechanisms that make the walls move are deep in the stone," Akua said, sounding a tad defensive. "They can't be changed without load-bearing walls being knocked down."

"How do we get through?" Indrani asked, more pragmatically.

The shade stepped into the hall fearlessly when the walls were near through, slipping around the edge of the right one and disappearing. A few heartbeats later there was a metallic wrenching sound, maybe a lever being pulled, and the walls stopped. They stayed extended, leaving a path maybe a foot wide between the iron spikes that led straight to the door in the back. *You could have at least pushed the door to the left so it'd be covered when the wall advanced, you hacks*, I silently thought. Akua slipped back around the edge of the wall, reappearing with a smile as she dusted herself off.

"And to cross that?" I asked, pointing at the steel grate.

"The Archer key," the shade gracefully replied.

The Archer in question snorted, stepping forward – Akua flowed around her – and pushing to the end of our little narrow passage. One, two, three, four. On the fourth Name-assisted kick the steel grate toppled down, ripped right off the hinges. I cocked an eyebrow at Akua.

"It is enchanted against blades and lockpicks, not mules," she shrugged.

"*I heard that*," Indrani called out.

Swallowing a grin, I shimmied through and followed the shade over the fallen grate. It brought us to another stone hall, this one rather more ornate than the last. The walls were covered with mosaics in the Sahelians colours whose patterns felt... oddly fascinating – I wrenched away my eyes forcefully – and whose floor was checkered marble in black and white. At the end I saw an open stone doorway and what looked like curving stairs going down. The three of us were huddled in a small antechamber between the halls, and out of curiosity I looked up. Yeah, as I'd figured the stone archway here had small depression in the rocks.

"Stone door falls down here and over there," I mused. "I'm calling... pit trap?"

"Oh," Indrani gurgled. "That's an *old* one. Is it the black or white tiles that make it work?"

"There are triggers under both," Akua sighed. "And the floor itself is not trapped. Once the doors close, the mosaic shifts in some places and begins releasing alchemical gas."

"What's it do?" Archer asked,

"It was a forgetfulness mixture, when I left," Akua noted.

"Prevented memory recall longer than five heartbeats. It could be anything now, of course."

"And we beat this how?" I asked.

It was too long for us to jump our way across, although maybe if I used Night...

"The stone doors open again once the monitoring enchantment senses that there is no longer gas in the air," she said. "I know where the openings are, so Catherine and I simply need to block them until the trap begins to reset. We'll have a window of four heartbeats to cross."

"That's very unsporting," I approved.

She pointed out where in the mosaics – near what looked like a swirl of pale eyes – we'd need to act and then we moved out. The doors immediately fell down from the ceiling, blocking the paths out, but what followed was almost absurdly mundane. I did not use Night or a Name trick, simply jamming my thumb into the opening and then waiting for a while as the doors began to rise again. We ran, Indrani snickering the whole time, and made it to the stairs before the trap activated again. We went down slowly, catching our breath, and I cast a consternated look behind us.

"I don't understand why your ancestors didn't just layer a hundred wards," I admitted. "This stuff can be beaten, a hundred different layers of protection changed every few years can't."

"We are in the Vaults, my darling," Akua replied. "It is presumed that anyone who made it this far into the Emyrean Palace has the help of traitors within our own. Wards can be crossed in the snap of a finger, with the right helper. This? This cannot."

I was about to object some more when she silenced me with a finger.

"These were the easiest of rooms, my heart," she said. "Now that we are below, tricks such as I used will find little bite."

Straight from the start we were faced with a crossroads, the paths going to the left and right. The left side, Akua explained, was where the other entrance above would have led to directly. The terror room.

"And where we're headed?" I asked.

The hallway here had mosaics much like those above, dangerous to look at for too long, which I figured was actually pretty clever on the part of the builders. You couldn't see the traps coming if you couldn't risk looking at your surroundings for long. Wouldn't want to be one of the poor fuckers in charge of cleaning this place, though. Maybe they had wards in place to prevent it getting dusty?

"Straight into the illusion room and the duelling room, then we may access the first vault," Akua replied, leading us to another steel grate.

It required Archer's tender attentions once more, but when forced off the hinges it did not fall into the room beyond it. Anchored by enchantments, our guide noted, and so we 'opened' the broken thing as if we'd used a key. Beyond was a hall that was entirely mosaic, that confounding little number we'd been walking through. Here it covered the floor and ceiling too, though, and led to another steel grate. I risked small glimpses at the floor, finding pale eyes there like those that'd covered the gas exits above us, but I bit my lip. Something was wrong here, itching at

me. I felt the presence of the Sisters fill me like cold water, Komena nudging my chin to look right instead of- the illusion broke and I let out a gasp.

"Fuck me," I murmured. "The spell here makes you twist left and right for up and down."

"Yes," Akua said, sounding pleased. "And so draw the eye away from this..."

She shimmied in front of me, dipping her foot into what my mind still insisted was the right wall, and the mosaic vanished. Under it was a sharp drop and even sharper steel spikes. Ah, lovely.

"There's a safe way through?" I asked.

"Indeed," Akua replied. "Archer?"

I turned to look at Indrani, who had her eyes closed and was muttering under her breath. She opened her eyes once, quickly glancing at the floor and then closing them again. Twice more she did that, looking angrier and angrier, until on the third she drew back her sleeve and bit her forearm hard enough blood came out. She looked again, eyes hard, and only then offered me a wild grin.

"It's fine, ladies," Archer said. "I can See it now. Mind couldn't get around trying to believe two things at the same time."

It was useful now and then to be reminded of how fucking dangerous Indrani actually was. Akua had been raised here and I had goddesses helping me see through this. Her? It was Name and grit that got her through. And somehow, now that she'd seen through the spell, I suspected that no other one like it would ever fool her again. We crossed the floor like children holding hands in dark woods, moving across the complex back and forth pattern that Akua unerringly led us through until we'd reached the door on the other side. Solid copper, this one, and our guide opened it by ghosting a hand through the lock and picking it with her own 'fingers'. It popped open, revealing another short antechamber leading into another hall.

This one, which she'd called the duelling room earlier, was little more than bare stone and mosaic walls save for the five longswords that'd been sheathed in stands of copper. It was a thick steel door that awaited us at the end of the hall, with no visible lock or pull.

"So we draw a sword and fight an opponent for each one we draw?" Indrani guessed.

"Not at all," Akua laughed. "Pulling swords only makes parts of the floor fall away into spikes when the monster is unleashed. It is the touch of flesh on the door that begins the duel."

"And how does the door open?" I asked.

"An enchanted key, which we do not have," Akua said.

I glanced at the steel door in the back and Archer did the same.

"I'm not sure I can force my way through that with brute strength," she admitted.

"We will not need to," the shade said. "The swords are, naturally, all cursed."

"Naturally," I drily echoed.

"The second blade from the right should have a particularly nasty rotting curse on it that I believe will damage the door enough to reveal the lock, if pressed in the right place," Akua said. "I should be able to pick said lock from there."

"And you have no flesh to rot," I mused. "All right, that'll work. That leaves Indrani and I to handle whatever creature comes out. You have any notion of what it'll be?"

"It used to be giant scorpion, but it should have died by now," Akua noted. "It shouldn't be too difficult an opponent, given the breakdown of relations with Aksum. That is where all the most... difficult creatures tend to come from."

I nodded.

"Can we use the other blades against the beastie?" Indrani asked.

"Alas, it is always bespelled to be protected when put away here," Akua said.

It was typical of Praesi highborn, I thought, that though a great many of them were utterly and irremediably mad their madness somehow turned out to be in some ways sensible and organized. It was a thorough sort of lunacy, and all the more dangerous for the thoroughness being married to the absence of sense in most other ways. I unsheathed the blade at my hip, rolling my wrist to limber it and stretching my limbs carefully. Archer gave me an amused look but did the same, Akua patiently waiting for us to be done.

"Where's it going to come from?" I asked.

The shade simply pointed upwards. Of course it was, I sighed. I looked at Archer, who nodded in approval.

"Get us started, Akua," I said.

Smoothly she walked up the swords and pulled out her chosen one from the copper stand, darting away afterwards. There was no visible sign of the curse she'd mentioned on the sword, but I could smell the scent of power in the air. She'd not lied when she called the enchantment on that nasty. Three heartbeats passed before a floor panel of about nine feet by three shattered into neat pieces and revealed a spiked pit below even as the ceiling shifted above us. There were three birdlike screeches as a massive form – Gods, large as two oxen at least – dropped down from above between Indrani and I. Two thoughts came to me about at the same time. First off, Akua had been rather optimistic when she'd assumed that the giant scorpion had died of old age.

Second, *this was not a noise a scorpion should be able to make.*

"Why does this thing have faces on its back?" I asked.

"Better question," Archer mused, "why are they all screaming?"

I ducked away from a lightning-quick strike of a stinger the size of my head, the massive scorpion trying to trample Indrani as it kept me away. She slid under it, laughing in glee as something in its belly began spitting out acid that she only narrowly avoided, and I chopped away at one of its bony legs to distract it. Bony was the right term for it, I found out, the bloody carapace was hard as bone. And that was just the leg, the body would be worse. That left the eyes to strike at or, urgh, the... faces. Which were still screaming, looking like damned souls sown into chitin and singing out their eternal torment. Hells, they actually might be. It turned its attention to me as Archer put distance between her and the tail, pincers twitching. I kept close to the wall, throwing myself to the side at the last moment when it struck and smiling at the screeches of pain it let out when the pincer hit solid stone.

"I am working the lock," Akua calmly called out.

"Archer, let's not fight the damn thing," I screamed.

"Boo," Indrani screamed back.

Her shout drew back its attention and it stabbed away at her repeatedly with the stinger, growing angrier as she kept dodging at the last moment, and I darted close to its face to make sure it had to keep its attention divided. The pincers came at me from both sides, but the anglers were predictable. Anger was making it sloppy. It grew even angrier a moment later, when Indrani finally baited it into a stinger strike at the angle for her to cut off the entire thing after she dodged. Even as it screeched I took the opportunity to land a few hacks at its eyes, black fluid dripping everywhere, and retreated as it began to attack blindly.

"Around the spikes," I yelled at Indrani.

There was a narrow strip between the walls and the floor that'd dropped, and with the scorpion partly blinded now was the time to make us of it. I began to cross towards the latter half the hall, where Akua was kneeling before the door, and Archer did the same a moment later. With any luck the bloody thing would try to follow us and fall to its death. Halfway through I turned to have a glance and had a moment of triumph when I saw the monster was following us, but it was short-lived. The scorpion's legs unfolded further with a wet wrenching side, and hoisted him up by pushing against both walls. *Oh fuck me*, I thought as it began to walk on the walls to catch up to us.

"Akua," I screamed.

"I am nearly done," she replied.

The tail Archer had cut was leaking black blood everywhere, but it could still serve as a whip. As I discovered when it snapped after me, forcing me to hop forward on my bad leg and nearly fall to my death.

"Akua," I screamed.

"And done," she replied.

I heard the door open with a click and threw myself on solid ground, landing in a painful. Archer was already there and she helped me up, dragging me as we broke into a run towards the open door. The monster was behind us, pincers lashing out as it landed on the solid stone with a clattering sound, but Indrani threw me through the doorway and I heard her stumbled through as I flopped on my belly. Akua slammed closed the door, not quite quickly enough to silence the screeches of rage from the monstrous scorpion. All three of us dropped to the floor for a while after that, catching our breath.

"So the scorpion might still be alive," I solemnly told Akua.

There was a moment of silence, then all three of us began laughing in spasms. The merriment passed, but it'd done us some good. Even better was that we were now going to get into our first vault of the night. The room we opened did not look like the fabulous gold-and-gem-laden treasury my imagination had conjured up. Disappointingly enough, the large vault looked more like an orderly storage house than anything else. The goods were interesting, at least. A dozen enchanted swords and twice as many armours, a bow made of dragonbone – which Indrani pawed lustfully at – and several banners whose cloth was woven with spells that inspired either valour or fear. There was also a saddle made of what I suspected to be human skin, which I almost hesitated to take. Well, the Sisters probably wouldn't mind even

if it was. It was minor artefacts aside from that, mostly enchanted jewelry and amulets.

"Prestige pieces," Akua told me. "All were crafted by famous practitioners. It is a traditional way to reward a subordinate without overly empowering them."

"Well," I shrugged, "into the Night they go."

It didn't take long to clear it all out, Archer reluctantly parting with the bow when it was pointed out to her that she did not have arrows to go with it.

"Left now," Akua said. "It will bring us to three adjoining vaults."

Huh, that did sound rather tempting.

"What's in the way?" I asked, and before she could answer I got my response.

It was, uh, remarkably straightforward.

"This is an acid pool," Archer said, looking down at, well, *that*.

"So it is," Akua cheerfully replied.

It was maybe three feet below the threshold we stood at, and there was no way to tell how deep it ran. The length of the hallway was at least thirty feet, which made it a laughable notion to try jumping.

"How do people usually get through it?" I asked.

"They bring a specially crafted silver bridge," Akua smiled.

"With a mage around you could make a bridge across out of shields," Indrani noted.

A heartbeat later, there was a little shiver across the room as a pulse of... something went through the air. I cocked an eyebrow at Akua.

"Raw magic," she said. "It would disrupt any ongoing spell formula. Anyone trying to cross on a shield panel would..."

She glanced meaningfully at the gently simmering acid. Lovely.

"I'm pretty sure Night won't be disrupted," I frowned.

"My ancestors did not, in fact, plan for the human herald of drow goddesses to infiltrate their vaults and then use a largely unheard of and poorly understood power to make a bridge across

their acid pool," Akua confirmed, her tone holding the faintest note of sarcasm. "How short-sighted of them indeed."

I coughed in embarrassment, then got to work. The wards over the palace were still making it hard to call on Night even though we were well past nightfall, and I found the magic pulse harder to deal with than I'd thought it would be. Had to do double layers to avoid a thinning, which made it take longer than I would have liked. It was with sweat beading the back of my neck that I brought us to the other side, where Archer promptly kicked her way through the steel grid. How had the godsdamned acid pool been the trickiest of these so far? It was a good thing the wards hadn't been updated here in a while, I thought, because a few more layers of whatever made it hard to shape the Night might have managed to lock me out from using it in practice.

Akua stopped us before we could enter the traditional antechamber, dragging an ethereal foot over the floor. Headsman's blades came out from both sides, cutting into nothing but thin air, and they began to withdraw. Well, that'd been bracing. They'd been building up the impression that the antechambers were safe this whole time, hadn't they? Tricky fuckers. The hallway beyond was unlike any we'd seen before, which I did not take as a good sign. Every part of the walls, floor and ceiling was covered with angled mirrors, giving the impression that we were standing on the inside of a gem. The uncovered parts were the doors in and out, and somehow I suspected that was only a temporary state of affairs.

"Enchanted mirrors?" I asked.

"They induce nightmare-filled sleep if stared at," Akua said, "but it is the doors to watch out for. They will shoot out burning rays of light, which then..."

"Reflect every which way," Indrani finished, sounding a little impressed.

"The enchantments in the mirrors amplify the heat," Akua said. "There is an upper limit, of course, but after seven reflections it would be enough to incinerate an ogre on contact."

Given the kind of people these defences belonged to, I suspected it was not a figure of speech she'd used there.

"Night's not great against fire," I admitted. "So that's a problem. How do we get through the door on the other end?"

It was a copper one and Akua had picked one of those earlier but I didn't want to assume.

"I can get us through the lock there," she said. "But not before at least a dozen spells have been shot out."

"These rays, do they reflect off anything or just the mirrors?" Archer suddenly asked.

I breathed out in understanding and so did our guide.

"The side of a sword should work," she replied.

Indrani shot me a smile, which I forced myself to return. I was getting closer to my Name, but the reflexes weren't quite there yet. I began to draw Night into myself, murmuring prayers in Crepuscular. At the very least quickening my limbs ought to help. Our swords were bared a moment later and as I grimaced we darted forward. Before we'd even made it a foot forward mirrors moved to cover the entrance we'd left and three spells shot out from the polished copper door. Whooping with glee, Indrani casually batted one away while Akua and I instead prudently moved to the sides. She went straight for the door, even as it began spewing out a second volley, and I took up a position guarding her back.

I narrowly caught a ray that would have hit my chest, reflecting it upwards and then into a wildly careening trajectory. The trouble with all those fucking angled mirrors was that it was hard to guess what path the spell would take when it came back. Archer was still in the middle of the room, moving with a dancer's grace as she reflected spells in what was too measured a way for it to be random. Eyes narrowed I tried to follow what she was doing, but only figured it out after the third volley of spells came out and two of the rays hit each other in midair, bursting into a ball of flame and smoke. Fucking Hells, was she actually making them hit each other? I could barely keep up with the ones actually coming for me.

That moment of inattention cost me, even my quickened limbs not quite quick enough when a ray I avoided was reflected right back into my shoulder from behind before I could blink. I managed to get it to clip the shoulder instead of bite into the muscle, at least, but I swallowed a scream as a parchment's depth of my shoulder just turned to ash and the livery over it vanished. *Fuck*, that hurt. Akua came through for us moments later, the copper door opening, and I was quick to retreat behind it. Archer took her time joining us, twice more slapping away spells before slipping behind the door as I slammed it closed. Her eyes dipped to my shoulder, but like Akua she said nothing. I called on Night to kill the pain and we moved on to the vaults awaiting us.

The first vault looked very mundane, until you had a closer look. The neat piles of wood were all atrociously expensive sorts from the Waning Woods or beyond, the blocks of rock and the gems all gave off the scent of magic without being enchanted – which meant inherent sorcery – and the sealed copper boxes here were all filled with living plants I did not recognize. There was a single potion rack, with maybe sixty vials in whole, but my jaw dropped

when I saw a whole half-dozen of them were as red and faintly glowing water.

"Are those actual healing potions?" I croaked.

"They are," Akua said. "And not even the most precious of the lot. The bottom row is the elixir of long life. Drinking it adds at the very least forty years to one's lifespan."

I'd keep one of those for Vivienne, then. I shook my head, still in shock that I was looking at the little red potions that were said to be the closest thing to a panacea that alchemists had ever achieved. They were also said to require the blood of a dragon taken while it still lived to be brewed, which had seen them placed squarely in the realm of legends. The last Callowan ruler said to have drunk one was *Elizabeth Alban*. It was with petty glee that I cleared out the room into the Night, being careful not to break anything. We wasted no time hitting the second vault, which was significantly less worth smiling about.

Rooms full of demons tended to get that reaction out of me.

I saw the same three Weeping Snares the High Lord of Wolof had stood me off with and promptly stashed them away, to the reluctant acceptance of the Sisters, but they had significantly less qualms taking in the rows and rows of grimoires that Akua told me were contracts with devils. Two silver jigsaw puzzles that supposedly could give a glimpse into how to make a Great Breach when completed went into the Night as well, as well as a dozen more of what Akua called 'insight' artefacts, but when we came to a simple copper crown on a pedestal the Crows sent me a wave of wariness.

"Insipientia," Akua reverently said.

My Old Miezán was rusty, but not *that* rusty.

"It's a bound demon of Madness," I said. "The same one your mother unleashed?"

"Yes," she replied. "My family has held other demons, over the years, but never was there a binding quite so thorough or a demon quite so mastered as Insipientia has been. Centuries of foes have tried to free and turn it against us, ever to no avail."

I reached out for it, but the Crows balked. There was something about the crown that spooked them, and I wasn't one to gainsay the instincts of my patronesses when it came to demonic taint.

"It stays," I said. "Vault's clear, what's in the third one?"

"Nothing, presumably," Akua shrugged. "It is almost never used. It is the guest vault, and my family has rarely granted the honour of its use to anyone."

"Hey, worth a look anyway," Indrani drawled. "Maybe there'll be loose change there we can toss into the Night."

I rolled my eye but did not disagree. I wanted to be as through as possible when clearing the vaults. Akua informed us there were only two more left after this, and the paths began to grow complicated- we'd have to double back over the acid pool – when we forced open the warded door, revealing a sight that gave pause to all of us. In the bare stone room there was an altar and a sleeping body on it, but that wasn't the part that gave us pause. It was the fact that we were looking at a perfect reproduction of Akua Sahelian when she'd died. A shift modestly covered the body, but I'd seen enough of Akua over the years to know that this was looking at a twin. One that was *breathing*. The shade, face unreadable, took a few hesitant steps and laid a hand on the body. After a moment she gasped.

"What is it?" I quietly asked.

"She has magic," Akua said. "No mind or memories that I can feel, but the Gift is there."

Ah, I thought, and the pieces fell into place. The guest vault, huh. So this was the work of the sole person in Praes who might feasibly make this request of Sargon: Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name. There'd never been any need for me to lay out bait, I now understood. Malicia had always intended to take it. She was in need of a Warlock and of someone who had a good handle of me and my plans, so she intended to secure both in a single stroke. And there was the deeper game here, the one I was beginning to glimpse. The Intercessor, who had outed us in the fortress but not gotten us captured. The Bard had made sure that Sargon would cover the treasury and the granaries, figuring out one step of me that it would leave me only one place to go.

That the Intercessor too had wanted Akua to be in this room, at this moment, sent a shiver of dread up my spine. Did she know something I did not? Had I made a mistake? Or did I, for once, better understand the nature of the woman we were dealing with than either my opponents? My fingers clenched, then unclenched. None of us would know the answer to that until the very last moment, I suspected. Besides, now that we had seen what we were meant to the Eyes – the dull throb of magic filled the air, a ward being tripped. *There you go*, I thought, as troubles as I was vindicated. And still I couldn't shake the impression that I was missing something. That I was still underestimating my opponents somehow.

"We need to get out," I said. "They know we're here."

"Fuck," Indrani cursed. "Think we should grab the..."

She hesitated. I glanced at Akua.

"No," she decisively said. "It will be a trap of some sort."

I nodded.

"We're still using the way out in the Emyrean Hall," I said. "Can you lead us there quick?"

"Very much so," Akua replied. "There is a hall that leads there directly."

I didn't bother closing the door behind us as we filed out. We took a left at the end of the hall where the vaults were, which brought us to another large hallway where aside from the mosaics the sole decoration was a tomb of stone.

"That doesn't look good," Archer muttered.

"There is no need to worry," Akua snorted. "For this, I will require neither of you."

Taking her at her word we followed her in, and predictably enough the tomb's lid began to open. A strikingly good-looking man in bronze armour began to rise out, smiling eagerly, but the shade met his eyes and straightened her back.

"I am Akua Sahelian," she said.

The man froze. His eyes were blank, I noticed only then. And I had yet to see him breathe. Undead of some sort? I glimpsed a slender sword in the tomb with him, already half-drawn.

"No," the man hissed in Mthethwa. "Not after-"

"I am of the blood of Subira," Akua said, tone flat. "By the ancient compact, I bid you to return to your sleep and grant us passage."

"Insolent child," the man bit out, "how dare you-"

And yet, for all his complaining, his limbs were moving. He lay back down into the tomb, and even as he cursed Akua profusely he closed the lid over himself. There was a moment of silence, then Archer cleared her throat.

"So, uh, what was that exactly?"

"Dread Emperor Revenant was not the first Soninke to attempt to rule forever," Akua replied with a smile. "Merely the most successful. And some of my ancestors had an... interesting sense of humour."

Well, didn't that sound ominous. Still, I counted our blessings and followed our guide as we left. The door wasn't even locked from outside, meant to keep people out instead of in, and we hurried through only occasionally trapped sets of stairs until we emerged above in what looked like a large marble hallway. Above us I caught sight of something staggeringly beautiful: the night sky in all its glory. It wasn't like the lesser version of the Vaults, this was the real one – the very wonder this palace was named after. I could almost feel the wind looking at the ceiling here, see the clouds move and even the occasional bird fly. It was one of the most magnificent works of magic I'd ever seen.

"We are close to the passage," Akua said, breaking me out of my thoughts. "Let us hurry."

Yet even with her navigating for us, this part of the palace had been on high alert. It was mere moments before we came across a servant, who screamed out in alarm at the sight of our swords, and soldiers were on our heels in moments. Arrows and spells streaked behind us as we ran, clattering against tall marble columns and setting tapestries aflame. How many were there? At least sixty, I thought. Archer took an arrow in the arm but she ripped it away without batting an eye, cursing as she did, and twice streaks of flame went through Akua. She came back... weaker each time she reformed afterwards. Tired in away I'd never before seen her be as a shade.

We remained narrowly ahead of our opponents, until we reached the statue of Subira Sahelian that was the mark of one of the eleven secret passages into Wolof. Akua pushed the crown the man held in his hand and the statue began to move, revealing a narrow set of stairs, and we wasted no time heading down. The soldiers were close. The statue moved back behind us, though, which ought to slow them down some. The oppressive weight of a new set of wards washed over me the moment I got onto the stairs but I grit my teeth and quickened my pace. We'd planned to leave through here from the start, though initially it would have been after we robbed the treasury instead of the vaults. See, like all of the eleven secret passages into Wolof this one was a trap.

The narrow stairs flared out into a larger platform where we all paused, and hastily I took out our last two water breathing potions. Indrani idly took two steps down the platform as I did, to trigger what we all knew was coming: moments after her foot touched the lower stairs water began pouring from the ceiling. It was a flood corridor, see. Either the pressure of the flood or drowning would take care of anyone who came through here. Except, of course, if they had prepared potions for this very eventuality. It'd never been an option to come back by the aqueduct again: we would have needed to swim uphill and against the current, and break through the enchanted barriers there again without the evanescent powder to do the work for us.

"Bottoms up," Indrani said as I gave her a vial.

We toasted and knocked down the drinks. I breathed in, limbering my shoulders for the coming swim. Sooner or later the guards would come down the stairs and try to snatch us with spells even if proper pursuit was impossible, we needed to get a head start. We waited a few heartbeats. And then, hideously, nothing happened at all. The potion did nothing.

"Cat," Indrani slowly said, but I did not answer.

Instead I closed my eyes. And there it was, the missing piece. Malicia had wanted Akua to see that body down in the Vaults, it was why the Eyes – who had no doubt reported to her body in the city the moment they'd been sure I could no longer kill them for it – had waited so long to pull the alarm. But it'd not made sense to me that she would then simply... let us go. Much as I despised the empress, she was one of the cleverest people I'd ever met. Malicia had been fine letting us go, I now realized, because she'd known we weren't going anywhere. The return vials of water breathing potion had been sabotaged before we ever left.

Had she gotten to the Concocter? No, I thought, she shouldn't have the leverage for that. Mostly likely just spies that'd had access to the vials at someone point before they got to my hands. A few foreign reagents would have been enough to fuck up a brew this complicated. And it didn't matter how it'd been done, I forced myself to acknowledge, just that it had. *The Intercessor knew from the start*, I put together as my stomach dropped. *It was Malicia's plan, and Malicia is Named*. So the old monster had just come in at the right time and the right place to nudge us so her favoured outcome came about. My fingers clenched.

Figuring out my enemies was useful, but what I needed right now was a way out.

"Akua," I said. "When we came out the reservoirs, you dried us. Do you think you could keep a bubble of air around our heads as we swim?"

There was a long moment of silence, then she shook her head.

"I do not think I am strong enough for two," the shade admitted. "Not after the spells I was struck by, and perhaps not even at my best. Around one of you, if I meld closely, and even then it will be difficult."

So Akua and one of us could still make it out. Not quickly, though, I thought. Which meant the person staying behind would have to keep the soldiers off their back for a while. Could I work around this with Night, steal air to bring with me? I murmured a prayer, reaching for the power, but though I felt the

Crows reach out to me our fingers... missed. The wards were too heavy here, I realized. Night wouldn't get me out of this.

"You can't use Night, can you?" Indrani said, eyes sharp.

I shook my head.

"That settles it," Archer said. "It's got to be me. Your Name's not there yet. I'll keep them off long enough and you can trade back for me later."

I breathed out, looking for calm. Forcing it.

"Yeah," I said.

She slowly nodded, then turned to ask Akua something, and without missing a beat I struck the side of her head. She was quick, and strong, but I was both too and she'd not been expecting it. I caught her in my arms before she could collapse, golden eyes following me all the while.

"They can't kill me," I said. "Malicia knows she'd be risking handing the Dead King a victory if she did."

There was simply no one else that could keep the Firstborn bound to the Grand Alliance and Callow in the war the way I could. Vivienne could maybe talk our soldiers around, but the drow? No, Malicia wasn't after my life here. She wanted me in her grasp.

I intended to make her rue that notion to her dying day.

Above us the statue began moving, and I handed Archer to Akua. The shade took our friend, coming so close to me for a moment it would have been the easiest thing in the world to steal a kiss from my lips, but she refrained. Shouts from above. There was no more time, and if I was going to make it out of captivity I needed... something. A plan, a workaround. And it came to me, in a flash, as above the first arrow was fired loosely in our direction.

"Takisha Muraqib," I hissed. "Make the offer for it. And the rest Sepulchral."

Her hand touched mine, impossibly warm, and she nodded.

"I will," Akua Sahelian swore.

Moments later she was in the water, bringing Archer with her, as spells began to light up the hall and I turned towards the enemy. Well, Night or not I had a sword and a long history of stabbing people with those.

Time to see how long I could buy them.

ruduen

Go boost!

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

Welp, it Archer forgot just how self-sacrificing Cat can be when things get bad.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani is only just now discovering what it feels like from the inside, of course she forgot Cat's not new to it!

[Liliet](#)

BOO YEAH.

So okay yeah it took slightly longer than I'd thought for things to go wrong... and than Catherine thought too!

I adore that Indrani actually fell for this. She keeps holding out hope for Catherine's self-preservation instincts, huh?

Nothing is on fire so far, which is really weird!

And we have a whole Two New Plots: Akua's Body and Catherine Captured!

dadycoool

Great, now I'm imagining Cat being trapped in Akua's body like it's a soul trap or something, but she's piloting it, since it's (presumably) an empty husk right now. At the very least, it would likely solve the "not enough fire right now" problem.

mamm0nn

Malicia: You fool, I planned for every eventuality and there's no way that you can- That's not how magic works! You can't just use the Gift like that! The element of fire cannot be mixed with shadow on a whim! Curse you and your woefully inadequate and shallow understanding of magic, Catherine Foundling!

[Casey Glick](#)

Did Akua not see the body? There was an obvious "curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal" moment, I felt. But I never got

any sense that Akua even acknowledged it? Setup for the maybetraya! later?

Frivolous

Casey Glick: I don't think Akua or anyone else could possibly trust the clone or duplicate body. It's probably heavily trapped.

Someguy

She did see it. I think it was Malicia's "I can ressurect you" pitch.

[Liliet](#)

Akua was the one who approached it and said that it has the Gift, and also the one who said not to take it because it's a trap.

> The shade, face unreadable, took a few hesitant steps and laid a hand on the body. After a moment she gasped.

>

> "What is it?" I quietly asked.

>

> "She has magic," Akua said. "No mind or memories that I can feel, but the Gift is there."

...

> "Fuck," Indrani cursed. "Think we should grab the..."

>

> She hesitated. I glanced at Akua.

>

> "No," she decisively said. "It will be a trap of some sort."

:3

[onedollargum](#)

When Cat described Akua's hand as "Impossibly warm" I started wondering if somehow Akua pulled a fast one and stole the new shell.

[Liliet](#)

I mean she would probably have Cat's wholehearted support in that one, Cat loves stealing shit. No reason to hide it.

Frivolous

onedollargum: More likely Catherine was feeling extra cold, due to something something blood flow, and thus Akua's hand felt warm in cmparison.

Miles

Akua's hand shouldn't even have a temperature.

[Liliet](#)

But it can if Akua wants it to, same as she chooses whether to interact with physical objects or go through them.

It's romantic!

Someperson

Oh dang Indrani isn't gonna forgive that very easily is she... I get why Catherine did it, if Archer made the last stand it would have "sacrificial death" stamped all over it and the Bard likely knew that... But getting forcefully sidelined like this is so very, very counter to who Indrani is.

Someperson

And I didn't mean for this to be replying to something else whoops.
The interface on mobile be like that.

[Liliet](#)



Sir Nil

That was a fun dungeon crawl.

Benjamin Huang

Let's be honest, we all knew Cat was gonna end up captured one way or another in this arc. Jailbreak time B)!

Bad@games

Ha! One of the 200 heroic axioms states that cat will succeed at least at buying enough time for Idrani and the ghost of bad decisions to escape

RoflCat

Black got captured and his soul severed by Pilgrim/Saint of Sword, the erstwhile biggest Heroes of the West.

Now Catherine get captured by Malicia with her Black Knight in tow, the current biggest Villains of the East...since Catherine doesn't have her Name yet Malicia can still possibly affect her with some Name power (the same way when she killed off that Merchant Prince guy before his name fully manifest)

Like father, like daughter....

Crash

Cat doesn't have her full Name yet but she is close enough to be enjoying some lesser versions of the martial advantages associated with it.

With all of her other titles and advantages, it doesn't sound like too much of a stretch to assume she already has enough story weight to be immune to Rule.

Hell, the Sisters are probably protection enough. Can't imagine they'd take kindly to Malicia trying to control their priestess.

Lord Haart

The Merchantis prince was actually immune to her Rule despite not having a Name yet, only a potential one – that's why she had him killed.

This could be very bad but probably not as bad as it got work Bard and DK. We still don't know how Pale Knight made her freeze... IIRC back in book 4 with Kairos she blanked or while in the DK's precense at some point.

edrey

that was great, the story is escalating, let see if Malicia understand what can of monster is the Bard.

edrey

what kind of monster is the Bard... sorry

dadycoool

What if the Bard is the can for an even worse monster? Maybe that's why she's so immortal, because whatever Demon, etc. has taken residence doesn't want to be vulnerable? Cat's soul was corrupted by a Demon in Liesse, after all. I can't remember what it did to her Search Engine Aspect, but it did need amputation.

Lord Haart

Bard is worse than a demon. However, if she dies (truly) then her patron(esse)s will probably come knocking. We saw what happened with the fleet of Ashur and that city Warlock died defending... Seems like it was demon-style impact on a massive scale, and that was just a *brush* of their presence.

Seems decent odds that some amount of Creation will (need to?) be remade by the end of the story. Not sure what degree to, but I don't imagine those the greater beaches laying there forever or three whole principalities remaining fallow for millenia. Seems a bit like too much of a win for Below and Above's response of the angel's corpse is basically just throwing away the game board, seems a bit unlikely. But then again, we don't know what will actually happen...

Earl of Purple

There's a Word of God that what the Ashurans did at Thassalonia wasn't the attention of the Gods Above, that's just what the Ashurans thought it was. The reality is 'a little more complex' is I think the wording.

With the exception of Light being granted to priests and the sacrifices taken by Below, there is no evidence that the Gods actually interact with reality at all.

Lord Haart

Ooooo thanks for sharing! Will have to dig up that WoG.

That's one more step in the direction that Above and Below are truly more narrative forces (maybe to the extent of being the author and/or reader, though maybe that's more meta than this series intends to go).

[Liliet](#)

Don't forget Calernia is a backwater, and don't forget that gnomes are known to have sunk a continent or at least a big isle-located civilization without any repercussions from Gods.

Lord Haart

Unless the Gnomes are just acting on Above's and Below's desire by resetting the board in such cases.

Which is still possible here. Mostly I just don't see the DK really getting a marginal win out of this. If the Above/Below conflict is really as much of a theater sport as Bard makes out, DK is like a team that tries to score one point the whole game and aside from that only

defends. Makes for really boring viewing and I just don't think it'll stand as-is. The DK pushed the seesaw his way a bit, and even if that was just a response to the smiting I don't see that holding for long.

I really do think DK's end game is to stick it to both Above and Below by essentially playing their game in the most boring way possible to force them to change the rules. That directly runs against Bard's raison d'être so she basically **HAS** to oppose it, even if on the inside she's done with the game too. Though DK'S glacial pace is probably too slow for her hence the escalations with Cat. That's one place Cat and DK really align – both want a de-escalated world with lots of rules and no BIG surprises. Cat just wants everyone breathing in it.



jamesc9

>Cat just wants everyone breathing in it. 😊

Or at least the non-named dying only from each other.

Frivolous

I'm not sure Cat's Last Stand is really in the offing. Cat and possibly everyone else seems to have forgotten she can Speak, at least sometimes.

This might even be the scenario that leads to Cat's Name flowering. Valiant rear guard defense of beloved comrades following an otherwise successful heist. Very Heroic.

[Liliet](#)

The problem is that Cat can't really Speak her way out of this one. She's deep into enemy territory with no way out. Speak is a tiebreaker, but she doesn't have Rule to go with it that would allow it to be limitlessly OP against her subjects.

(And these people aren't her subjects anyway. Her thing is authority over NAMED, regular people would just get hit by regular Speaking rules)

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, she'll get captured for sure. Because her name involves interacting with other names. If she's getting it out of this incident, it will be when she's face to face (or at least body double) with Malicia.

Sparsebeard

If Indrani had stayed behind she definitively would have died.

Liliet

Unless she saw Cat's strike coming and knocked CAT out first. THEN she would have been fine.

But if Cat had actually agreed to leave her behind, yeah, that would have not gone well.

Lord Haart

Eh, that's still a heroic sacrifice story and Malicia might kill her to get at Masego. Or use her to have him switch sides.

Was much happier Cat was captured here, overall. Last book so one or more of the Woe might die but this would have been a bit sooner and uglier than I'd have expected.

Liliet

Yea it's just that the odds shift depending on how exactly she gets there – the teammate who is left by others to cover their escape and the teammate who knocks the fuck out of others so they can stay and cover their escape have different odds of tragedy vs badass action sequence complete with busting out at the end.

Liliet

(The gravity of the heroic sacrifice aspect of the staying can be expressed through dramatic infighting, leaving the rest of the sequence to be badass, or it can be passed over in everyone just going "ok sounds fair" and then be SHOWN in what happens next)

hoser2

How do you know which potions to sabotage? If either person tries a sabotaged potion on the way in, the plot fails. Unless the potions are sabotaged after the first two are used, it seems unlikely that the right two get used on the way in. It's not like there's an advantage to potions that don't work for as long.

And I must be missing something here, so I am really just begging enlightenment. It is theorized that WB wants to die, to end their existence. Why don't they stop acting out their story? The Thief and Squire names fell off when Cat and Vivienne stopped acting out their stories. Can the WB just stop acting out her story and cease being Named, then die namelessly?

Liliet

IMHO: all four potions were sabotaged, but there was either a calculated delay or an external trigger (the latter is easier to coordinate imho) on the sabotage.

(Calculated delay is super easy to do on a potion, just wrap the offending ingredient in a neutral, slowly dissolving shell. The problem is more the calculating part, it'd have to be timed pretty confidently)

aurikdomi

they spent a good while in the city and any point after entry is a good to go for timed delay. I like the idea of external trigger but same as regular sabotage, struggle to imagine them not noticing someone doing it. i.e. if its magic or an additional added ingredient or really anything other than time.

aurikdomi

ooh I take that back they could have updated the massive wards they are constantly going through to include the trigger hidden behind something else. They haven't really had the time to carefully examine all of those anyway.

[Liliet](#)

Wards they were passing through. Bonus points for specialized wards being a good preparation that can be done in advance without knowing when they are going to actually go in.

[sengachi](#)

If you sabotage them all with something that simply makes the potion degrade faster, you don't have to pick the right vials.

dadycoool

iirc, waaaaay back in Book 1 when Cat was up against the Lone Swordsman she tried going against her Name and it basically punished her for it with nightmares and such. I think the reason why Cat and Vivienne's Names faded was more that their Stories faded, or something to that effect. Vivienne found less and less ways to be a thief, so Thief basically starved. Cat was only ever Squire, so when she and the Black Knight, the only option for mentorship, had the falling out while she was becoming more queen and less apprentice, Squire dissolved similarly to Thief. There were also other extenuating circumstances, like Winter, but I think that was the core reasoning.

[lolo96](#)

You are correct except the nightmare part. She got a Name dream about Black killing a hero after she spared a hero. Basically, her Name was showing her what she did wrong. She also accidentally entered a redemption story. So Above juiced her up with guilt.

Liliet

The Name punished her by withdrawing, she was weaker for a while.

shikkarasu

Cat was transitioning into the Black Queen, because Callowan squires can become royalty, but the Pivot there was accepting a deal from Malicia. Once Cat had made her choice, but Amadeus **Destroyed** the weapon (and by extension, the entire deal) Cat was left with a wisp of Squire, but not enough to use any of its Aspects. She had 98% transitioned out of Squire, but there was suddenly nothing to transition *into*. From there she stabbed Black and cut the last thread.

If she had just rebelled she might have become Queen some other way, but her Narrative was wrapped up in the superweapon and tacit cooperation with the Tower.

Lord Haart

Yeah Black really saved her more than she knew at the time, or has acknowledged since.

The stab was more of a "this is how you greeted me into your family, now here is me accepting you as my dad the same way" sort of thing.

Juff

Typo Thread:

take you word > take your word
particularary > particularly
small depression > a small depression
what followed what > what followed was
small glimpsed > small glimpses
through sort > thorough sort
anglers > angles
make us of it > make use of it
half the hall > half of the hall
in a painful. (missing word)
her stumbled through > her stumble through
as through as possible > as thorough as possible
either my > either of my
meant to the Eyes > meant to by the Eyes

as troubles as > as troubled as
Tired in away > Tired in a way
Mostly likely > Most likely
someone point > some point

[LaNuup](#)

The funny thing is that with Cat beeing captured, the heist was a failure. Since they need her to get the loot out of the night without her they achived nothing permanent.
Cat is after all only a mortal with a budding name at the moment, so she can be forced to surrender the stuff.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think she can be forced, and all they need to get stuff out of the Night is one (1) drow and the Sisters' cooperation. Hell, with Sisters' cooperation they might not even need a drow.

Konstantin von Karstein

We saw that the Sisters are actively monitoring what Cat does with Night. If the Sisters don't want that loot taken out of the Night, it will not be.

Anonymous

You're assuming her patron goddesses can't move the loot themselves if they choose to exert themselves.

Lord Haart

Seems reasonable they cannot, at least not easily, since otherwise the Night could be used as one big dimension door. Possibly they can do it slowly and for relatively small amounts at a time which might be enough.

It bodes poorly that Malicia saw them coming, some of the artifacts and portions could be booby trapped...

[Liliet](#)

The Night CAN be used as one big dismension door. It's not trivial, but drow use it for short-distance travel casually.

SpeckofStardust

Now the real question is will the next chapter continue this or are we going to do a round of interludes?
Cause lets be honest, as soon as cat can use the night again she can start using all the fancy crap she just stole.

therealgridlock

Not really a question, since extra chapters are patreon only right now, the next chapter *we* get is a regular chapter, even if it takes months of interludes to happen.

[Liliet](#)

You're confusing extra chapters and interludes. They are not the same thing.

therealgridlock

Oh. Fair enough. Well, if it's going to be at the current point in the plot, but from another perspective, I think my point still stands. We won't get the plot interrupted.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine being captured will most certainly start the next arc tho, and interludes come between arcs.

Shveiran

But we are just at the ninth chapter mark. i don't think we are done with this one arc, unless EE dropped the three-arcs formula for the first time in the series.

...There could still be interludes, I'm just saying this should still be the first arc.

[Liliet](#)

Eh, Book 6 isnt really clearly divisible into 3 arcs.

Miles

We always get the plot interrupted by interludes.

mamm0nn

This chapter was awesome, it's such a shame that most of it was just Cat's dream. They may be Praesi, but they're not so stupid that the gas holes aren't with little rosters to prevent you from jamming a finger into them, and with poisoned needles at the side to severely punish the attempt.

Plus, of course, putting holes very low and very high instead of at a convenient height for people's fingers. And summoning some devils to attack the humans with their fingers stuck in the wall. And putting some alarm ward on the traps being triggered at all, that would at the very least alert someone if multiple traps are triggered in the correct order to show that someone's going through them.

Akua: Carefully disarms and avoids trapped books.
Archer: Topples the entire bookcase into the Shadow.

Liliet

We've just confirmed that the whole thing was an intended trap. Whoever needed to know about traps being triggered most definitely knew, they were just under orders to not interfere until they got where they needed to.

therealgridlock

Akua said on the very first door that the mechanisms were so far inside the walls that it would require redoing structural support beams to change, that indicates to me that this hidden dungeon of traps is **under** a big ass palace, and hence built first.

So, it was built a long time ago, by old ass people, who were inventing traps for the first time. They were the best things they had at the time, and you could even argue some of them are **meant** to be easy to defeat, since their own people are supposed to go through them.

If the gas ports are hidden in the carvings, and you have no idea where just by searching, it doesn't matter if you get a Nat 20 for a total of 60, it just can't be found. The only reason they made it through was Akua was trained where they all were, and was smart enough to figure out ways around them.

I mean, some of them they technically **didn't** have ways around. The acid? Beaten with magic with extra steps, the light ray room? I expected them to beat the door down with its own rays, but no, they just send them bouncing around willy nilly.

The giant scorpion? Well if you didn't come prepared, you use yourself, or the cursed swords, if you came prepared, it's not much of a fight.

Every trap can be overcome by being prepared for it. There's no such thing as a perfect trap.

The gas can be overcome by permanently gluing a rock in the hole, unless you have the hole rigged to explosively clear itself every time, there's no point. The security measure was "hard to find" not "impossible to stop"

In cyber security we were taught that every lock is a compromise between hard to open and easy to open. You want it easy to open for the correct user, hard to open for anyone else.

You can make a perfect lock, it's a lock with no keyhole and un-shimmable latches. But nobody can ever open it. You can make a lock that's 100% guaranteed that the user can open it, with no penalty, it's a handicap accessible door.

Usually security is achieved by a combination of difficulty, biometrics, and obfuscation. Hiding the port, making it hard to reach, and making it hard to stop up, or impossible to stop up all of them, that would make it nearly impossible to overcome. Clearly that is more complicated though, and can still be overcome with magic, or a personal air supply.

Nothing is perfect.

dadycoool

The perfect lock is a wall.

Sykomantis

Walls are just doors with extra steps, if you're strong enough

dadycoool

Doors you can't close again?
btw, because I have to, "Oh, yeah!"

[TeK](#)

The perfectly secure vault is an empty vault.

Darkening

Nice of Cat to secure their vaults for them in that case.

jamesc9

Modulo the silver crown of even-murder-crows-don't-want-me.

Anonymous

About the potions, I assume that the two not drunk at the start needed to be stored in some way, in order to protect them from going through the water and everything that would happen afterward. No need to do so with the ones being drunk immediately, so they are probably being stored in a simpler container.

Not sure about the WB. Maybe wanting to die is part of the role, or following the script is forced on her?

Shveiran

This was very neat and all, but... were the vials numbered? Because otherwise this sabotage plan had just 25% chances to work out as a trap as intended, and 75% of simply resulting in Catherine aborting the infiltration.

I guess the Bard could have ensured it somehow, but it still feels... a weird gamble for Malicia to take unless the Empress is actively coordinating with the Bard.

Konstantin von Karstein

Like someone else said, you can put the sabotaging ingredients in a shell that doesn't affect the potion but dissolve in a liquid.

[Liliet](#)

...or you can rig them to trigger upon encountering a specific ward, or you can make them make the potion degrade faster so it'll be still usable the first time but not a couple hours after that...

therealgridlock

Think of it this way. We don't know **how** they were sabotaged, we just know that narratively they had to be, and so therefore, they were.

They could've all been bugged, or they might have been labelled, or they might have been tampered with later, or not tampered with at all, but because WobbleBoob has plot powers, **caused** them to be sabotaged to achieve a goal.

The end result, by hook or by crook, is the same, that they were stuck having to make a sacrifice to move the plot forward. This book is very meta-textual, they know about stories and narratives, so we can safely understand that if something **isn't** explained, then it doesn't matter, it would have been done in a way that ensured it happened the way it needed to, therefore why bother explaining it.

The villain fell off a cliff, because the cliff crumbled. Why did the cliff crumble? Do we need a geological analysis of the erosion of the shale? Or is it enough to accept that that happens sometimes and he gets his just desserts?

The hero survives the unimaginable, in this universe it's literally because Names carve out paths through destiny that make the impossible possible because it happens every day. It's the gamification and plot-use of tropes in a book.

I agree that sometimes “oh no, everything was sabotaged and not even remotely explained why!” Can be annoying, but that actually rarely happens, it feels to me anyway, in this book. Usually someone explains it, or explains the reasoning. Like now, Cat realized that this was the trap that they didn’t account for, and so it doesn’t matter *now* that it’s been achieved, because it’s too late to stop or think about. She instead reflects on the goals of her enemy and why the trap happened, which is more relevant to the plot, and the important part of “why don’t the potions work” is explained with “sabotage, for plot reasons, because malicia is smart and evil and saw us coming, even if I don’t know how at the moment”

I guess to sum up, the complaint is valid, but it’s personal preference, because the book is written in this narrative style, so complaining won’t do much to change it, really.

Liliet

I would say this: if you can think of multiple plausible ways something can be achieved, and they require different assumptions about background details that have not come up, it’s not really a fault in the narrative that it doesn’t give you information on which one is true. You’re fully within your rights to be curious, but you’re also fully within your rights to be curious about the existence of printing press on Calernia and the prices of grain in Ashur, and it’s just as much not really the writer’s obligation to tell you. “Plausible” is enough.

It’s reasonable to (rhetorically) demand information if the assumptions required would significantly change something about the narrative (for example if theres an implication a named character must have been a traitor and its just glossed over), but all the significant implications Catherine went over: there were spies in her camp, it’s probably not Concocter, could really be any of the regular soldiers. That’s the important part!

The rest is just... plausible, from there. Maybe it was an external trigger, maybe the potions were packaged differently for ease of access vs security of storage, maybe there was a delay, maybe it was well-timed slow decay, maybe Cat is wrong and they were got to in the city. All of these are possible, and none of them are important! (Except possibly the last one, in which case presumably we’ll find out)

ninegardens

So like... here’s the thing that’s getting me...

If Archer is imprisoned, and Cat free, Cat currently has ALL THEIR STUFF with which to Bargin.

If Archer is free and Car imprisoned, then... Cat has all their stuff in her night bag, but like... feel feels easier to extract it from her (magically, or via coercion).

Also: Cocky gave them 4 vials... but I don't think she specified the drinking order?

So like... how do you have 4 random vials and guarantee that get drunk in the right order to make the plan work? It feels a bit weird.

aurikdomi

the upper comments go over it. time delay or hidden trap in the wards to mess with the potions, any drow with the sisters consent could remove the items from the night.

aurikdomi

as for coercion or magical force removing them, I think they are going to try to negotiate with cat long enough that it would be moot because the other side already removed them.

[lolo96](#)

This is not in a pocket dimension of magic but Night. I'm guessing Sisters can open it for other people. Cat's last words probably mean Akua will use them in negotiation. So, Drows will open it in camp maybe.

[Liliet](#)

That's not a night bag. That's just Night. The Sisters have the loot, not Cat.

Linnus42

Hmm Impressive Malicia's Spies are so effective. This is interesting, I am not sure Malicia would kill Indrani sure Cat is more valuable but Malicia knows how close Indrani is to various players.

Shveiran

If Malicia was pulling that sort of punches, we wouldn't have had the Night of Knives.

Archer is a partisan of Cat and probably her most powerful combat asset, and the only ones who would get pissed at her death ARE ALREADY AT WAR WITH MALICIA.

The only reason she would have given her a stay of execution is to use her as bait or bargaining chip, who was just asking for things to go wrong.

Liliet

Now, now, killing her would just be throwing away a valuable hostage.

Cutting off her hands, however, would be a quite reasonable counteraction to anything she can do – possibly even depriving her of her Name as she's no longer capable of fulfilling her Role – while still keeping her valuable for outside actors to bargain for.



Crash

Capturing Indrani alive is a recipe for disaster.

Missing member of a Band of Five, lover of the Black Queen, in a relationship with the Hierophant and known Lone Wolf operator and physically the strongest and most well rounded of Cat's allies. Yeah, do not take her alive, there is no way it works out well.

Openendings

oh no we're due for, like, three months of back-to-back interludes, aren't we D:

Earl of Purple

I love that scorpion, and I want four. One to ride into battle, one to feed my enemies to, and two to start a breeding program so I can replace them.

On another note, do you suppose that demon of Madness was bound by a Diabolist, with capital D?

pirateddesigns

Diabolists deal with devils, not demons, so it's just as likely for another mage Name to have done it. Probably a Warlock at some point, but that's a hunch based on the popularity/long history of the Name. I think Diabolist is a fairly uncommon Name, like Hierophant. I may be incorrect – I don't recall if Diabolist and/or Hierophant are Names with long histories or if they are uncommon (Zeze might be the first Hierophant? I don't remember).

Liliet

No idea about Hierophant, the one precedent we know of for Diabolist was Triumphant pre-DE

Earl of Purple

Pretty sure it's mentioned somewhere that Masego is the first known Hierophant, when he meets the Praesi nobility before Thassalina, maybe? When he sets someone on fire for insulting Cat, or something?

Sinead

Interlude: Heretics refers to Hierophant as "unprecedented"

[Liliet](#)

Nice, thanks!

I really really want to know where the fuck the lowercase word hierophant comes from, though. Has to be precedent for THAT.

[Liliet](#)

* where it comes from in-universe. I'm aware of IRL usage.

[TeK](#)

Diabolists deal with both, and it can be assumed that Triumphant's Name before her ascension as an Empress was Diabolist.

hue hue

I am beliving that the author of "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms" is Cat or one of the Woe

pagesbe

She would have to have had the ability to go back in time to write it then, because it's actually mentioned in-universe by the Saint of Swords.

[Liliet](#)

Bard is a time traveling Cat confirmed?

aurikdomi

and after an eternity of life knows the only one who can kill her and take her job is herself? trippy.

Daniel E

On the subject of interesting time travel, I strongly recommend watching 'Looper' and 'Primer'.

[Liliet](#)

This theory was inspired by Hel in "Journey into Mystery".

[TeK](#)

I am the bone of my pipe.

hue hue

Well, my first fan theory shot dead. Which chapter she says that?

chaospixel

I don't think the potions them selves were sabotaged, It's more likely that it were the vials vitch were tinkered to leak during way in or react to the sinthetic holy water used during entry.

Sinead

Love this chapter!

Some thoughts that I have between this and some other discussions on Reddit:

1) Has Endurance's perspective on Cat shifted at all? She always has used herself as an Aegis for those under her care. I know it's been said that Judgement would issue a death verdict for her, and Contrition only ever sees people's sins, but that is the issue with the mono virtue lens.

2)On the subject of Cat's self-sacrifice/protector vibe, as well as her Arbiter Role, is there any Name that comes to mind that covers both? She has a very Odinn Wanderer aesthetic, but her actual reputation puts her closer to Athena in some ways. Both in the strategic victory in war and in the establishment of laws.

[Liliet](#)

Cat is a born facetank, but she doesn't really... keep going forever. She protects others for as long as she's capable of fighting at all, but she cannot fight indefinitely. Twice she's on record as just giving up, lying down and waiting for death – the first time she got out of it bc the guy insulted her homeland and it turned out shes more willing to die than to let THAT stand, the second time it was just taking too long and she got bored waiting. And of course her literal physical endurance is something she'd deliberately allowed to be cut down, with the unhealed leg injury.

Cat is a decent fit for Judgement ("justifications only matter to the just", Cat muttered to herself in a desperate attempt to convince herself that it's fine and she should stop thinking about it, and a couple of times it even worked), has been mildly Contrition'd ever since the encounter with the same (I'm

p sure she didn't used to be as prone to guilt over everything as she is now before First Llesse), gets along quite well with Mercy, but Endurance and Fortitude aren't really much of her thing either of them.

Cat is very breakable.

[308924810a](#)

Hey EE, I've got a question: if wards don't work when submerged in water(mentioned in relation to the defence of Thallassina, and again during this infiltration), could someone engaging in gate based lakeomancy pour a lake's worth of water over a warded city wall to break the ward?

[Liliet](#)

I'd guess probably depends on

- 1) the relative sizes of the city and the lake;
- 2) whether the lakeomancy is allowed to proceed uninterrupted for a sufficiently long time.

Should the lake be big enough and the city undefended by people capable of closing lakeomancy portals the fuck back up in time, I imagine yes, that would work.

Crash

EE I am fucking begging please, PLEASE just release a full list of the classical elements you absolute fucking monster!

It's been over half a decade of teasing, you madman. This is ground for a villainous background! This is probably a Madness demon aura at this point.

Judane Fowler

There's been speculation that Cat's new Role/Name might be Arbiter, but that sounds a bit too limited to me, especially if it's restricted to Named. She seems to be heading for something much more encompassing (though I haven't worked out quite what yet) of which Arbiter is an aspect instead of the whole thing.

superkeaton

Huh, figured that might happen. This reeks of Story.

Chapter 10: Parley

"Diplomacy is as sailing, catching the way the wind blows."

– Ashuran saying

There was something deeply disorienting about waking up after having been knocked out. It wasn't like falling asleep, there was this sense of... confusion, when where you were didn't match what you last recalled. So when my eyes opened, I made myself breathe in and out slowly as I forced myself to be calm. I did not know this bed, or these sheets – silk – or this room around me, lit with magelights and open windows giving a beautiful view of Wolof spread out below.

I rose from the cushions I'd been leaning on, soft and plump and exquisitely embroidered, and to my surprise my limbs did not pain me. I could feel my left arm was tender, the skin pulled taut in that way it was after mage healing was used on flesh, but even the ever-present dull ache in my bad leg had been made quiet. My clothes were not the ones I had last worn, loose yellow cotton trousers and a matching robe patterned in green, but they were a comfortable fit. I padded onto the stone floor barefoot, finding that a beautifully carved cane of red mahogany awaited my hand. I tried it out and it fit perfectly, the spread wings of the ravens sculpted on the handle comfortably matching my grip. Leaning on the cane, I cast a more elaborate look around.

It was a square room, and though the floor beneath my feet was covered in tiles and my surroundings were panelled in wood I caught it was all stone beneath it. Ignoring the slippers – was that *lion's fur*? – that'd been laid out for me, I ignored the rich furnishings of what was no doubt an elaborate prison cell and limped my way to the windows. Three large glass panels, open just slightly but enough that I could feel the faintest breeze coming through. I flicked fingers at them and was not surprised in the least when the illusion flickered and a flat panel of bronze covered by a book's worth of runes was revealed for a heartbeat. The illusion resumed the moment my fingers ceased contact with the bronze, returning the false but beautiful view of Wolof under afternoon's light.

I reached for the Night knowing what awaited, and I'd been right: I could not quite grasp it, layers and layers of wards preventing me from drawing it close. The Sisters reached out towards me as well, and though our metaphysical fingers failed to connect their presence was a manner of comfort.

"Is my mind intact?" I asked them in a murmur.

Andronike sent a sense of reassurance, and from Komena I felt only cold anger at the thought that mere mortals might have tried to meddle with their First Under the Night. I let out a soft breath of relief. My thoughts and memories were still my own, then. I remembered fighting in that secret passage, keeping close to the wall to prevent the mages from getting a clean shot at me, but after the first few lives I'd taken it was... something of a blur. I'd been knocked unconscious at some point, presumably, and brought here. I drummed fingers against my cane, letting out a small hum. Had I held long enough for Akua and Indrani to escape? Yes, I decided after a moment. I should have gotten them enough of a head start if the guards had needed to dig me out with swords.

The goddesses in me withdrew, as if coming close had been an effort, and I offered the illusion of Wolof a wan smile. I'd not planned for this little venture to end in my being a prisoner, but I could deal with the change of plans. If Akua had grasped what I'd meant with those few words, near the end, then my sappers were already digging at the foundation of my captivity. Why, I just needed to bet it all on the strength of the understanding of myself between a woman I hated as much as I loved – and who would, before the moon's turn, betray me sure as the coming of the Last Dusk. Until then, though? My gaze swept the room again. My captivity came with a small rack of wine bottles at least, I found, not to mention bowls of assorted nuts and fruits.

I found a pair of books, too, atop a pretty cabinet. One was a book by a Mistress Adad titled 'Great Works', which a quick thumbing revealed was about ancient Soninke architecture. The other, to my reluctant amusement, was a Praesi highborn etiquette guide. Fair. Following the teaching of my Callowan forbears, I picked the book about architecture out of contrary spirit and limped to the table. Huh, was that a fully-stocked writing desk too? Nice. I picked up a bottle of wine on my way, refusing to take one of the gold-rimmed crystal glasses by principle, and wrenched open a bottle of what looked like a Nok red before dropping into a seat and cracking open the book.

It ought to tide me over before Sargon came to talk, I figured.

—

The time of the day displayed by the illusion did not match what my sixth sense told me of the passage of time. It would have been a clever trick to disorient me, otherwise. Before I saw either hide or hair of High Lord Sargon or Malicia – who would be coming sooner or later, I knew – I first encountered servants. Veiled and silent they came thrice a day to bring out delicious four-course meals, fill my wine rack, empty the enchanted water cabinet in the corner. Heated water for washing was in the

morning, after breakfast, and not once did any of them even twitch at anything I said. I even shouted at the top of my lungs once, to see if I'd at least get a reaction, but nothing. They might have been deaf, I thought, or at least bespelled for deafness.

I found had little to do but eat, read and drink for a whole day. Though I got restless before the first bell had passed, in a way this was also... relaxing. There was only so much I could do from in here, and how long had it been since I'd had so few demands on my time? Still, I wouldn't simply resign myself to it either. I inspected my cell but found no opening to it save for the hidden door the servants used, which led to a stone passage I only ever saw lead to a closed steel gate. I wasn't going to be popping that open with a cane, I knew, though it might be worth checking if I could touch Night while in the passage. Somehow I doubted it, but why leave the question unasked?

On the second day of my captivity, before I could find a good opportunity to try the passage, a servant in Sahelian livery came. No veil on this one, and unlike the others he was feeling chatty.

"This one bears the words of High Lord Sargon Sahelian, Queen of Callow," the man said.

"I'm listening," I replied, cocking an eyebrow.

Sargon was asking whether I'd agree to have my midday meal with him, as it turned out. I was tempted to decline just to see what would happen, but I held back. I wasn't sure if he'd left me to stew in the room for a day just to make sure I'd be inclined to talk, but if so I had to admit it'd worked. I took him up on the offer and was promptly afforded the services of a tailor, which I bemusedly agreed to. The clothes I'd been provided were comfortable enough, tunics in green or yellow with a Callowan cut, but I wouldn't turn down free clothes. Deciding to indulge a whim I ended up wearing a soft yellow sundress, paired with a short frock in pale green and comfortable shoes. Alas, Sargon was warned well in advance so I did not get to see a look of surprise on his face but the momentary blankness was enough to have smiling as he sat across the table in my cell. He was not so ornately dressed as when we'd last met either, his white and red tunic rich and well-cut but otherwise unremarkable.

He was dressed in that way that those whose family had been rich for generations got dressed, when there was no longer a need to trumpet about the wealth.

"We will be having fey fowl as the main plate," the High Lord of Wolof amiably told me. "One was caught last month a few miles to the south."

"I'm going to assume we're not eating an actual fae," I replied, cocking an eyebrow.

He chuckled.

"We are not. The birds are descended from experiments of Dread Emperor Sorcerous' that his successor loosed into the wilds," Sargon said. "It is said he was attempting to infuse birds with the powers of Arcadia, but only ever succeeded with the basest of their kind. The first specimens were highly toxic, but not so their progeniture."

"Huh," I said. "They taste any good?"

"Delicious when braised and served with zaze sauce," Sargon smiled. "I don't believe you've ever had it before."

The man kept a damn good table, I'd give him that much. The first two plates were warm herbal bread served with sauces and a spicy but refreshing broth, followed by the fowl-on-rice with the zaze sauce that proved exactly as good as he'd boasted it would be. It ended with a creamy, sweet pastry that tasted of eggs and cinnamon I found paired well with my wine. And none of it was poisoned, an additional point in its favour. The conversation had been enjoyable but light, the two of us pretending I wasn't a prisoner in Wolof and discussing what I'd read in 'Great Works' – I suspected his enthusiasm there was not feigned in the slightest – and a few anecdotes about the city itself. All of it very tame.

When a servant brought me a pipe stuffed with wakeleaf and refilled my wine, though, I knew the real conversation was about to start. Sargon gallantly struck the match for me and lit it, himself indulging instead in a small cup of an amber liquor that smelled strongly of peaches.

"This morning I threatened to have you executed should your army not retreat," Sargon conversationally said, "but your marshal declined rather rudely."

"Juniper knows an empty bluff when she hears one," I shrugged, pulling at my pipe.

Praes couldn't afford to kill me right now. Much like I was pulling my punches fighting them, as I wanted the Empire's martial strength mustered against Keter, they too had to pull theirs. If Malicia killed me, there was a very real risk that the western fronts would outright collapse – and much as she liked to pretend otherwise, the empress didn't actually want the Dead King to want any more than we did.

"Sadly," Sargon sighed.

I breathed in deep of my wakeleaf as he sipped at his drink.

"I have been advised to torture you publicly in order to force compliance, naturally," he conversationally added.

I blew out a small ring of smoke, shaping it by making my lips pop. I did not answer. He chuckled, revealing that slightly crooked smile again.

"I know better than to attempt such a thing, of course," High Lord Sargon said, "though you do not seem worried in the slightest."

"I had my soul eviscerated by lesser gods once," I idly replied. "Came out of it mostly sane. Not a lot of torture than can beat that, even if you get inventive."

And neither Juniper nor Vivienne would fold at the sight anyway. They both knew I'd tan their hides if they did. All it'd win Sargon was my genuine enmity, which he was taking pains to avoid earning.

"I would not dare claim that I can imagine," the golden-eyed man amiably replied. "You will understand, naturally, that holding the head of a host besieging my holdings prisoner is something of complicated situation."

Meaning some of his people wanted me dead or at least with fewer things, and that refusing them while my army was camped outside the gates did him no favours. Amusingly enough, it could be argued that in several ways his position had been *worsened* by capturing me.

"Must be frustrating, having Malicia dictate to you in a way that goes against your interests," I said.

He thinly smiled.

"Not executing you is in my interests as well, Your Majesty," Sargon replied. "Greater implications as to the fate of Calernia aside, should I murder the most distinguished Queen of Callow in two centuries I will have heroes coming for my head every spring until I die."

He sipped at his liquor, sighing.

"I expect several of my more short-sighted cousins are pushing for your execution in the very hope that the Woe will murder me in turn," he admitted. "Yet I would argue that my greater frustration in all this affair is that I would much prefer to be at peace with you, Queen Catherine."

"That's easy enough," I frankly replied. "Turn on Malicia. You're only in my way so long as you're one of the pillars propping her reign up."

The dark-skinned man laughed, the merriment of it lighting up his eyes. Akua's cousin, yet so little like her. Even at her most carefree she held something of herself back but Sargon Sahelian was... less restrained. He allowed himself to feel more genuinely, I decided. Would she had been like that too, if she'd not been raised to be the monster of monsters among this most terrible of families?

"I will be honest with you, Queen Catherine," Sargon grinned, "as every report my spies have brought me insist that it is the approach you best respond to."

The worst part of it, I thought, was that even knowing what he was doing I still found my lips twitching. Sargon Sahelian might be a monster, but he was a *charming* one.

"I find it saves times," I shrugged. "By all means, my lord of Wolof, lay it on me."

"I am not a good man, Queen Catherine," Sargon indifferently shrugged. "So long as my city is left to me, so long as my domain is unmolested? I do not much *care* what happens to Praes, or even Calernia at large."

Much as I would have liked to damn him for petty apathy while the world was falling apart a mere two nations west, I held my tongue. How much worse was he than Proceran princelings, in truth, or even the squabbling League of Free Cities? I doubted he was any better than them either, but I would not pretend that the careless disregard on display here was some unrivalled pit of evil.

"My support of Dread Empress Malicia rests on two pillars," Sargon continued. "The first is that, for all her flaws, she remains the individual in Praes best able to deliver a resumption of order."

She was at least half the reason order needed resuming in the first place, as far as I was concerned, but that was why he'd begun this by making his indifference clear. What did Sargon care that much of this was on Malicia's hands, if she were still the woman best placed to ensure it wouldn't spill over anywhere that mattered to him? I puffed at my pipe, blowing out a stream of smoke to the side.

"And the second is that she has your soul in a box," I finished.

"Indeed," he politely agreed. "I am loyal to her in the sense that a noble of the Wasteland is loyal to anything or anyone – that is, only so long as the balance of consequence and convenience is not greatly moved in disfavour of continued loyalty."

The unspoken part was that an army outside his gates, on top of the messes that my presence kept heaping on his lap, was pushing on that balance noticeably.

"Which leaves one important question before this conversation proceeds," Sargon Sahelian said. "Can your patronesses free my soul, Black Queen?"

I'd known that was coming. It was an obvious bribe to approach him with, a good way to flip a High Lord against the Tower without much military power needing to be exerted. Which had been why I'd first asked Sve Noc as much months ago. It'd not been a coincidence that I'd not made the offer.

"Not from here," I said, "and not without a price."

The Crows were sure his soul was being held in the Tower, and they weren't going anywhere near that place if they could help it. I honestly wasn't sure even a Choir would be able to bring the seat of Praesi power down – it'd taken the armies of two thirds of Calernia and entire *battalions* of heroes to get it done, last time.

"Unfortunate," the High Lord of Wolof murmured. "It would have simplified this all a great deal. I am, alas, not eager to trade a single mortal mistress for a pair of immortal ones."

"You'd find the payment much more agreeable than expected, I'm sure," I easily replied. "But that is your right. We will speak again should an opportunity arise."

"Of course," Sargon said, inclining his head. "And so while we remain so refreshingly bound to honesty, I am compelled to ask—"

He leaned slightly forward, drink in hand.

"- what is it that you *want*, exactly?"

I snorted.

"There's a broad question," I said. "Right now? Vale summer wine. Or maybe the journal of the warlock your ancestors placed at the side Theodosius the Unconquered."

"I can have the latter brought easily enough," Sargon waved away. "And as you no doubt grasped, I mean to ask what is it that this entire Wasteland campaign of yours is trying to achieve. You've not the strength or inclination to occupy Praes, that much is plain, so what is it you *do* want?"

I set down my pipe, amused at the boldness, and smiled at him over the rim of my glass before taking a sip.

"Arguably, as one of Malicia's backers you're one of the last people I should tell," I pointed out.

"On the contrary," Sargon said, shaking his head. "Unless you intend to purge the empress' supporters among the nobility, I am one of the individuals you most need to convince. Even if you kill the woman in question, Queen Catherine, what she *represents* does not disappear."

"And what does Malicia represent, exactly?" I asked.

"A strong Tower with no taste for foreign adventures. Power being concentrated in Ater through the Imperial Court and the bureaucracy," Sargon replied without hesitation. "It comes at the price of curtailing many of the old privileges and ennobling greenskins, but many still consider it an acceptable trade."

"Nok was sacked," I flatly said. "Thalassina is dust. Foramen is held by High Lady Whither, the Grey Eyries outright seceded, the Steppes are in civil war and two of the High Seats are openly backing another Dread Empress. Half the army that's supposed to serve her *deserted*. You call this a strong Tower?"

"The Dread Empire of Praes turned back the Tenth Crusade with Thalassina as its sole permanent loss," Sargon countered.

"Foramen was brought back into the fold bloodlessly. Sepulchral's rebellion has stalled and the only reason it ever gained grounds was that the Carrion Lord's attempted coup – which failed, half the Legions staying loyal to the Tower even after decades of other loyalties being cultivated among their officers."

My eye narrowed. They were blaming the messes on Black. *Of course they would*, I thought. *He's Duni, the nobles despise him and they're not wrong about him having added to the chaos in the first place*. I wondered how much of this was decades of hatred between my father and the aristocrats given voice and how much of it was opinions Malicia had seeded herself. It would hardly be the first time she blamed the unpopular parts of her reign on Black and the tactic tended to be a successful one.

"As for the Clans, Queen Catherine," he continued, "that they would war on each other is only to be expected when some among them were raised above others. Strong Lords of the Steppes will emerge from the violence, able to ably discharge the duties that were passed onto them."

I hummed. There was no point in arguing this with him. I wasn't even sure he believed in the first place, anyway.

"Let's say I buy that, for the sake of argument," I shrugged.

"She still needs to go. She's been an aggressive ally to the Dead King while the rest of Calernia has been fighting for survival. She fucked us in the League and in Procer, and even before she

antagonized *every single other ruler* on the continent the grab she made for the doomsday fortress that was made of Liesse made it clear she can't be trusted to remain in power. Nobody wants the Tower with a weapon that makes Hellgates, Sargon. *Nobody.*"

"Considering all the nations so antagonized have been at war with the Empire for years," he drily said, "one might argue she was in fact rather rest-"

"You're being obtuse," I flatly interrupted. "Even if there weren't a hundred reasons to put her head on a pike, and you know there are, at the end of the day she had to die because we can't allow the *precedent*. If the Grand Alliance doesn't cut her head off then we're telling the world that we can be backstabbed while fighting existential threats without there being consequences. And there's not a single signatory that's willing to swallow that, Sargon."

"This is a compelling argument," Sargon Sahelian mildly said, "largely for people who are not Praesi."

I sipped at my wine to hide my expression. That was a decent point, actually. We didn't actually have a lot to offer people who weren't already rebelling against Malicia. The truth was that the people currently backing her reign *would* lose out when she got deposed. They wouldn't gain from what I wanted to achieve here in Praes. One the other hand, the fact that those same people couldn't give less of a shit that Malicia's plots abroad had caused thousands of deaths and risked the annihilation of Calernia didn't particularly endear them to me. They didn't get to pretend they were being unfairly victimized after turning a blind eye to that. If you threw stones at bears for long enough, you got mauled.

There was no deep lesson behind that except that you shouldn't fucking throw stones at bears.

"We're a few knives in the back past lectures from your side, Sargon," I flatly replied.

"Praes would be a silent place, if that were the case," the High Lord laughed. "Though you have me curious now, I'll admit. Who is it that you mean to replace Her Most Dreadful Majesty?"

I cocked an eyebrow.

"The Carrion Lord?" Sargon tried. "He is disappeared, if not dead. And Sepulchral is unlikely to remain a steady ally to your Grand Alliance for long, for all that she now courts your friendship."

Abreha Mireembe being a snake was hardly news to me, but the first half of that was rather amusing.

"It never ceases to fascinate me," I said, "how large of a blind spot you highborn have when it comes to Amadeus of the Green Stretch. It's like we're talking about different men."

"Half the High Seats would rebel at the mere idea of Duni ruling over them," Sargon said, eyes narrowed as he studied me. "Yet you know this, I think. And so I wonder if you do not play a longer game than any of us had considered."

I leaned back into my seat.

"Oh?" I said. "What game would that be?"

The dark-skinned man raised his glass, the last wisps of amber liquor swirling.

"Mile thaman, Sahelian," the High Lord of Wolof toasted.

I smiled and spoke not a word. If he wanted to believe I had come east to raise Akua Sahelian as empress, let him. He drained the cup.

"It would be an interesting time to live in, if you got your way," Sargon admitted. "It is almost a shame you will not."

"I've heard that before," I said.

He looked faintly amused.

"I've a great deal of respect for your abilities, Queen Catherine, but this once luck was not on your side," the golden-eyed man said. "There is little you can do from captivity."

I met his eyes with mine, baring my teeth in a malicious smile.

"Before the week's end," I said, "I am going to walk out of the front gates of Wolof with everything I want. And the both of you are going to let me."

So ended my first meal with Sargon Sahelian.

—

He sent the journal, as he'd said it would. Made for interesting reading, with a surprising amount of steamy bits between the battles and commentaries. Kojo Sahelian had gotten around and not been shy in writing about it. I sat and read and waited, knowing this was only beginning.

—

When Malicia came she did not bother with charm.

She knew better than to believe relations between us could be mended, I supposed. It was the following morning, shortly after breakfast, that she was announced by a servant in livery. I didn't bother to study the last meat puppet she'd decided to wear in any great detail – what would be the point? She wore a woman's form, Soninke and tall, and besides that I did not bother to take her in. I stayed standing as she stepped in, cane in hand as I leaned against the wall. The illusion of Wolof behind me showed an early afternoon, so the light came through at my back. It'd make it hard to look at me properly. The Dread Empress of Praes sat gracefully at the table, not waiting for my invitation, and set a single parchment scroll on the table. She said nothing, waiting. After a bit I snorted.

"You know, I figure I could play that game," I mused. "Ignore you or insult you, the works. But it just sounds *tiring*."

I pushed off the wall.

"Say your piece," I simply said, "and get the fuck out."

"Your manners have not improved," Malicia calmly replied.

"Could I beat you to death with my bare hands before they came in to restrain me?" I asked. "I'm not sure. If you test my patience, though, we'll find out."

I'd lied, of course. If I was to kill her puppet, I'd definitely use the cane.

"It would avail you nothing," Malicia said. "You were captured, Catherine. This particular game you have lost."

"It's Queen Catherine to you," I smiled, all pretty and friendly and utterly false.

"If I gave you the courtesy, would you return it?" Malicia said. "I think not. Yet I will overlook your many and varied insults, as I have for some time, for you have once again made yourself into an important enough piece you cannot simply be ignored."

Implying that I should treat her the same way. *Good luck with that*, I drily thought.

"I'm still waiting to hear what you want," I said. "To be honest, this is being something of a bore."

"We had a conversation, some years ago, that I believe you must have forgot," Malicia said. "Not so long before Akua's Folly. You asked me about Still Water for the first time."

I did recall that, more or less. I'd warned her that if she'd been behind all of it then she had best watch her step from now on or there would be blood. We'd discussed politics abroad, too,

but what did any of it have to do with this? It'd been the Hierarchy and the Tyrant that'd been the thick of the talk, and one was pissing off an entire Choir while the other was years dead.

"I told you why Wekesa insisted on trials, that he believed they would revolutionize our understanding of rituals," she prompted.

I frowned, scrounging through my memories. I had pretty good recall, but it'd been years and my Name memories weren't as crisp since the Sisters had brought me back from the brink.

"I asked if it really had," I slowly said, "and you replied..."

"That what he learned would allow us a fighting chance against the Dead King, should he ever wage war upon us," Malicia calmly replied.

Ah, I thought. And there it was. The way she believed she could barter herself out of the grave she'd dug. She had a weapon, maybe even more than one, that she thought could win us the war. Cordelia and I might despise her, but we were pragmatic women at heart: we'd choose survival over hatred. But that went with the assumption that we needed Malicia herself to have those weapons. That my father becoming Dread Emperor wouldn't get us all of it anyway without all that it would cost us to let an empress who'd knifed us at every opportunity walk away with a slap on the wrist. Malicia was no fool, I thought, and so she would have seen the flaw in that plan.

"So what did you do?" I asked. "What poisonous little precaution did you take so you could threaten us with it?"

She'd already done it before, after all, when she'd spread word that by the terms of her treaty with the Dead King so long as she lived the dead could not invade Callow. Taking her own life as hostage was a favourite trick of hers, the kind of signature that Name tended to take on after years of settling into their Role.

"There was no need for anything too elaborate," the Dread Empress said. "My death would result in all the necessary knowledge burning green, that is all."

Which just meant she had to be taken alive. Had she prepared contingencies for that too? Probably, but I figured there simply wasn't a lot anyone could plan against having Sve Noc peel open your mind before rummaging about for the useful stuff. We'd just have to be quick and careful.

"It's all on the scroll, I take it?" I asked.

"Indeed," Malicia smiled. "Along with a possible solution to the Hellgates issue as suggested by a mage in my service."

"Good," I said, "good."

I moved quickly enough that the cane caught her on the side of the mouth before she saw it coming, but though she felt it didn't make her bleed. Ugh, she'd come decked out in artefacts. I tried to strangle her, but soldiers poured in and wrestled me down before I could get it done. She was ushered out, breathing hard, and I waved mockingly.

"There's always next time," I cackled right before the door closed behind her.

—

I read the scroll that very afternoon.

It was in Malicia's interest to exaggerate what her weapon could do, but she also had to know that Masego would be able to see through anything to egregious in a matter of moments. To my distaste, this might actually work. Wekesa the Warlock had been a brilliant man, and Still Waters had only been used in its most straightforward of applications so far. He'd believed that his creation would be able to turn the tide in two ways.

The first had been that soldiers fighting the Dead King would be made to ingest the alchemical compound and then prepped with the right spell so that when they died they would immediately rise as undead in the service of the Dread Empire. He'd believed that with the right dosages and sorcery it was possible to keep those soldiers largely the same as before their death, nothing like the mindless wights I'd fought at the Doom of Liesse. It would make armies that, even when slain, would rise against just as tireless as their foe and significantly better trained.

The second was more of a gamble. By modifying the alchemical compound so it could enter through the skin, Warlock had believed that necromancers could potentially *usurp* control of corpses from the Dead King. The strength of Still Water was that it wasn't really a ritual, that the active magic was simply an ignition while the alchemy did all the heavy lifting. Which meant if it worked as Warlock had thought it might, we might be able to steal entire armies in moments. I doubted it would go that smoothly, but the prospect of finally having a way to turn the Hidden Horror's endless numbers against him was deeply attractive.

And given that we were well past the days where anything but a direct strike on Keter could win us this war, what was written on this scroll could be an edge that made the difference between the life and death of nations. Malicia was not one to come to a bargaining table poorly armed.

What I read of the proposed solution for Hellgates was largely gibberish to me, and so likely meant for someone better schooled

in magic to read over. The only part that was understandable was the one that talked about raising fortresses over the gates after the first rituals were done, to make sure they wouldn't open again. That and the estimates for the number of mages that would be required, which was around two hundred per gate. There simply wasn't anyone but Praes left who could field that many well-trained practitioners, especially since there would need to be some able to use High Arcana.

Another pointed reminder by Malicia that we needed her.

—

On the third day, mages sworn to Wolof came into my cell.

It was all done very properly and politely, but I was still bound while a dozen men and women inspected every inch of me with spells and tried to access the Night. One got bold and tried to see into my mind, but the Sisters took offence to that and melted his eyes. I complained about the smell after they dragged him out, mostly to fuck with them, but several of the mfuasa actually *smiled* and one cast a spell to clear the air. They left after a few hours, carrying back to Sargon Sahelian the answer he'd been hoping they would not give him.

They had not found a way to access the Night through me.

—

I decided that, since I had so much time to spare, I might have a crack at writing my memoirs.

You know, for posterity. Sadly after a single page about my years at the orphanage I got horribly bored and started sketching out the troop movements for the Battle of Three Hills instead. It was pretty hard stuff, memoirs, I was impressed Aisha had gotten so far in hers. In the end I dropped the subject entirely and instead wrote a scathing critique about the defences of the Vaults, with a particular eye about how easily heroes could have gotten through some of those. I doubted it'd ever amount to anything, but it did make me feel oddly satisfied.

It also allowed me to sharpen a quill until a weapon could be made of it and secrete it away.

—

On the fourth day, I had supper with High Lord Sargon Sahelian. The meal was delicious, he was a delight to talk to and he'd somehow gotten his hands on a bottle of Vale summer wine. Once more wakeleaf was brought to me and I duly indulged, leaning back against the very comfortable seat.

"I offered Princess Vivienne to ransom you back," High Lord Sargon said. "She declined."

"Yes, she would have," I faintly smiled.

"You do not seem displeased," he said, sounding wary.

My smile broadened.

"What is it you asked for – the artefacts or the books?"

A moment of silence.

"The artefacts," he finally said.

Ah, it'd been Malicia's idea then. The books would have been more important to him.

"When I named Vivienne Dartwick my successor," I said, "I didn't pick her name out a hat."

And that was all I said on that. His polite sideways inquiries about my accepting my own ransoming for his library back were just as politely ignored.

—

One the fifth day there was something of an incident.

Or at least so I assumed, as around noon forty armed guards crammed themselves tight in my cell and wards were put up to prevent anyone coming in or out. I finished my meal and, because I was never one to miss an opportunity to be a wretch when it was on the table, I took up Kojo Sahelian's journals and began reading them aloud with great enjoyment – especially the explicit bits, which by the looks of it made more than a few of these nice soldiers uncomfortable. An hour and a half later they left, but the guard remained doubled and from now on even the veiled servant came in flanked by an armed pair.

Idly I wondered who it was that'd tried to rescue me, and how close they'd gotten. It was only going to get worse for Sargon from now on. That was the trouble when you couldn't kill your prisoner: people would keep trying to free them, knowing there couldn't really be any consequences for it.

—

One the sixth day they were desperate, which I knew the moment Malicia's puppet walked in.

Why else would she be here again? Four soldiers came with the empress, faces hidden by helmet, and they had shackles that I was expected to put on nicely. I had last time, when the mages had

come to poke and prod looking for a way into the Night. I knew why the Dread Empress was here, though, and I wasn't going to be anywhere as nice. I pretended to cooperate, at first then the quill I'd sharpened days ago went into the slight gap between helmet and armour and got the first man in the throat. Another I broke the neck of, smashing him into the table, but Malicia ran out before I could get my hands on her.

My cell, and for all the gilding it had never for a moment been anything else and never had I fucking forgot that, my cell was flooded with guards and mages. They got me after I nearly smashed the last of my table legs on scale mail and broke my hand on a helmet. They got the shackles on me and did not heal me. Again there were only four when Malicia came back, face a blank mask.

"Well," I smiled at her through bloodied teeth, "there's always next time."

She went still for half a beat but it was enough. I might be the one bleeding, but I wasn't the one afraid.

"This brings me no pleasure," Malicia said, looking down on me. "It is of your own making."

She did not speak a word, not with her lips anyway. The world pulsed with the echo of it anyway. *Aspect*, my instincts whispered. And in the instant that followed a power seized me by the throat. I gasped out, writhing in my shackles, as a will tried to wrest mine into submission. I was being ordered to do something. Deep inside me the Sisters stirred, their anger a cold and burning thing. They were jealous goddesses, my Crows. But it was not them that calmed me. My fingers clutched at thin air, but still they caught something. Fur, deep and matted and warm. I laughed, dragging myself up by pulling at nothing. Malicia took a step back, eyes wide.

I felt a great maw open by my head, fangs being bared. My Name had not taken kindly to being given an order. No, more than that. It was not one that recognized the rule of another over me.

"*Mistake*," I hissed at her in Mthethwa.

The guards were moving, but they didn't get it. They moved to restrain my limbs, to push me down, when they should have gone for my mouth. My eye found Malicia's and I grinned red even as she opened her mouth.

"**Be silent**," I Spoke.

Her mouth closed. The guards forced me down, but I laughed.

"You overstepped," I told her. "I wonder, does it work only on this body or your real one too? How long are you going to be fighting-"

Finally one of them covered my mouth, shortly before I was gagged, but no matter. The damage had already been done.

It was almost over now.

—

The first time I'd heard about soulboxing, that evening I'd wondered why Dread Emperors did not force it on every High Seat at their coronation. There was, of course, an answer.

On the seventh day, after I had breakfast the veiled servants came and laid out different clothes for me. Black trousers, a black tunic, a black cape and a black eyecloth: all exquisite and embroidered with silver thread. And with them came a circlet of silver, an elegant crown displaying flying crows. Matching silver shackles too, little more than bracelets, but still a symbol of my captivity. I was helped into the clothes by attendants after being informed that I was to be give audience in the Empyrean Hall, and before long I was leaning on my cane and limping down the halls of the palace where I had been held all this time.

Forty soldiers armed to the teeth escorted me, in plate and capes. Ten mages kept an eye on me, amber stares unwavering and their magic so close to them I could taste it in the air. Limping across marble tiles I breathed in the air, stretching under my cape, and I felt Sve Noc reach out for me greedily. I let the Night billow out of me even as shouts echoed across the hall. Swords left their sheaths as the soldiers spun into a circle, runes of light filling their air as incantations reverberated. I closed my eye, smiling, and struck the ground with my cane once.

Shadows spun close, threading themselves through my clothes until it was not mere dark cloth I wore but darkness itself. My foes had thought to dress me, to measure me, but my patronesses had willed it otherwise. I opened my eye, studying my escorts. They were still as stone, but there was a scent in the air I was most familiar with. Fear.

"Ah," I smiled. "*Much better*. Take me to your lord, now."

And they did, wary but obedient. I'd thought the halls I'd run through at night had shown me the splendour of the enchanted ceiling for which the palace was named, but I had been wrong. The Sahelians had kept the heart of the wonder for where they received guests and supplicants, a great hall that was as another world. I stepped across the span of the noonday sky, clouds beneath my feet as my cane cracked against the enchanted stone.

The Sahelians had aptly named their hall: I stood here as if I was striding the very Heavens, the sun above and the world below.

On the sides, hidden behind veils, people stood. Sargon's court. Golden-eyed nobles even more beautiful than their clothes, lesser nobles of military turn and even those who wore their sorcery as their signature. Guards, too, and war mages whose eyes missed nothing. I advanced with my escort around me, all leading to the man at the end of the sky. It was against the laws of Praes for any but the Tyrant in the Tower to sit a throne, and so the Sahelians had followed the letter of the law: though Sargon sat a great seat of stone atop a dais, roughly hewn into the shape of roaring lions, further steps still led to a great ornate seat of gold where none sat.

That one was the throne, of course, which meant Sargon's was a mere seat.

No sign of Malicia, I thought. Was she hidden, or had it struck even deeper than I thought when I Spoke? I looked forward to finding out. My escort led me to the feet of the thrones before spreading out, thin invisible barriers that could only be wards separating me from Sargon Sahelian. I stood alone in the silent court until a woman with a beautiful speaking voice broke the stillness.

"Her Majesty Catherine Foundling, Queen of Callow, First Under the Night."

Sargon's face was as a clay mask, all thought and emotion smoothed away. I hummed the first few notes of *Two Dozen Snakes A Knot Do Make*, casting an unimpressed look around. How many of the watching snakes were Sahelians, I wondered? Had to be at least a couple dozen. All of them *hungry*, waiting for the man on the lion throne to falter.

"Quaint," I drawled out.

Oh, they didn't like that at all. But that didn't matter, because even as they murmured their disapproval and glared I kept close to me the answer to a question. Why *didn't* Dread Emperors soulbox all their high nobles the moment they climbed the Tower? Sure they'd be hated for it, and it was certainly tyrannical, but what would most of those madmen have cared? They'd know that the greatest threat to them was the High Seats, that it was well worth the hatred of a few who would likely seek to kill them regardless. The answer was around me, watching the High Lord of Wolof rather than the queenly captive brought before him. The two dozen snakes that made a knot. The Sahelians were a family, not a man.

And none of them would tolerate Wolof being made a tool for the sake a single man, one whose seat they craved like a drowning man craved the shore.

"You are summoned to speak terms of trade, Queen Catherine," High Lord Sargon said.

See, for all their many flaws the Wasteland high nobles they *loved* their family. Not their actual kin, the institution of the family. The High Seat of Wolof, here, and the power that came with it. They were willing to sacrifice a lot to preserve the power of their family, its importance. For all that the great bloodlines of Praes constantly murdered each other for power, they'd also keep a breeding program going for centuries – they knew how to think *long term* in a way that few actual royal dynasties could. It was bred in them, taught to them. They were Sahelians, and only the power of the Sahelians mattered. Nothing else.

I hummed, cane clacking against the floor as I moved and the guards moved with me – like minnows around a shark.

"What need is there for that, High Lord Sargon?" I replied. "If you seek terms, I already gave them when last we parleyed."

"They were frivolously given," Sargon said, voice thundering.

I laughed in his face. Just because he was charming, did he think I'd forgot he was my enemy? That I would safeguard his reputation anymore than I would some other leech's?

"Then let me repeat them, since you have been slow in learning this lesson," I drawled. "I want your treasury. I want your granary. And I want to walk out the open gates of Wolof."

Now the thing was, Sargon didn't want to take this deal. At the start, he'd not actually been worried about what I had stolen and put away in the Night. Sure it was missing right now, but he held me captive and he could wait out the conflict. When I was forced to make a treaty with Malicia, she'd bargain on his behalf for all of it to be given back. Except that they hadn't counted on Akua. Beautiful, clever Akua who had heard me ramble a few sentences and understood everything I meant. See, we weren't threatening to torch the library and the artefacts. That would have been bad enough, but it wouldn't have lit a fire under them like this did.

Akua had reached out to High Lady Takisha Muraqib of Kahtan and offered to *sell* her the entire private library of the Sahelians. Because High Lady Takisha was a supporter of Malicia and the last Taghreb high noble in all of Praes, if we actually did sell those books to her Malicia *wouldn't actually be able to get them back later*. It would be a guaranteed rebellion of the entire south of

her realm. The Taghreb noblewoman would not doubt have been skeptical, but I was guessing that the Crows had gotten out a book or two for Akua and they'd been sent as a token of goodwill.

The step just past that had, naturally, been to make this known to Wolof.

I could see the layout of it in my mind, clear as if it were ink on parchment. On the third day of my captivity, I thought, Malicia had learned of the offer. It was why the mages had come to look at me, try to get at Night. On the fourth, Sargon had. It was why he'd tried to ransom me to Vivienne and probed my interest in such a deal. On the fifth day, the Woe had tried to free me. It had put the pressure on them, made it clear that sooner or later my people would get me out and they'd be even worse off. On the sixth day, I thought, word of the offer had spread through Wolof widely enough that Sargon's situation had become *dangerous*. And so he'd gotten desperate, agreed that Malicia should try to force me to spit out my loot with an aspect. But that'd failed, badly, and so now here we were. The High Lord of Wolof, the man who'd usurped Tasia Sahelian, looked down at me with burning eyes.

And I knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth, because if he didn't he was going to die.

"Your schemes ran deep, Black Queen," High Lord Sargon Sahelian snarled. "We will bargain. Arrangement can be had, should you sign the proper pact."

"My word isn't enough?" I grinned, badly faking surprise. "Oh dear. I suppose I could sign a pact, if you insist."

The only bone I'd throw him, just enough that he could do this without *entirely* losing face. Humiliating him entirely would just serve to corner him enough he might do something stupid. He was already going to have a rough few months ahead of him. See, the reason that Dread Emperors didn't soulbox all the High Seats was that no family strong enough to be one of those would ever tolerate being led by a pawn. The moment the High Lord went against their family's interests, they got their throat slit. And what I'd stolen? It was the foundation of Sahelian power. The secrets that kept them one step ahead of everyone, that kept the finest mages of Praes in their service.

And instead of burning them, I'd threatened to sell them to the High Seat that was the *second* best at magic in the empire.

The artefacts that kept their rivals wary, their enemies from picking fights? Akua had offered to sell them to Dread Empress Sepulchral, demons and all. Even Malicia had to have found that an unpleasant surprise. No matter how many spies she had in that

camp, three boxes holding demons and enough materials to make a dozen more artefacts was going to be trouble.

And so the Sahelians were looking at Sargon looking at me, because not a single one of those golden-eyed monsters was willing to ruin the power of their centuries-old family to keep High Lord Sargon in his seat. He could accept my terms, or he could have his throat slit before one of his cousins accepted them in his stead. And Malicia would bend here, not just because otherwise the other woman claiming to be Dread Empress would buy a terrifying arsenal but because if she *didn't* bend then Sargon would die. And she would not have the soul of the next High Lord of Wolof in a box.

"One day, Black Queen, this day will come back to haunt you," High Lord Sargon coldly said.

I eyed him up and down, then snorted.

"I beat Akua Sahelian," I said. "Should I now tremble at the shadow of her shadow?"

—

On the seventh day, I walked out of the gates of Wolof with everything I wanted and they let me.

Anomandris

Holy hell!

Tall about subverted expectations with this chapter. I expected a decent period of the whole Captivity trope (which I am not particularly a fan of, since it feels very reductionist for the story).

Instead I get a chapter which fully showcases Cat's awesomeness....and not with a complicated plan, but with sheer nerve of a very simple one.

And, hey, Akua FTW (never thought I would be saying that 18 – 24 months ago)

Brilliantly written, EE.

[*Liliet*](#)

Hijacked!

Go boost Catherine's rising Name on topwebfiction~

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

Charles

Beautiful. It gives me shivers.

Anonymous

Good ol' Akua

[Liliet](#)

BLESS

Interesting how certain Cat is that Akua will betray her – and continuously non-specific in how exactly that will happen. And fascinatingly contrasted with Cat's reaction to the body and Intercessor's meddling with it.

And Cat's thoughts about Scribe being "I am going to be betrayed very soon, the question is once or twice" sure do suggest that it's not something she's specifically agreed with Akua upon?

I want this.

ruduen

"And so the sound of my fragile mortal shell being ripped into signaled it was time for everyone's favourite Wasteland game: backstab, help or both. Akua had grown on me, rather like the bubonic plague, so I was going to give her the benefit of the doubt and put my money on 'both'."

My money's on 'both' this time. I think there are enough hints that the seeds of the story for Akua claiming the Tower are there, and that's one avenue for a backstab to happen. With Amadeus's current plans unknown, it's difficult to gauge just what might happen.

Of course, even if Akua claims the Tower, the redemption-quest arc in play means it's difficult to know just what she'd do with that power in the short term.

[TeK](#)

I think she will betray her for the body, because a chance at life is just too tempting to pass up, not for the Tower.

[Liliet](#)

Cat was already planning on Akua betraying her before knowing about the body.

Crash

It has to be both, there's no way she just backstabs and leaves it at that. There's no way she survives it.

Which is why this is such a big question. What the fuck does anyone have to offer Akua that makes this worth it? What can she get?

She knows enough of Cat's plan to know the level of madness required to pull a betrayal in the middle of all this. Hell, she probably expects Cat knows she's gonna be betrayed.

What the heck is she looking for?

[Liliet](#)

Exactly!

tynam

In guessing it's not what does "anyone" have to offer Akua. It's what does Bard have to offer. Nobody else has the foresight and planning and knowledge to make it work.

hakureireimu

When did this happen? Do you have a link?

[Liliet](#)

Last chapter.

> And there was the deeper game here, the one I was beginning to glimpse. The Intercessor, who had outed us in the fortress but not gotten us captured. The Bard had made sure that Sargon would cover the treasury and the granaries, figuring out one step of me that it would leave me only one place to go.

>

> That the Intercessor too had wanted Akua to be in this room, at this moment, sent a shiver of dread up my spine. Did she know something I did not? Had I made a mistake? Or did I, for once, better understand the nature of the woman we were dealing with than either my opponents? My fingers clenched, then unclenched. None of us would know the answer to that until the very last moment, I suspected.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2021/04/02/chapter-9-vault/>

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm thinking it's part of a story beat. Akua is in the position to have everything she once wanted (Or at least a lot of it) and wavers. And then realizes how utterly empty it is, how it doesn't outweigh the doubts and the guilt like she thought it would, and she turns back, more resolute then ever. Cat knows she's going to have one last fling with Evil, so she's arranged things such to control it and make it part of the story that leads to her success.

therealgridlock

Why not one better, set Akua up to have one last chance at full evil, and having trained her to evaluate things like a real mature and rational adult, able to understand not just the self-centered greed of evil but also the selflessness that is friends and doing good for others, Akua makes the choice for good not because Good forced her, and not to spite Evil, but to actually break the cycle, and choose to do something for the good of others for its own merit, and not as a narrative ploy.

As in, she thinks to herself, what a wonderful world. And you know, stuff like that.

Turns out, it's possible to be a good person and not one of the Good. Just because you are bad guy, does not mean you are bad guy.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's very plausible.

Rumu

I don't think she can arrange backup plans, because that would ruin the story aspects. She is counting on controlling the story, not on controlling Akua directly.

Tenthyr

Utterly magnificent, Catherine was more regal than anyone in that city without once being anything other than rough and utterly unconquerable.

And malicia has realised that Catherine can Speak to her. And that attempting what she had has nudged Catherine even closer to her rebirth.

Tenthyr

Though now of course we have to wonder: when will Akua betray her.

Everyone loves the story of a reformed villain tempted back to Darkness... Only to realise their folly and once again take up the arms of Good in a glorious self-sacrifice.

[Liliet](#)

The better question is WHY. I guess the best guess is “when Akua realizes it presents a beautiful opportunity for Cat”?

Anomandris

A betrayal in line with expectations? In order to cement a piece of the story? Or even as a killswitch (Cat’s new name being way too controlling)?

I like it.

Anomandris

That’s interesting – a way for the betrayal to cement a story thus actually helping Cat’s plans.

I was thinking of a killswitch with Cat thinking her new name actively jeopardizing her Accords

Forgot_My_Name

I think before the month is out, Catherine will act in such a manner as to force Akua to choose between Catherine herself and the values Catherine has taught her these last few years.

Forcing that moral dilemma on Akua and ultimately having her pick what is right over the person she loves will firmly cement the story of Akua as having internalized those lessons.

Black Spiral Dancer

I actually hate that trope. Self-sacrifice is stupid and weak and guilt only shackles society or religion casts to restrain greatness and make all equally average.

Shveiran

Geez, ain’t that a bit much?

You can like what you like, obviously, but really, self-sacrifice is stupid and weak? Guilt is only a shackle?

I’m quite aware that society or religion may impose guilt on the individual that has no goal save making them easier to control; that has happened and will happen.

But let's be real, that just means that sometimes you may feel guilty about the wrong things.

It doesn't mean that guilt itself is a bad thing.

Guilt is the feeling you get when you think you have done something you shouldn't have.

Can you honestly tell me you can think of no actions that you believe people should feel guilty about committing?

Rape? Genocide? Burning hospitals for orphaned puppies?
No limit whatsoever? All greatness that shouldn't be restrained?

Christian Oaks

For the sake of the argument great Evil has always caused a greater good to stop it.

Black Spiral Dancer

Can you honestly tell me you can think of no actions that you believe people should feel guilty about committing?

No. I do not feel myself so superior as to arrogantly believe people should feel guilty for this or for that. Instead, I despise people who feel entitled to tell others what they should or should not feel guilty about. Even if they do not realize it, THAT is true evil.

Greatness is just a word, but it means people who aren't completely bound by the restraints of their time and age, those that accomplish great tasks, be they Vikings or Prophets. Both show greatness of a kind, and I admire them both, for they have dared to go further, to go beyond most people around them.

Now, there ARE certain actions I have done and I wouldn't repeat, but I never ever will feel guilty about having done them, because they are an important part of my history and life, and more importantly, they will never go away. Instead of trying to repel or delete my past, which CAN'T BE DONE, I accept and make it fully part of myself, and I learn from whatever actions didnt result in the objectives I intended them to, but I fully understand that they have granted me knowledge and experience and for that I'm grateful, for that is truly what life means: TO EXPERIENCE THINGS.

...and yes, burning hospitals for orphaned puppies and all the consequences of that action would result in a myriad of new experiences for myself and for others, so if those experiences are something you seek, then it is ok with me,

far from me to want to IMPOSE some form of guilt upon you. Those are just more shackles and never result in anything good for the guilty, only suffering.

Bored one

What a hollow point of view. What happens when someone wants to physically impose their will on YOU and you aren't able to stop them? Just accept you can't change their will?

There's trolling, and then there's trolling yourself..

Black Spiral Dancer

What do you mean, what when someone wants to physically impose their will on YOU and you aren't able to stop them?

The same that happens to you, I reckon? Suffer their will? I probably would try to mentally transform the experience into something pleasurable to me rather than traumatic, but I realize everyone has a limit to that ,too.

But why do you ask how I would act against something I can't change? When you can't change something, what IS to do but to accept it?

Or do you perhaps think that suffer to the max and become traumatized by choice is a better option? Isn't THAT a much hollower point of view?

Morgenstern

If somebody traumatized you, would you really NOT want them to at least feel guilty about what the fuck they did to you?

Morgenstern

Try to make up for it, apologize, ANYTHING?

Henry

But that won't undo your trauma in anyway or help you. What does it matter if someone feels bad for murder if they already killed the person Then feeling bad doesn't bring anyone back or make anything better. What's done is just done you can either decide to get vengeance or MoveOn but the person who harmed you isn't obligated to feel guilty about it. And if you really want them to that's pretty much just for the sake of your

revenge. Which is perfectly fine but you shouldn't pretend that it's moral or anything

Black Spiral Dancer

For some reason I can't reply to Henry, MaxReply number achieved, but it's what he says.

Anomandris

It's funny how much will Cat has been able to impose on The Story of Calernia, post Squire. Gives me a sense that Names end up shaping your behaviour whether you like it or not. I mean, maybe just Tyrant forced his will on his story, and not his name?

It also illustrates the bind Malicia is in. From a story perspective, she knows that the best way out is to throw her lot in with Black (if not the Alliance). And she knows how names and stories work. And yet, she can't (won't) do that without her pound of flesh. Dread Empress practically forces her to.

Makes me almost feel bad for Ally. Almost (Rip Ratface....)

nick012000

Malicia might not be a very good Dread Empress, but she might make a decent Chancellor once Amadeus takes over...

Insanenoodlyguy

Still thinking that's gonna be Akua.

Shveiran

That ship has sailed, I'm afraid. Even if Black could still trust her, no one else would be in favour of her surviving.

If the story is to be about how unrestrained actions bring grave consequences, it cannot brook her getting away with what she pulled.

No ifs, no buts, she has to go.

It doesn't have to be gruesome, but it has to be definitive.

[TeK](#)

Sadly, there will definitely be no Chancellor again. Amadeus fought to unmake Praes as it is, but I winder, if he has a vision of what it could be. I am a tad afraid, he is too focused on getting out of the circle, to think much about the after.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus had talked back during Book 4 about how you should never wage war without an eye to peace that comes after it.

I do trust he has some ideas, we just haven't heard them yet.

(Beyond the obvious foreign policy beats)

[TeK](#)

It's the epigraph written by Grem iirc. Black's take on what comes after stuck in my memory as "after that we can learn, grow, and become something more than a snake devouring itself. Anything more is unnecessary, anything less is unacceptable." So, I don't think he has much of a plan, but not because he fails to see the necessity, but rather, it shouldn't be up to him. All he really cares about is passing that particular hurdle.

[Liliet](#)

Not that.

...actually it's Ranker who says that, not him, pardon me.

> "Some might say it's too early to start thinking about after the war," she said. "You and I know better. No point in even seeking a victory if when achieved it leads nowhere."

also has a fantastic answer from him

> "A better world," the Black Knight murmured, looking up at stars that were not those he'd been born under. "Oh, I have wondered. What it might mean, what it would look like."

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/10/10/interlude-queens-gambit-declined/>

devildragon777

Badass.

Lictor Magnus

Well played Cat. Well played 🍵.

Benjamin Huang

Cat's name is playing with power in a whole different ballpark
holy jumping crows.
To order the Dread Empress and ACTUALLY GET HER TO SHUT UP.

WHAT.

[Liliet](#)

Ordering the Grey Pilgrim in a similar way *by accident* was solid grade foreshadowing of this, and the reason why THAT was so... surprising for everyone involved.



[James Felling](#)

Cat's logic in re Akua is likely this. It's Cat's Name. The story beats that have led this far by logic lead to a sudden inevitable betrayal. It's the Plot of the story that drives this forward or at least that's her take on it Genre Savvy wise. I think Cat hopes Akua won't betray her and maybe even believes Akua won't betray her subconsciously. But both story logic and Name forces her to believe otherwise.

There a reason that people refuse names like Cordelia did. Names grant power, but unless you are very careful you lose yourself and fall into the tropes for your Name.

[Liliet](#)

Cat's Name can't *cause* Akua's betrayal if preconditions for it aren't met. Manipulating coincidences is one thing, but like, there's a reason Cat's not expecting a betrayal from IDK Hakram...

hakureireimu

This was already foreshadowed in book 5, when Hanno referred to Cat as the "most prominent villain of their age". The same sentiment is repeated by others in book 6, meaning Cat is already widely recognizes as being higher than Malicia.

mavant

What do you mean, Akua is going to betray you before the moon is out? This isn't WWE, we don't need a heel face revolving door.

codyman495

So very awesome. Such a good chapter

Oshi

So, now can we see why Bard stuck Catherine in a cage for 7 days?

therealgridlock

Well, we know Bard stuck Cat in a sacrifice situation, it is yet to be seen whether or not the outcome of that sacrifice situation was planned for or not.

Likely Bard wanted her to sacrifice her subordinate, and run around doing bad story decisions, but instead Cat sacrificed herself and trusted her friends, and turned the situation around for her own benefit.

If Bard planned for all that, then Cat getting everything she wants in Wolof has to also help the Bard accomplish something, because otherwise it would've been easier to just sabotage the efforts to free her. I mean, Bard is much better at story crafting than Cat is, so it shouldn't be that hard.

We will find out. Either something terrible has happened and oh no, you couldn't stop it, or this is secretly Bard's plan all along to undermine her efforts elsewhere.

Some have speculated that Bard wishes to perish, and that therefore she is secretly helping Cat, but I refuse to believe that story could exist or happen without there being a hidden twist or ulterior motive, therefore Bard can't **really** want Cat to succeed in her story, and we know she doesn't, so she has to somehow subvert the efforts here.

Obviously it's silly to speculate on what, since we will find out in a few weeks anyway, the same time the characters do.

It is entirely possible, on another note, that the outcome of the sacrifice play doesn't matter at all, since if Bard hadn't intervened the entire "sneak in" bit could've gone off effortlessly and without a hitch, and this is just a delaying tactic to get the dead angel going.

It's also entirely possible that Cats infiltration was always going to fail and Bard intervened to ensure it would fail controlledly and in a way that ensured the continued survival of the characters.

Who knows.

[Liliet](#)

I'll point out this has to have influenced Malicia one hell of a lot, with the unsuccessful attempt. IMHO it's very plausible for Bard to have seen *that one* coming (the readership certainly did), and for THAT to be the desired next step in whatever her scheme is.

dadycoool

If nothing else, it spooked Malicia. People who are spooked don't necessarily make the best/most rational choices, or they retreat to regroup and rethink, which she really can't afford to do with Cat Right There.

[Liliet](#)



Oshi

This was my thought. bard couldn't play the political game or the gambit Cat set up so she played the desperate Empress. If Malicia invites the DK onto the field because she goes nuts...Well she wouldn't because she is practical but the more she plays to the tune of the story...

Xinci

I think its more Bard is in the pit with Cat. Arsenal wasnt a situation with enough related consequences/situations to be good enough proof that Cat is worthy of the Role Bard has had for so long. So she cant hold back, the Gods want a full on contest to see who is better. For her to perish Cat must prove the superior iteration of a agent to intercede for the Gods.

Abrakadabra

I think it is the opposite. Bard is a tool of the gods. Cat is not.

megaprr

Hot damn this chapter was absolutely delicious. Thank you EE for yet another great Monday night.

[MephInBlack](#)

I wonder if ee read Christopher Pike's The Last Vampire because this chapter lovely took me back to my youth, the vibes of the third book of that saga.

mamm0nn

"We had a conversation, some years ago, that I believe you must have forgot," Malicia said. "Not so long before Akua's Folly. You asked me about Still Water for the first time."

Oh shit. When she said that, I thought Malicia meant to remind Cat of that time she mentioned she had three or four world-ending doomsday devices in her Tower from which Still Waters was but one.

MagnaMalusLupus

Threatening a captive monarch that you're going to release a doomsday weapon is such a trope that it would be trivial for the Gods Above to destroy you. It's like something the Tyrant would do, except without the massive amounts of ham to make it not end in your inevitable death. Further, at this point everyone is far beyond the need for petty threats. Cat knows the score, that Malicia can't use the real bad stuff without eventually leading to a story death. Malicia knows that Cat can't be bluffed like that anyways at this point, so she skips the pointless and frankly crass monologue.

Shveiran

In addition to what others already said, IIRC Malicia also said that two of those doomsday weapons were inherited, and the fourth was "dependant on Wekesa being alive to function".

So she is already down to two plus Still Water, and the two were weapons the previous Dread Emperors had and didn't use. Which isn't something to sneer at (they are still judged by Malicia to be doomsday weapons) but they likely have very steep costs BESIDE the obvious downfalls of a doomsday weapon. Otherwise, well, Nefarious would have used them on Callow after the Wizard of the West broke his power, even if the Chancellor couldn't access them during the following Civil War. Somehow I doubt that rapist would have balked at destroying Callow if he couldn't have it, so there must be some reason why he didn't use them.

Possibly these two need massive sorcerous, Named skill to use? Which he didn't have after the Wizard broke his power? If so, Malicia couldn't use them too.

Though I guess Nefarious still had a Warlock, so there is a flaw in the thory; then again, Praes being Praes, maybe he simply didn't trust someone else with that amount of power.

Juff

Typo Thread:

rack, empty > rack, and empty
shrugged (appears 4 times. might want to reword some)
I found had > I found I had
have smiling > have me smiling
King to want > King to win
High Lady Whither > High Lady Wither
that the Carrion > the Carrion
achiever > achieve
said it would > said he would
shorty > shortly
Name tended > Named tended

ton exaggerate > to exaggerate
to egregious > too egregious
cooperate, at first then > cooperate at first, then
The got the > They got the
give audience > given audience
sat a great > sat on a great
sake a single > sake of a single
flaws the Wasteland high nobles they > flaws, the Wasteland high
nobles
reputation anymore > reputation any more
not doubt > no doubt

Frivolous

And once again Cat Speaks to tell someone to Be Silent or Shut Up. And this time someone who has an aspect of Rule.

I wonder if she may have permanently muzzled Malicia's ability to Speak. That I think might be the most terrible potential consequence of her order, taking away Malicia's big gun.

EE, please let Catherine's Name manifest so we can know what it is. I'm begging.

I'm guessing the one who sought to free Catherine was Archer. Can't have been Adjutant; he's not swift enough, and he's really too bulky. Hierophant would have been much louder. Akua was probably busy doing diplomacy with Takisha and Sepulchral.

I suspect one advantage the Woe had was the Crows could reliably let them know how Catherine was doing. They didn't have to worry about whether Catherine was dead or being tortured or mind controlled. The Crows would always know.

therealgridlock

Well, we know her name is extremely powerful, since it is taking so long to make/manifest/carve, and we know it has to do with ruling/sitting in judgement over named/names, we know she's morally pragmatic, instead of Good or Evil, we know even the Good respect her, even if their gods don't, we know the Evil... Well, I'm not sure how they feel about her, and the individuals are individual in their feelings.

I for one am not witty enough to hypothesize Names for her, but it would be funny if she was Pope Catherine Foundling, First of her name, Judge of Named, Ruler of Footrests.

I dunno, it's something Cardinal related, we know that. Cardinal sin? Pope? Bishop? Churchy things are Good though, so. Some sort of Teacher? Professor is too small, they exist in world, I dunno. Principal? Headmaster? I said I wasn't witty.

Yunamed

Cat is going to be the next wandering bard or a similar role where she can intervene on both sides of Good and Evil

Ben Serreau-Raskin

For a while now I've been thinking it might be something like Wandering Judge, or synonyms to that effect. It's definitely a position of authority over others, possible Named in particular, and it's not likely to be a rulership Name given that it's coming in the lead up to or the aftermath of abdication. She also got set up as a foil for the Grey Pilgrim, whose position is now vacant and relied heavily on wandering/mobility.

Sykomantis

If she's going to be stuck in one place running Cardinal, then she can't be Wandering anything... oh damn just had a brain blast.

Dictator

Sykomantis

Or better yet:

Director

therealgridlock

I swear to God if a magic gun shows up and a triangle starts talking I'm going to throw a rock at something.

Stephen Marsh

Arbitrator.

dadycoool

Muzzle Rule? Now THAT would be game-breaking. For a ruler to lose her power to command her subjects would crush her in multiple ways, especially one who rules a snake pit like Praes.

Burdi

You have to be patient man, like me, I have been waiting cat's new name since 2018, when she lost her Winter power

ninegardens

Dammmmmnnnn.... that gambit was cold, and I love it.

And....I do feel a bit bad for Sargon. It was nice spending time with a character who was charming, and seeing our narrator be pampered, and like... he never ASKED for any of this bullshit, with soulboxing and all that jazz.

Also, she is taking the GRANARY of a city. A city which has seen famine and starvation far too many times.
That's... fucked up.

Also, it is kinda fabulous seeing a chracter who was nothing but a footnote 3 books back, and then having them as a legit important character for a little story arc just here.

[Liliet](#)

Same, re: granary. Knowing Catherine tho I'm assuming she's left enough food for them to hold out until the Tower brings aid – and it has to, at this point.

[308924810a](#)

Yeah this plan is bold and clever, I like it.

RanVor

Magnificent.

BargleNawdleZouss

I was definitely expecting a long drawn out version of Egwene al'Vere's captivity from The Wheel of Time. This was much more well executed!

Darkening

Eh, I rather liked Egwene's captivity arc. But it's not like Cat's being held captive by an order that she's part of, so slowly subverting it from the inside wasn't really in the cards.

ohJohN

OH DAAAAAAAAMN!!!

All that from a last-minute plan she barely had time to vocalize?!

What's really blowing my mind is that every piece of this feels justified: we've never so explicitly seen the delicate balance of internal High Seat family politics before, but it all follows logically and neatly from the ample context we did have (families hoard power through knowledge, artifacts and breeding; they compete with the other High Seats for influence; while members are loyal to the bloodline, they'll knife each other in a second;

etc). And this is **exactly** the kind of equilibria Cat has been learning to recognize and exploit since some of her earliest lessons with Black & Malicia about the overall balance of power in Praes, how to effectively rule Callow, etc.

Masterfully done, ∞/10.

[*Liliet*](#)

This ♥

Fully earned, beautifully presented.

Earl of Purple

This was great. I love the Beast Cat visualises as her Name, it makes me wonder how other characters see theirs. Amadeus has a clockwork machine, always ticking, but I don't think we know anyone else's. Might just be a thing Amadeus started, so no one else actually thinks about it.

Shveiran

I think it was mentioned Wekesa saw his as being a dam containing a lake of power, and Malicia as a weaver of tapestries.

dadycoool

He's also the only other mortal we know of that is able to recognize Stories, so it's entirely possible that others just don't have the level of awareness it takes to notice. Even after all these years, Cat still has to shush everyone when they start triggering a "tempting fate" flag.

Shveiran

He isn't the only one, he's simply better than most.

Admittedly, several we knew were aware of the patterns died in the past years, but I'm pretty sure several more were taught during the war.

After all Catherie, Hanno and Tariq can't help but teach others. Even their last reunion before the battle of Hainaut included meaningful story bits.

[*Liliet*](#)

Malicia visualizes hers as gloves she puts on.

dadycoool

This? This chapter right here is why we all adore her. Everything about this chapter is the distilled essence of the being, the

entity, that is Catherine Foundling, Queen of Callow. Sowing chaos to bask in its warmth, using the ashes of her antics to forge exactly what she wants, and dominating her opponents in a way that none of them could ever have conceived of, punishing every mistake in a way similar to how Saruman punished the Deeping Wall for having a drain, with all the shock, trauma, and astonishment. And then, when she comes to analyze the situation, she beholds the whole of it and laughs. And walks away with everything she wanted, her foe thanking her for the opportunity to give it to her.

Shveiran

You know what I really liked?

So far, we saw the High Lords and Malicia try to oppose Cat and making a good show of it.

Cat brings the orcs around, she has Named superiority but not enough to batter everything down, Nim leads a commando to inflict strategic losses while also unwittingly entering a Pattern of Three, Wolof has good enough defenses it can't be breached without major losses, then there was a surgical strike for Vivienne, then the sabotage of the infiltration which lead to Cat's capture.

And one might read all that as "Malicia actually has a shot at it". There is enough resistance the Empress might actually win.

And all that is ripped away in this chapter, because we see that there is no possible endgame for her.

Really think about it: you caught your enemy and she has no defense whatsoever.

And you come to the realization that you literally can't touch her. That having her in your clutches helps you not at all.

Her mortal allies won't stop coming if you hurt her. Her immortal allies cannot be hurt through her. She can't be coerced to give back what she stole because she physically cannot without a third party's permission AND you'd need to give her back access to the Night for that to work, and good luck with that.

If you kill her, the world power you BADLY need to keep your "ally" in check collapses, and you end up the only neighbor of the Kingdom of the Dead. For a short while, because remember: you don't have enough food to survive without trade, and Keter won't trade you food. It will let you die in a Civil War and then invade whoever wins to finish gobbling up Calernia.

And we saw how trying to use Name shanenigans against one of the top three story-fu black belts in the continent ends.

I guess it... sunk in, you know?

How there is no winning for Malicia anymore. She is trying to buy her way out of a corner, but there aren't really any takers.

It must be terrifying, from her point of view.

She can't kill her enemy or really see her lose, or she'll lose as well.

And she know, so she won't stop coming after you because there isn't really anything meaningful for Malicia to threaten her with anymore. It doesn't matter if the Empress could blow up Callow because she can no longer afford to: any further escalation would either collapse the Grand Alliance or further cement Malicia as its enemy, and both are lose conditions.

If Catherine wins, she'll want her head; if she loses, Malicia has already lost too.

She is stalling, trying to weaken Catherine to that narrow point where she is weakened enough she needs Praes but can't take it by force, and it just... won't work, because Catherine is not fighting a war. Much like she couldn't stop the Saint or Pilgrim with strategical necessities, she can't now be stopped by Malicia's sabotage.

It just doesn't stick.

Truth his, the last possibility Malicia had went into smoke at the peace conference. When the Dead King got serious about the war.

Keeping by his side through three years of apocalyptic conflict against the whole continent kind of ensured she could only choose which way she'd lose, in the end.

dadycool

"Catherine's not fighting a war." She's just doing a fetch quest. "Oh, the world is ending and you need to go to Keter to stop it." "Sure, but I could use some xp, so I'll do this 'close the Hell Portal' sidequest first. The end of the world won't happen until I trigger the event anyway, so I might as well do everything I can beforehand."

Shveiran

On one hand, I feel tempted to say that's not how it works at all.

On the other... godsdamn it, it kinda does, doesn't it?

Damn it, I can't unsee it now.

Sinead

Eh. I think that only works if there wasn't a timer on the Hellgates that would keep ticking while she was running against Keter.

It is an XP grind, but that's not how Cat's viewing it, so the meta meta plot doesn't really apply.

Shveiran

Sure, there is that.

But even out of Arcadia, in a narrative-driven world a timer only ever runs out when it is dramatically appropriate.

And Cat sets the narrative.

So really, in a way, dadycool is kind of right

matesbe

But it's not just a good thing. Malacia might decide that if she's going to lose anyways, she might as well go down swinging. After all, if she's dead, she's too dead to care that the Dead King is eating the continent.

Malacia can still do damage; so far she's refrained from anything too egregious because she doesn't want the Dead King to win either, but if she really really believes there's no way out, I doubt she'll bow out quietly.

Oshi

Which is exactly what I think the Bard wanted when she got Cat captured. A mad Empress who would break the world and in the process give a reason for the use of the Angelic weapon.

Cicero

The thing is that Malicia never planned on defeating Cat, she's been planning to hurt Cat until she become indispensable to Cat, and then trade her services for her survival (and continued rule as Dread Empress). To her that makes a lot more sense than just being an ally and trusting faithfulness will be returned.

It reminds me a bit of Japan attacking America in WWII. Japan never had a strategy for victory through war. The plan was always to inflict such a hard blow on America that America would "obviously" choose to negotiate a peace, at which Japan would return a bunch of things (though not the Philippines), and leave Japan in a position to defend her new possessions in SE Asia. When America instead took the position of "unconditional surrender or death" as the only terms they would accept, Japan had no back up plan, no way to actually fight and win the resulting war.

Japan would have been better off attacking the Dutch, British, and French holdings and left the Americans alone. That would have left America in the perfect position to completely eviscerate Japan's logistical lines, and inflict a terrible defeat on Japan – but American domestic politics, probably

meant that America wouldn't ever do it, despite the perfect position to win easily.

Japan just couldn't tolerate putting itself in that position of vulnerability. Just as Malicia could never accept the vulnerability of a de facto independent Callow, even if de jure it was allied with Praes. So she attempted to secure a position of power that would ensure Callow couldn't betray her, and ended up instead making herself an implacable (and unappeasable) enemy

Of course, knowing Malicia's backstory it's not surprising that she would make such a choice, but it does have a aura of inevitable tragedy to it, like all the best villains do.

Liliet

I started thinking about how Malicia could plausibly personally get out of this without a big Amadeus Ex Machina if, idk, taken over by a ghost of alt!Cat or something.

And I keep running against the mind control issue.

Malicia cannot be trusted around people who aren't the specific handful of Named powerful enough to throw off her influence. Even Amadeus, if still un-Named, would have to personally trust that she wouldn't plant hooks in his mind without his awareness. And while I could see him taking that risk, literally no-one else would think it justified. Because the trick with the Legions' officers showed that she cannot even be relied upon to follow obvious self-interest in mutual non-fucking-over. She's just... a scorpion that stings out of habit, and from an outside PoV there's at this point no situation you can put her in and be reasonably confident she won't wreck everything from it.

Save for personal attention of the sort Cat bound Akua with, and *that* was half self-inflicted – Akua'd been the one to take her own soul out of her body.

The mind control wrecks it all, and Malicia's demonstrative unwillingness to follow any ethics around it whatsoever.

I do think there's still routes for her to survive, but only at outside parties' mercy, because to lose Rule she needs to be beaten and broken. Catherine-style calculated surrender will not work, because it'll keep her a potential of a Name. Someone needs to bring her low enough she just... doesn't have any power at all, anymore, and then decide to spare her.

(Contrast this with how GA looks at Cat holding their collective fates in the palm of her hand and philosophically shrugs "eh, it's probably going to be fine")

hue hue

Man, you are a really good writer. This is the kinda of thing I expected from a published book, not something found mentioned in a comment on a isekai web novel. Never have I seen such good worldbuilding, to be fair I don't read much world focused books.

Serious, good job. I going to your's patreon now, finnaly got mine second salary this month.

Xinci

Hm wonder if one could do similar things with devils or demons as they did with the fey fowl. Finding the right species would be troublesome since you are basically trying to steal materials with specific dimensional rules/intrinsic qualities like cells stealing genes.

Cat has a fair point on precedent, regardless of anything else the Grand Alliance will be wary of allowing a malfactor like that to stay. Now Cat just needs to get a carrot for her stick. Or at least Black needs to destabalize things so that she can aid implementation of the carrot.

I am glad to see that I was right in the methods they could use Still Water. Does make me more curious about how well Alchemy could be used to affect souls or help induce things like the Gift.

[Liliet](#)

Malicia has kind of wrecked any possible carrots, because here's the thing: Amadeus's allegiance was the greatest carrot she could have ever had.

And she just threw it away on paranoid impulse. A sequence of paranoid impulses. A sequence of decisions that just. Really set on fire any possible idea that she might be a rational agent one can bargain with.

If she cannot be trusted to not fuck over the guy who literally put her on the throne and supported her there for four decades while also being her personal friend and someone she's described as "part of her soul". She cannot be trusted to not fuck over *anyone* in *any* circumstances.

Where the definition of "fuck over" goes alllll the way between "allowing a city to be turned into zombies on a slight miscalculation of consequences of an action", "openly supporting an omnicidal lich because surely it'll be fine" and "planting mind control hooks in officers of her own army out of paranoia".

That's a really fucking wide spectrum, partially strongly characterized by being kind of bad at predicting destructive consequences of one's own actions.

...yeah. Bad.

Cat has good reasons to go for her customary shitty wine / sword combo on Praesi nobles. There's no genuine carrot left for her to possibly offer.

Sam

Absolutely incredible!

Xinci

Hm wonder if one could do similar things with devils or demons as they did with the fey fowl. Finding the right species would be troublesome since you are basically trying to steal materials with specific dimensional rules/intrinsic qualities like cells stealing genes. Better said you are trying to fuse materials compatible with other rules of reality. It seems that creatures generally need to have less modifications for a successful transplant(which actually makes the Praesi's interbreeding make more sense given humans are apparently quite flexible about mixing other things into themselves)

Cat has a fair point on precedent, regardless of anything else the Grand Alliance will be wary of allowing a malfactor like that to stay. Now Cat just needs to get a carrot for her stick. Or at least Black needs to destabilize things so that she can aid implementation of the carrot.

I am glad to see more in the methods they could use Still Water. Does make me more curious about how well Alchemy could be used to affect souls or help induce things like the Gift. Presumably the principle of the method it could be used for a host of things like affecting agricultural cycles or affecting water density as well.

JRogue

This was transcendent. This was beyond. The writing in this chapter alone places EE alongside the best writers of today. Amazing story building and insight. Her last line; "Should I now tremble at the shadow of her shadow?" is a truly chill-inducing line.

I am overwhelmed by this, and someday, when these books have been turned into paper and are sold, I will buy every one of them and give them a place of honor on my book shelf.

ninegardens

So... you know what scene the initial talk with Malicia reminds me of?

The 5 way discussion at the end of the princes graveyard.

GP: "How well you have tied us up with the strings of our own necessity"

Cat: "Do you resent me for making this a victory for people other than myself?"

Saint: "CUT OUT THE ROT! I HATE YOU ALL! BURN MOTHERFUCKERS!"

And Here:

Malicia: "I can give you everything you want. Here's some sweet rituals for fighting DK"

CAT: " ohhh... woe is me... how neatly you have tied us up with- lol, nevermind DIE BITCH DIE"

And its like... I'm starting to realize that that trick... that TECHNIQUE of making herself too useful not to negotiate with... she learned that from Alaya.

And also... it kinda feels like if we thought Cat was clever and good for doing it previously, its a bit weird for calling Alaya wicked for doing it now.

Hell, there's even a similarity with Saint being like "Look, you weren't attacking us, but your Allys with the Black Knight who has been rampaging around the Procean countryside burning shit. And your an evil shit, we can't let you set a precedent here"

It's just... there's a LOT of parallels here. We're just on the opposite side of the conversation this time. Saints side of the conversation. 🙄

hakureireimu

The difference is that Cat tried very hard to keep her end of her bargains.

Shveiran

The difference is that, you know, the Empress helped the Dead King to devour the world for years.

This isn't protagonist bias at work.

Are there similarities? Yeah, sure.

Do the differences change the context meaningfully? Absolutely yes.

ninegardens

I mean.... Cat had been helping and supporting Black's attempts to burn shit down. The fact she didn't always APPROVE doesn't change the fact that he was an ally to her, and very dangerous.

Probably the bigger difference was, at that stage Black wasn't CURRENTLY setting fire to shit, unlike Nessie up north.

The differences change the context, but I don't think they change them as much as you seem to imply.

Shveiran

I'm sorry, are you implying that there is no substantial difference between the conquest of a single nation (a conquest that didn't really involve a culling of the population or any great restriction of its citizen's freedom, which isn't speculation but a plot point since that is WHY it worked for decades) with the END OF LIFE ON A CONTINENT?

[Liliet](#)

With the difference being that Catherine has been an actually TRUSTWORTHY ally to everyone she's ever allied with for as long as they kept their end of the deal.

While Malicia has fucked over, in sequence, everyone who has ever allied with her. Her alliance with Amadeus ended with her setting fire to it. Her alliance with DK was conceived as one she'd betray as soon as she deems it convenient from the very start.

Catherine isn't saying "you can't play with us because you've played with the mean kids". Catherine is saying "I tried playing with you, cost me a city, I watched while my father KEPT trying to play with you, you just ignored his goodwill without a blink, what the FUCK are you expecting at this point".

Malicia is, in fact, a neat illustration of why Laurence had reacted to Catherine the way she did. I mean – I've always been sympathetic towards Laurence. She was factually wrong, but she had good fucking reasons to make the predictions she did.

Forgot_My_Name

Catherine will probably magnanimously offer to sell them Callowan grain back with a very generous interest rate for their debt, too.

Frivolous

Realized something a few hours ago.

This is probably the first time in many decades that Malicia has had her will usurped, been subjected to another's Speaking. The last time it happened was probably when she was still the

concubine Alaya, and the one who did it to her was probably Dread Emperor Nefarious.

I don't think even Kairos Theodosian dared to Speak to her. Then again, Kairos never showed any aptitude for Speaking.

So Malicia may have experienced some degree of flashback to trauma from Nefarious following Catherine's command to Be silent.

Note this is not certain, because not every Dread Emperor has Rule as an aspect or knows how to Speak, but it's quite likely, no?

So even if Malicia didn't hate and fear Catherine before, she surely does now.

Of course, there are huge and very peculiar differences between Nefarious's relationship with Alaya, and Malicia's with Catherine.

For one thing, Nefarious was basically Alaya's owner. She was his concubine and sex slave. He had all the power.

Here, Catherine was Malicia's prisoner, and yet Malicia failed to command or even frighten Cat, and Cat succeeded in commanding and frightening Malicia.

Akua used to say that any Sahelian agent that has been in the same room with Malicia must be assumed to be compromised. Now the same axiom must apply to Malicia if she ever meets Catherine again.

Is there anything more unlikely and oxymoronic than a vulnerable, helpless Dread Empress?

[sengachi](#)

Yikes. Especially considering that exact trauma and resulting need for control is what led to her Rule aspect becoming such a focus for her ... damn. This just got real pathologically personal for Malicia didn't it?

Sinead

Yeah. That's why though I can appreciate why that scene is impressive from Cat's perspective, Cat commanding Malicia to be silent made me feel cold.

There have been studies that show that people from traumatic backgrounds very often describe the purpose of power being to keep yourself safe. Is it a wonder that Malicia developed the ability to bend the will of those around her without speaking a word?

And Cat broke that illusion.

I don't like Alaya, but I do find her so very tragic. She was pulled into the Tower, and thought that the only way to be free of the Tower is through to the top.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly, considering how far Alaya spiraled on her current coping mechanism for feeling safe, maybe Cat breaking that illusion will actually do her some good. Like, maybe she'll find her way toward survival after all.

Xinci

Issue being people with trauma need to feel safe while also having a change in perspective to really get post traumatic growth. Maybe Amadeus could do something for that former portion but otherwise such people tend to just lash out in self-destructive ways.

[Liliet](#)

Malicia is already lashing out in self-destructive ways. The first step when a kid is swinging a bazooka around is taking away the bazooka. If Alaya's ties to her Name weaken, she has potential to ACTUALLY achieve safety.

jamesc9

> Is there anything more unlikely and oxymoronic than a vulnerable, helpless Dread Empress?

If the Empressness is a temporary condition, then I would think that they all go through a phase like that. It's a bit like Outside Context Problems in the Iain M Banks culture novels.

[sengachi](#)

Honestly the fact that Cat can Speak to Malicia is *terrifying* and says a lot about her Name.

Malicia is one of the most matured Named on the continent, with the single most established history of any ruling Name, with a Name designed for Speaking, with an aspect designed for Speaking, and so much concerted practice into that aspect that she apparently transcended any prior recorded ability with it (Speaking without speaking).

And Cat, without an aspect or even a fully formed Name, no-sold her. And then Spoke to *her*. There's presumably a trick to it, some narrative reason Cat had to wait for Malicia to Speak first.

But this ...

This is like a no-Name no-aspects claimant out-wrestling Heracles and making it look easy. And the writing made me buy it. I am in awe.

Steven Silver

It's probably because Cat's nascent name is meant to usurp Malicia's. So Malicia's reign is on the way out while Cat's is on the way in. Bad portents for the Dread Empress, eh?

Crash

Eh. Usurp has weird connotation here. She's not about to climb the tower.

Probably more accurate to say that she has made so much of her persona being unwilling to bend to rules she disagrees with that she managed to make it important enough to her Name that she not be overruled. Especially not by Malicia.

Even just thinking about this little arc, Cat's has taken pains to establish that she will not listen to Malicia and that they will never meet in anything but her own terms. At every opportunity, as soon as she has the information she needs, she gets rid of Malicia.

When they first do a parley, before the campaign truly begins she immediately kills the puppet. When it becomes clear the scroll has what she needs to know, she attacks the puppet and removes it from her rooms. Even the Sisters refuse to allow control over their chosen one.

She's playing the narrative real good here.

Darkening

Yeah, Cat just establishing early and often that her highest priority is brutally killing Malicia as soon as she is able to and as often as she needs to is a hell of a thing. Like, even with the detachment of having it not be her own body, having someone **repeatedly** kill you in brutal fashion can not be pleasant. She killed her a bunch in Keter, killed one here earlier, made several attempts on the other one here, and has made it abundantly clear that she's going to keep attempting it with the, 'there's always next time' line. I feel like that story groove of, "Cat kills Malicia," is getting worn pretty deep at this point. Combined with Cat just not selling her greatest strength and turning it back against her, Malicia might finally grasp what Ime's been trying to tell her for years and start being very scared of what Catherine Foundling is going to do.

Christian Oaks

So who is betting before the books and artifacts are returned they at least used night to copy the books? Or maybe heirophant already somehow read them all?

Crash

Yeah, no way they get to give those back without Masego having read through all the interesting ones lmao

That or they have to get something real cool to show him because it not he's gonna be pouring for the rest of the book.

(Maybe everyone is being real careful about not telling him what has been stolen?)

Steven Silver

When Malicia tried to compel Cat, I was reminded of the bit from Family Guy where Peter opens a can of whoop-ass. If you haven't seen it, look it up, you'll get what I mean 😊

Valkyria

Look at Cat, just being an absolute little shit just for fun and giggles. Cause she CAN.

I absolutely love it

Crash

Cat's new name is Named that's it. That's the play. One of her Aspects is just Speak.

A generic name for an all-powerful Odin stand in. It's what the vagrant impersonator would have wanted.

Vivienne also gets the Heiress Name in the same paragraph.

I will not be taking criticism. Thanks.

BIDZ180

An absolutely magnificent chapter.

superkeaton

That. Was fun.

Jefepato

Hm. I recall that Cat has described her Name as a "beast" in the past, but I think this is the first time she's described it as having "Fur, deep and matted and warm."

I am not sure how to interpret that, since her new Name is clearly something with considerable authority as well.

“Queen of the Beasts?” It doesn’t have the right ring to it.

Stephen Marsh

Makes me think of the expired member of Black’s band of five very time it fades towards that description.

Just hoping Cat doesn’t get killed and skinned.

Lord Haart

Yeah I think there’s a risk there. Even in stories where the beast garners sympathy, there are few cases where the beast survives.

Lord Haart

I mean back in Marchford we got a note visual representation IIRC and I’ve definitely been imagining it with fur.

I don’t think it implies she will have much to do with literal beasts, more that her name is something Primal vs Malicia’s gloves/tapestry or Amadeus’s ticking machine.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I doubt the Beast image is relevant to Cat’s external power or actions, it’s just her internal view.

Chapter 11: Descent

“Loyalty is not opposite of betrayal, but in truth adjacent: to truly place a person or principle above all others is to promise injury to a thousand others.”

– Extract from the prisoner’s memoirs of Princess Eliza of Salamans

My soldiers cheered as I rode back into camp.

I’d had a party waiting for me shortly outside the gates, led by Vivienne herself. She’d pulled me in tight for a hug, to my surprise and pleasure, before we took the saddle and headed away from the prying eyes atop the walls of Wolof. I’d expected there

to be something of a strange mood in camp after I'd spent a sennight in captivity, but if anything my sudden return seemed to have been expected. Like I'd been a given that I would pull a trick, find a way out of the pit. It was as once oddly touching and brute burden. Sooner or later, I thought, I would lead them to a doom there would be no bearding. The thought of the look on their faces then had my stomach dropping.

It wouldn't do to return grim-faced, though, so I smiled and laughed and stopped to speak with men and women I recognized. There were more than I'd expected. The First Army had pulled heavily from rank and file of the Fifteenth, back when it'd been first raised, and in some ways it had seen less action than other parts of the Army of Callow. There were fewer holes in the ranks here than there would have been in the Third or the Fourth.

When I first got to my tent it was to a warming sight: all of my closest companions had gathered there. Gods, even Pickler had come and it was even more of a chore to pull her away from her work since Robber had died. Akua kept to the back, tactfully keeping away from Vivienne, but I found her eyes and inclined my head. I'd speak no more of it for now, but I'd not forgot whose scheming it would be that got me out of that cell. Scribe was keeping her company, anyway, another whose presence surprised me. Wine was poured, though little of it – it was before Noon Bell – and I was asked about my time imprisoned. There was a great deal of outrage when I explained I'd pretty much lived in the lap of luxury, with good wine and interesting books.

"It figures even in a cell you'd stumble into a better bed than us," Indrani complained.

"Even got to maul Malicia twice," I cheerfully added.

I had a thousand questions to ask them, but before getting to it I wanted a wash and a change of clothes. Pretty as mine were, I wasn't going to keep wearing what my foes had given me. Masego insisted on inspecting me for illness or enchantments, which I agreed to once I was clean from the dust of the road, and most of them took the hint that I wanted to wash immediately. Hakram lingered, no doubt to brief me on all that I'd missed, but to my surprise so did another.

"A private word, if you please?"

I eyed Scribe with surprise. Over the length of our association she'd made it a point to avoid getting Adjutant out of the room whenever she reported to me, as if to make it perfectly clear that she was not trying to usurp his position at my side. I doubted she would have broken that custom without reason, so I slowly nodded before glancing at Hakram.

"We'll talk before the evening council," I said. "I need to be caught up."

"And more," Hakram gravelled. "The envoys."

Ah, that. Yeah, it made sense the orcs wouldn't begin the journey back to the Steppes until I was out of Wolof. Not only had we been meant to speak again but there would be no point in making a deal with me if I were to stay Malicia's prisoner.

"Bring in Vivienne for that, then," I said.

"I'll see what can be done," the orc drily replied.

He gave Scribe a nod before taking his leave, limping away on his iron leg. That left me alone with the Webweaver in my tent, for the first time in what must have been ages. I poured myself a cup of water with lemon slices in it, asking if she wanted one with a cocked eyebrow. She declined, standing rigidly before my desk. I still couldn't see her face in more than small glimpsed, always half-faded, but from the way she held herself I would have thought her nervous – or at least as close to it as a woman like Eudokia ever came.

"Now you've got me curious," I admitted. "This isn't professional, is it?"

"Not entirely," Scribe admitted. "I would like to make a request of you."

My brow climbed up. That would be a first. I'd sometimes wondered if there was still a woman under the Name or if she'd died when the Calamities had split.

"What about?" I asked.

I wouldn't accept or decline without knowing more, but I didn't actually believe that'd been what she was baiting with her lack of elaboration. She was, I was growing certain, genuinely uncomfortable having this conversation. Was it about Black? No, we'd talked of that before. Of loyalties. It wouldn't make her like... this.

"You still have in your possession the corpse of the soldier that Marshal Nim possessed," Scribe said.

"Marshal Nim can't possess shit, Scribe," I amiably said. "The Black Knight did that."

Neither of us were particularly comfortable matching that Name to anyone but Amadeus of the Green Stretch, but best we got used it. I did not think it likely he would ever resume his old Name, which meant that even if Marshal Nim survived the tussle over the

fate of Praes someone else would step in and fill those shoes. Scribe conceded the point with a nod.

"I would like for it to be passed into my custody," Eudokia the Scribe said.

I blinked. That, uh, hadn't been what I was expecting. I wasn't sure what I actually *had* been expecting, but it was emphatically Not That.

"Masego's studying it," I finally pointed out.

Or at least he'd been doing so when I'd been captured. It'd been too much to hope he would be able to give me the aspect that'd done this, but I wanted at least an understanding of the mechanics involved.

"He believes he has already learned all he can," Scribe said. "I believe he would be amenable to closing the matter, should you ask him."

Huh. She wouldn't even have needed to spy on him for that, I reminded myself. Zeze considered her like an aunt of sorts, he would have simply *told* her if asked.

"So I feasibly could give you the body," I acknowledged. "And we're going to walk right past why I should – for now anyway – to ask instead why you'd want that corpse in the first place. What are you going to use it for?"

She had to know I'd ask, I thought. I was not exactly known for my policy of handing over dead bodies to Named without asking questions. She had to have known, and still she hesitated before answering. That was fascinating to me, given who I was dealing with.

"I want to Inscribe it," the Scribe said.

I swallowed a grin. Oh my, that'd definitely been an aspect. I was finally getting a peek at the juicy secrets of the Calamities, was I?

"And what does that do, exactly?" I asked.

"When I first began to us the method," Scribe quietly said, "it was little more than a trick. I could make my words... weigh more than those of others. Make them linger where they were written."

But tricks improve, I thought, and this one she'd refined until it became an aspect.

"By the time I met Amadeus," Scribe said, "I could make eyes and ears of vermin. Sometimes I could even Inscribe instructions onto others that they would be beholden to obey."

I calmly set down my cup on the desk. Living people, living creatures. Yet she was now asking for a corpse.

"You can make corpse-puppets," I said. "And the higher quality the corpse, the better the results."

"The first one I made was a puppet," Scribe said, and I glimpsed a faint smile. "Little better than undead. Yet when I was destroyed, I retrieved the corpse and found that what I had inscribed could be retrieved. That there was more. The inscription had changed. I used the changes, and so the second was... something more."

I breathed out a soft, incredulous laugh as it all fell into place.

"Gods Below," I said. "You madwoman. You actually made a *Named*, didn't you? By fucking accident."

"We began calling him Assassin after the fourteenth iteration," Scribe told me. "Wekesa helped me with the inscriptions that made it coherent enough for sapience, based on the contract Tikoloshe was bound by. Quickly enough we realized that the primary limitation was the quality of the base material. Most bodies could only carry part of the inscription before they began to wither. "

"So you used dead *Named*," I said.

Assassin *had* died over the years, I thought. Dozens and perhaps even hundreds of times. And every time the Scribe had retrieved the corpse, ripped out the inscription and shoved a refined version into another dead hero's corpse. Gods, had that been what my father did with all the Callowan heroes he'd nipped in the bud? Dropped them in some crypt, stashed away until Eudokia needed more materials? I was as appalled by the desecration as I was impressed by the brutal pragmatism.

"This one was possessed by a Black Knight," Scribe said. "I will only be able to Inscribe seven parts in ten, at most, and there will be need for extensive... surgery so the resulting entity has a human silhouette. But he would be a match for the Assassin we were using in the decade prior to the Conquest, by my estimation."

I could think of a way or two to use such an asset, I thought, but I still far from sold. It would, for one, not be *my* asset.

"How much control on the entity do you have, after you Inscribe him?" I asked.

"It cannot refuse a command from me," Scribe said, then grimaced. "I fear you do not fully understand, Queen Catherine. I do not

simply write words on dead flesh when I do this. I give of myself. It is the wholeness of the aspect. He cannot act against what I make of him, because there is nothing else to the entity."

When I had fought Akua in the depths of Liesse, when I had passed through the Fourfold Crossing she laid out before me, I had glimpse of a life in which I had kill the Assassin. Goblinfire had done it, masses of it. *It's not a metaphor when she says she invests her aspect*, I realized. *It's physically in the corpse*. Practically speaking, it was probably why the construct could mimic Named abilities to some degree. The 'Assassin' wouldn't have aspects of its own, but it wasn't just flesh and power either. Not exactly. *So if the body's destroyed with goblinfire or demons it probably ruins her aspect too*, I decided.

"Does Malicia know?" I asked. "Ranger?"

"Ranger does," Eudokia said. "Malicia does not. She is aware that Assassin has 'died' in the past, but believes him to be a manner of wraith possessing bodies."

Which wasn't even entirely wrong, as tended to be the case with the best lies. Huh. That would be a trump card up our sleeve dealing with the empress. Which was probably why Scribe figured I might agree to let her make it. *And it wouldn't be a real Named*, I thought. That had implications, considering the other opponent I was facing here in Praes. An entity with some of the abilities of Named but who could not be manipulated or predicted the way they could? That was a rather more tempting offer than just another knife to pull on the Dread Empress of Praes. The trouble remained, of course, that in the end it wouldn't be *my* sleeve that card was up in. It'd be Scribe's tool, and Scribe's loyalty to me was not on solid foundation.

Her enmity with Malicia was very real, though, I judged. It was what she'd broken with my father over. And she despised the Intercessor as the architect of Sabah's death. Could I trust her, though, to use this almost-Assassin to match those threats instead of pursuing her own goals? I took my cup, sipped at it for a bit as I felt her study me.

"And what do you want to us the thing for?" I asked.

"I would like to assassinate Malicia," Scribe frankly said, "but I recognize that there are political realities and that the Tower is likely too well-defended for an incomplete Assassin. Instead I would commit him under your command to offensive operations against her cause."

That was believable enough, but why would a lie from the Webweaver's mouth would be anything else? Best to be blunt, I decided, and avoid misunderstandings.

"I'm not comfortable with giving you that kind of power when you have no personal loyalty to me," I honestly said. "Especially when we're in Praes. And while I don't doubt you could grant me partial control, I don't have the time to handle that on top of my other responsibilities."

To my mild surprise, she nodded without seeming particularly offended.

"I understand," she said. "In other circumstances I would have offered that Adjutant be placed in stewardship over the entity, but given his coming departure I would venture that Vivienne Dartwick is now the best candidate."

First my right hand and now my successor. She'd picked the names well, couldn't deny that.

"And you'd surrender part of the control without argument?" I said, somewhat skeptical.

"I recognize the investment in trust and resources you are making," Scribe calmly said. "I will not pretend offence, though I *will* remind you I can do significantly more damage to the Grand Alliance with a few letters bearing your fake signature than a dozen Assassins."

I was not unaware of that, but 'I didn't cut your throat with this knife' wasn't much an argument for giving someone a sword either.

"So what is it you do want?" I pressed.

"The right to brief Princess Vivienne on operational opportunities and present targets of my own," Scribe immediately said.

Ah, there it was. Even after she'd been evicted from leadership of the Eyes here in the Dread Empire by Malicia's own spymistress, the Webweaver still had more spies here than Callow did. That meant she'd be able to indirectly guide what we used Assassin for by simple dint of often having better information than we did. I hummed. She could also simply go back on her word and use the entity for whatever the Hells she felt like doing, of course, but that wouldn't be like her. *And though you might yet betray me*, I thought, *even if you do it will be to Black*. I simply couldn't believe he'd order her to use something like the Assassin on anyone dear to me.

"Hierophant will supervise," I finally said.

As much because I wanted someone I trusted in that room as because if I robbed him of the opportunity of witnessing that he'd sulk at me for months. Even through the aspect I saw a

surprisingly girlish smile light up Eudokia's face, as she eagerly agreed and began to thank.

I could only hope, I thought, that I had not just made a grave mistake.

—

The gold and grain began reaching us half past Noon Bell, after I'd washed and Masego had declared be to be in the fullness of health.

It was only good sense to check the merchandise when you bargained with Praesi, so I unleashed Zeze and Akua on the goods while I got caught up with my informal council. There'd been next to no skirmishing in my absence, as it turned out, and Juniper believed what few blows had been traded to have been accidental. Patrols running into each other by happenstance, nothing intentional. As I'd expected it had been Akua — with Vivienne along for formal authority — who'd conducted the negotiations that'd pressured Sargon into my release. High Lady Takisha had been most eager to get her hands on the Sahelian library.

Akua had even tied up the affair neatly by ensuring the three tomes she'd sent south as proof that we did have the library were precious enough the High Lady of Kahtan wouldn't be too miffed by our ending the negotiations. It was a nice touch, and I told her as much.

Sepulchral had been handled more by Vivienne, though, and there the talks had been rockier. Not for any misstep on my heiress' part, but because Abreha Mirembe had wanted more than simply the arsenal the Sahelians kept in their vaults: she'd wanted a formal alliance between us, as well as the backing of the Grand Alliance. Vivienne had put her off by saying we couldn't agree to that without the First Prince's permission and the backing of all four remaining great lines of the Blood, which Sepulchral had recognized for the putting off it was.

"She warned us that the time for sitting the fence is coming to an end," Vivienne told me. "That the civil war will be coming to a close soon, one way or another."

"Or another yet," I mildly said.

High Lord Sargon hadn't been wrong, when he'd implied that Sepulchral was about as trustworthy as a hungry tiger. I'd been happy to throw her the occasional bone so far because she was a thorn in Malicia's side, but I was not enthused as the notion of Abreha Mirembe holding the Tower. She'd probably hold off on backstabbing us until the end of the war on Keter, I figured, but she'd be trouble in the years that followed. Dread Empress Sepulchral would have no real interest in reforming the empire

into something less poisonous to everything it touched, and I honestly suspected that she'd pull out of the Liesse Accords at the first opportunity.

That was not acceptable to me.

"We will need to take inventory of the coin and grain as they come, Catherine, but I believe in both cases our expectations were lower than the reality," Aisha told me. "Wolof's treasury, in particular, appears to have been fuller than we thought."

"My cousin has been sacking the hinterlands of Askum rather relentlessly," Akua noted. "It would not be surprising that he aimed to steal wealth along population."

That or Malicia had been propping up his reign with gold. As had been pointed out to me last year, given that she still drew taxes from most of Praes, half her army was gone and most foreign markets were closed to her the empress was actually sitting on a lot of gold she didn't have that many uses for. Solidifying the position of the High Lord she'd soulboxed would have been a good investment for her.

"How much are we talking, Aisha?" I asked.

"If the wagons are all carrying the same amount of coin, we would be looking at around a million aurelii," the Staff Tribune replied.

I let out a low whistle. In the year after Second Liesse, when the shock of the second largest city in all of Callow and the crisis that'd followed was still hitting us the hardest, my tax revenue for the entire Kingdom of Callow hadn't actually been much higher than that. I let that sink in for a moment.

"Well," I finally said, "I suppose that makes up for the ransom money being stolen back."

That got some smiles, the good mood infectious. It'd been a *long* while since our treasury had been quite so full.

"We'll give a cut of the loot to Razin and Aquiline," I decided. "As they helped us take it."

Maybe a tenth? Much like my own countrymen Levantines tended to get pissy about anything they saw as charity – the pride of our fellow poors, I amusedly thought – so I might have to end up calling it an early wedding gift. The gold ought to help them strengthen their position in Levant after the war, too, assuming we all made it there. I would repay my debt to Tariq Fleetfoot in full, one bite at a time.

"So who was it that tried to rescue me, by the way?" I asked.

"Indrani led the attempt," Vivienne said. "But Masego, the Silver Huntress and the Barrow Sword went as well."

I let out a small whistle. Not a bad lineup, for a jaunt like this. I'd have to ask Archer how far she'd made it, for Sargon to find it worth filling my cell with guards.

"I suppose I ought to encourage that," I drawled. "And since we're rich, we ought to throw a feast before all the gold's gone. Tonight."

"A fire?" Juniper asked, leaning forward.

"It's been too long," I agreed.

My soldiers would get rewards of their own, extra rations and ale casks being broken out to celebrate our successful 'siege' of Wolof, but tonight I'd share a fire with my friends.

—

We did it *proper*.

Akua found us a good place, slightly away from the camp but not too far. Indrani and Hakram dug the pit, Vivienne got the benches and Pickler started the fire. I went with Aisha to obtain a few drinks – some of them smuggled, but we knew those tricks – while Juniper began to roast the pig. Masego rustled up a few wards, just in case, and we got old Legion cooks to make us a pot's worth of the old staples from the War College. By the time the sun came down, we'd claimed our hilltop and seats as Juniper began cutting into the pork and the usual haggling began.

"I *am* a princess, nowadays," Vivienne attempted. "Of Callow, too. Arguably-"

The rib chops were dropped unceremoniously into her plate as I cackled along with Indrani.

"This is borderline treasonous," Vivi whined. "What do I have to do to get a shoulder cut?"

"Be named Aisha Bishara," Hakram drily noted.

"It's a little sad when being royalty doesn't even get you on the right side of nepotism anymore," I said, but then I caught Juniper's hard stare being turned on me, "-is what I would say if I shared her opinion, which is obviously wrong."

I got a satisfied nod for that, letting out a breath for that. I'd gotten used to juicy tenderloin cuts, I wasn't going to let pride get me demoted back to chops. After we'd gotten our plates filled according to the arcane and mysterious system Juniper had developed over our years of companionship – Zeze got downgraded

to leg for having suggested using a magical fire while Indrani got bumped up to fillet for having actually listened during briefings for a whole week – the bottles got opened the drink flowed freely. Aragh and ale, mostly, but some wine too. Nok pale for Akua, to Aisha's profuse mockery, and Vale summer wine from my personal stock.

It was a reality that invitation to these little fires had come to be seen as a prize, a mark of favour from the Black Queen and her inner circle, so while I wasn't going to spoil the whole thing I'd made some concessions to the inevitable. People came by, staying for a time before leaving. Razin and Aquiline were first, curious to try pork cooked in the orc way, and though they wanted to hear of my captivity at first they ended up spellbound by a tale Aisha told about ancient Taghreb legends that claimed her people had some kinship with those of Levant, that they'd been brought west on great ships by strange and cruel gods. It was why Taghreb disliked ships to this day, she told them.

I thought it more likely that the whole living in a desert thing had inspired a healthy dislike for seafaring, but what did I know?

The older Named came by, after that, and with them both Grandmaster Brandon Talbot and General Zola. The Refuge crowd, Silver Huntress and the Concocter, kept close to Archer. Akua caught the latter's interest by speaking about some of the potions her family had accrued over the years and they ended up in an animated discussion in what I believed to be tradetalk, but Alexis the Argent and Indrani mostly spoke to each other in stilted, stiff tones. They didn't argue, I saw, but it was hardly a triumph of diplomacy. *They're trying, though*, I thought. *Or at least Indrani is.*

Juniper and I got into it with General Zola, who'd fought at the Doom of Liesse under General Afolabi. She'd been a supply tribune, then, but their legion had gotten into enough a mess during the battle that it'd been all hands on deck. Pickler actually seemed to be enjoying a talk with Brandon Talbot, to my surprise, though what little I overheard told me why. Marchford had been his home long before it was my personal fiefdom, and it was Pickler I'd once ordered to rebuild the defences there. The walls had been pulled down after the Conquest, but I'd had no intention of leaving my holdings so vulnerable.

Hakram and Ishaq were quietly talking on the other side of the fire, which I considered to be a situation well in hand. The Barrow Sword saw Adjutant as a peer of sorts, and that meant Hakram could work him I ways I could not. I wanted him disposed to pitching in for the peace in Levant after the war, so preparing him for it early was important.

The last to visit were the kids, well after the others, and though I'd expected Sapan to stick to Masego's side as a barnacle the way she usually I instead found that she and Arthur Foundling wanted to hear from me. Like the lordlings my captivity was of interest to them, but more than that they were rather excited by the way High Lord Sargon had been forced to release me even as I lay in his power.

"Look," I said, "there's nothing wrong with a good sword. Stabbing the right people can get a lot done, don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise, but if you want a win that lasts longer than a season you've got to use other levers. The stuff that actually makes the world go round."

"Was it not your use of the Night that forced him to surrender?" Sapan skeptically asked.

"I could have stolen his treasury with Night and it wouldn't have done a thing," I shrugged. "The man who taught me, he was a stark believer in the victory of cleverness over power. I'm not as much of a purist – Gods know I use artefacts much more than he'd be comfortable with – but he was right that power doesn't mean much unless you know how and where to apply it."

"Because it was politics that forced the High Lord to bend," Arthur Foundling frowned. "Not power."

I nodded.

"Night let me take his library, clean out his vaults," I said. "But I knew what to take because I knew what was important to him. The power wouldn't have meant much without the second part."

"The Carrion Lord taught you this?" Sapan asked, a little hurriedly.

As if she'd been going through with it before she could think better, I decided with a grain of amusement.

"He did," I replied. "I'd say it's a shame he's mostly remembered for the number of Named he's killed, but that would be ignoring the fact he probably cultivated that reputation very much on purpose."

"He conquered Callow, ma'am," Arthur quietly said. "They say it was the governors that did most the ugly deeds, afterwards, but he's the one who handed it all to the Empire."

"He's a monster," I calmly agreed. "But he's also one of the cleverest men I've ever met, and ironically enough perhaps the best chance we have for peace between Callow and Praes in the coming decades."

It was why I meant to see him climb the Tower, even now. I could trust my father with the Dread Empire, to curb its worst instincts and tangle it so deeply into the bonds of peace with Callow that it would not be able to free itself of them without breaking. Neither Malicia nor Sepulchral were acceptable alternatives. The trouble was that I was not so sure the man in question wanted to claim the Tower. Maybe at the Salian Peace he had, but it'd been over a year since. And the way he'd left...

The conversation strayed to lighter subjects after that and eventually we sent the kids to bed. That left only us, as it was meant to be, and a second round of bottles was opened. I clenched, suddenly, when I felt Robber's absence like a gut punch. How many ghosts were out there, just beyond the light of our fire? Nauk. Ratface. Hune. I pulled at aragh to chase the thought away and had succeeded in claiming a pleasant degree of inebriation when I caught sight of one of the phalanges approaching Hakram to whisper in his ear. Seeing he had my attention, he gestured for us to move away from the fire and dragged in Vivienne as well. Once we were slightly away from the others, he wasted no time.

"Word from Scribe and the Jacks," Adjutant said. "Armies are moving towards us."

My eyes narrowed. He wouldn't be meaning the forces under Marshal Nim, which had already been headed our way for some time.

"Sepulchral?" Vivienne asked.

He nodded.

"But more," Hakram said. "The deserters as well. They've decamped from the Green Stretched and they're in close pursuit behind the loyalists and the rebels."

Well, it looked like I was overdue a talk with General Sacker. Half the point of becoming her patron was being warned of things like this in advance. I breathed out, trying to parse it out in my mind's eye. The armies of the empresses would reach us weeks before the deserters were in sight, if not months, but they wouldn't have begun to march without a reason. They wanted a piece of this too, in some way or another.

"Northeast of Askum, northwest of Ater," I finally said. "That looks to be our battlefield."

Deep in the Wasteland, which was bloody campaigning grounds for all involved. I wasn't looking forward to that.

"Agreed," Adjutant said. "And it means I can no longer delay my departure. Come morning, we must speak with the envoys and I will leave with them come noon."

I grimaced. I wanted to refuse. I'd just come back and already he was leaving, but I knew it was not a sensible answer. There could be no replacement for Hakram, no one who would mean what he did to his people or who would know my mind as well.

"Tomorrow," I reluctantly agreed.

He must have caught my displeasure, for he squeezed my arm comfortingly with his skeletal hand.

"We still have tonight," Hakram said. "Let's not spoil it yet."

I silently nodded, and after a moment he moved away. Vivienne lingered. I looked up at the night sky, the stars spread out as far as the eye could see and the moon glaring down as a pale eye. At least these days I did not feel irrational hatred at the sight of it.

"Beautiful night," Vivienne quietly said, looking up as well. "Moon's almost full."

"It is," I murmured. "It'll turn soon."

Tonight or tomorrow, but no later.

—

Well past Midnight Bell we began winding down, the drink and heavy meal taking their toll.

Usually we would have slept there, and some of us *had* fallen asleep, but we were outside the camp and in enemy territory still. Wards or not, it would be a risk. So instead everyone was roused and we began making our way back to the palisades, Hakram carrying a half-asleep Vivienne on his back to Indrani's vocal amusement. I hung back with Masego to make sure nothing had been left behind, and after he took down the wards I torched the entire hilltop with blackflame. We were mere miles away from Wolof, the beating heart of sorcery in Praes, so I wasn't going to be taking risks. I was mostly sober by now, having tapered off drinking near the end, so I did not feel vulnerable enough to rush back. I'd intended to walk back with Zeze after he took his last look, but when he did I found that someone else had stayed behind. Atop the burned hill, a golden-eyed shade was standing among the ash. My heart clenched.

Tonight, then. I'd almost hoped it would be tomorrow.

"You go on ahead," I told Masego.

He frowned at me.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

He could see her as well, of course. But it wasn't Masego's way to meddle in what he saw as the personal affairs of his friends. I breathed out.

"I am," I told him.

And he did not ask again. Hesitantly he brushed a hand against my arm and I smiled at him. Nodding and wishing me a good night, he began trodding back to camp. I murmured it back then turned to the hilltop. I limped my way back up through the ash, falling in at Akua's side as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The two of us stood there for a moment, looking up at the night sky. She was the one to break the silence.

"There is a place I would like to show you," she said. "Not far from here."

"Cityside or waterside?" I asked.

"Closer to Sinka," she said, and her eyes asked the question again.

I nodded. It had, I thought, the weight of the inevitable to it. We made our way through the darkness, sure-footed on small and winding paths. It was beautiful, out here. The sight of the orchards touched by moonlight, dappling the ground, the lights of Wolof in the distance as we went downhill towards the Wasaliti. There was little wind but the night was cool, and the thin breeze was enough to lazily stir leaves. We'd not broken the silence as we moved, her leading and I following, but as we crossed a cove of palm trees she began to talk.

"I did not find it myself," Akua said. "It was shown to me, when I was a girl of thirteen."

"Who by?" I asked.

She laughed, the amusement lighting up golden eyes as I caught a flash of pearly teeth.

"Some boy who thought he might become my consort," she said. "Alas, his hopes were greater than his charms."

"And I bet you were just the sweetest girl," I drily replied.

"I was not so terrible, back then," she smiled. "Not so artless as to be taken in, yet hardly the sharpest of irons."

She would have spoken the last part of that sentence with a touch of reverence, once. No longer. It was, if anything, disdain. But then Akua Sahelian was, in her own way, one of the finest liars I had ever seen. She had made a game out of charming my inner circle, and largely succeeded even when some of them had spent *years* despising her. As Aisha had once warned me, that was the

famous peril of the Sahelians: they were so charming and so useful that even the cleverest let them in. And then they turned on you. So how much of it was Akua's truly held beliefs and how much of it the face she wore when around us? There was, in the end, only one way to tell.

The crucible. Trial by fire.

"I barely remember what I was like at thirteen," I admitted. "Feels like a world away."

"Much like you were at seventeen, I imagine," Akua mused. "Swagger covering vigilance, looking every gift horse in the mouth twice. And, in your own way, dangerously insightful."

I coughed to hide my embarrassment. That was the closest she'd come to giving me a genuine compliment – one not wrapped in anything else, honest praise – perhaps since we had first met.

"And terribly easy to embarrass, of course," she teased.

"I wouldn't have been that easy to fluster," I snorted. "For one, unlike you *I* was the one taking the boys to dark corners."

Girls, too, but not as many. I'd tended towards boys when I'd been younger.

"And yet I'm told the redheaded mage you took as a lover had to be the one to seduce you," Akua said.

I'd noticed that she usually avoided using Killian's name. Or talking about her at all, really. Not that it was hard, considering most of my closest friends tended to avoid the subject. Even Juniper, who was not known for shyness or tact, had not hazarded to venture an opinion on that whole debacle.

"It's different when it's someone under your authority," I replied. "I thought there was something there, but I didn't want to..."

"Overstep?" Akua suggested.

I hummed, not disagreeing. In a way. From the moment I'd held command of the Fifteenth I had been both a villain and the apprentice of the Black Knight, both positions that in many ways made me untouchable. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to abuse my position if I cared to, and arguably I had. I'd been very much against Legion regulations to sleep with my own Senior Mage, for one, but rules applied to Named in Praes more or less only when people higher up the ladder said they did. And in my case, Black had been more supportive than anything.

"I'm also not great at taking hints sometimes," I admitted.

"Truly?" Akua said, tone drier than a desert.

I rolled my eye at her. We swerved to the north well before reaching the shore, to my surprise, still we into the cultivate parts of Wolof's surroundings. The side of the hill where she led me, though, was cracked. Old scorch marks still blackened the stone, from some ancient battle, and she guided me through the broken grounds until we reached a tall flat stone covered with moss. Akua passed a hand against it affectionately.

"You'll have to help me move it," she said.

Interest piqued, I put my back into it and we toppled the stone to the side. It revealed a narrow, uneven passage going deeper into the hill. Akua glanced up at the sky, as if checking on the height of the moon, and nodded.

"Now is the best time," she said. "Come."

It was uncomfortable squeezing through the passage and the stone tore at my clothes some, but aside from the burn of my bad leg there was little to hinder me. To my relief the passage led to some sort of broader room, pitch dark – not that the darkness was trouble for me, blessed by the Sisters as I was. Here I could stand to my full height, and Akua almost, but it was still small. She showed a low fold in the stone to our left, though, and after crawling for a foot or so I followed her into a small cavern. I stopped almost immediately after rising, stunned.

It was not a large cavern, perhaps twenty feet wide, and most of the ground was covered by water. The sides had been scarred by spells, like the outside, but here the heat of the spell used has turned entire swaths of stone into something like smooth glass. And what brought it all together was the long opening in the ceiling that looked up straight at the night sky: the moon and stars were reflected perfectly on the water and the walls, as if we had crawled through the earth only to somehow stumble onto a slice of firmament. Akua leaned against wall, water lapping at the stone not far from her feet, and offered me a gentle smile.

She did not say anything, or need to.

I came to stand at her side, enjoying the coolness of the stone. There was no warmth from her, either, though we were almost close enough to touch. She was yet a shade, and a shadow had no warmth to share. We stood there for a long moment, silent and unmoving, as the stars and moon ghosted on stone and water. Eventually I felt her moving closer to me, and said nothing. My stomach tightened.

"Until tonight," Akua quietly said, "I was the only person in all of Creation to know of this place."

I did not ask what had happened to the boy. It was Praes. I knew well what had happened to the boy who had once wanted to be consort to a Sahelian. And I knew, too, what it meant that she had brought me here. Shared a wonder and a secret with me, asking for nothing. But, perhaps, hoping. We had toed the line closer and closer, as the years passed, but the line had always been there. Tonight she had not even touched me, and still somehow it felt as if it had been crossed. I turned enough to look at her but not to invite more. She'd always been gorgeous. I'd thought as much from the first time I'd glimpsed her in that tent.

Often, though, she made a spectacle of it. Magnificent dresses and jewelry, seductive smiles and teasing words. Right now, though, I found not a trace of it on her face. I could barely even make out what she wore, save that it was a dress, and there was nothing seductive about the look on her face. It was, I thought, longing and perhaps something like hunger. There was nothing veiled about it, and the nakedness of that realization had my stomach clench with desire and something else. I did not move, either closer or further away. A moment passed, heavy, and my arm tensed as she slowly began to lean closer – eyes on mine, asking. And I answered the question by turning away, looking down at that field of stars she had stared with me. I did not see her expression. Did not let myself see it, else I hesitate.

I must carry it out to the end, even if it stung. Especially if it stung.

"Even now?" Akua quietly asked, voice ailing.

"Even now," I got out.

"I had thought it would be different," she whispered. "There is... I chose you over my *family*, Catherine. My home. Everything I've loved since I was a girl, save for my father – and even his death I set aside, refusing vengeance on your own for it."

"I know," I said, wretchedly.

But her folly had been the death of Liesse. One hundred thousand lives, every single one of them in my care. *My care*. Even if the Gods Above and Below had demanded of me forgiveness of Akua's folly, it would have been the same answer. I was who I was, and in the end that was a creature of long prices.

"It's not something you can win," I murmured. "That's not how this works."

Because that was the last thing that needed to be stripped away from her so she could truly enter the crucible: the thought that if she was kind, if she was good, if she fought for the cause the two of us might have a future together. It tasted like ash in my

mouth to rip that out of the unspoken between us, but it must be done. The silence stretched out.

"There is no *end* to it, is there?" Akua finally said. "The shadow cast by that day. No sun that will chase it out."

I smiled mirthlessly.

"We all live in it still," I replied.

And always would. I still avoided looking at her, oddly ashamed, and so it was in utter surprise that I felt soft, cool lips press against the corner of my mouth.

"So we do," she said, moving away.

Her golden eyes shone. Could a shade cry? I did not know.

"I would like you to leave, please," Akua Sahelian said.

I didn't argue. All I could wonder was if this was the way Hanno had felt, back in the day, when he flipped his coin and it spun in the air. Before it had landed.

—

By morning she had not come back, as I had known she would not.

[*Droughtbringer*](#)

Go vote!

. . .

Or boost? It's different now, and I'm a bit confused. But do the thing!

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Stay safe, enjoy your chapter.

[*Liliet*](#)

Hey!!!

[*Droughtbringer*](#)

Hey!!!

David

Probably my favorite chapter of this new book. Wonderful job, and please please please publish this at some point. I'd fill my walls with the series if I could.

ruduen

Something like this isn't a surprise. Just an inevitable conclusion.

And yet, I still wonder if this is a betrayal in a way. And if it is... Who is the betrayer, and who is the betrayed?

[Liliet](#)

It's not a betrayal if you were never loyal, in much the way Cat can't be betrayed by idk the ratlings.

Akua knew the score, she just hoped.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's both. They had a very real closeness, becoming something more, and it will never be the same. Both of them just broke each others hearts. It was as nasty as it was because even if Cat knew it was going to end this way, it was equally real leading up to here. Whatever comes of them, it won't ever be quite like this again. And both of them really liked this. Which was the point. Cat gave Akua love so she'd be someone able to love, but also to make her understand how she was unlovable. Akua became somebody she could love, but must refuse to. If she'd just tried to stab her or whatever, this would have been easier for this. But her greatest enemy just showed beyond doubt that she wants to be the opposite, and so forced her to gut herself just as deeply, since it's the only way to truly let her have her story truly reach conclusion.

Because Akua truly understands now that there is no redemption for what she has done, at least in the eyes of the most important to her. She knows that she and Cat could be something glorious. She knows she could make her happy, and vice versa. And now she knows, firmly, none of that changes that it's never going to happen. That the one thing she's wanted in forever that is pure, for the right reasons, free of any evil or Evil tainting it, is just not not obtainable. Worse, she knows it's not about trust, Cat knows that she means it, that this isn't about suspicion, that there's nothing more she can do to make Cat understand because Cat does and it doesn't matter.

So now, she has to figure out if there's still any reasons she wants to be good at all, since one of her primary motivators is ash now. She'll at least entertain a few alternatives here: Get her body back probably, because the trap isn't something in the body, it's the OPTIONS. Then she can go for the Tower herself.

She could destroy things the woman who just devastated her cares about in revenge. At her darkest she could even make herself a rival all over again, now the story of the jilted lover maddened in pain and grief, which she knows would result in her final end but it'd be one in which she'd MATTER to Cat, in a hate that'd somewhat mirror love. And not a one of these options wouldn't be thrown away for the world with no shadow where Cat could say yes, but she might conclude they are all she has left. And that will kick Cat in the gut because she elevated her and has now sent her plummeting right back down.

Then again, she might decide that she does want to be this better person, no matter how much it hurts. And that'd actually hurt Cat all the more, because if Akua decides to come back in the end then she'll truly have left that other path, but it still can't matter.

This is Akua's ultimate pivot, and she's gone because this is a decision she has to make all alone in the end. But no matter what she chooses, when she comes back, any decision Akua has made will be one betrayal.

therealgridlock

We the reader all know what's going to happen, we just don't know how or when.

She's going to betray Cat, and when the world, and the story, need her most, she's gonna swing in at the last moment and save the day.

I don't know whether it'll be self sacrifice, or if it'll just be a selfless act to show how hard she's been working to actually be good, but I do know it will be *glorious* when it happens.

It might not even be in this *book* but I know she's going to come back, because nobody can actually experience character growth and then throw it all away without some bigger plan in motion.

It might be a darth Vader, but it'll still be cool.

Dow Gray

Personally, I'm wondering whether there's any world where Akua turns to Contrition, perhaps thinking they'd give her a way to atone? No doubt things would get ugly if so, but perhaps there are some narrative callback to when they first met, and the Lone Swordsman's story.

And I guess Contrition's deal would involve eventually accepting she could never be loved, rather than allowing for forgiveness, at the end.

Insanenoodlyguy

By it's very nature you don't go to contrition if you think you can atone.

Stephen Marsh

I saw it that way as well.

Though I keep wondering what will Cat's name be and will this affect that.

RoflCat

The sad part is...they couldn't have become this close without being who they were...

Without Akua's threats and catastrophes, Catherine would've... simply not really cared about her that much. The Callowan long price of turning Akua into 'human' and then denying her love at the end would never have been planned if Akua never started this path.

[Liliet](#)

This is why Catkua is best ship

Miles

"The price will be long and it will be paid thrice."

I think we're on #2 now?

SpeckofStardust

Cant betray if she's not working for her anymore folks you'll wrong now.

Anomandris

Can't she act as a tentative conduit to night, having worked the Goddesses' magic a lot?

agumentic

Nah, that was through her connection to Cat that was cut back at the end of Book 6.

Insanenoodlyguy

She'll be back in a flesh and blood body with magic. I think Akua is experiencing her ultimate life-defining pivot right now, but no matter which way she goes with that, I think she's going to get her body back when we find out what path she takes.

I'm fairly convinced she's going to be Dread Empress or Chancellor now.

Insanenoodlyguy

Amending this after seeing Tak's comment below, definitely Empress. The Girl who Climbed the Tower was about Akua all along.

therealgridlock

I suspect it'll be a Darth Vader, that she "betrays" Cat and the rest, leaves to go on a personal quest (remember, whenever the heroic party is having problems, just split up for a while, they'll be fixed when you next see each other) and becomes chancellor.

After that... It's just waiting around to betray an Empress for Cat, either Malicia or Sepulchral.

She might become Empress, that would make sense, dread empress repentant, or benevolent, or something, but the betrayal will ultimately be of her old life, her old ways of thinking, of her old moral code.

She's come to the realization that since nothing can make up for her actions, she has to take responsibility for them, and since she still gets something out of doing good (dopamine lol), she can do good without expecting anything in return. Get is the wrong word. For herself, not for others.

That's what her character arc has been. Redemption, with extra steps, and without the redemption.

Cayle

Warlock

[Mental Mouse](#)

Left at this altar... she might well seek apotheosis, becoming a lesser goddess in her own right.

SpaceDorf

Undead / Resurrected can't be Rulers under Praesi Law.

Same reason Cat can't be Dread Empress

Insanenoodlyguy

Later chapters clearly prove this is not an issue, at least for her.

[MatrixM](#)

What the fuck?? Why would you comment about later chapters here??

Insanenoodlyguy

Dude. several years later is a bit much to not expect spoilers if your going to necro comment Threads.

Insanenoodlyguy

Months^

[matrixm](#)

1

How about new readers who read the comments after the chapter? I did that. A lot.

2. I've held off resuming this story for months because I wanted to wait til it was done and my exams were over. And I get an email with this comment in it.

So...yeah. the fuck? Don't do that.

morroian

There are new readers like me who like reading the comments, and its mostly been safe because most people are respectful of that.

Konstantin von Karstein

Not if Sve noc doesn't want it.

[TeK](#)

Can't betray someone if you already did.

Tenthyr

And there is the softest betrayal.

Anomandris

Finally an itch scratched after so many years – Assassin.... And it would make a brilliant asset the way it worked. The whole point about people thinking you are dead is kinda tbe best assassination tool available.

Also, Redemption is a funny thing, isn't it? Even Forgiveness. It belongs in the pantheon of concepts so remarkably qualitative, they embody the name. It could be denied to a killer of one who has saved millions, or granted to someone the other way around.

It was always going to the short end of stick that Akua got. Even if Cat and hell, Vivienne and all the other woe end up being ok with Akua, you are always going to have Callowans calling for her...well, not head, but demise?!? Which would really hurt Vivienne trying to rule.

On a practical basis, does this diminish the Army's capabilities significantly? Not in the manner of intelligence, Scribe can fill in there. But Akua was the best Mage in the army would could work Night – Masego can't. Given that Night has often been Cat's ace, it is gonna wrangle a lot.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, Akua's not gettting denied it. She just has to walk the rest of the way on her own.

Lord Haart

Maybe. It's also possible that there really is no "redemption" for that kind of crime. Like losing a limb, it's gone forever, all you can do is make the best of what's left. Not redemption then, but perhaps... Acceptance.

[Liliet](#)

To me, redemption just means... change. To no longer be the person who would do that.

It doesn't mean "making up for it" – there is, indeed, no fixing it. It doesn't mean being forgiven. It just means becoming someone who would not do that again.

[Mental Mouse](#)

In that sense, she's already been redeemed. But her reparation would take a dozen lifetimes or more to achieve (a Long Price indeed!), and her rehabilitation... well, that may simply be impossible for the Doom of Liesse.

Maybe the Last Titan has some spare room in his cave...

[Liliet](#)

Yea, now she just has to figure out that it means she really doesnt want to stick with Praesi Classic even if Cat has romantically rejected her.

Cheet4h

> But Akua was the best Mage in the army would could work Night – Masego can't.

IIRC in one of the Arsenal chapters Cat explored this with Masego, and he's able to ****Wrest**** Night from her to work with it. Remember that Masego also used Night during Cat's showdown with Bard to hide his presence.

[sengachi](#)

I can't believe the ending blew out of my mind the incredible revelation that Scribe had indirectly been Assassin this whole time.

therealgridlock

I kinda called it, or suspected it, a long time ago, you can't see either of their faces.

When someone's faceless as a feature and not a bug, it's a big sign.

Rynjin

Considering it's been one of the most popular running theories since about the middle of book 2, it can't be THAT surprising. =P

beleester

It was a favorite theory – Assassin always acted at Scribe's command, and it seemed very fitting for the way the Calamities operated – but there was also some fairly convincing evidence against it. Scribe and Assassin were often in different places at the same time, and Amadeus describes Assassin's personality and backstory as if he's a separate person, even in his internal monologue.

I wonder if Inscribe requires Scribe to come up with a convincing backstory as part of the process – creating a "paper trail" for the person she's creating.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The fan theory was that Assassin was Scribe herself... as so often, we just didn't think weird enough!

Bad@games

Right? People keep talking about Ubua, but im more interested in Scribe and Assassin

Konstantin von Karstein

Akua can't work Night anymore, her connection to Cat was cut off by Cat at the end of last book.

Xinci

I mean in this case it seems more as a being measured against a long ruler of how much of a threat you are before you can be pulled into the fold. Redemption overall seems to be that sorta thing, a marker used by a person or society against those who have transgressed. The long price in of itself seems to be a very aggressive method of cost prohibitive aversion for future conflict for Callowans(a logical thing to come up given how often they dealt with foreign aggression). Cats mostly just made it clear, that as far as they are concerned there is nothing she can do to gain that level of trust(which is kind of a lie as this whole scheme of manipulation seems to have been to do that more or less).

[Liliet](#)

It's not about trust at this point, it's pure punitive justice.

[sengachi](#)

Not necessarily. Cat said consistently throughout this chapter that she didn't know if Akua would still be on their side after rejecting her, and for that matter she's still not sure exactly what Akua is doing now.

And that's kind of a problem. If this mass murderer of epic proportions is doing good things now because it earns her a place, friends, romance, and a position of trusted power ... is that really a person you can trust? Or love?

If you can trust someone like that to be good only so long as you're able to keep giving them those things (and say, never break up with them for personal reasons) ... that's not actually them being a good person who deserves those things.

Cat successfully taught Akua that being decent to others and cooperating with them leads to a happier and more fulfilling life than being the last one standing atop a mound of enemies' corpses. And Akua wanted that.

Doesn't mean (and this chapter's ending leaves this very much up in the air) she actually became a person who deserved it.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has trust issues the size of a mountain, and they usually appear in the shape of the following sequence:

1. Commit irreversibly to a course of action requiring absolute trust / leap of faith.
2. Start talking about how you really, really just don't know if it'll work out.

Prominent examples:

- giving Winter to the Sisters in Everdark;
- hiring Scribe on the logic that Black isn't an enemy either way;
- telling Akua the outline of the ransom plan in the previous two chapters.

Just because Catherine says she doesn't know what Akua will choose, doesn't mean she doesn't in practice trust that Akua will choose the right thing. Cat's just anxious like that.

[sengachi](#)

In this case I'd say the anxiety is warranted. Even if she was 99.9% sure Akua would continue to be good even if they had a messy breakup or something, that is way too high of a chance she's wrong when it comes to mass murder on this scale.

[Liliet](#)

Eh, Akua no longer has incentives for mass murder specifically. The stakes aren't quite THAT high.

Cicero

I always had this sneaky suspicion that Scribe was Assassin somehow, but I couldn't figure out how to make it fit...

Juff

Typo Thread:

I'd been a given > it'd been a given
was as once > was at once
from rank and file > from the rank and file
it was even more > it'd been even more
scheming it would be > scheming it was
small glimpsed > small glimpses
Marshal Nim survived (should this be "did not survive")
to us the > to use the (occurs twice)
I was destroyed > it was destroyed
a refine version > a refined version
I had kill > I had killed
sleeve dealing > sleeve when dealing
enthused as > enthused at

Askum > Aksum (occurs twice)
to her the > to her, the
opened the drink > opened and the drink
the ended > they ended
him I ways > him in ways
usually I instead > usually did, I instead
over a year (hasn't it been over two?)
Green Stretched > Green Stretches
your certain > you certain
I'd been very much > It'd been very much
still we into the cultivate parts > still well into the
cultivated parts
long princes > long prices

edrey

They say the third step is the cruelest,

Walk when the moon is at her clearest:

Love ends with the kiss of the knife,

Trust is the wager that takes your life

this is just great, i cant wait for the end of the song/story.
as side note, if Scribe is the assassine, she really is the
counterpart with Thief, woe- calamity, and black said assassin
learned from others-and had a graduation ceremony- then Eudokia
is one of the most OP characters i have read.

[TeK](#)

Oh shit, I never connected the dots, but is it about Aqua? Like

The first step is hardest, they said to her.

You will have to walk through fire.

It will burn away what you once were,

And always devour whole a liar

(Her defeat at Liesse, perhaps?)

The second is the longest, they said.

You will walk under the restless dead.

The hanged all crooning from the gallows

To join them and rest in the shadows.

(A reference about being a shade? And her entire redemption ark
up to this point, really)

They say the third step is the cruelest,

Walk when the moon is at her clearest:

Love ends with the kiss of the knife,

Trust is the wager that takes your life

(Basically this, yes)

The last is strangest, she said to them
The easiest and the most solemn
For when the tower is yours to claim
You will have forgotten why you came

(She wanted to claim the Tower when she was young, but when it was offered to her, she took it for different reasons?)

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm convinced more than ever that this is the case. We've repeatedly been told during this book that Amedeus is a bad fit for the tower, and doesn't really want the tower to boot. Akua wants it even less these days, but you know she'd be damn good at it. And so her long price is being given everything she'd ever thought she wanted once she was made to understand why it was so inadequate to her true desires.

Natalie

"and wasn't that just praes in a sentence? Everything you want, just not the way you wanted it"

Insanenoodlyguy

I knew that Scribe and Assain were linked! She was the actual 5th of the Calamities all along!

Vortex

Gosh, this story is so damn good sometimes. Akua made a lot of sacrifices for Catherine in the past few books, but for small slights, long prices.

Catherine is perfectly willing to snuff out something honest and true, something she really wants herself, something rare and precious, to let Akua feel the weight of her actions.

It's so damn Callowan of her.

nimelennar

Huh. I really didn't think the fan theory that Scribe was Assassin had any basis, but it turns out that's pretty much exactly the case.

[TeK](#)

That's the thing with fan theories: throw enough on the wall and something sticks.

Lord Haart

I didn't see any theories that Assassin was more of a Golem/construct, just ones that had Scribe being a split personality. So while this is a bit similar it still caught me off guard a little.

Fantastic writing this book. On par with some of the best published writing I've read.

Deworld

It always, since the very first prologue, seemed like Scribe is much closer to other Calamities than Assassin, and that she was the true fifth member. On the other hand, we got almost no info on Assassin. Unclear positions on both of them made it pretty obvious that they were connected somehow.

sadfan

I don't understand why Catherine's arc can't lead her to accept that 100k Callawan mooks were overrated and Akua is the best.

[TeK](#)

True, who would even care about an opinion of some mudfoot peasants, when you can get most gorgeous girl ever?

Shveiran

Few.

Which is, incidentally, why Catherine's armies are loyal to her.

It's not that she wins. It is that she gives a damn.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Is this sarcasm, or have you forgotten that Cat is, herself, a mudfoot peasant?

[Liliet](#)

Sounds like sarcasm to me.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

They weren't mooks in universe, they were people as legitimate and real as Catherine herself. Cat's whole deal is that she cares immensely about those whom more traditional Named of all factions are accustomed to writing off as collateral damage. She sacrifices others when she must, but sacrifices herself or parts thereof in defense of others whenever possible. The part of her that could love Akua is sacrificed here in defense of the memory of those innocents lost in the Doom of Liesse.

[308924810a](#)

Huh, Eudokia wasn't the sixth ranger in the group of five of the Calamities, she was a central member all along, and Assassin never existed/was actually one of Eudokia's Aspects.

mamm0nn

Yes, who could've thought that the faceless woman working from the shadows was in any way related to the many-faced man working from the shadows?

[vernal.ancient](#)

... now I want to see a character ask that in universe, completely sincerely, and then realize what they just said and facepalm

Isaac Martinez

Cat can't forgive Akua for the same reason that she can't forgive herself. This crucible is for both. Liesse was her charge, and she failed to protect it, and Akua was one of the reasons why it happened. Cat has made many mistakes that are haunting her, and there is no end to them.

And as Akua, as long as she lives the shadows will haunt them forever.

Lord Haart

Yes, well put. This is as much a crucible for Cat in some ways – while not ultimately responsible for Liesse II the way Akua is, she has still killed many for personal power (notably by letting Will go to start a pattern of three) and I'm sure that on some level she wants there to be hope for Akua to find a way back in her own because then maybe Cat can do the same. It's probably the Liesse Accords if at all, but who knows if those will actually become reality.

naturalnuke

Ominous music builds as Akua realizes the truth.

There is no Happy End for her.

RoflCat

For Them*

Catherine herself isn't expecting to find happily ever after at the end of this either.

P Jay

Typo thread

"I was who I was, and in the end that was a creature of long princes."

"Princes" should be "prices."

Awesome chapter EE! Can't wait to see where this goes

Shveiran

According to the Kingfisher Prince, Cat is a creature of long princes too.

Evgeny Permyakov

> Cat is a creature of long princes too.

pause

Could you please unpack this?

Shveiran

I could, but you will be better served by me pointing you toward Doctor Garrus' seminar regarding reach and flexibility.

Daniel E

This conversation has me in tears from laughing, thank you. Gods but Mass Effect was amazing. Well, the first 2 anyways. Then they tried to cram the entire universe into a trilogy, leaving the third as so much hot garbage. But I digress.

ninegardens

... At the risk of being completely dense, I did not see this coming. I just assumed that all the Catkua shipping was pure crackfic.

Like... it never really jived for me reading it. Like... there an excellent pair, but then again so is Hakram and Vivi (No, shippers, piss off, I am not going there).

It almost feels like...

Like Akua and Cat are close, and because Akua hasn't BEEN close before, she assumes it must be Romance? I dunno. Probably is just me being dense, but mostly all of that just felt weird.

Also... why is it that Cat seems to have prior knowledge of what's about to happen. I get that she has story instincts, but normally... normally we as the audience get to see a bit more behind the veil as to WHY she story intuits particular things. Here its a bit... "I'm going to be betrayed. Because Reasons"

Burlyraven

You're not alone. Akua has always felt like nothing more than a plot device with some actual personality, if that makes sense. I don't see her as a potential romantic option for Cat, or feel any real tension between her and Cat beyond Liesse. That's not to say I didn't like Akua in her own way, and she has had some character development, but the only times I've ever even thought about Cat and Akua ending up together are when the story directly states I'm supposed to think about it.

ninegardens

Out of interest, which character gives you the "Realist" vibes? Which character feels most like a real, fully fleshed out person to you? (lets assume we exclude Cat herself for these exercise).

Burlyraven

Cordelia, Kingfisher, and Hanno are the three I find myself most able to imagine existing when they aren't in Cat's field of view. Of those three, Cordelia is the one I feel most confident in saying earned that status because of how well developed she is, and not because of any bias on my part.

Hanno and Kingfisher are cool characters, and as close to true heroes as this story allows, so I may be filling in the blanks with them, but I'm almost indifferent to Cordelia on a personal level and she's still easy to imagine going about her day to day.

ninegardens

Personally I rate Cordelia, Malicia and Tariq.

Like... Malicia is a big bad villian thing... but her victories and failures are such HUMAN victories and failures.

Hanno I can see. Less convinced by Kingfisher- he's a treasure, don't get me wrong, but doesn't feel as real as Cordy or the others mentioned here do.

Shveiran

Out of curiosity, did you read the extra chapters with his background? That's what did it for me.

In the main story, he's nice but admittedly a bit of a side character.

But his backstory combined with the chapters about the war in the north in book 5 build such a compelling picture. I was simply stunned.

ninegardens

Oh yeah, I read Kingfisher's side chapters. They were fabulous.

For me, they made him feel... badass? Compelling? Charismatic for sure. But they don't make him feel like a PERSON to me, they make him feel like a "Hero". A fairytale character.

And there is nothing wrong with that. This is a story. Kingfisher is great. Just a different kind of great compared to the others.

[Brian Cong](#)

This may be an unpopular opinion and something I get criticized for, but I think most, if not all, of the characters in the guide are actually quite realistic, at least in terms of depth. With regards to fanaticism I'd say perhaps a little less so, and people aren't generally this dramatic IRL, but if you think critically about the question: how deep are people that you typically encounter in life? The nuance, development, and level of character that you see in the people in real life isn't so far from what you see in the Guide; people range from extremely complex and nuanced to very simplistic and straightforward, the whole gamut exists, with a great many people I've met being the latter, though plenty of the former exist as well. In that regard, while I'd say that, perhaps, on average, the characters in the Guide have less depth than the average person, that's more due to screen time and lack of ability to display that depth, rather than inherent lack of characterization, and not by a massive margin either.

[TeK](#)

It's not really about romance. I think. It's about acceptance. It's all really jumbled up. At part yes, Aqua is probably longing for that connection that usually come with romance, but what I think she really wants is forgiveness unconditional, like the one we may sometimes give to our loved ones. There is nothing sexual about it, nor romantical. It is, as you say, a desire for closeness, and closure.

And Catherine can't give it to her, because she needs Aqua to truly regret Liesse, and she can't do that, unless the consequences of it stay between Aqua and the one thing she desires the most. It's fitting, really. Aqua never truly shown remorse for what she did, so the crutch had to be used. I hope she takes the right lessons out.

ninegardens

In that case... it almost feels like Akua should have gone for a Hug, rather than a kiss.

I mean, whatever- I ain't the author, I don't know the internal states, all that jazz.

But like... the kind of connection you are describing of wanting unconditional forgiveness... wanting support and warmth... to me that's way more associated with a Hug, or crying on someone's shoulder, or... all those other things. That... that would have been a very different scene. Akua crying because she saw a real damn body that could have been hers and... Cat just refusing to provide support. Not saying better, just different.

This scene was... heavy romance. A secluded nook. lots of talk of past lovers. "It was, I thought, longing and perhaps something like hunger" – it was all sorts of romantic, and some sexual tension.

I can kind of believe the argument that Akua was confused chasing after romantic love, when she actually needed... probably something closer to parental love. Protector type love. I get that those often come together in same package, but here her actions are really leaning on the romantic half of that package and it feels... weird.

[Liliet](#)

Akua has been showing signs of a bad crush on Cat since Book 3's "you will never like me but you will learn to love me" yandere enslavement attempt.

Cat's emotions wrt Akua have been a rollercoaster since the start of book 5.

They DO have romantic tension (WoE if nothing else), the trick is that it's not the part that matters. Romance just happens to be the specific thing Akua wants that Cat believes she must deny her even though it hurts herself too.

argumentic

> Cat's emotions wrt Akua have been a rollercoaster since the start of book 5.

More like since Everdark, if not Keter. Though it grew as time went on.

[Liliet](#)

Tru

[Liliet](#)

I mean, WoE is that the romantic tension is real.

[TeK](#)

Where did he say that btw?

[Liliet](#)

> ! Chaos Kal-tron:
> Is Catkua canon?
> EE:
> depends on what you mean by Catkua
> but if you mean romantic tension sure. I didn't think that was subtext so much as text

AMA 2021

BIDZ180

It's not about Akua regretting Liesse. The whole point is that no matter how much Akua regrets it, no matter how much she wishes she didn't do it, and no matter how much good she does to atone for it, it's done. 100,000 people are dead at her hand, and **nothing** can undo that. Remorse doesn't enter the equation.

BlackPhoenix7777

I'm really not sure how to feel right now. I mean, I saw it coming long ago, but it still feels like a punch in the guts. Well written, Erra.

I've been shiping these two since Book 1 and still never though I'd see the day I'd feel bad for Akua and angry with Cat.

Insanenoodlyguy

If it makes you feel better, Cat was hurt nearly as much by this. She knows Akua meant it, and more importantly, that they really would be good for each other. She just took the best chance at true love and happiness she's ever had, and... wait for it... SET IT ON FIRE.

BlackPhoenix7777

True. At this point I'm almost as sick of Cat's tendency to hurt herself, often for no good reason, as of her stupid "small slights, long prices" philosophy.

Daniel E

In fairness here, wiping out a measurable percentage of the Kingdom's population is hardly a small sleight.

BlackPhoenix7777

That I agree with, my problem is the philosophy itself. Can you imagine Cat being fine with being on it's receiving end? When a certain heroine took her revenge against her rapist, Cat's reaction was to execute her because it was politically convenient.

My problem is A) the logical endpoint of "long prices" is ruin for everyone involved and B) the staggering amount of hypocrisy Cat exhibits in this issue (and others) that no one calls her out on. She's just as much a monster as most other villains if not more so, (excluding DK and WB) and probably has a lot more blood on her hands than Akua at this point. Her father probably trumps both of them.

Make no mistake, I love Cat, vicious little monster that she is, but that doesn't mean she gets a pass.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly, Cat doesn't actually stick with this philosophy for things she DOESN'T feel also personally guilty for.

Shveiran

Honestly, Cat doesn't actually stick with this philosophy at all.

This is not about masochism, and it isn't about punishment or long prices.

It's about believing that nothing you do can erase the past; which is NOT the same as saying there is no point in doing better for the future.

Combine that with the belief that the person you love most in the world should probably not be guilty of a genocide of your own people – which is something Catherine also believes – and you have why she is willing to care and be a friend to Akua but not her lover.

After all, this would not be a fling.

No one ever understood Akua the way Catherine does, and possibly only Hakram may claim to understand Cat better than Ubua.

But whatever ELSE Akua becomes, she will always ALSO be Doom of Liesse.

And Catherine cannot bear to love that.

[Liliet](#)

This tbh.

Catherine and Akua's relationship is very, very close and intimate already. They understand each other better than anyone else, see every part of each other and love each other with all the parts.

If Catherine were to accept this as a romantic relationship, they might as well get married at that point.

And so, there's a line that Catherine keeps drawing.

Mental Mouse

> When a certain heroine took her revenge against her rapist, Cat's reaction was to execute her because it was politically convenient.

Sigh. People keep getting this wrong. It wasn't that executing her was politically convenient, it was that *not* doing so would have been politically *ruinous*, destroying a great deal of what Cat had spent years to build up, and indeed compromising the greater war. And it didn't help that Red Axe was sticking to her suicide-mission Story, much less that Hanno had a bad episode of craniorectal inversion.

Longprices

I don't understand why people are angry or sad that Cat won't be with Akua, of course she's not gonna be with the person who destroyed one of her cities, murdered a good chunk of her population, caused a battle that lost even more Callowan lives, fucked her over at every single turn, and let's not forget about the time she wanted to torch an orphanage. This ship is really messed up on so many levels, it's literally "what if Adolf Hitler was a hot and charming girl".

agumentic

Because they are good together, and would be good for each other in that impossible timeline where Akua didn't kill an entire city in addition to all her other stuff. That's the whole tragedy of the situation, despite them both having feelings for each other and knowing their relationship could have been so good and sweet, they can never reach it, because Akua's actions killed it before she even could understand what exactly was she killing.

Lord Haart

Pretty sure the tragedy is the 100,000 dead, not some hurt feelings.

Don't confuse this being hard for Cat with this not being the plan since Liesse II, find a way to make Akua HURT for this in a way that doesn't just justify "iron sharpens iron" and all her other backwards philosophies.

agumentic

Well, you could have seen this coming from a mile away, even though I expected it to happen a bit later. That was always the point Catkua was going to reach. Now, let us see what the two will make of themselves after it.

Insanenoodlyguy

I don't know if it will be as an ally or bitter enemy, but I'm now convinced Akua will be crowned Dread empress, and The Girl who climbed the Tower was for her all along. .

[Liliet](#)

high five

[Burlyraven](#)

So knowledge on Assassin's true nature is awesome. That aspect of hers is basically a limited version of the Dead King's Revenants.

The fire made me a bit sad, though, with how many missing members there are now. At this rate, there may come a day when it's just Cat drinking alone, talking to ghosts.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Her and the Scorched Apostate, you mean. Since he's definitely coming back any day now. 😊

Linnus42

I am not sure I bet on Malicia not knowing how Assassin works considering she was far closer to Warlock then Scribe seems to think. Beyond that bittersweet like this is probably the best end you can get to Cat and Akua it was never going to actually work a lot of reasons. I do think there is a good chance that Akua ends up as Dream Empress actually. The number of viable options to take a shot at the role aint high, I really don't think Black wants the job anymore personally. Nor do I think he is the best to play with Nobles and not burn it down to a mess. Cat also doesnt really seem to want the job. So Akua is not really a bad option in some ways assuming the redemption arc is legit. Selling it to the gen populace is an issue but its not a saviour plot so I do like that.

Brax3n

I think it's actually a good bet Malicia doesn't know the truth about Assassin. Scribe has never trusted Malicia and Aspects are one thing that all Named know to keep close to their chest, even with allies. I think it would be very in character for Wekesa to have chided Scribe for being so secretive among friends, but keeping Malicia in the dark anyway because its poor form to share a secret like that.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, same.

Crash

I'm sure she didn't. Post-Bard and Mom!Black Knight, there's enough to feasibly justify a jump of logic from wraith to Name-controlled.

Is it a large stretch? Yeah. But then again, it's Malicia so who the fuck knows what a stretch even is.

Crash

Whelp, autocorrect just turned Nim into Mom. Love typing stuff on mobile

[Liliet](#)

This isn't the end 😊

Sintonir

Huh, so I was right: Scribe is the Assassin. Actually around the same way I was thinking of: I was sure it was some Aspect which created her body doubles, and then she somehow changed them to look less like her.

[Sugar Roll](#)

This is the betrayal? I was expecting something more...bloody. Someone getting stabbed in the back or at least some dead bodies along the way. It's much tamer than what I thought would happen. I can't tell if it's genuine or an act on Akua's part. I'm skeptical but I'm looking forward to what happens next.

ArkhoneIX

Sometimes that things that truly hurt the most, are the ones that physically hurt us the least. I freely admit that I thought the betrayal would also be bloody, because this is in many ways a war story, but I love how the biggest betrayal here

is the personal one. This will definitely be a catalyst for something, though for what we'll have to wait and see

[308924810a](#)

Also the romance scene with Catherine and Akua was... interesting.

[308924810a](#)

I still think Catherine's plan with Akua is going to be ruined by Catherine having too much trust in Black.

[Liliet](#)

From my observations of this story so far, it's pretty hard to have too much trust in Black. Unless you mean trust in his judgement and ability to make good plans.

mamm0nn

You fool! You didn't burn the camp side with blackfire thoroughly enough! And now I, Praesi mage supreme, have captured an echo of your power of friendship, and weaponised it to use against you! MHU-HAHAHAHAHA!

Frivolous

This is very nice. Catherine gave Akua a tremendous gift: Absolute freedom to choose who to be, what to do.

The crucible here is the existential dilemma: After the failure of all your former goals and the necessary rejection from your former love object, then given absolute freedom, what do you do?

Akua can go Good. Akua can go Evil. Akua can just do nothing and laze around if she wants.

Personally I believe Akua will choose to become Good. She'll be hated and reviled by most heroes and most villains, but she's gonna be Good anyway.

This is all very Immanuel Kant, very long dark night of the soul, wrapped in a nearly transparent sexy shimmering unrequited lesbian love affair, haha.

It's very nice to learn Eudokia's aspect of Inscribe, and the true nature of Assassin.

One question, though: How did Ranger learn about Assassin? Can she penetrate Eudokia's perception filter?

Braxen

Ranger definitely fought one of the Assassin corpses. A Named solely dedicated to killing others? She would see that as both a challenge to her Name and as worthy to hunt.

Shveiran

What do you mean, how did Ranger learn about Assassin?

She was in the Calamities for decades, of course she bloody knows. Any Named working that long with a group and fighting through thick and thin would learn the others' aspects by exposure to them if not being outright told.

We are talking about the Villains who first weaponized the power of friendship. Of course Ranger knows!

Evgeny Permyakov

> Akua can just do nothing and laze around if she wants.

She really can't. It's not in her nature. And she can't really go Good (because she doesn't really believe in it) or Evil (because she was shown that it isn't a way). If it was a story about Akua, I'd say it is a good place for a soul search ark. But since its end is unlikely to end with either Above or Below, it would be unlikely to ever truly end.

[Liliet](#)

Good doesn't really need belief. I mean, actual heroic formal Above allegiance does, but *doing Good* doesn't. You just have to care about other people / find enjoyment in helping others / dislike others' suffering.

And I don't think Akua doesn't have it in her 😊

Shveiran

To be fair, neither does she have it in her.

It's just, well, she's like Indrani: they can do good, but it's mostly doing good to someone they know or care about and not actively doing bad. Which, you know, it's what most people do.ù

It's not wicked nor anything, but it's not actively doing good.

It's not caring about people IN GENERAL, it's not spending time and effort to try and improve the lives of others because someone ought to and not because you know them personally.

There is a huge, huge difference between being able of genuine affection for someone, to the point where you are

willing to make sacrifices for them, and feeling that helping others is the point of your life.

Liliet

Yeah, the thing is, Akua spent her original lifetime doing her duty to the Sahelians. The whole "devoting herself to a personal relationship" thing is what's new. Doing What's Right is very much old hat to her, it just used to be Sahelian!right instead of everyone else!right.

She is not even remotely like Indrani in this.

Evgeny Permyakov

>Yeah, the thing is, Akua spent her original lifetime doing her duty to the Sahelians.

Nope. Akua spent her first timeline pursuing her personal ambitions, it just so happened that her ambitions aligned with ambitions of Sahelians as a whole, this chapter clearly shows how it works. And a lot, if not all time she spent with Cat she also pursued her personal ambitions. Akua is a very convincing liar, so everything she shows to Cat should be taken with a huge grain of salt.

Cat defeating Akua ended Akua's ambitions. She *could* go into afterlife quietly after that, because even in defeat she achieved something, or at least it appeared so at the moment. But she was unable to do so and had seen how her greatest achievement were used as a brick in building Liesse Accords, something that is very much against the school of Evil Akua played for. This practically invalidated her 'victory' in her eyes. So she absolutely had to find a different way to self-validate. At the time, Cat played arguably good guys as a defender of Callow, so Akua decided to try this particular brand of ambitions. But it didn't penetrate and was a skin-deep game, and it was shown at least a few times.

At the moment, Akua has no avenues to self-validate by leaving a lasting mark. 'Heroes' won't take her, because, well, Doom of Liesse. 'Villains' are not allowed long-term victories. But going down utterly defeated is clearly against her ambition to leave a mark. And she won't go for pure altruism because, well, she is a very self-centered person, because this is what her culture is about and first half of her life was about. This part of her psyche cannot be undone.

Add in that Akua probably has a thing for Cat purely because of sheer diffusion over a few years of adventuring together, but, well, Doom of Liesse salted the ground here. This works as further deterrent for the villainous route.

Given all that, sure, Akua isn't like Indrany. Indrany never had all that much ambitions to begin with, she simply is what she is. Indrany is content with her life. Akua... very much isn't. Akua, at the moment, is a double failure without visible ways to self-validate and it weights on her. But doing 'what is right' is very much not Akua's thing.

[Liliet](#)

> Nope. Akua spent her first timeline pursuing her personal ambitions, it just so happened that her ambitions aligned with ambitions of Sahelians as a whole, this chapter clearly shows how it works.

Here's the thing.

> "Do you ever get tired, Lord Fasili?" Akua asked suddenly.

>

> The man blinked.

>

> "Of?"

>

> "This," she said, tone whimsical. "Of what we are. Of what we do."

> In the depths of the city of Liesse, beyond layers upon layers of wards and traps, there was a room. For more than a year it had been slowly crafted to perfection, and for years before that had Akua Sahelian spent days and nights refining its design. Removing impurities and inefficiencies, balancing ease of use and breadth of effect so that only a single soul in all of Creation could use it as it was meant to be used. Should she live for a hundred thousand years she would never make anything half so great, for it was the culmination of everything that she was. All that she loved and hated, all that had made and fought her. There had been a child, once, who looked upon pyramids of mud and blood and felt awe. At the skill, at the scope, at the power that still dwelled within – and though Tasia Sahelian had toiled greatly to make a hollow husk of that girl, a mere receptacle for her ambitions, that spark of wonder had never been snuffed out.

> "I do not hate them," Diabolist said. "Nor the Empress. For all their flaws, they sought to make our people rise. I am not Mother, Papa – I do not despise what they are. It is a mistake made in good faith, and killing them was never the point of this. I am surpassing them. If that must involve taking their lives, then so be it."

>

> And how long had she dreamed of this, of escaping the shackles? The Carrion Lord had been right, in part. They could not win the war by repeating the same defeat with a hundred different fresh faces. But the pair that ruled Praes had abandoned everything that the peoples of the Wasteland were to avoid another disgrace, and that was a betrayal greater than mere failure. They could win and still be Praesi, Akua knew. Go to your grave gladly, Black Knight, having learned the truth of that – you were, for all your weaknesses, a patriot. She would not deny the fearsome depth of that loyalty, however twisted it was.

> Diabolist stood before the rune-inscribed walls and laid a single finger on them. They lit up like a starry sky, reaching for a hundred different arrays spread across houses and bastions and pits. The Carrion Lord had spoken for the ruling order, for the woman who held the Tower. She would speak, then, for the Wasteland. For the Empire that was and would be, for the greatness that was not yet forgot. Akua Sahelia stood proud, for there was more to her than mere ambition.

I still cannot find the quote where Akua talked to Cat about the separation between the woman and the queen, about how she was brought up to treat the Heiress of Wolof and Akua Sahelian the person as two separate people.

But that's the trick.

Akua never wanted to rule. Nothing in her dreams is about what happens after she wins. Her imagination goes "I make the COOLEST WONDER EVER, then Praes returns to its former glory, then IDK don't care".

Last time Akua talked to Catherine about ambition, she was pushing the idea that "ambition" is something all villains have and it is a desire for excellence, as a broad enough concept it encompasses poor Aspasia with her "ambition for excellence at survival in difficult times". Which is a really fucking long reach, if you ask me.

Akua was just... never power hungry, not in the "power over other people" way. She just wanted to drive the BIGGEST monster truck.

And she also HAD A DUTY TO do that while striving for the Tower.

Evgeny Permyakov

... I think, this post is meant to be a counter-point, but as far as I can see, most of it just expands my point. Are you sure you posted what you meant to post? I mean, aside from possible misunderstanding what 'ambition' means (ambition has nothing to do with desire for power per se) and the last claim that is, in my understanding, baseless.

[Liliet](#)

Ughhh I cannot find one of the most important quotes there and I'm not really up for combing through the text. I'm going to check if I have a reddit writeup for this.

Oh, I did write something. Here: https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/i6ggp0/akua_is_a_perfectionist_not_ambitious/

This post was about a slightly tangential point to the one I'm making here, but the quotes that form the basis of my understanding of Akua's personality are there.

Then there are the subtle touches: the black swan form, the offer to be the sacrifice at Hainaut, Catherine wondering back in Book 5 which category of commander Akua is between those who accept losses as fact and those who get personally hurt by them, the guard she got Cat to spare, the sheer ease she has understanding, predicting and following Cat's motivations (if anything, she's tended to underestimate Cat's ruthlessness, back when they were rivals)

Evgeny Permyakov

... You begin from arbitrary redefinition of the word and then begin telling that this is not what Akua is. That is a bad style. Also, I fail to see how your 'point' is opposed to mine. It doesn't matter what Akua's ambitions are at this point, what matters is that they were shattered twice, with two major approaches not valid anymore.

I do not see a point in continuing. I see that you are vaguely offended by my understanding of the situation, but I don't see why, and honestly don't care.

[Liliet](#)

Welp, have a good day then.

devildragon777

...To try and put this in another way, I think Liliet's point here is that Akua wasn't following her ambitions this entire time, and maybe probably doesn't really get how to be ambitious at all?

Like, Akua's prideful of the Wasteland, she believes her culture has value and cares about her homeland a lot, but she doesn't and hasn't really ever wanted to be a big bad Villain or rule over it or anything of that nature at all. Tasia Sahelian wanted those things out of her, and so Akua strove for it in the way she knew how: trying to be the best at it.

...but she honestly didn't care about it.

My own interpretation is that that's part of why she starts following Cat after Second Liesse; Akua has just been trained to leave the whole long-term goals and ambitions to other people, and just do what she is needed to do with excellence. She follows Cat and adopts her plans and dreams and does her utmost to bring them to fruition because... she doesn't actually have anything else to strive for. There wasn't something that Akua really actually wanted to do or be or accomplish.

And that's the tragedy of Akua Sahelian as a character: she never really wanted any of what she had accomplished. And despite doing her best at the choices and goals that were put in front of her, she never actually got what she wanted, and she in fact lost her chance at it: Acceptance for herself, the kind of warmth that comes with someone really understanding and just...caring about her as a person. And the one person who actually offers that in a meaningful way has a hundred thousand graves in the way of being able to give that to her.

Tl:dr Akua was just a girl who wanted friends, her peers to look upon her with pride, and to

accomplish whatever she did well. She wasn't some grand schemer or someone with strong ambitions, she just someone who got used and raised by a family of those types, and it's cost her basically everything she's wanted.

Liliet

Basically this, yes.

Akua DID learn to be a masterful schemer (even though it'd never been her personality), and she did weave a couple of things she wanted into what was expected of her: freeing herself and her father from under her mother's thumb, making a really cool magical artefact.

Those were things she really wanted, and for all of a month or so she even had them, and then they got ruined by the rest of the aspects of her plan.

Akua didn't really know how to want things for herself – not until Catherine taught her the beginnings of it.

Evgeny Permyakov

It seems you agree with this

>I think Liliet's point here is that Akua wasn't following her ambitions this entire time, and maybe probably doesn't really get how to be ambitious at all?

This is profoundly untrue. We get a direct look into Akua's mind in "Villainous Interlude: Crescendo" and some more at "Interlude: Kaleidoscope VI". I can't remember if we get other direct looks, feel free to point me. There is also a scene where Cat interrogates Akua under magical bindings, which mostly aligns with looks above, but since it is words and not a direct view, it's still a suspect, for Akua is a very consummate and convincing liar.

Point is, those direct looks weight a lot more, and "Villainous Interlude: Crescendo" gives a very specific view of Akua as aiming for Triumph and achieving it in Liesse, at least from her PoV. As far as I read from those views, I see a woman who is very self-centered and mostly self-sufficient. She associates herself with the school of classic villainy that is Praesy culture, but this is

exactly how far anything resembling 'duty' goes. She also is a mastermind and plays long games, aiming for some specific goal.

Whatever you dig up from her words, should be taken in the framework established in those two direct looks we had.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, there's a reason half my Akua analysis quotes are from Crescendo and Chiaroscuro. We just draw really different conclusions from them.

Shveiran

Akua will not become Catherine's enemy. If she does seize the Tower, she'll do so as an ally and to change the Dread Empire into something that doesn't create more Akuas, not as some weird, spite-driven payback. Anything less would be so deeply unsatisfying after books spent building this redemption arc.

This is my hill.
Come forth if you wish, but I'm prepared to die on it.

Evgeny Permyakov

Cat narrated... I think, 2 chapters before, that she expects Akua to betray her a few weeks later. This is an interesting foreshadowing.

agumentic

She narrated that Akua will betray her before the moon's turn, which was just now. That was the expected betrayal.

Abrakadabra

Jesus said to Judas too that you will betray me... And it happened. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Cat did get momentarily worried at seeing Akua's new body that Bard wanting her to see it might mean she's wrong about Akua.

meaning there's something in her expectations for her to be wrong about :3

Lord Haart

I think it's somewhat likely but with the twist that while Akua will act as an ally in action, she will need to continue

playing the role of a Villain in at least some ways. I imagine someone with the intrigue of Malicia but bent to practical good instead of evil – and keeping up an image of just being an incompetent, harmless ruler that is no threat. By making Praes so vulnerable, Callow then feels more comfortable trading food to Praes and Praes flourishes from within, at the grass roots level, while gradually replacing expansionism with diplomacy and neighborliness. This is what Akua knows is needed for Praes but the charade, while satisfying in some ways, is also uniquely isolating and she is never truly happy again.

Or, I'm wrong and Dread Emperor (and Sentient Tiger) Irritant the Traitorous reemerges from one of the hells after being sick of masquerading as Triumphant and decide to settle down for a stint as Dread Emperor Benevolent the Bootmaker.

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Evgeny Permyakov

Curios. On one hand, it is a clear end to the "Akua Tries Redemption" meta-ark. On another... I'm very certain that the experience taught her something, so she is unlikely to move to her old way. On yet another hand... Akua didn't reach the spiritual peace needed to go quietly to the afterlife.

... I think, Akua at this point could make a fine material for a "Wandering Jew" type Named, if shades can even be Named. Certainly, I would be disappointed if her story ended here. This is clearly a crisis point, where she should achieve some kind of revelation, but not a good point to end it.

Reader in the Night

This entire arc reeks of Contrition. I'm betting next time she shows up, Akua'll be carrying Willy's angel sword.

Evgeny Permyakov

That would be awfully out-of-character for Akua, imho. Contrition imply morals, Akua as far as she might have a thing for Cat still reads to me as completely amoral.

[Liliet](#)

Akua has always been a morals person, her morals were just completely fucked up. She was a "getting attached to your powerbase is a sin" morals person.

Lord Haart

I don't think morals are what drove her though, just what she warped into a form to justify whatever her actions were at the time. Her world view (whether ambitions or principles) are shattered now and so she has no framework left to run in but the one she invents herself.

BTW, I still don't know that I fully buy that she even had feelings for Cat the woman vs Cat the symbol*. Akua's hunger is indeed to leave an indelible mark on the world, but having done that through both evil and God, she had seen that hunger cannot be quenched so simply. Her defining moment, and Cat's too, will ironically be that in the new Age it's not pivots that define you – is who you choose to be every single day, every single moment. By the time the hammer has fallen, we were already forged (to paraphrase an excellent recent epigraph).

*Akua makes a big deal about having 'betrayed' her family to Cat, but we know from her PoV she really cares not a whit for the family or even really the name – it was only a tool to get her where she got. Her *father's* family she might care for, but probably not her mother's. I think it's more than likely this was a lie, if somewhat subconscious.

Lord Haart

Oh and new theory – as Black prepares to finally claim or destroy the Tower, Akua comes back at that moment and kills him for murdering her father, the only person who has ever lived her without condition.

Or did she previously make peace with Black? I don't recall so.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure Akua does genuinely care for her family in abstract, the way Catherine described it here. For her family's... cause. She just wants to change that cause – or at least she's done and said things that suggest she does.

Or did. I take it she's put that quest on pause for now~

[Liliet](#)

"Curios. On one hand, it is a clear end to the "Akua Tries Redemption" meta-ark."

No, it's the start of the final leg of it.

zenanii

Cat said this was the final crucible. But you're not really supposed to stay in the crucible, you're supposed to endure it, and then emerge, either strengthened or broken by the experience.

So I'm reading this as Akua's final challenge before she can actually be forgiven. After all, there is no point in punishment just for the sake of punishment, and if there is one thing Black has drilled into Cat it's his brutal sense of pragmatism.

ninegardens

There is no Forgiveness. Cat doesn't have the AUTHORITY to grant that. She doesn't have the power. That's the point.

The "emerging strengthened" isn't the "And now I get forgiveness" it's the "And now I accept who I am, and what I've done, and move on... WITHOUT forgiveness".

Some times you break something bad enough that it can never be fixed. That's what happened here. Akua can leave if she wants. She can become a different person, live a different life, earn new friends. But THESE friends will never be truly open to her, because of what SHE did.

Shveiran

I agree on most of it, but not the conclusion.

These ARE her friends now. Catherine has genuine affection for her, there is nothing fake about it.

It's simply that there is no erasing the past, even if you change the future.

There will always be a fly in the ointment; that doesn't mean that there is no effect to changing the swamp water into an ointment in the first place... it just means you are adding good, not erasing the bad, and you need to be aware of that.

[Liliet](#)

Akua can come back to be Cat's companion again. She'll just never be Cat's lover. And that's okay.

ninegardens

Oh yeah, I never said they weren't her friends. I never said they were fake.

I just said that they will never be FULLY available to her - as you say, a fly in the ointment.

Earl of Purple

I, too, wish to know how far Indrani got on her rescue mission. And I wonder if they killed or broke anything important.

Cat discussing Amadeus with her ducklings was good, too. I really want Arthur to meet him, ideally without knowing who he was at the beginning.

[Liliet](#)

Has anyone else noticed that Alexis was there with her?

Lord Haart

Yes. Also the fact that it was a band of four, not five - possibly not PLANNED to succeed, just threaten to, which is rather perfect really.

I hope we see more to Alexis and Indrani. The Alexis relationship is in some ways the best outsider look we have of her since Cat and Masego are quite biased. But Indrani is a bully and doesn't take accountability for her actions and Alexis (and Cocky too actually) expose this. I do wonder if changing that trait will make Indrani, or will break her name since being burdened by unacknowledged guilt is either what's driving Horizon or what might break it.

Indrani also has the least plot armor (arguably Hakram has more outright plot threats though) of the (non-Cat) woe so I fear that next time a heroic stand comes up, she might take the fall. Possibly related to revenge on Lysander too.

[Liliet](#)

I think Indrani is not DRIVEN by unacknowledged guilt. It's... also there, IN ADDITION to what's driving her, a stone in her boot.

And I think she's acknowledged it plenty. Even if afterwards she had flashes of return to the same patterns when interacting with these people, doesn't mean she hadn't already been feeling guilty for how she'd treated them before, and hadn't already admitted it to herself.

We do learn about the bullying from her explaining to Cat about how much Refuge sucks, after all.

Liliet

Indrani has already taken revenge for Lysander (during the Hainaut sequence, on the specific Revenant that killed him, when Concocter had helped her with acid eating through armor joints) and she has already made a dramatic heroic last stand offer (in chapter 9, right before Cat knocked her out).

You're not wrong about her character arc beats, they're just not... having the consequences to worry about, so far.

aurikdomi

Hot Damn. Assassin, Akua, the moving troops, finally a confirmation on Black being Cat's intended emperor, and even the little things like Arthur and Saban learning about Black.

Xinci

Ah so this kind of confirms its the bindings are key then for things like sapience/choice. The bard can easily be given a new body and name as all that is needed is a inscription system and material components. It being two fold the materials and inscribed information explains further why a domain can differ like it does in a pig than a tapir. Also may explain why they made Creation at all with so many inset rules(especially if the Gods are Creation). What better base materials than themselves?

Comes back to the question of if something is of Creation or really any dimension what seperates it from anything else? The rules inset in it that bind it along with the configuration of its make up do seem to be rather logical answers. Fae seem to be the ur example, they are only differentiated from inert matter by stories and in of themselves these stories are bindings. Its just inscribed information that is preserved across cycles so that the Fae retain themselves(kind of like information theory on what actually makes up a organism). We still don't quite know what happens to Arcadia materially as it shifts from season to season though in the dream Cat had it did seem tl reconfigure itself as well. Winter cat is also a good example, she remained the same individual as the information inscribed was the same, but she was more static til she basically got Winter ripped out and reconstructed by Sve.

Lord Haart

Interesting points. Not sure it will be plot relevant in the end but I do think I mostly buy this as fast as Guideverse metaphysics go. But what are Demons then, and Angel's, in

relation to the upper G Gods if the Gods are just Spinoza creation?

Mental Mouse

WOG is that it's devils who are the opposite numbers to angels, either way they may well represent the direct investments of the Gods Above and Below. Demons are possibly leftovers from Creation, either the stuff the Gods didn't want to work into their main Creation, or the original inhabitants of the stretch of underlying reality that the Gods paved over and rebuilt.

beleester

It feels like Cat's reasoning for turning away from Akua is less because of her personal feelings, and more because "the story has to be this way." Because she believes that the only way Akua's redemption arc will properly play out is if she's never forgiven for Liesse.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. On the one hand, not forgiving the murder of hundreds of thousands is an eminently reasonable thing to do. But on the other hand, betting on "the story is on my side" is always a dangerous bet, and it makes Akua's "inevitable betrayal" a self-fulfilling prophecy. The first time she's shown genuine emotion in decades and you tell her it means nothing – what did you think was going to happen?

schree

I read it, not as Cat doing things because The Story Said So [™], but because Cat genuinely feels that the murder of an entire city of her countrymen is an unforgivable act, and she can't allow her own love for Akua without feeling like she's betraying those who died – those who Cat failed to protect.

The "inevitable betrayal" was because Cat loves Akua, and knows Akua loved her... and so knew a moment like this had to come someday. They both know they love each other, and Akua had just hoped that would be enough to overtake her own sin.

TeK

What? She turned Aqua doe because she planned to do this from the Liesse. It is the revenge she crafted coming to a climax. How do you punish someone who is so unrepentant, she considers his sins a virtue? The purpose of punishment is to make someone regret their actions, how do you make someone like that regret? Why, you make them desperately desire one thing they can not achieve because of their crimes. A knife was already in the wound, this was just a twist.

Liliet

Cat WANTED Akua's betrayal because betrayal at this point is the only way the redemption arc can play out to the end.

Lord Haart

I think this is one spot where Cat knows that if she **expects** a redemption arc, she'll get something else. I don't think this series would go straight along the lines of such a common, obvious trope. There will be a twist in there – E.g. Akua comes back good and slays Black for the deaths and war crimes in his name (Black arguably killed more innocents than Akua with his madhat rampage in Procer and never truly paid for it). Or Akua comes back Evil, kills Cat and takes over the Llesse Accords in some way that still preserves the net value of them (less collateral damage and more rights for average people). I don't know how exactly, I just think this story deserves better (more nuance) than "mass murdered comes in to save the day after thinking really hard about why that's worth doing". That would cheapen these chapters in my mind, which would be a shame as they are phenomenal.

Hopefully this is just the start of a long, long price. I think it works be fitting for it to last as long as the years and futures they lost. And I do hope good comes of it, but not for Akua's sake, entertaining as she is to read.

DustHurricane

I don't really care about tower or whatever right now. My heart is fucking shattered.

I really, really like Cat and Akua... I'm gonna be hoping with everything that I physically am that eventually, they find a way to work this out and be together. Cause goddamn it, but I need that in my life...

hoser2

The tower has been torn down before. And rebuilt. I think Amadeus wants to destroy the Tower past rebuilding along with the Name "Dread Emperor/Empress".

Cat would be happy with Amadeus as Dread Emperor but I think we are seeing broad hints about the problems with that plan.

Shveiran

I think that's his plan too... but I'm not quite sure how he could possibly do that.

hoser2

Yeah. For me, that's a big part of the anticipation. It seems difficult and interesting. EE could solve it either way or somewhere in the middle.

To have a real peaceful structure for Callow, it seems like Praes has to change. The Tower and Dread Emperor/Empress setup seems like it will make that difficult.

It seems like Amadeus is as skilled as anybody at destroying Names, so if there's a way, he might find it. If any of the nonhuman races gains enough power, the empire starts to creak, methinks. If the Empire ceases to exist, can there be a Tower?

beleester

Amadeus's original plan was not to destroy the Tower, but to make it powerful and secure enough that it could be a stable regime without resorting to mad schemes of conquest. The three prongs to this plan were conquering Callow to secure their grain supply, destroying the power of the High Lords to remove the risk of rebellion, and rebuilding the Legions to create a professional force that doesn't rely on Named or sorcery to function.

I think that plan is still workable – if the Tower is held by a non-evil or Reasonable Evil person, and if Praes is seen helping to defeat the Dead King so that trading grain with them doesn't look like giving aid to the enemy, then they can make a permanent peace with Callow and settle into a new, non-crazy equilibrium. The question is, who do you trust to sit in the Tower and not go crazy for long enough that you can pull it off?

hoser2

The original plan may be workable, but the end of the Epilogue of the previous book suggests that it's no longer Amadeus's plan:

"He looked east, where in the distance waited the gargantuan shape of the Tower jutting out from Ater, and he raised his half-empty bottle of wine in a toast. When was he to settle his accounts, if not the end times?

If the song refused to leave him, then he would silence it."

sadfan

How is Cat's body count qualitatively different from Akua's in a feudal society with conscription?

hoser2

Gotta think there's a difference between fighting to defend one's own country while making peace and zombifying a city to make guards for a Demonic breach.

Leaving the breach aside (although it's probably the greater offense), if Akua had zombified Wolof, I doubt we would be hearing much "Ever worthy, Sahelion"

[Liliet](#)

I'm going to actually take this question seriously.

1. Cat also hates conscription as an idea and finds it unethical and didn't do it until she had to – in a way that the people subject to conscription also recognized as a valid reason for it, culturally. Contrast this with Akua's, uh... not that.

2. People who get conscripted don't all die. Risk of death and guaranteed death aren't the same, ethically. People are fully free to choose the former for themselves – Cat's risking her own life, too, alongside theirs, that's why she's liked by her army.

3. The loss of culture. Akua destroyed an entire city with all of its inhabitants and inhabitants of its surroundings, as she'd been taking it for refugees too. The only Liessen left are those who happened to not even be in the region at the time. Liessen is one of Callow's major cultural centers, and now none of it is left. Conscription doesn't do that even if it's deliberately targeted against one group (which Catherine never did) bc it tends to leave enough people to at least raise the kids.

agumentic

Cat would not be in a particularly forgiving mood should she meet herself, either.

unLucker

"There'd been next to no skirmishing in my absence, as it turned out, and Juniper believed what few blows had been traded to have been accidental. Patrols running into each other by happenstance, nothing intentional."

Chekov's gun? Maybe alongside those skirmishers was Malicia's body and implanted some commands.

John

I think they've already got precautions in place against low-level soldiers being compromised in various ways.

Cap'n Smurfy

I love how Scribe made Assassin by accident. I really get the impression the Calamities half stumbled and fumbled their way into Power before achieving competence.

ninegardens

I love the fact that like... Scribe and Assassin both always seemed like "half characters". You hear about them, but neither of them is "all there", in the way Sabah or Wekesa was.

With this revelation however, yeah, "Scribe+Assassin" DOES feel like an "Entire character". It's really cool. And seeing Assassins' jackass sense of humour and "ironic" murders and such tells us a lot about Scribe I suspect.

Though.... I still don't know what the deal is with Black having a contract for Assassin to kill him if he ever went crazy. That was just never going to work.

jamesc9

> Assassins' jackass sense of humour and "ironic" murders

I think it helps that the Assassin bodies are somewhat disposable.

sadfan

I simply couldn't believe he'd order her to use something like the Assassin on anyone dear to me.

Mistake.

Shveiran

Why? The only someone that Cat loves and Amadeus might want to murder is Akua. And I'm not sure the kind of killing she'd need is the kind Assassin can dish out.

[Liliet](#)

Not because he wouldn't hurt anyone Cat likes, but because the specific people Cat likes are those Amadeus has no reason to hurt.

Except Akua, but my understanding is that Cat doesn't count her for this.

Lord Haart

There is the off chance he hurts one of them to work a story though. Malicia was ruled out of having killed Juniper's

mother in a recent PoV so it's just Sacker or Black left IIRC. Tempting to blame Sacker but Black could have done it knowing it'd look like Malicia in order to help bind Juniper to Cat. Hard to know what a machine like Black might consider reasonable when we've only seen part of the machine.

Liliet

It's all but confirmed to be the Matrons. They benefited from it on every level.

Frivolous

Since we're on the topic of the bodies of Named, I wonder what happened to the body of the Intercessor following her death in Interlude: Knock Them Down.

I figure that Catherine couldn't steal aspects from the corpse because the Intercessor woke up in a new body shortly after, but surely the corpse itself could be useful to someone. For instance, the Harrowed Witch might have used her necromancy on it and forced it to answer questions.

And now we know Scribe might also have used the corpse to make an Assassin.

Crash

Might've misread it, but I've been under the impression she doesn't leave a body behind. Everything goes Nowhere when she "dies".

Frivolous

Crash: Quote from Interlude: Knock Them Down:

Catherine Foundling looked at the corpse for a long time, clenching her fingers and unclenching them.

The implication is that her body didn't disappear.

Also, this was the first time we've seen the Intercessor die with a reliable witness around.

Crash

Huh. Completely missed that! Thanks mate.

Crash

EE has said before that Scribe and Assassin aren't the same person. Yeah, because they were an Aspect this whole time. Fuckin weasel lmao

That said, Malicia is working with Bard at least a little bit. And with the new Black Knights Aspect and her previous knowledge of Assassin, there's enough on the table to justify her possibly knowing what Inscribe does. So the corpse has to me a 4D chess move right? No way that ends well.

Big stretch of the word betrayal there, by Cat. If anything, she's the one twisting the knife in this instance. Unless Akua is supposed to do something rash through the night.

Shveiran

Yeah, honestly the whole "she told me she loves me and that's the betrayal" really feels... weird to me.

I mean, a pivot? Sure. But a betrayal?

[Liliet](#)

P sure the betrayal is Akua subsequently going to take Malicia's offer.

Shveiran

I really hope Akua wouldn't be so stupid as to allow the Empress that edge against HER, nevermind Cat.

If Akua takes the bait, it will be to betray Malicia from the inside.

Come on, there is no way in hell that the body is free of strings.

ninegardens

Hey, anyone remember that time that Akua captured Cat, decided to keep her as a "Pet dragon", and then subsequently got her heart torn out?

Malicia MAY have strings controlling that body... BUT we have seen there's something of a story in that. (tbh, there is also the story of angst and tragedy as Cat is forced to fight and/or kill her previous friend. Both stories can be brought to bear)

[Liliet](#)

True enough, no way Malicia won't have some way to ensure Akua can't turn on her without fucking herself over in some way.

The question is, will Akua's view of how bad that "way" is align with how bad Alaya would expect her to take it to be?

[Liliet](#)

The betrayal connects with Catherine previously “showing Akua unbound as bait”, discovering the body Malicia prepared in the vault and realizing there was no need for bait – Malicia was already going for it.

AKA, Cat’s plan/expectation is that Akua leaving here means she’s going to go take Malicia’s offer.

Yunamed

I feel pity/sorry for Akua, to be told your best isn’t enough after sacrificing everything you knew...how many people truly do good for doing good’s sake. How many times has Cat done something good without a motive or an end game in mind. Why can’t Akua be allowed to do the same? Doing good because she wants to stay with Cat and friends.

[Liliet](#)

That IS what Cat wants to get her to do – to do good without an end game. Because end game implies she doesn’t have to keep trying to do *even better* after that. She’s already climbed to the level she needs to be on.

Akua’s problem is that she kept clinging to “is this enough”. No, it’s not. No such thing as enough.

And Cat knew that at this point after having this reiterated she’d run off and try out the alternative. And Cat’s expectation is that she’ll return.

[Adrian_V](#)

Mmmm does this mean that every bit of information about Assassin so far is about Scribe in reality? The stuff i remember would match, like the fact that it was said (it was in the doc of WoE) Eudokia is from the free cities and Assassin was supposed to train there for example, and she does have a twisted sense of humour (she named the orphanages for example)

[Liliet](#)

Eudokia specifically said that Assassin is a sentient entity on his own.

mavant

Dread Empress Irredeemable.

jamesc9

Which in practice means unpredictable and undeterable.

mavant

Some commenters have noted Catherine is a bit hypocritical about body counts and long prices. True enough, but that's because the "long prices" thing isn't really about morality as such; it's a credible precommitment to mutual destruction.

[Liliet](#)

Oh good phrasing.

[MatrixM](#)

Holy shit...my heart...this hurts..

While reading the last 2-3 chapters I was legit fantasising(?) scenes were members of the Woe tell Cat to reconsider her plan for Akua and actually focus on doing what will help her sleep at night/make her happy.

But then this came while I had all those thoughts in my head and...damn. Think that brought another level of powerful.

Interlude: West I

"Terror is the hand that rips away the masks. What stays when it has stripped away all the civilized lies we tell ourselves is our truest face, ugly as it is."

—Alrich Fenne, first of the Iron Kings

Life was full of ironies, Prince Frederic Goethal had found.

Death too, he supposed, though circumstance dictated that one's enjoyment of such humour would be severely curtailed. For this jest, however, the Gods Above were yet smiling down on them. The endless armies of the Hidden Horror had smashed themselves against the walls of the Morgentor again and again, hordes beyond counting and horrors beggaring nightmares. The last fortress of Twilight's Pass had held back the madness, as Lycaonese grimly had for centuries, but all the world had known that it was only a matter of time until the Morgentor fell.

There were simply too many of the dead and too few soldiers to stop them, no matter how sharp the courage and tall the walls. All of Procer, perhaps even all of Calernia, had turned its eye to fortress in the frozen north where horror was yet dammed. Like a face cringing away from a blow yet struck.

Yet they had *done* it. Against the odds, against the night and the fear and the endless cruelty of Evil, the Morgentor had held. Towers had fallen, even the fortress itself for a time, but always the armies under Otto and Frederic had taken it back. Even now, as the morn's light fell on the stony grounds below, Prince Frederic stood atop the tower known as the Westenhaupt and knew the living to be the masters of the field. The dead were scattered and burning, the miraculous engines known as Pickler's Nails – *picklernagel* – pounding away at their retreating mass.

Balls of pitch hit the ground, tossed by spindly catapults, spilling blackness where they landed and spreading the flames everywhere. The changes goblin engineering had made here... The Dead King's commanders had grown *wary* of committing beorns to the first wave of the assault, after the fourth time they died without even touching a wall. Wary! The absurdity of that old monster's generals being wary of anything at all had been as fine wine.

It had been night and day. Even after the Hidden Horror plied fresh tricks and opened a gate into the very Hells, the lines had buckled yet stubbornly refused to break. With valour and fire, the armies of the west had held back the tide even as all the world expected them to fall. But life was full of delightful, cruel ironies and so it had not mattered. To the southeast the Hocheben Heights had fallen: the dead were now pouring into Bremen like an unstoppable tide, burning and killing as they went.

The Morgentor had not fallen but it was going to have to be *abandoned*, lest the dead march north and surround it entirely.

The Kingfisher Prince looked down at the fleeing dead, sword in hand and fingers tight on the grip. Two years he'd fought here. Bled here, with the hard-faced soldiers at his side. The Morgentor was hundreds of miles from the borders of Brus, but he fancied he now knew the fortress as well as if he had been born here. It was not his home, but Frederic had well thought it might be his grave before it all ended. It was... frustrating to abandon it like this. The prince knew well the strategic necessity – already it would be a hard campaign to push south through the enemy invading Bremen, to be enveloped here was death – yet what the mind knew the heart disavowed. It tasted like defeat, leaving.

It was in the soldiers around him too, he could feel it. **Aid** fluttered in him like butterfly wings, urging him to help but not quite knowing how. Westenhaupt was heavy on Neustrians, whose home was south of Bremen was now next to fall, but that stern lot was no more inclined to leave than the rest. Garbed in steel and iron the soldiers milled about the rampart, talking in terse Reitz and keeping an eye on the wyrms in the distance. Even

Frederic's own retinue was in a dark mood. Such a small thing, pride, but was it not the smallest of axles on which the world rested? Small wounds could kill an army if left to fester.

Yet what could he do?

"It is finished for the day, my prince. The curs will not return until they have greater numbers than this to field."

Frederic glanced at his captain – a distant cousin of his, he'd been given to understand – who'd addressed him and nodded agreement.

"They'll be back under cover of darkness," the Prince of Brus said.

Even with goblin spotters, night had the living at a disadvantage. The span they'd just bought, however, would be the opportunity of their departure. The armies had been ready to decamp and march south for days, it was only the constant assaults of the Enemy that'd kept them still. A fighting retreat all the way to Bremen would be... difficult, even for veterans like these. The soldiers around them had been listening without even the pretence otherwise and a familiar officer stepped forward, Captain Fredda of the Neustrian royal army.

"It is done, then," she said. "We will flee south?"

The question was blunt, but more importantly reflected on the faces of most around them. **Aid** fluttered in him still, insistent. The Kingfisher Prince looked away, down at the fleeing throng of corpses. What could he claim?

"We will be back," Frederic said. "And so will they."

Grim nods, but the arrow had missed. The Kingfisher Prince thought, for a moment, of what Otto would say in his place. Something stern, do doubt. They were a stern and unflinching lot, the Reitzenberg. The Prince of Bremen was called Otto Redcrown by men for the proof of that, the same stubborn charge that'd killed his father and two elder sisters before the crown passed to him and he carried it to its end. And like that, Frederic found his answer.

"It begins now, our war," the Prince of Brus said.

That claimed their attention.

"We will march south," Frederic Goethal said. "Through Bremen and Neustria, through my own Brus in time, but though battles await us on that path it cannot be called a campaign."

He smiled.

"It is a *muster*," the prince said. "The last muster we have in us, the last gasp of Procer. And you all know where we will strike, once the strength of the east and the west is gathered."

The Kingfisher Prince raised his sword, pointed it east. Where, beyond mountains and lakes and clouds of poison, lay the Crown of the Dead. Keter, the Hidden Horror's seat of power.

"You call it fleeing," the Kingfisher Prince laughed, "but you should know better, Fredda. Today, at long last, we begin our march on Keter."

And inside of him the wings ceased fluttering at last, a smile from Above, as all around him backs straightened and stares hardened. Frederic had not lied, after all. The dead would chase them south relentlessly, until the time came for the last battle of this war. Frederic Goethal watched the corpses fleeing below one last time, fingers tight around his sword. Doom had come for the Principate of Procer, doom as no realm of man had ever known before.

They would meet that end, the Kingfisher Prince swore, straight-backed and proud.

—

The blow had split open her helm.

A shallow cut, she'd been lucky, but head wounds always bled ugly. Rozala Malanza, Princess of Aequitan, ripped off the straps of her helmet and tossed it away. It was useless now anyway and shaking free her sweaty hair was a small pleasure. Irritated at the delay, she glared at the priest laying his hands on her back.

"Hurry up, would you?" the dark-haired princess bit out.

A cleared throat followed and she glanced guiltily at Louis Rohanon, the former prince of Creusens who was now her formal secretary. And something rather more thrilling, in private, though that was best kept quiet.

"It would be easier if you dismounted," Louis mildly said.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to get back on my horse if I do," Rozala admitted.

Russet eyes narrowed, but he knew better than to argue against her getting back into the thick of the fight. The Princess of Aequitan was not the kind of general that shied away from the melee: it was why men followed her into the dark. She asked them to brave no peril she was not willing to risk at their side. Louis simply nodded, even though he disapproved, and she felt a sudden swell of affection. He was a wonderful lover, but she had

often thought he could be more should politics allow. Perhaps even if not. She had come to suspect there might be... other considerations. The dark-haired princess laid a hand on her belly. It was still too early to tell, but there were signs.

"The Levantines are still holding strong out west," Louis told her. "But the Red Knight sent word that the Hawk has been nipping at them all afternoon. Lord Yannu took an arrow but he still lives."

Rozala grimaced, the Light wielded by the priest at her side finally reaching her scalp. The wound began to mend.

"Someone really needs to kill that thing for good," Rozala cursed. "And the eastern flank?"

"Still harassed by skirmishers, but the Cleven horse is scattering them," Louis said. "If we can push through to the south, we have our path to Peroulet."

Where the last line of defence for the principality of Cleves would stand. How quicky the wind had turned against them, Rozala thought. But a few months ago she had triumphed at the Battle of Trifelin then resisted the siege that followed in the victory's wake. Even the opening of the Hellgate had not been enough to dislodge her. Yet the Hidden Horror, while losing battles, had found ways to win the war. As he had done to the Lycaonese up north, he had done to her here in Cleves: when the neck did not bend, he had struck the ribs. Rozala had lost the western coast while pinned in Trifelin so and seen herself at risk of being surrounded should the city of Atandor fall.

Cordelia Hasenbach had sent the order to retreat south to Peroulet before she could even consider a stratagem to turn this around. And though part of her had wanted to fight the First Prince's command to retreat, Rozala had known it to be the right decision. Cleves was good as lost and there would be no reinforcements coming until it was far, far too late. It had been good that she'd not dallied out of pique, for Atandor had fallen earlier than anticipated and the army that'd taken it had swung north to attack her from behind as she already led her armies into a fighting retreat. For three days now her forces had been fighting the dead in heavy skirmishes, the Hidden Horror trying to mire her out here in the open instead of behind the walls of Peroulet.

She would not give the old monster his wish.

"Find me a helmet," Princess Rozala asked her lover. "And a fresh lance. We must pierce through, else half of us will be corpses come morning."

"Both are already on their way," Louis replied, ruefully smiling.

Rozala almost leaned down to kiss him, holding herself back at the very last moment. His lips quirked anyway. Rising her saddle, caressing her charger's neck, she turned her gaze to the field in the distance. They would make it to Peroulet, that much she would swear to any Gods that cared enough to listen. After, however... That fortress would be the last holdout before the hordes of the Dead King broke into the plains to the south. *And if they do then Principate is dead*, Rozala thought. It was a harsh thing, to realize that she had already given all the ground that she could afford to give. The moment she raised her banner over Peroulet, Rozala Malanza's back would be to the wall. And the terrible truth was that, beneath all the oaths and speeches, the Princess of Aquitan was not sure she could hold the city.

No, that was a lie. She knew she would lose those walls. It was only a question of how long she could eke out before she did.

Breathing out, Princess Rozala Malanza accepted the helmet her lover pressed into her hand, setting it atop the crown of her head. A lance filled her hand, familiar weight, and she looked up at the sunny afternoon sky. They must first survive today, she reminded herself, before being troubled by tomorrow.

"One miracle at a time," Rozala murmured into the wind, and rode back to war.

—

The First Prince thought it would look much like this, if an empire could see the headsman's axe coming down on its neck.

The Morgentor had fallen. Rhenia had fallen. Bremen was halfway into the grave. The sole major military force left in northern Procer, under the command of the princes of Brus and Bremen, was fighting through the horde so it could make it to the temporary safety of Neustria. Cordelia had done all she could to evacuate her people further south, into Segovia, but many had stayed. Too many. Lycaonese, she should have remembered, were a stubborn lot. They were not retreating, not leaving. They would fight the dead fiercely for every league of stone, every river, every hill and forest and muddy road. It was the old fight, the old duty. The walls must hold, lest dawn fail.

That pride might yet kill them all, and with every passing day Cordelia Hasenbach could do less to ward away that fate.

Cleves was holding better, but barely. A ring of forts had been raised along the line drawn by Peroulet, after Cordelia drew from the refugee camps for labour. Food and places on carts headed south for the families of those who accepted had earned her enough volunteers that pits could be dug, palisades raised and stones stacked fast enough it could almost be called a miracle. The First Prince knew better. If there was one thing the

Principate still had plenty of, it was hands that could be put to work. The entire effort had felt much like raising a sandcastle to stop the tide, but the fair-haired princess had gritted her teeth and seen it done regardless. Despair was not worth a whistle. If Cordelia failed, it would be after she had moved Heavens and earth trying.

Even from Hainaut the news was grim. General Abigail had been dislodged from the Cigelin Sisters by an enemy offensive, though she'd retreated in good order to Lauzon's Hollow after covering her retreat with swaths of goblinfire. The White Knight's crushing victory at Juvelun had secured the eastern passage, for now at least, but all of Cordelia's generals agreed it was now only a matter of time until the Army of Callow was pushed back to the old defence lines at Neustal. And once that was the case, once all that stood between Procer and annihilation was forts from the hills of western Cleves to eastern Hainaut, then it would be the beginning of the end. The Dead King would hold the shores of the lakes and be able to cross unimpeded.

Looking at the grey stealing inch after inch of the exquisite map at the heart of the Vogue Archive, Cordelia Hasenbach could almost hear the whistling sound the axe was making as it came down on the neck of the Principate of Procer.

Though tastefully clothed and as rested as she could afford to be, Cordelia could not help but feeling worn to the bone. It showed, too, in some ineffable part of her. She'd glimpsed it in her looking glass, that subtle quality that came from a tool being worked 'til it was near breaking. Yet the fire in her belly would not let her close her eyes, not when every missed opportunity was a few hundred more of the people in her care sent to the grave. The First Prince heard the Forgetful Librarian approach, recognizing the footsteps, and afforded the other woman a questioning glance.

"Word from the Dominion just came," the Damned said. "It worked."

Cordelia did not hide her surprise quite quickly enough.

"They agreed to the oaths?" she pressed.

"Every major line of the Blood swore oaths that the seneschal of Levante is to hold the city until the end of the war, when the Majilis will convene to settle the succession of the Isbili," the Librarian confirmed. "The peace-oaths were not as widespread, but the rumours the Circle seeded seem to have moved public opinion where you wanted."

This time it was a smile she hid. Cordelia had ordered that word be spread the Grey Pilgrim had died wishing for peace between Levantines before his sacrifice at the Battle of Hainaut, which would have meant little in Procer but carried a great deal of

weight in the Dominion. He had been revered as half a god, in those parts. There would still be bandits and raiders that took advantage of the chaos, but the spectre of the Peregrine's disapproval would stay many a hand. Perhaps, if she were lucky, enough that the Dominion of Levant did not collapse into utter anarchy. Methodical anarchy, at least, she would be able to prop up for a little longer still.

Long enough that if she no longer could, it was because Cordelia could do nothing at all.

"We can turn our attention to the League, then," the First Prince said. "Have our envoys to Bellerophon sent word back yet?"

"Yes," the Librarian grimaced. "That they have yet to be received by the expedition's generals."

The Republic of Bellerophon had, to almost universal surprised, succeeded at assembling an army and sweeping over the last holdings of Penthes. Unfortunately, the victorious citizen-soldiers had then begun a siege of the city-state that they were very unlikely to be able to carry out successfully. Cordelia would have had little issue with this, had General Basilia not been leading a coalition army east with the intention of besieging that very same city only to find that there was already an army camped beneath its walls. Given that Basilia had bought dwarven engines so that she would at least be able to breach the walls of Penthes and put an end to the war she'd begun, this was a... frustrating situation.

The Secretariat of Delos had invited her to mediate a peace between the parties involved, but while Helike and its vassals were amenable the Republic was proving to be rather more obstinate. The People had voted that Anaxares the Diplomat yet lived, and so was still Hierarchy of the League of Free Cities. As a consequence, it was illegal for them to receive foreign envoys. The situation in the south had therefore turned into a farce of standoff under the walls of Penthes, General Basilia having refused to give battle and instead sent war parties to pillage the Penthesian countryside. She was, Cordelia suspected, trying to earn back what she had spent on those dwarven war engines.

"Then we lean on Atalante," the First Prince said. "If they consent, Delos could at last call a formal session of the League of Free Cities."

The end of hostilities that entailed could be used to force Bellerophon back to its territory, given that the republic still claimed to be loyal to its lost Hierarchy. If General Basilia could steal a march on Bellerophon when hostilities resumed after, she could claim the siege first and finally bring the civil war to an end. Beginning to consider how the ruling priests might be convinced to end their self-imposed isolation, Cordelia

ceased when she saw a messenger come for her. She glanced at the Librarian, who snorted before taking the offered scroll for her. It was given unto her afterwards, however, and she frowned. The head of the Circle of Thorns, Louis de Sartrons, claimed he had urgent news.

And to think she had almost begun to find a silver lining to the cloud.

Cordelia wasted no time in heading towards the salon where her spymaster would be waiting. The conversation would trouble her carefully arranged schedule if it ran for too long, and she had an obligation that could not be put off later that evening, but she would have to adapt. Louis de Sartrons was not the kind of man to call anything *urgent* without good reason. Within moment of sitting across from him and taking a polite sip at the served tea, the skeletally thin older man spoke a sentence that chilled her blood.

"The Dead King is looking for the ealamal."

Cordelia carefully set down the cup, painted porcelain of exquisite delicacy. She did not ask whether or not her spymaster was certain, as it would be an insult to the both of them.

"Has he found it?" she asked instead, forcing calm.

"I believe not," Louis de Sartrons replied. "A Revenant was caught in southern Lyonis and another was seen in Lange, but the facility in Brabant has not been breached."

It would not be catastrophic even if it were, Cordelia reminded herself. Brabant had been judged too close to the enemy, and so the weapon had been moved into southeastern Aisne.

"Destroy it," Cordelia ordered. "We must be sure the Enemy learns as little as he can."

"I will see it done," her spymaster agreed, then thinly smiled. "It may very well be only a matter of time until it is found regardless of any measure, Your Highness. Unless we let Chosen see to the defences-"

"We will not," the First Prince sharply interrupted.

She would not let the White Knight usurp control of the weapon. It had been made of the corpse of an angel of Judgement, there could be no pretence of Hanno of Arwad not becoming its master as soon as he laid hands on it – and he would, if any of the Chosen took up guarding the ealamal. The loyalty of the heroes went first to their champion, and the White Knight had already proved himself untrustworthy in the Arsenal. Cordelia would not make the same mistake twice.

"Then the best we can deliver is delay, Your Highness," Louis de Sartrons blandly said. "And I would consider Sister Alberte's proposal that a limited test be attempted. Otherwise we know too little of the weapon for it to be considered usable, in my opinion."

The First Prince hesitated, staying silent. It had been the question that plagued them all ever since the Salian Peace. What would a weapon made of a fallen angel of Judgement do, if Judgement was kept silent by a madman? The Hidden Horror himself had claimed that the Tyrant of Helike had spared them all a great doom by arranging for the Hierarch to do this, and the secrets unearthed in Levant last year had borne this true in part. If the Intercessor truly could influence angels, using the ealamal would have been a mistake. It would have given that enigmatic monster power of life and death over half of Calernia. Yet with the Hierarch staying true to his course of obstruction, the situation had changed again.

If the ealamal could be used without the Intercessor's meddling, then Cordelia still had a way to prevent the fall of Calernia. If. Only none could tell her what the weapon might do without the guidance of angels behind it, and there was no known precedent to draw on. What way but a test was there to gain an answer? A small use, limited in scope, but still a use. The First Prince was inclined to agree with her spymaster of the necessity, but it was not so simple as that. There was another crowned head whose assent must be gained before that, lest in chasing ghosts Cordelia make an enemy of the living. Catherine Foundling had not been shy in voicing her disapproval of the entire affair, and absurdly enough the Black Queen was now Cordelia's closest and most important ally.

"I am to speak with the Black Queen tonight," she finally said. "The subject will be broached."

"That is all I can ask, Your Highness," Louis de Sartrons said, bowing his head.

—

The parlour had been refurbished from floor to ceiling when it was first dedicated to a new purpose, that of serving as the scrying room the First Prince of Procer would use to speak with the Queen of Callow. An entire wall had been covered by a beautiful silver mirror while the plush sofas had been replaced by a beautiful yet severe set of Lycaonese armchairs and tables. Bureaus had been filled with papers which might be of use in discussion, the latest reports and predictions, while the walls were covered with maps and tapestries. Every detail had been tailored according to what her agents believed to be the preferences of Catherine Foundling.

Though Cordelia doubted their common amiability could be traced back to these changes, it had to be said that at least the change of furniture had ensured that the Black Queen would no longer eye the more elaborate Alamans furnishings with barely veiled disdain. The First Prince was in some ways rather amused by the other royal's disdain for luxuries, considering that for all her severe inclinations she was likely one of the wealthiest women in all of Calernia these days.

The First Prince of Procer poured herself a cup of mead and set the pitcher down on the table before slipping into the armchair – discreetly made more comfortable with cushions – and allowed herself to take a sip. Unlike the Black Queen, who usually guzzled wine as if it were water while they talked, she moderated herself. It made it all the more frustrating that the drink usually came to redden her cheeks before it did the other ruler's, to be frank. Before she had even set down the cup, the surface of the mirror before her rippled. It took a moment for the wizards of the Observatory in Laure to bind her to the Hierophant's spell in Praes, but hardly more than a few breaths.

On the other side of the mirror the Black Queen, looking as tired as Cordelia herself felt, offered her a lopsided grin.

"Your Highness," Queen Catherine of Callow said.

"Your Majesty," First Prince Cordelia of Procer replied.

Catherine Foundling could be striking on a good day, but this did not seem to be one of them. Her clothes were ruffled, her expression drawn and there was no sign of the ruinous charisma that had drawn so many to her causes – fair and foul. The cloth covering the eye she'd lost in Hainaut was slightly askew, which made her sharp cheekbones stand out more than usual. Cordelia almost wished she had not taken the time to put on a fine dress in Rhenian blue herself, but only almost. Even if Foundling noticed the difference between them, which a slight frown told Cordelia she had, the queen was always easier to deal with when the Lycaonese princess was dressed becomingly.

The Black Queen's wandering eye was well-known, and Cordelia had not gotten where she was by refusing to use the arrows in her quiver.

"A trying day?" the First Prince asked.

The tanned woman – even darker of skin, now that she campaigned under the Wasteland sun – barked out a laugh.

"In a way," the Black Queen said. "I have what I came for: High Lord Sargon's granary and his treasury are secured and ready to be moved. I can begin heading south for a decisive battle."

"A great victory," Cordelia said, meaning every word.

The city of Wolof was famous even in her native Rhenia, known as a great fortress that'd broken the same armies that had taken Ater and brought down the Tower. That Foundling had beggared it without even having to storm the walls or losing more than a handful of men was the kind of feat a reputation could be made of, were the Black Queen's own not far beyond such tales nowadays.

"So they tell me," Catherine Foundling tiredly said. "Akua Sahelian left my camp two days ago. Our spies in Wolof tell me she has entered the Empyrean Palace."

Cordelia, knowing the Doom of Liesse to be a thorny matter, took a sip from her mead as she chose her words.

"Her desertion is as you predicted," the First Prince said. "And planned for."

The other woman winced.

"If I might give you a word of advice?"

Cordelia cocked a brow but nodded.

"I wouldn't ever say anything that could be construed as a variation on 'just as planned'," the Black Queen said, and she seemed completely serious. "That never ends well."

The blonde princess leaned back into her seat. It was absurd enough advice, on the surface, but it was no fool giving it.

"One of the obscure rules of... Named, I take it," Cordelia said, deciding using Chosen or Damned would be undiplomatic.

"More for villains than heroes," the Black Queen said, "but it's best steered clear of across the board. Sharp irony tends to ensure."

"I will keep it in mind when dealing with Named," Cordelia replied.

It was useful information and there was no denying that in these matters Catherine Foundling was a great deal more learned than Frederic Goethal, who Cordelia had attempted to learn from only to find his knowledge of the affairs of Chosen to be rather shallow. The likes of the Peregrine and the Black Queen seemed, unfortunately, to be quite rare.

"Might be useful for you to keep in mind period," the queen drawled.

"While I appreciate the implicit compliment, I am not Chosen," Cordelia flatly said.

The other woman leaned back into her seat, inside that campaign tent of hers. She took up a goblet of what looked like that truly horrid orcish liquor – aragh – and knocked it back, offering a toothy smile afterwards.

"Maybe not right now," the Black Queen said. "But I wouldn't bet on that staying true forever. Vivienne tells me you've gotten Levant back into a semblance of order."

The heiress to Callow would have read the report earlier. It seemed an odd change of subject, but likely wasn't. These little detours were a staple of conversation with Catherine Foundling, she had learned.

"Lady Itima's contributions were key," Cordelia said. "But I will agree that the Dominion has somewhat stabilized."

"Yeah," the Queen of Callow drawled, rolling her eye. "I'm sure *Itima Ifriqui* was the one who came up with that oath and propaganda plan. Seems right up her alley, that play."

Cordelia's lips thinned.

"You have a point, I imagine?"

"You got Levant in order," the Black Queen said. "You're keeping Procer from falling apart and taking the lead in the fight against the Dead King. There's a title for someone who does that, Hasenbach."

Ah, were they now dispensing with titles? Foundling usually on began that a few drinks in.

"Is there?" the First Prince replied, skeptical.

"Sure," Foundling shrugged. "Warden of the West. What a fun coincidence that you happen to already bear it."

"That door lay open before me once," Cordelia coldly said. "I did not step through the threshold. It is not a choice I regret."

"You didn't take the Name, maybe," the Black Queen said. "But the Role, you made it yours anyway. There's not a pie west of the Whitecaps you don't have your finger in. Might take a year, might take twenty, but Creation will answer to the truth of that."

She smiled, looking fearsome and sympathetic both.

"You can swim against the river all you like, Cordelia Hasenbach," she said. "It won't get tired before you do."

The genuine sympathy in the other woman's voice made it a harder blow than if she'd been cruel. It sounded like something she truly did believe. And though this talk of Name and Role was... esoteric, there seemed to be some manner of logic to it. However tortured. *And though you are a madwoman, Catherine Foundling, Cordelia thought, you might just be the cleverest madwoman alive.* This was not an assertion to be lightly dismissed.

"I will heed your warning," the First Prince said, politely calling the subject to a close.

Foundling nodded, looking almost nonchalant. She was... loose tonight, Cordelia decided. Less controlled than usual. And for all her drinking and seeming carelessness, the Black Queen usually kept close mastery of herself. This, though, seemed unguarded.

"Does Sahelian's betrayal truly trouble you so?" the fair-haired princess quietly asked. "You told me of its coming months ago."

"It stings," Catherine Foundling artlessly confessed. "I didn't think it would. Wasn't sure it would, maybe."

"And still you went forward with this scheme," Cordelia said. "Why? There are less convoluted ways to take revenge, Foundling. And I did not question your plans, for this is an affair of Named and Callowan besides, but I will admit I find what I know of this to be baffling."

The one-eyed queen's lips quirked. That had, somehow, pleased her to hear. She truly took as compliments the strangest of things.

"It's not just about revenge," the Black Queen said. "It's... hard to articulate."

Cordelia was not so sure. She thought it might instead be that it was the simplest thing to articulate in the world, but that the queen across the mirror would resist speaking those words to the bitter end. It was a shocking thought, that Catherine Foundling might have affections for the woman that'd destroyed Liesse, but in a way fascinating as well. Cordelia was not certain whether it was the tint of tragedy to the whole affair or simply that she had never before met someone with such spectacularly terrible taste in women before, but the perhaps the truth lay somewhere in the middle.

"A strange revenge indeed, to return her home and to the Tower's service after having been one of your inner circle," Cordelia mildly said. "Unless you have sabotaged her prospects?"

The Black Queen grinned, a vicious slice of ivory.

"Oh, not at all," Catherine Foundling said. "She is going to get everything that she ever wanted."

The queen poured herself another cupful of liquor.

"But that's the thing with Praes, see," she continued. "You get whatever you want, but never the way you want it."

"It is your campaign to lead," Cordelia finally said. "And I cannot gainsay your results so far."

"It'll be a battle next," Foundling opined. "A convergence. The fate of Praes going forward is going to be wrestled over. And after that..."

"Ater," the First Prince completed.

"It ends there," the Black Queen said. "I'll get it done, Cordelia. I know the stakes. I'll muster the East and we'll come with its full array of war."

And the truth was that the First Prince believed her. Because the two of them had grown beyond enmity, even as enemies, and though they were not friends – would never be – a trust had grown between them. You could only share the burden of the world on your back with someone for so long before you took to them, even a little.

"We don't have long left," Cordelia quietly admitted. "We are giving ground on all fronts now. And the southern principalities are beginning to buck my authority, slowly but surely. I expect there will be defections before you return."

There was only so long people were willing to have the lifeblood squeezed out of them to support a war they'd never seen with their own eyes. And though Cordelia had pushed through the Highest Assembly measures that would buy the realm a few more months, the hard measures she'd relied on to see it done had made her enemies.

"You're keeping up the sky with your back, Hasenbach," the Black Queen replied, tone oddly gentle. "I don't expect the impossible of you. If it were anyone else in your seat, this war would already be lost."

"We might lose it anyway," Cordelia said, and hesitated.

It was now, she thought or never.

"The ealamal," the First Prince said. "I want to find out what it does with Judgement silenced. In case..."

In case they lost the war, she left unsaid. The Black Queen grimaced.

"You want a test," she said.

Cordelia nodded. Added nothing more.

"Fuck," Catherine Foundling cursed, leaning back into her seat.

There was a long moment of silence.

"Crows take me. *Do it.*"

[Droughtbringer](#)

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Insanenoodlyguy

"The Primal Hunter is looking for the boost. ."

Cordelia carefully set down the cup, painted porcelain of exquisite delicacy. She did not ask whether or not her webmaster was certain, as it would be an insult to the both of them.

"Has he found it?" she asked instead, forcing calm.

"I believe not," Louis de Sartrons replied. "A Salvos was caught in second and Six chances was seen in third but the practical guides lead has not been breached."

topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil

nimelennar

Huh. I neither would have guessed Cordelia would consult with Cat about the weapon, nor that Cat would agree. The former mostly because of the latter.

I mean, I guess she has to concede that they do need a back-up plan in case "Conquering Praes and stealing its diabolists" doesn't work, but given how much she's disliked the idea in the past, it seems a sudden shift.

I guess the war is just going that badly.

saithorthepyro

The war is essentially doomed at this point. Their campaign that was supposed to end the threat of the bridge that was

terminal to the war ended with the bridge destroyed but was otherwise a massive failure and even without the ticking time bombs that are the hell gates the Dead King has pushed them to the last natural or man-made barriers capable of holding him outside of the breadbaskets of Procer. If it falls militarily the grand alliance is done for. Cat also probably realizes that Cordelia is probably going to be desperate enough to do tests anyway even if she was willing to approach Cat first about them.

[308924810a](#)

I personally am of the opinion that the correct choice is to skip the testing and just shove the thing through Twilight into the Serenity to fire it at full power. If it works, great, if it doesn't/backfires destructively, we can hope it won't matter.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think that's logistically as simple as you're proposing.

Though the idea is interesting!

shikkarasu

In Regard:

"He'd hardened the metaphysical borders with Arcadia after she'd slipped through there the third [time Ranger infiltrated]"

Ironically, if Ranger hadn't told him about that weakness 40+ years ago it would have worked perfectly. As it stands, Indrani would need to match/surpass her teacher in matters of infiltration for this to be viable.

[Liliet](#)

That's for Keter, not Serenity.

Cpt. Obvious

And it has been said that the roads of Twilight lead to more places than you think. So is it not quite likely that it's possible to gate from Twilight directly into the plane of hell that the Dead King appropriated and calls Serenity?

ArkhnIX

I think in many ways, they are treating this like the Atom bomb was treated. You're facing a deadly enemy, you fear what

happens if you can't stop them, and you already know that you will face a massive loss of life without it. At that point, you're desperate to end things, so you decide to have the fallback option in case things go wrong.

I don't quite think Cat or Cordelia will pull a Truman, as that isn't quite in their natures, but the potential is there, and that is what will be interesting to see going forward.

[Liliet](#)

From my knowledge of history, that was super not what happened with Japan.

That's all I want to say.

JRogue

That is not at all how that happened.

Both the United States and Japan knew that Japan has lost the war. It was just a matter of what Japan was going to do about it. How long was it going to last? Japan could surrender or they could fight to the bitter end. Japan choose to fight until the bitter end.

President Truman knew exactly how destructive the A-bomb was, he called it "the most terrible bomb in the history of the world.", and later wrote, "It is an awful responsibility that has come to us,". It had been tested extensively and reports told him that it could level an entire city. There were no surprises for Truman.

So, since Japan had decided to fight, Truman had a few options. 1. Keep up conventional bombing, 2. invade Japan by ground, 3. demonstrate the A-bomb at an unpopulated area, or 4. drop it directly on the population of Japan. Truman and his advisors decided, in the end, that nothing more than an actual demonstration would force the hand of the Japanese leadership.

About 120,000 people were killed instantly between the two bombs, and tens of thousands more would die within the year. These numbers are considered conservative.

Truman never shirked his decision, always saying it was ultimately his to make, but he never apologized either. It was his opinion that he saved American lives at the cost of Japanese lives and that more than the total death toll of the bombs would have been lost between both sides by a ground invasion. Truman said of himself, "And he alone, in all the world, must say Yes or No to that awesome, ultimate question, 'Shall we drop the bomb on a living target?'" , and although

they have had the same power, no other President has exercised it.

AI

Truman never made a decision to drop the bomb. The only decision he made with regard to the atomic bomb was to *stop* dropping them without his express permission after he was surprised by how soon the second one was dropped.

For most of the people involved, using the bombs was just the natural consequence of developing them in wartime. The people running the project were actually worried the war might end before they could use one, and they would then end up having to justify the ridiculous amount of money spent on the project without tangible results to show for it.

Sources in the 'website' box and on the rest of that site.

AbraKadabra

The real irony is that Japan did not surrender because of the bombs. They lost a hundred thousand people, so what? They lost the same amount in the firebombing of Tokyo. The actual reason was that the soviets attacked in the continent and they defeated the 1 million strong japanese land forces in one week. That is the real shock to a military junta not the loss of civilians. So they capitulated, citing the bombs as reason for several reasons one is that american occupation was preferable to a soviet one and the ruins of their army delayed the soviets enough to ship in american forces. The second reason is that they attempted to preserve national pride. "No we did not get defeated on the Field, we surrender because of our enemies dont fight fair." Which neatly ties into the victim pose, Which evolved later.

John

Practicality, straight out of the title. Classical heroic OR villainous behavior leans a lot more heavily on "no plans, no prototype, no backup." Field-testing and debugging your superweapon under controlled conditions, instead of waiting for the last minute and leaving success or failure almost entirely up to the divine power of narrative, is part of the core of what they've both been fighting for, going back at least to the start of Amadeus's reforms of the Legions of Terror.

TeK

She mainly disagreed because dhe believed (much like Black Knight) that the victory can be achieve by the conventional force of arms, and so using a doomsday weapon will inevitably

kick up the story into the rungs of cosmic horror. After Hainaut, however, it's already there. The Hashmalim rained down the star on earth, while the Dead King answered by opening not one, not two but three bloody permanent Hellgates. The metaphorical cat is out of metaphorical bag. There is much less reason to hesitate now.

Konstantin von Karstein

It was the Ophanim who destroyed Hainaut 😊 Hashmalim are from Contrition.

Deworld

Nah. It could be a part of the reason, but her main reasons to dislike were 1. Cordelia's secrecy around the weapon, 2. Unknown mechanisms of its working, as well as a potential threat to the whole continent, 3. Cat's general dislike to angels after the First Llesse.

Liliet

Cat's general dislike of angels was BECAUSE of understanding how they can easily be unrestrained weapons of mass destruction. It's not a grudge, it's a highly justified wariness, which brings us back to cosmic horror.

Miley

Praes' Dianolists are as Callow's weather.

Not easily stolen.

nimelennar

A shame they don't have a Thief anymore.

edrey

haha, i knew it. it's about Akua.

"The last is strangest, she said to them
The easiest and the most solemn
For when the tower is yours to claim
You will have forgotten why you came."

now let's watch the angelic fireworks.

Xinci

Aid fits Frederics role quite well. May also make him actually quite useful in peace time which fits the origin of the Name

So if the Angels are blocked and the angel corpse is just unguided power. One could probably bind a pattern like the Smite Masego figured out with Tariq. Other spells too probably, honestly a lot of potential is there if you are basically using a font of power.

Big I

I'd be surprised if Frederic survives this war. I'm expecting him to go full Fisher King and sacrifice himself to bring life back to the dead lands.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, but Tariq is dead and Cordelia is (quite reasonably) not going to let Masego within scrying distance of that weapon, let alone eyeshot.

Linus42

Cordelia is still salty I see. I am not sure the Heroes are all that unified but I don't disagree with the main conclusion that Hanno could probably take control. Beyond that I am not sure how a test proves that Bard cannot modify it. With no Name around for the test and Procer's quality of casters, Bard could easily do whatever she wants undetected or simply not intervene now to bait them into thinking she cannot mess with this weapon only to show up for real when its actually used. Beyond that testing it risks detection. But I agree overall you kinda have to test your super weapon before you use it even if the test will be inconclusive. Still everyone is getting pushed you can win every battle and still lose the war, attrition is hard to overcome even without your opponent having a chance to get stronger everytime they kill one of your troops.

nick012000

The Intercessor can only intervene when Named are involved. If it's just ordinary mages and clerics carrying out the tests of the superweapon, she wouldn't be able to show up to intervene.

laguz24

Yeah, but it's not just mages and clerics it's done on the orders of the warden of the west, it's a thread that she can ride.

Konstantin von Karstein

Cordelia isn't the Warden of the West yet, and Bard can only interact with Named. She can't just appear to some random minion without any weight, which any personnel working on the weapon would be.

She could ask some Named to interfere with the test on her behalf, but all T&T Named were warned of her. Maybe if she pull out of nowhere a Named good enough to do that, but that's unlikely.

Adrian V

Not exactly right, she can also intervene in important EVENTS, or with peroson with important roels even without a name (Cordelia is a good example right now).

I think the use of a superweapon fills all the boxes for her

Linnus42

Not really she is mostly limited to Names alone. But big enough events allow her a door see her interacting with Sve Noc and Cat when they didnt have Names. Still my point is Bard has no inclination to show up for a test trial, I would expect actually using the weapon to give a big enough door.

shikkarasu

Agreed. It is in her best interest to convince Cordelia that the weapon is foolproof, assuming that Bard can sabotage it. That way she can cause it to backfire only in the moment when it matters most. Not to mention that Bard can then tap into the "The first step always works" narrative. The test is the 'first step' for Cordelia, and the sabotage would be the 'first step' for the Bard. The second use of the weapon will have less narrative impact (sort of like why no-one wanted the Severance to be used before it cut the Dead King) and Bard tampering with the weapon will never again be so successful as the first time she tries to.

beleester

The Intercessor can also intervene where Angels are involved. Their theory is that she can't intervene with Judgement because Judgement is sealed, but they haven't tested that. And even if she doesn't intervene in the test firing, that doesn't prove she *can't* – she could have simply chosen not to act.

Xinci

I think its more that she naturally comes to times/places of narrative weight. Remmeber how she gets teleported near Hannos band in the free cities?

It may be more that Named simply have more weight so she has more interactions and thus ability to influence them. Sve Noc wasnt Named yet but their situation had a lot of weight due

the fate of their entire people riding on it.
I think she might not interfere since she may still want Catherine over anything else at the moment.

Sintonir

They are not trying to test if Bard can modify it, they are trying to test if it does anything at all in the current circumstances.

edrey

i make me wonder, why dont just make the test in the Ways, where Dk cant go and there is anyone? there the bard cant do anything.

Sintonir

I don't think, testing it in the Ways is an option. It might change the results, and it is also threat to Ways if the test goes badly.

Deworld

Also, it's a freaking angel corpse. The logistics of its transportation are unknown (and likely pretty difficult), and moving it into a different dimension is even more problematic in a lot of ways.

[Liliet](#)

That's why they're still treating the weapon as a last resort "after we've already lost the war" option.

That Other Guy

Maybe Bellepheron (sp?) could be the Bikini Atoll. It clears up 10000 headaches, and it's less likely DK would get his bony little fingers on it than if it was trialled near the front.

Yes, it'd be appalling. That's why you get the Barrow Sword to do it. He's good that way

Earl of Purple

Given the weapon fires Judgement, and the Choir that power would come from is still neutered by a scion of Bellerophon, I cannot see that going well for anybody.

[Liliet](#)

The Barrow Sword is on Cat's front. Logistically difficult.

Also, I'm having a hard time appreciating the joke part of the idea. Too close to how it happens in real life.

Abrakadabra

I am still waiting for Bellerophon to join the fight against DK. You know, they all about resisting tyrants and equal freedom for all.

Well there is a thing about tyrants and slaves, they all die eventually. In death all are equal.

But if the DK wins everyone will be his slave.

Forever.

jamesc9

> In death all are equal.

This crosses the ways in which any measurement of currently living people underestimates inequality. If we assume that genetic individuality matters, then the (non-)descendants of people who were genocided are worse off than the descendants of the tyrant who did it.

Abrakadabra

My take on it is that the one WHO would be controlled is Hanno instead of the weapon.

Juff

Typo Thread:

and tall the walls > and how tall the walls
to fortress > to the fortress (also, shouldn't it be away from,
since it's cringing)

was south of Bremen (maybe "just south of bremen")

do doubt > no doubt

Rising her saddle > Rising in her saddle

then Principate > then the Principate

but feeling > but feel

universal surprised > universal surprise

moment of sitting > a moment of sitting

shark cheekbones (should this be stark)

was was > was

well-know > well-known

usually on began > usually only began

aurikdomi

I wonder if they will try to test it in secret or try to use it against the dead armies directly as the test. Also I think the story is headed towards Black's death because of the previous chapter. Catherine confirmed she wants to put her father in the

tower, but we also can basically confirm the song will end with Akua in the tower instead. Ergo for Cat to accept anyone other than black in that role he might have to die. idk just conjecture.

Liliet

Amadeus doesn't want the Tower, he wants it destroyed. Even if Akua really is the subject of the song, doesn't mean her staying there is endgame.

Raven

I still think cat is going to end up on it somehow.

Obvious choice I know, but I just can't help but think it

Deworld

Cat as Dread Empress would be terrible, both for her and for Praes. You need a decent skill to survive the snake pit that is Highborn society, more so to rule it. An outsider like Cat just can't have it, not to mention she wouldn't be respected by High Lords due to her heritage. Power can only take her so far. Maybe with a skilled trustworthy Chancellor, she could manage to keep her reign for some time, but the only person who comes at least somewhat close to this description is Akua, and at this point, it's better to make her straight-up Dread Empress.

Frivolous

I laughed at this, though it is bad form to use the word 'before' twice in the same sentence:

"or simply that she had never before met someone with such spectacularly terrible taste in women before"

I hadn't anticipated that Akua would return to the Sahelian fold, at least not so soon. I thought she'd sulk for a while. She must have been planning what to do in case Catherine rejected her.

I guess Otto Redcrown must be dead? According to the text above, he carried his crown to its end. If so, that's sad. No more Reitzenbergs.

It's nice to know one of Freddy's aspects anyway. Aid is a surprisingly subtle and humble power.

I'm surprised Yannu survived a hit from the Hawk. Even the Mirror Knight almost died from that.

I wonder if Catherine could break the impasse between Judgement and the Hierarch by simply Speaking to one or both and telling them to Shut up.

Catherine can command angels because she's done it before. She can command the Hierarch because he's Named.

[Liliet](#)

I'm assuming the reason Akua went to talk to Cat was that she was REALLY tempted to return and that conversation was the last chance she'd given herself to stay.

Leventide

"or simply that she had never before met someone with such spectacularly terrible taste in women before"
Oof

nimelennar

She says, very shortly after noting that Cat is attracted to her.

[Burlyraven](#)

Listen, there was a lot of good stuff in this chapter, but I'm genuinely just kind of giddy to get some Kingfisher content (and actually finally get one of his aspects revealed).

beleester

Kingfisher is a boss.

"The Morgentor didn't fall. We didn't retreat. We advanced southwards to prepare for a strike on Keter."

Skaddix

Reminds me of Warhammer and Cadia

[Liliet](#)

Important facts this chapter:

- Frederic's Aspect! And it's a compulsion to help when he can god bless this pure soul ♥ Wonder if this was itching when he got Cat to talk to Red Axe, too.
- Formal congratulations to Rozala Malanza/Louis Rhanon shippers!
- Cordelia is handling Levant and the Free Cities in Cat's absence, god bless her ♥ ...aaand Cat thinks a previously not taken

Name can come back around if you're still doing a matching Role.
FASCINATING ISN'T IT, *Black Queen*?

– On which note, Cat just thoroughly sank the argument that the “no Named rulers” clause is in any way reasonable because “they can just refuse Names”. Yeah... no, and Cat herself says so.

– Cordelia confirmed for (1) being a “can’t look away from the trainwreck someone pass the popcorn” Catkua fan, (2) dressing to catch Cat’s eye when she’s due to meet her, (3) monitoring whether or not Cat looks “striking” at the moment. Dunno about y’all but personally I am having an EXCELLENT time.

– BELLEROPHON, MOTHER OF FREEDOM!

[Liliet](#)

* Rohanon

SpeckofStardust

Cat has long passed the black queen in terms of role, Cordelia hasnt left the role that first lead to the name offer, cat has very much left the role of being the Black Queen, her queenship is the least important thing, high priestess of the drow and top dog of the villains of the grand alliance has made her effectively the person with the most authority considering she is effectively has no one above her, even her goddess treat her less like a servant and more like a co-conspirator, where when she was going to be the black queen was basically an upgraded black knight a servant that gets to rule instead of as a weapon second to an empress but still ultimately a servant (if highly likely to betray said empress which you know cause evil).

Like heck last chapter even if everyone told her to forgive Akua she would in fact refuse why? Because no one has authority over her. Which is very different from the cat that let Akua rule one of her cities because of “rules”.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but all that is still called “Black Queen” by everyone else is the thing. The meaning of the words has shifted.

[lolo96](#)

Queen means ruling a kingdom and Cat doesn’t plan to do that. You can argue she is ruling Named but eh. I don’t see that. Also EE said Cat getting Odin look is related to her Name and Black Queen doesn’t bring the Odin image.

Sinead

I would say that the Story of the Black Queen has changed.

Before it was the story of a Black Queen reviled by her people and her enemies (do you think Callow would have swallowed second Liesse going unpunished?).

Now she is the Black Queen because she holds the right to Rule to such a degree that half the champions of the gods fall under her ageis, and the other half stand down. While Cordelia has her hands full juggling the politics of the West, Cat's own influence is equally broad in scope when it comes to non-Proceran polities.

Since second Liesee, she has gained the formal acknowledgement of Edward VII basically spiritually legitimizing her rule, before then getting further recognition of authority from both the drow and Named. The remnants of the Name that was preserved in her legacy (ever since she was Countess of Marchford) grew from different soil. The Role has been redefined, but the Name still fits.

I liked the idea of a different Name because I thought it would be interesting for Cat to get a Neutral Role.

However, her being such a big Boss of Evil that she still gets to kill demons would also be great.

[Liliet](#)

Exactly this! People put different meaning in the same words. They get to be... reused.

Nope

Warlord of the East would have interesting symmetries with Warden of the West, and Cat has been called warlord before...

[mindsword2](#)

I am still expecting the Angel Weapon to be fired at Cat and her band after they defeat the Dead King.

jamesc9

Ok. In what ways are you expecting it to function and misbehave?

Xinci

I am curious if the Lycaonese as a sub-culture are already doomed. Most of the elders who would carry on their traditions are dead. Now it looks like the more fit adults will die. Without a proper propagation being maintained the youth of their people wont really have too much of a identity. They may still sorta exist in the future but its entirely possible that they would be assimilated and exist as a even smaller sub-group or have the

same name but little sustained connection to their original culture. I due to no one being around who actually remembers it. I am also curious about if all these lycaonese being dead will lead to eventual Named as fewer and fewer of them are around to share the weight.

Sinead

That is a good point. It would depend on what the reclamation process of the Northern territories would look like as well for time scale.

I think what you might see is the melding of Brus and Lyconese influence, since Fredrick "opened the borders" to the northern refugees. You may see that Brus becomes an "honorary Northerner", and that the repopulation of the North will reflect this cultural shift.

Also, since this will end with a change in the status quo against the Dead King (and if the drow are still able to keep pressure on the ratlings, a change against the Hunger), you will still see a massive cultural shift as the two defining pressures on the culture ease off.

[MephInBlack](#)

The Forgetful Librarian slowly arouses my suspicions. Cordelia already had a well working staff but since she got the FL services we see her relying on them more and more. Let's not forget it is a villain we are talking about, and as the Saint of Swords depicted with the tale about the Salutary Alchemist this is not irrelevant.

Sinead

While this is true, Cat was also heard, and acknowledged, Lawrence's point. I would not be surprised if Cat is able to keep things from getting out of hand.

Aiden

I am really interested in what name Cat eventually claims. Maybe just Queen since she isn't particularly black anymore I don't think. Definitely pragmatic but not really evil.

[Openendings](#)

It's been said before, and it's too silly to really work, but as Amadeus's greatest student in pragmatism and story logic, and as a bleeding-heart "why can't we all stop being idiots?" type who is mentoring even *Cordelia* on name-lore, if anyone deserves the Name of Practical Guide... ^_^

hakureireimu

Arch Villain has been my prediction since book 5.

[Liliet](#)

Now Black just refers to her clothing style.

Which she doesn't even like.

Whoops.

Deworld

Nah, she's still pretty "Black". She is representative of villains, openly admits Below as her backers, wields powers of goddesses born out of murder and theft, and has a pretty dreadful reputation she supports with her actions more often than not.

DC

Abigail remains the best character in the series for the simple reason that every offhand mention of her brings to mind an entire chapter's worth of misadventures.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Abigail deserves a spin-off

sadfan

Alas, alack, the weapon has only one round of ammunition

superkeaton

A gun is not set up to go unfired. And a nuke is not made to be unused.

It's adorable that Cordelia can see the love in Cat for Akua.

[jerdenizen](#)

I find it interesting how Cordelia assumes that only Named have to worry about tropes, and based on the story so far I don't think that's actually true. It is amusing that so few people seem aware of this kind of thing (she only lists the Pilgrim and Cat), but it does make sense to keep your genre savvy to yourself if you want to make use of it.

Interlude: East I

"As a rule, principles are trouble. If you have them, unprincipled men will despise you. If you do not have them, principled men will despise you. My advice, my son, is therefore to choose terribly mediocre principles but keep to them religiously."

– Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthe of Nicae

"And the nature of her alliance with the First Prince?"

Akua Sahelian had found that betrayal was not unlike putting on an old dress. The cut did not quite fit as it would have once did, but there was a certain comfort in the... familiarity of the object. Sargon had been dear enough to grant her use of the family's finest scrying mirrors – ancient artefacts, tall as a man and twice as broad – so the illusion that she was seated at a table in the same council room as the Dread Empress of Praes was rather convincing. The clarity of the spell allowed for the game to be played as if they were in person, Malicia reading her face as she read Malicia's. It was rather invigorating to fence this way with a woman of the empress' calibre.

"Largely a result of common interests," Akua said. "There is a surprising degree of trust there, but that is not unexpected after Catherine's restraint during the Peace of Salia."

Callow had been well positioned to extort Procer when the time had come for bargaining. There was not much the First Prince could have afforded to do but bend, given the imminent collapse of her realm if she did not, but Catherine had instead chosen to court goodwill. Given how important the trust between the two greatest rulers of the Great Alliance had become, and the veiled frustration on Malicia's face when she spoke of Procer, Akua was inclined to believe it had been the right decision to make.

"There has been some method to her recklessness," Malicia conceded. "Your opinion, then, on her relationship with Yannu Marave and Itima Ifriqui?"

Oh my, she truly was frustrated. Mentioning those two names – the two heads of the great lines of the Blood that were not Catherine's informal pupils – was a tacit admission that Malicia was trying to get a peace here in Praes by getting the broader Grand Alliance to twist Callow's arm into accepting it. No doubt she'd already tried Cordelia Hasenbach and been rebuffed, so she was now looking for other angles of approach. Unfortunately for the empress, the Dominion was dead grounds in this regard.

"She is highly respected, due to her role in the Grey Pilgrim's resurrection after the Princes' Graveyard," Akua said. "I don't believe she has spoken much with the Lady of Vaccei at all, but she has a solid accord with Lord Yannu."

Akua decided to keep it up her sleeve that not a single one of the Blood would dare to cross Catherine at the moment. Not while she had the Barrow Sword at her side and they very much wanted to avoid her protection of him extending beyond the confines of the war. If she kept meddling in the politics of Levant that might change, but for now having both fear and respect at her back meant that Malicia would find no purchase with the Levantines. It might be amusing to see her fail in the attempt, however, so Akua offered her empress a pleasant smile instead of potentially useful information.

"Her talent for ingratiating herself to key individuals is proving to be an obstacle," Malicia deplored.

And perhaps Akua would have agreed, as a girl, when she could only think of strength through the Empire's conception of it. An outlook that would claim Catherine was ahead because of a superior quality. In this case, Malicia seemed to have decided it was talent for making alliances at the highest rungs of power. To triumph over her the Dread Empress would have to bring her own superior qualities to bear and decisively beat her opponent. Yet the old certitudes no longer rang so true. *Praes is so deeply despised out west nowadays that Hasenbach could not agree to a bargain even if it were advantageous*, Akua thought. *That is not of Catherine's making.*

The Dread Empress had won too many battles, ceasing to question if they needed to be fought at all. Victory was a heady brew, Akua knew better than most, but she was surprised that Malicia would fall prey to such a mistake. The empress had always struck her as being an exquisitely self-controlled woman. Then again, the Carrion Lord was involved. It was always harder to see clearly when the cut was so close to the heart.

Akua knew that too, and learned the lesson roughly enough it still left the edges of her raw.

"The Dead King has forced together strange alliances," she simply said.

Malicia looked amused, understanding the sentence for the veiled reference that it was.

"How have you found the body?" the empress asked.

Akua closed the fingers of her right hand into a fist, enjoying the sensation of skin on skin. It had been almost overwhelming at first: her time as a shade had blurred the memory of what

sensations actually felt like. Returning to the real thing after the pale shadow she'd lived with had needed some adjustment. There was an even greater boon attached, of course. Akua murmured a single word in the mage tongue, opening her hand into a flat palm, and a dot of hellfire bloomed above it.

"More than satisfactory," she said. "A princely gift, Your Dread Majesty."

"I reward loyalty, Warlock," Malicia smiled. "And sometimes even the anticipation of it."

The Named being spoken aloud earned a small shiver from Akua every time. She was not a claimant for it, not yet, but Creation was recognizing the... possibility. That the potential was there. Neither of them mentioned the spells Malicia's mages had hidden that would allow the empress to kill her with a word, though they both knew they were somewhere in the flesh. As always, the Dread Empress' words had two meanings: if loyalty earned reward, then disloyalty earned punishment. The mere anticipation of it would too, as Malicia had subtly warned.

"I've no doubt ours will be a close relationship, Your Dread Majesty," Akua lied.

"Oh, I agree," Malicia lied back.

The empress deigned to take a sip from her cup, some dark liquor cut with water.

"My decision to place trust in you is why I have decided to assign you to the Black Knight's command for the coming battle," Malicia continued. "Your unique insights into the adversary will be of great use, I am sure, but I most look forward to seeing your magic on display once more."

A transparent enough ploy, but that was on purpose: the empress was asserting control. As the first measure of that control, she wanted Akua to kill enough of the Army of Callow with sorcery that the bridge back to that side would be forever burned. There was not a ruler worth their salt on the continent that did not know Catherine Foundling loved her soldiers just as fiercely as they loved her.

"Of course," Akua replied, not batting an eye. "In that spirit, I would seek your permission to obtain artefacts from my cousin. The Sahelian arsenal is best put to your service, not left to gather dust."

"If he is amenable, I don't see why not," Malicia smiled.

A lie, Akua decided. The answer had been too smooth, too unthinking. Sargon must have already been given strict

instructions about the calibre of what he was allowed to lend her. The empress feared she might be able to slip the leash too early, then. Interesting.

"My thanks," she said, bowing her head.

"Think nothing of it," the empress dismissed. "Are you confident, with such aid, of being able to match the Hierophant on the field?"

"It would depend on the amount of magic he first ingests with **Devour**," Akua said, feigning reluctance. "I have not seen his upper limit as a thaumatophage. Placing mage circles under my command or moving me to Marshal Nim's side early so that I might begin preparing rituals would increase my chances."

She liked Masego. He was a fascinating conversationalist and Akua had something of an inherited fondness for tactless mages. It had been marrying convenience to her own preference to lie about his abilities. With the Tower under the impression that he could simply suck dry entire battalion of mages if they were in sight, he'd be treated as an entity to be avoided instead of a Named that could be fought. And if Malicia's most sensible answer to this was placing greater power in the hands of another special asset – like an incipient Warlock, just for example – then was it not the best of both worlds? The Dread Empress studied her for a moment, then conceded with the slightest movement of the head.

"I will speak with my Black Knight," Malicia said, committing to nothing. "Expect to depart soon."

A moment passed.

"Great gifts bring the expectation of great results, Warlock," the empress added.

Meaning that should she be granted her request failure to match the Hierophant would have... consequences. Ah, how very old-fashioned of her. Akua found it rather charming.

"That is only natural," Akua easily replied.

The empress chuckled. It was a languorous sound, and though it had little effect on her Akua could appreciate the artistry as a fellow seductress. Dread Empress Malicia was almost inhumanly beautiful, of course, but in truth that ran rather somewhat contrary to Akua's tastes. She had spent many years surrounded by the perfect and the splendid, eventually growing tired of the fare. She preferred character nowadays, the interestingly imperfect. The empress was simply too exquisite to qualify. Besides, women were rarely of interest to her. She could count on one hand the number she'd been attracted to. She caught the scent of smoke.

Looking down Akua saw her hand had closed into a fist, smothering the hellflame. She'd not even realized she'd done it. The growing pains of a new body, she told herself.

"I do enjoy conversing with you, Akua," Malicia lightly said. "They are always interesting, our little talks."

"I aim to please," she replied.

The empress smiled and Akua could feel the conversation was now to end. They had reached the end of their business for the day. And it was a whim, to ask, but she did not kill it when it rose. She had wondered from the moment she'd realized that work on the body awaiting her in the depths of the Empyrean Palace would have begun months before she ever set foot in Praes.

"How did you know?" Akua asked.

The Dread Empress of Praes studied her with dark eyes. Not a speck of gold in them. Blood as muddy as the land she'd been born of, running through the veins of the longest-reigning tyrant in the history of Praes.

"That I would turn on them," she said. "I did not, until the very end. How did you *know*?"

Dread Empress Malicia's smile was sad, she thought, and perhaps the sole genuine emotion she had shown this entire conversation.

"You came too late," the empress said. "Even if some loved you, and I expect they did. You came to them too late, Akua. They were never going to forgive you for what they might have forgiven each other. There was no becoming one of the five."

Her face went blank, like she was some kind of tipsy debutante. It was still better than the spasm of pain that would have shown on her face otherwise.

"In the end, darling, you were always going to come back," Malicia gently said. "This is the only home you have."

Sorcery rippled across the mirror, turning it back to simple polished silver, and Akua was left to wonder whether it had been kindness or an assertion of power to end the spell on that sentence. Perhaps a little of both, she decided. Though the dark-skinned woman knew she could have risen to her feet and distracted herself with movement, with pouring herself a cup of wine from the carafe or biting into a pear – the sheer pleasure of proper *taste*, after all this time – she did not. Instead she sat there and closed her eyes, thinking while it was all still fresh.

She had just fooled the empress successfully for the first time, after days of being interrogated for every scrap of knowledge on the Army of Callow and the Grand Alliance that she cared to divulge, but it did not feel like much a victory. She would admit it had been enjoyable, sparring with the empress. Sharpening iron with iron, the two of them knowing a single misstep would be enough for the other to pounce. Yet now that it was over, looking at what had been done, it felt... childish. Gaudy. No, neither of those were exactly right. More like she'd been indulging in something particularly-

"Wasteful," Akua Sahelian murmured.

Scrapping iron for no real purpose save vanity. What had been gained from it all, really? They had circled each other like crocodiles snapping at each other's tails, a triumph only of showing teeth. If instead they had sat and spoken plainly for even an hour, understood where they differed and where they might concur, would it not have – *ah*, she thought. And there it was. That old Sahelian greed, whispering again in her ear: she had left the fire for the dark, but she wanted all the pleasures of both. Akua rose to her feet at last, drawing back the chair and gliding past the wine carafe. It was the long window at the back of the room she sought, great panes of glass that could be pushed open to pair a lazy evening breeze with the view. She leaned against the windowsill, enjoying to the touch of the wind on her face, and lost herself looking at the distant silhouettes of Zaman Ango. The ancient maze, the sloping pyramids of mud.

Malicia had been right, she thought. This was home. The warmth of the fire had lulled her into indolence, but she'd snapped out of it at last. She would not forget that moment in the cave, where it had at last sunk in that *nothing* would make a change. That Akua could turn on her family, on her people, on everything she believed in and had ever loved since she was a child, and still it *would not be enough*. Because her folly had been the doom of a city, of a hundred thousand souls, and while the Gods knew of forgiveness Catherine Foundling did not. Had that been the revenge, she'd wondered then? Making her... and then ripping away the curtain, leaving her to look a merciless truth in the eye.

Maybe it was. Dartwick had wounded more shallowly when she'd made her rip out the eye instead.

And the worst of it was that, even now, part of her ached to leave. To return. It would not go without comment, her absence, and yet Akua thought she might be able to talk her way out of the worst of it. And she'd still have the evenings spent designing wards with Masego, the drinks and lurid gossip with Indrani. Even those cautious, almost Praesi talks with Adjutant – who wanted to learn all she had to tell of the highborn of the Wasteland while

giving back as little as he could for it. And another, of course, the one she'd left behind most of all.

Akua had thought to kill Catherine Foundling, once. To slay her and claim all she had built, perhaps even wearing her face. When she had still been a prisoner of the Mantle of Woe, sent back to the maddening boredom of nothingness in between brief tastes of Creation. Ah, but what *interesting* tastes they had been. Grandiose plans of war against half the continent, diplomacy with the most powerful people on Calernia. Then even more terrible sights, on the way to Keter. And even as she was dragged from wonder to wonder, there was the once-Squire in the middle of it all. Now a Black Queen, turned into everything Akua had thought she might become.

Fascination had been the doom of many a Sahelian.

"But it doesn't matter, does it?" Akua said to the wind.

There was no joy to chase at the end of that path. No long-awaited delight, nothing to suffer for. She would not be forgiven, and even a lifetime of saving strangers and helping fools would not see her redeemed in anyone's eyes. She had been chasing ghosts the entire time. So *why* stay? Why not come back to the home she had sold for *nothing*, to the destiny that had been taken from her? Warlock, yes, for that was Malicia's offer. But why stop there? Sargon wanted her to free him of the soulbox, and so she could use him to free this body from Malicia's yoke. Beyond the walls of Wolof, Praes was a cauldron about to tip over and in such chaos a clever woman could rise far. If she was to have a foot in the Tower, why not climb all the way to the top?

If none of it mattered, why should Akua Sahelian not get everything she deserved?

A voice she was learning to hate whispered that perhaps she already had. She ignored it. It was the voice of weakness, of the lion gone tame. She could see it in her mind's eye, the path up the stairs. It began with the Black Knight, Marshal Nim. The key to the Legions, not that Malicia seemed to have grasped that. Her only Black Knight before Nim had the loyalty of the Legions for having reformed them, but the bond ran deeper than that. Black Knights were the champions of the Tower, commander of armies and killers of heroes. There was a Role: Malicia had done more than simply name a new champion when she had recognized the ogre's claim. Should Marshal Nim prove less than utterly loyal, why, it might just be that the armies of Praes would split between following the old Black Knight and the new.

Did that not simply reek of opportunity? Yes, she decided, it was the beginning of a plan. One that would allow her to sit on the sole throne in all of Praes, before all was said and done.

So why, Akua Sahelian wondered, was she not hearing the song?

—

Amadeus had always enjoyed looking at the Hungering Sands as night fell.

It was a pleasure to the eye, the way the sky turned to vivid purples and yellows with not a cloud in sight. The way the shadows lengthened among the dunes like slithering snakes. Even the coolness was pleasant, when wearing a cloak. That much had been a necessity, given that it was only feasible to meet the woman he'd come to see under some cover of darkness. He'd not seen her in at least fifteen years, by Amadeus' reckoning, but neither of them would forget the other. Lady Layan Kaishi had once been Commander Layan of the Third Legion, before she came to rule a prosperous little town at the outskirts of the Hungering Sands.

She'd lost an arm at the siege of Laure, and not in a manner where it might be replaced, but the Legions had not abandoned her. When she'd sought a discharge and returned home to settle accounts with her family, 'volunteer legionaries on leave' had accompanied her. Lord Kaisha had fallen down some stairs, as had his young wife – Layan's own age, he'd heard – whose luck in birthing a son possessing the Gift had first seen Layan given the choice of the Legions or the grave. Some of those legionaries had even returned after their terms were over, stayed on as household guards, and though the holdings of Lady Layan were not large or rich they were known to be orderly. It'd drawn people to her town, as safety always did in troubled times.

Layan had not forgotten whose help it was that'd seen her made a lady: when Amadeus had contacted her, she'd agreed to lend a hand without hesitation. It had not been an onerous favour he asked for, anyway, simply the use of one of her family mages for a scrying ritual. Sometimes the dark-haired man wondered if anyone aside from Eudokia really grasped the sheer number of veterans he'd settled across the breadth of Praes. Most of them were not lords or ladies, of course – a campaign to stack the nobility with his veterans would have caused rebellion – but he'd seen to their livelihoods. Appointments in the local bureaucracies, free land leases in the Green Stretch, cushy posts in city guards or advantageous trade permits.

The Legions of Terror had bled for him across a dozen fields. Amadeus would not let their legionaries tumble into destitution after they left the ranks. And now, in his own time on need, he had found many doors still open to him. It was not the same as when he had been able to call on the Eyes, when Eudokia and Ime had left no stone unturned and council unheard, but he'd learned he still had friends in many places. Not a net of them, but it was better that way. Ime would have been able to infiltrate an

organized apparatus, but she could not track entire decades of friendships and loyalties forged through two wars. So long as Amadeus remained quick and careful, so long as he kept moving, the Eyes would stay one step behind. It'd be enough.

In most fights, one step's worth of distance was all that he needed.

Layan had aged gracefully, hair threaded with silver and skin wrinkled but staying fit in form. She'd come to him out in the sands with her mage, as the odds were good that there was at least one traitor in her keep, but when they met she had hesitated before clasping the arm he offered. Amadeus's lips quirked in amusement. She had not been the first of his veterans to react this way.

"The beard?" he teased.

"And the grey," Layan admitted. "Never thought I'd see you with either, sir. No offence."

"None taken," he said. "You'd be surprised how many reacted the same."

She snorted.

"With all due respect, sir, no I wouldn't," Layan said.

For all the levity, her eyes had sharpened when he'd mentioned others. She hesitated, then spoke again.

"Is it true?" Layan asked. "That out west you made a claim on the Tower?"

"Rumours fly far and swift, I see," Amadeus noted.

"Rashan up north was a captain in the Fifth," Lady Layan said. "His kid and one of mine are married. Lady Salah's husband, out in Jubar, he's the brother of the Second's last quartermaster. We talk, sir. And not just us. There's a lot who came home after the wars who're still around. And a lot of us who have kin in the Legions and the Army."

It still filled Amadeus with a rueful sort of pride, every time he heard the army raised by Istrid's daughter and his own spoken of as a peer to the Legions he'd given so many years of his life to.

"I spoke words at the Peace of Salia," Amadeus said. "I stand by them still."

Layan Kaishi nodded, eyes hooded in the unfolding dark of the evening.

"There's a lot of us who'll come, if you call," she quietly said. "More than you know. Not just veterans and our families."

She hesitated.

"It can't go on like this, sir," Layan said. "This *chaos*. Ashur burns our coasts and now we play parlour games pretending they're allies?"

She spat to the side, into the sand.

"Fuck that," Layan cursed. "And whatever the Hells is happening with Sepulchral up north should have been stamped out years ago, not left to burn for whatever scheme this is. The empress is getting lost in her plots, sir. Doesn't matter she keeps winning, we're just *tired* of the games."

And in a way, Amadeus thought, those few sentences he'd just heard were the most damning a verdict passed on Alaya's reign he'd yet to hear. Because when the Tower was losing people like Layan, who was neither rebellious nor ambitious by nature, who most wanted out of a ruler competence and order, something had gone wrong. *Were you always like this, Alaya, and I simply never wanted to see it?* No, he did not believe that. They had lost perspective, over the years. He as much as she. They'd spent too long sitting on high seats, forgot what the view from the mud was like. Like all empires, like all rulers, they had reached their zenith and begun to decay. Old mistakes were yet in need of mending, and Amadeus of the Green Stretch would not relent until he had laid them all to rest.

That much he owed, to all and to himself.

"I am already a rebel, Layan," he faintly smiled.

"We can be too, if you want," his veteran boldly offered. "And there's enough of us we can get High Lady Takisha behind you if you toss her a few bones. It's not just us old hands who want an end to the messes. We've got support."

The High Lady of Kahtan would turn on him the very moment she felt she was in a position to claim the Tower for herself, of course. They both knew that without Layan needing to speak the words.

"Another banner raised won't end this," Amadeus gently declined. "But beyond your help tonight, there *is* something that can be done."

Layan Kaisha was almost seventy. She'd not been in the Legions of Terror for over twenty years. And still, the moment he finished that sentence, she snapped at attention like a cadet fresh off the College rolls. *Some things just stay with us, don't they?* he

fondly thought. Amadeus understood. He, too, had never quite shaken the stray dog out of his bones. He still found it easier to bite than kneel.

"High Lady Takisha has gathered the nobles of the south to her court," he said. "Do not let them disperse. Take them north: Ater is where this all comes to a close."

Layan slowly nodded.

"So long as the Grey Eyries are rebelling and Old Wither's holed up in Foramen, many will balk at leaving the Sands," she said.

"The Tribes won't move," Amadeus said.

It was not a prediction or a promise. It was a statement of fact. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Are they- no, best you don't answer that," she decided. "They can't get out of me what I don't know."

It was rather heartwarming to see that the safety protocols Ranker had designed were still being kept to. Her contributions to the Reforms had been more discreet than his or Grem's, but no less crucial for it.

"I'll spread the word, sir," Layan said. "We should have enough pull for it."

And Alaya would want the nobles close, even if she lost the battle taking shape in the depths of the Wasteland. The starker her disarray, the closer she would want them to the Tower: troublesome as they would be in its shadow, it was nothing to the trouble they would make out of her reach. So even if the Eyes learned he had a hand in this, and they would, Alaya would allow it. She would trust in her mastery of the Court to triumph against whatever scheme he might have arranged.

"There'll be a battle, before it ends," Amadeus said, offering his arm to clasp.

"Then we'll meet again, sir," Layan smiled, taking it. "I still fit in my armour."

She cast a look around, glossing over the young mage she'd brought as he requested – he had long prepared the ritual, needing only a word to begin – and casting about for another shadow in the gloom.

"I'd heard the Lady was with you," she said, a question in her tone.

"Ranger's out and about," he smiled. "Checking to see if there are any rats."

"I pity them if there are," Layan muttered.

With one last glance they parted ways, Amadeus sliding down the side of the hill to speak to the mageling in neat robes awaiting by a simple scrying bowl laid atop a rock.

"I can begin at your pleasure, my lord," the young man said. "Though the key you gave me is utter nonsense, so it ought to do nothing at all."

"Then it will do nothing," Amadeus serenely replied. "The spell, now."

Though somewhat put out, the young sorcerer duly spoke the incantation and the spell shivered across the air. When the water's surface rippled the mageling gaped in surprise. Amadeus' cool stare shook him out of it, making the dismissal clear. He bowed, then ran off after his aunt into the sands. The green-eyed man passed a hand through his hair, which he decided was getting a little too long, and waited for the ripples to cease. It took nearly a quarter hour for it to happen, and only then did a face appear in the water. Deep-set yellow eyes and wrinkled skin that looked like brown-green leather swam into focus.

High Lady Wither of Foramen, formerly Matron of the High Ridge Tribe, looked highly irritated until she realized who it was she was looking at. Then her face went blank, mouth closing shut with a snap.

"Good evening, Wither," Amadeus smiled, showing only the faintest slice of teeth. "It's been some time, hasn't it?"

The old goblin hissed in displeasure through her teeth, almost like a whistle. Obtaining the key to her private scrying bowl had not endeared him to her, evidently.

"Never long enough, Carrion Lord," she said. "Come to threaten me into changing sides?"

"I usually threaten only people I intend to later kill regardless," Amadeus noted. "Fear is a poor incentive for alliance. I suppose I could bluster a bit, if it will make you feel better about what is to follow."

"And what's that?" Wither mocked, flashing her teeth mockingly.

"I am going to tell you a story," Amadeus amiably said, "and you will then give me what I politely ask for."

"You're getting thick in your old age, Carrion Lord," Wither said. "My defences are fine enough Ranger didn't even try for my life when you two passed through Foramen. You have nothing to

threaten me with, and any offer you make the Tower will double without batting an eye."

Ah, Wither. For all that she was the first Matron to truly enter the highest reach of Praesi politics, she'd yet to learn to think beyond the goblin conception of conflict. Amadeus had never attempted to lay a hand on the High Lady of Foramen because what he'd come for had been of much greater value than anything an assassination might bring about. The green-eyed man had promised his old acquaintance a story, however, and so he would tell it.

"After the fall of Summerholm, during the Conquest," Amadeus said, "it took less than six hours for the first rebel group to form."

Garrison soldiers and a hedge wizard that'd escaped the Fields of Streges, planning to go to ground until most of the Legions left the city and then strike out at the invasion's supply lines while the siege of Laure began. It had been a reasoned and practical plan, in Amadeus' opinion. He'd appreciated the professionalism of it. Unfortunately Wekesa had spared the mage on purpose at the Fields, marking him with a discreet tracking spell, so they'd all been executed after interrogation.

"Three more emerged the following day," he continued. "Even with Scribe personally overseeing the Eyes in the city, it quickly became clear that the situation was not tenable. Sooner or later we'd miss the cabals and the push against Laure would be endangered. Something needed to be done."

Some had suggested mass executions of former soldiers, but Amadeus had found that ill-advised. It would simply replace known possible insurgents with military training for thrice their number in grieving relatives inclined to methods of insurgency that were harder to put down. If not worse. Callowans had long proven that they were perfectly willing to torch their own towns and cities while invaders were in them, should they be pushed far enough.

"The grey's brought rambling with it," Wither snorted. "You're turning into a joke, Amadeus."

The dark-haired man's friendly smile did not waver.

"It occurred to me, then, that fighting the inevitable was pointless," he said. "There *would* be rebel cabals. This was not an issue, however, so long as they were *manageable* rebel cabals."

"So you started making your own rebel groups," Wither dismissed. "Where spies were in the ranks from the start. I know the tale, Carrion Lord. It's an old one – have you run out of cleverness, to be boasting of tricks decades old?"

"Ah," the Carrion Lord said. "So you *do* remember."

He cocked his head to the side.

"Why, then, did you old witches believe I wouldn't catch you out using the same trick?"

Wither's face went blank.

"Come now," Amadeus murmured. "Alaya never bothered to understand your people beyond the levers that could be used to move them, Wither, but I made a *study* of you. Did you really think I wouldn't figure out the Tribes have been making their own traitors for centuries?"

On the surface, the goblin custom of constant backstabbing and treachery was remarkably similar to broader Praesi philosophies: iron sharpening iron, echoes of jino-waza. But that was a surface resemblance only. Goblins always preferred taking from outsiders than each other. Competition was brutal within units – within a family, a tribe, within *the* Tribes – but unlike the governing philosophies of Praes the Tribes did have a concept of the 'common good' of their kind. They could and did sacrifice, if not for each other, then for the sake of their race. When the Goblin Rebellions became losing proposition, the Matrons always made the same decision: one or more turned traitor, the rest were butchered to appease the Tower.

There must always be someone in the Grey Eyries that Ater could deal with, else the talk might turn to annihilation instead of vassalage.

"You are grasping at straws," Wither dismissed, "your position has become des-"

"It was cleverly done," Amadeus honestly praised. "Whoever wins the war, wherever the balance of power lies, the Tribes will gain. Either Alaya keeps the Tower and you are confirmed the first High Lady of your kind, or the Grand Alliance prevails and the Confederation of the Grey Eyries is recognized as a sovereign nation by more than half the continent."

It had been, in that classically goblin way, a viciously executed gambit. Because whether it was Wither that was the face of goblinkind going forward or the Confederation, the 'loser' would have to be drowned in blood. The deception risked being found out otherwise, the truth that the Matrons had planned this entire civil war of theirs from the start and that Wither was still very much one of them.

"You have nothing," Wither said. "Not a thimble of proof to back this, because it is complete *lunacy*."

"You played it too straight, Wither," Amadeus told her, not unkindly. "That is what gave you away. We came to Foramen and there was not a *single* secret line of communication between you and the Matrons."

He saw the realization sink into her, the way her large eyes narrowed in dismay. They had overcorrected in cutting off ties entirely. The Matrons *should* have been secretly negotiating with Wither if this was a genuine civil war. They'd wholly cut ties because they did not want the Eyes to catch them talking and figure out the entire affair was a ploy, which had been the very detail to confirm for Amadeus that it was all a ploy. Alaya would understand it too, if it was brought to her. Wither knew that.

And so she knew that Amadeus now had his fingers around a throat: hers and all the Tribes'.

"You sat on that for more than a year," Wither finally said. "You've not simply been wandering around drinking and fucking the Lady of the Lake."

Well, he'd not done *just* that.

"In the spirit of our understanding," Amadeus amiably said, "I would like to make polite requests of you."

"What is it you want, Carrion Lord?" Wither hissed. "You've turned the knife enough for a night."

"I would like you to refrain from sallies outside your territory."

"Fine," Wither said, with ill grace.

"I would like use of your smuggling routes into Ater."

She began to speak, but Amadeus raised a hand to interrupt her.

"I know the Matrons' own were closed, but also Alaya left you your own as a reward," he said. "Don't bother."

Wither grunted.

"Anything else?" she mocked.

"Oh, just one last thing," Amadeus nonchalantly said.

The friendly smile turned thin and blade-like.

"I would like every last drop of goblinfire in possession of the Tribes."

[Droughtbringer](#)

Keep the Guide at the top!

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Sorry if this annoys anyone, but go boost!

[Liliet](#)

This is INDESCRIBABLY less annoying than the altered quotes versions others post -_-

bless you for doing this

stevenneiman

Eh, I like the altered quotes better. Requires a little more creativity. Then again, I also unironically like Loss and Rickrolling, so I might just be weird. But either version is good to remind people to vote.

[Liliet](#)

I do like rickrolling and I hate loss so idk.

The altered quotes have an unpleasant tendency to use quotes that are otherwise meaningful/touching. Altering them to cheap jokes instead feels a little like taking a sip from a glass of water only to discover there's a turd in it. I just... wow, I can't even describe how unpleasant it is to *accidentally* read them. It's made worse by how people who make them are often good at making the alteration punchy/memorable so it STICKS in your head, too.

I know I'm not the only one who feels like that, though it's obviously not universal.

Just... wow. I wish there was a way to block them or something, just so I'd never see them again.

[BarthHumphries](#)

I know. I hate those creative people who can take something you love and make a witty pun out of it that you remember long after you've forgotten that thing that you originally loved. 😊

[Liliet](#)

*barfs on you because seriously this feels GROSS and I actively feel sick about it when it happens, like

physically, I am not exaggerating for comedic value, I love puns, my brain just completely rejects these alterations with psychosomatic results*

[BarthHumphries](#)

> these alterations with psychosomatic results

Just saying, those are also technically puns. I'm sorry for your discomfort. Good luck! 😊

[Liliet](#)

To the shock and confusion of scientists, it turns out bad puns do, in fact, exist)=

The stock market crashes, there's panic in the streets...

jamesc9

RoyalRoad has spoiler tags. Is something like that possible here, to enable people to make their reuse easy to avoid?

[Liliet](#)

Considering WordPress doesn't even let you fucking edit your own fucking comments? I expect not -_-

Insanenoodlyguy

"As a rule, vote reminders are trouble. If you make them elaborate, the ones who want simple reminders will despise you. If you do not have them, the bored will despise you. My advice, my son, is therefore to choose terribly corny reminders but keep to them religiously."

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Tenthyr

Oh he was not being metaphorical about breaking the damn tower.

Zggt

He does seem the type to be thorough when destroying something

Konstantin von Karstein

I thought the same!

That Other Guy

He is planning on seeing Cat again soon. Might as well prepare properly, right?

Cicero

Cat's going to get blamed for setting Ater on fire and burning every Praesi noble to death, isn't she?

Halinn

Would you have it any other way?

[Casey Glick](#)

"It was on fire before I got there, I promise!"
– Black Queen Catherine Founding

Cpt. Obvious

So THAT'S why Akua can't hear the song, there won't be a tower for the girl to climb...

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I look forward to Tuesday and Friday. Then I wait until I am done with work (job, house/home) and winding down for the evening to Read.

I save you for last.

Always good writing. Plot, Character, Pacing, you name it. Your writing is simply hands down the best I've seen online. And the Meta is not just Strong, it's "Baked In".

I've imagined a desktop RPG, an old-skool single player story driven RPG video game, an Online Version...

I love your Epic.

Thank you

-a devoted fan.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I'm winding down Thursday night, re-reading for tomorrow night, then I find out you're at least 3 hours before PST.

SMH. I'm gonna read this Tomorrow night. I thought I was posting this on Tuesday's post, Interlude: West I.

Irony. But I'm still gonna wait.

dadycool

It comes out around 9pm Monday and Thursday for me, so I'm always excited for evening on those days.

Anomandris

For me, it's like Tuesday and Friday at 930 AM. So, perfect after checking into work, replying to messages and then read at my leisure with a nice cup of coffee

Big I

So he's planning on killing all the nobles, burning the Tower and maybe Ater along with it. That's dark if it's true.

Alex

There is also the possibility that he is bluffing. Imagine that the goblins leak that Amadeus got his hands on the goblinfire arsenal and is heading for Ater. Malicia tries to keep the nobles close, but they want to run. They might even start infighting before he reaches the city.

Alex K

Damn, Catherine is going to be blame for another city burned with goblin fire?

Insanenoodlyguy

The prefect plan at last unfolds. All of this, since the beginning that night in the ally. All of it was to make a incredible warlord with a known penchant for fire: all to pin the greatest conflaguration Goblin Alchemy will ever cause on somebody else. He's gonna gut the whole nobility and the damn tower in one fell swoop, and either give his daughter the credit or let her take the blame. Either way, just as planned.

therealgridlock

All according to keikaku.

And in other news, that would be brilliant, because Cat would take credit just to say that she gets to reform Praes in her image 😊

Anomandris

Well, there is always Akua to throw the blame on....what's another destroyed city, or two?

In any case, that isn't Black, sorry, Maddie's way. He has always been taking full responsibility of everything he does – good, bad or absolute carnage

The point that made me lol was Wither thinking her defences were too good for Hye....if Amadeus and the Ranger want you Dead, you are dead... (Or, well, undead...)

par

> The point that made me lol was Wither thinking her defences were too good for Hye right?? this is the Lady who regularly broke into Keter for shits lmao

[Sethur](#)

Agreed. If Wither's defenses were as good as she claimed, Ranger would have taken that as a challenge and at least tried to kill her. The fact that Ranger was around and didn't bother to try means she already knew she'd succeed.

Shveiran

I know, right? This is Penthes and Mercantis all over again... And it is just so viscerally satisfying to see the world remind them of their actual place in the food chain.

thisismyName

I'm thinking one big final team-up before he rides off into the sunset. "Look, daughter, I got you a gift! Can we be civil for 6 hours while we use it on ? I promise I'll stay out of your hair afterwards, me and my girlfriend will just go muder-hobo elsewhere. Look us up sometime after you give the throne away."

dadycoool

Nooo, Amadeus! Don't take all of Cat's goblin fire! At least he's generous enough to leave the rest for her.

Sparsebeard

Like daughter, like father!

Anomandris

Well, Cat's speciality is usually flooding rather than burning.....

dadycoool

While true, I'm pretty sure Sparsebeard was referring to the stunt Cat just pulled with Wolof, the whole "You're gonna willingly give me exactly what I ask for and there's nothing you can do about it."

Benjamin Huang

I see the reflection of burning Towers in those green glass eyes....

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Somebody much more clever than I could make a riff on Al Stewart's "Roads to Moscow" based on this ...

Benjamin Huang

"Eyes of green and gears of brass,
Ticking softly beneath the glass,
A vast machine of terrible yield,
Westward always lies the field,
A crown of blades but no throne for he,
Who would see the gameboard neath his feet,
Flames of green and a burning Tower,
His to claim, a Role to Devour,
Armies afoot one last time,
One sin, one grace, so ends the rhyme"

NerfGlaistigUaine

Holy shit, you wrote this yourself? Kudos man.

[Adrian_V](#)

Oh i see where this is going, like father like daughter, would it be the other waya rounf in this case? Anyway we all know who will be blamed for this, he may even do that on purpose xD

dadycool

"I'm gonna set this whole nation ablaze and everyone's gonna blame Cat for it, who will tear her hair out trying to sort it out." The ultimate prank he could pull, especially since it'll look to everyone like she's trying to legit conquer the place.

NerfGlaistigUaine

It's amazing that even after all this time Amadeus still scares the shit out of me like no other character.

[sengachi](#)

I love it when war stories talk about the concept of becoming too used to winning, and so not even questioning whether fighting is necessary. And this whole chapter executed on that so well.

Deworld

Huh. Hadn't expected Akua's interlude this early. I thought it would be placed later when she already settled with Malicia, so we would see the process from Cat's eyes first. Well, that was a surprise, but not an unwelcome one I would say. Akua's character arc is the most interesting part of the story as of now.

So, she directly plans to take the Tower. Nice, theories are gaining more weight. It would be that mentioning it that early

can jinx it, but I don't think that what we have now is enough. The fact that she doesn't hear the song is interesting though. Perhaps claiming the Tower isn't something she truly wants. I wonder if it'll stop her in the end? I hope not. There's something ironic that being Dread Empress would be a punishment for Akua.

hakureireimu

We already saw the process from Cat's eye last chapter.

Deworld

All we've seen is how she left. What I mean is seeing some real actions. Attacking Army of Callow in the upcoming battle, doing sabotage using her internal knowledge, becoming an actual Warlock, that sort of thing. So Cat would actually doubt about Akua, and we with her. Giving her new priorities (even if it's clear these are not final ones) to us this early isn't something I expected.

[Liliet](#)

It's because tension needs payoff. Akua's arc going anywhere or not has been in tension since book 4, and it was really way past time we found out what her head sounds like from the inside.

That is – now, now that we have new tension in the form of “there's an Akua in the redemption arc! No-one knows what she's going to do, least of all Akua – she's never been in a redemption arc before!”

Deworld

I just expected tension to be built up a little more, that's it. Not that I'm against what happened – the opposite, as I said. Guess I just tend to have pessimistic expectations in regards to what we'll see and when.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, EE's pace IS picking up in the last four chapters...

Lord Haart

I still feel like “redemption” is too clean/strong a word for where this might head.

I don't think Akua will end up as a sixth wheel in the Woe again, for example. Or that Cat will ever actually let that last layer of guard down. The Doom of Liesse may have been partly a product of her time but she still was

intelligent enough to understand her actions and what she did is DONE.

There is no way back, maybe just a way sideways. My money is still on her claiming the Tower and ultimately being the factor that ends Praes as the contential problem that it is, either by (purposefully?) being a terrible Dread Empress or by outright bringing the Tower down *herself*.

Ending the Tower and the Flying Fortess madness that comes with it would perhaps be the only kind of peace she could bring herself, and I still wouldn't count that as redemption.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine's rejection of Akua is not about letting her guard down. She trusts her in full already and sees what her choices are going to be when, that was a different thing entirely.

Redemption is a fucky word. Far as I'm concerned, Akua's far enough from who she'd once been that she's been doing the redemption thing the entire time and honestly still is, just in a weird direction – because in my eyes, redemption just means change. Means you're not the person you've been. And you gotta KEEP not being that person, so the journey's never over. It's not about "making up" for what was lost, that's a different thing entirely. It's not about being forgiven, because you cannot force that no matter how minor the original offense. It's just about facing in a direction away from what decisions you'd once made, and walking forward.

Evgeny Permyakov

>Giving her new priorities

Was it done, though ? The giving of her new priorities, I mean. As far as I can tell, she sees a path before her, but she is very ambiguous about if she want to walk it.

Also, curiously, while we have wording "sit on a throne before all is said and done" it isn't worded to be the final goal.

[Liliet](#)

Akua has already offered and even insisted on sacrificing herself for Cat's goals, that one time in Lost&Found. Her priorities are conflicted because she still has lingering loyalties to her home, and she still also wants stuff like a new body and getting to use sorcery again. And of course she's now reeling from heartbreak (again).

(Which is likely at least in part less heartbreak and more struggling with guilt and desire for forgiveness/absolution. A small voice in the back of her head saying she already got what she deserved, hm? That shit hurts, of course she's running)

If Akua didn't have the new priorities, she wouldn't be talking about how much she just wants to go back, to design wards with Masego and gossip with Indrani, and even where she is to just have a... regular productive conversation with Malicia, not a sniping session.

Pyrdwein

Does no one else think the goblin fire is meant more for Keter than the civil war? I have to imagine that's an unbelievable amount squirreled away, especially goblins being goblins. Sure he will use some but I have to figure he's going to trade it to his daughter somehow. Just giving it wouldn't be his style, but he'll let her earn it old school dad style where he won't admit his pride and support outright. Instead he will create an impasse or scenario where she gets exactly what she needs without him having to actually be honest about his support and pride lol.

[308924810a](#)

I ... am unclear on how Cat is going to react to Amadeus burning down Ater after her introducing the Liesse accords with provisions specifically to prevent 'people from burning down half a city to kill a ruler'.

I wonder whether Amadeus has a technical wording loophole he can use to get away with this.

[sengachi](#)

... well. Now that phrase is starting to sound like foreshadowing.

[308924810a](#)

A shocking amount of this story is foreshadowed in throwaway phrases and jokes. I really need to find someone else rereading this thing and get their opinions on how many times that happens.

Though in that case I thought the phrase was a reference to how Scribe's catspaws nearly burned down Salia to try to kill Cordelia.

I begin to wonder whether Black really intends to survive/remain on calernia and infleuntial in the empire through to this new era Cat is building, so long as the High Seats and more problematic nobles also don't survive and he leaves Cat

forced to take over the empire in order to keep it under control, he and the empire still wins in the end, guaranteeing that Callow will always be willing to make their food available to the wasteland by keeping them one country.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Amadeus hasn't intended to survive to see the new era from the start, at least from the moment he stabbed Cat to make her his Squire. He's even spelled out that he's "a tool no longer needed" to her face that one time.

Nothing new :3

Earl of Purple

He does. It won't be *half* a city he burns down, and he's planning on killing way more than the ruler.

[308924810a](#)

That ... could be a loophole.

If you're burning down a city not to kill one person, but to kill a most-of-a-city-occupying mass of people, that might be a permissible level of force.

[Liliet](#)

It probably helps that not many people realize that Tower is *basically* a city (and I doubt he intends to burn down the whole of Ater)

[Liliet](#)

I mean. Accords HAVEN'T been signed yet. They don't have retroactive clause.

Shveiran

I'm guessing it would still burn a bridge, though. My bet is on this being a gargantuan bluff.

therealgridlock

It'll burn more than a bridge, I tell ya hwhat.

[Liliet](#)

I just honestly don't think the GA leaders will care. Praesi affairs are dismissed easily, and the fact the Tower is *basically* a small city with all the workers is not... regularly a part of their considerations.

Cat might put this as another mark in her “wow my dad is an awful person” tally, well “might” she absolutely will, but it’s not political suicide.

Shveiran

So... your take is Catherine Foundling would not throw a fit over nuking the largest city on the surface of Calernia for no good reason at all?

I... disagree?

[Liliet](#)

Wait, you think he wants to burn down ATER, not just the Tower?

Shveiran

No *I* don’t think he would, but that was what the original post was about. I was saying that he wouldn’t.

...though admittedly I have no idea how he could burn down the Tower in the middle of Ater with a highly unstable substance that devours everything without bringing down the city with it.
My bet is that this is a bluff.

[Liliet](#)

Well, there is that gatekeeper demon at the base of the Tower...

Who would he be bluffing tho? The information about goblinfire won’t spread further than the Matrons bc of how he got it.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Bet he’ll only burn down a third of the city. Loophole!

[sengachi](#)

I think my favorite part of Akua’s downfall is that she could have had *almost* every happiness she wanted. But she had that Sahelian greed. She thought she was entitled to that last little piece of happiness. And it ruined all the rest.

She could have had those evenings designing wards with Masego, trading knowledge and insight freely and without a hint of contest. She could have had that casual friendship with Indrani, a woman who grew up loving a monster as a mother and so does not care what a monster Akua was. She could have kept sharpening her iron against Hakram, a genuine sharpening of iron where both are

the better for it and both know they will never hurt the other because of a shared loyalty to someone greater.

And she could have had Cat. Not her love, but her friendship. Her presence. Akua could have laid her broken heart to rest and spent a hundred years at Catherine's side as a friend, a confidant, a respected advisor, a right hand. She could have had something close to what Hakram has with Cat, with maybe a bit of what Indrani and Masego have with Cat as well.

But Akua felt entitled to Cat's romantic love. She'd done all the right things, said all the right words, committed in all the right ways, why couldn't she have that too? Why couldn't she **earn** Cat's love by being good enough?

She didn't have it in her to recognize that she could have been sad, experienced heartbreak, and admitted that yeah, sometimes you fuck up badly enough and it costs you. She could have recognized that **most** people, almost everyone in fact, don't get **everything** they want in life. And she could have been happy with being happy. With having good enough, with having days that were happier and warmer and better than anything she ever could have imagined in her old life.

But she felt entitled. She had to have that. last. drop.

And when she couldn't have it she threw everything away, to start over in the one last place where she thought she could win it all. She could climb the Tower, sit atop the throne, and **win**. She could win until there was no more winning to do, until she won and won and won and won until she could not climb any higher on that path.

Only to find that the highest reaches of this path will never make her as happy as sitting around the fire with the Woe.

And it was all her fault.

ruduen

I find it interesting that she's very much focused on 'the end of the story'. A lot of her plans seemed to be devoted to climbing the tower, but so much of her effort was spent on getting to the end result that she tends to forget about what happens along the way.

Meanwhile, she's so distraught because the end of her story with Cat would involve not getting that last bit of satisfaction. She's so desperate for that ending, despite it being likely that even the journey so far were some of the happiest times in her existence.

If one is focused on the ending, it can be easy to forget that they're only one piece of a story – and that there's a whole lot making up everything before, and even what comes after, when the tale is told. The end of a story is often defining, but it isn't always the final part of a character's life.

[sengachi](#)

That's a huge part of it too. Akua was so focused on the romantic relationship with Cat she couldn't have, that end-goal peak of relationship status (as she saw it), that she couldn't focus on what she **did** have with Cat.

ninegardens

Yeah... her focus on the forgiveness and romantic relationship that Cat would not and could not give her... that she feels **entitled to** after all her efforts just seems...kinda sick and entitled. like "No one owes you a relationship".

And like... actually all the stuff she has done for Cat **was** already paid for*. It's not like Cat didn't give her a spot by the fire, mercy, friendship, support etc. Cat (and family) have given Akua SO many things. This is not to lessen all she has done for them, but... she mostly just seems bratty. 😞

(To be clear, this is not bad writing, just... a normal person thinking in a biased manner after having their heart broken... and she still seems kind of dumb as a plank)

[Liliet](#)

I think the entitlement is just her reeling. She REALLY WANTED IT, and now that Cat basically slapped her in the face with that "no", she's soothing herself with "I totally deserved it, Cat's just being mean". Even now she has a voice whispering that she got what she deserved in her head.

Absolution/forgiveness is important to her BECAUSE she feels bad about what she did, now :3

[sengachi](#)

Of course she gets to reel. That's not entitlement. The entitlement is in Akua **going back to Evil** because she didn't get Cat's romantic affections.

People get to be sad when they get rejected. They deserve some understanding if they act in complicated ways afterward or struggle with surging emotions. But going back to literal Evil with a capital E because you're rejected, Evil with slaves and human sacrifice and betrayal for its own sake and

the whole nine yards? That's right up there with shooting up a school after being rejected.

And I use that metaphor very intentionally. Joining Praes and giving intel on Callow, however much Akua may shield the Woe themselves, is an act of mass slaughter. Cat may have some plan in place to mitigate it, or to ensure this turns out in her favor in the end. But if she does Akua doesn't know it, and is turning over intel to Malicia with full knowledge it will see people die in droves for nothing more than the sake of Malicia and Akua's personal power.

That's why Cat had the right of it, in rejecting Akua's romantic advances. Akua was capable of performing good. She was capable of doing the right thing for the right reasons and she realized the true benefits of compassion and cooperation. But she wasn't capable of letting go of that entitlement that: A) There had to be a 100% win condition for her, and B) Not winning 100% justifies flipping the board (even at the cost of other's lives).

I don't think Cat would have been happy with her in the long term, with this aspect of her personality lurking underneath. Because Cat is a person of sacrifices. She constantly deals with the fact she can't have everything. Every single arc has been her learning to make more and more mature decisions about what to pursue like a dog with a bone, and what to let go. Hell it gets hammered home like every five chapters that Cat's personal biggest desire of the Liesse Accords, "no Named rulers", just isn't happening, and Cat *lets it go*. She mourns it, frets about it, can't stop thinking about it.

But she lets it go, because the rest is too important.

Akua doesn't. She goes Evil because her beau rejects her.

[Liliet](#)

It's a little more complicated than that.

It's very much worth remembering that Catherine is currently waging war on her HOME. As Catherine has commented on Sahelians in general, Akua might have hated her mom, but she has genuine attachment to her family as an abstract idea – she argued about SAHELIAANS being capable of kindness on the example of her great-uncle Thandiwe back at the start of Book 5. She talks about "selling her home for nothing" in this chapter.

Akua isn't dangling between "principle" and "none", she's dangling between two sets of principles. It's important to remember that she was ALWAYS acting out of a sense of

duty, "how an heiress to Wolof should act". Akua isn't just doing "the worst thing she can" here, she is doing "the right thing, alternative edition".

She's going back to how she was BROUGHT UP to consider right and wrong, now that she's here and the memory is newly fresh. And in that framework, her loyalty to Cat was a "lethal fascination", everything about wanting to go back is her mind betraying itself the way minds do, and what she OUGHT to do is take the opportunity and wring it out to the very last.

She has rejected this set of principles before, but between sharp pain from considering how Cat's set works right now (the refusal of forgiveness, the voice in her head telling her she got what she deserved) and her childhood home, *everything she ever loved as a child* right there in front of her, she's snapped right back to it.

She doesn't even *like* what she's doing. She enjoys her body but she does not enjoy any other part of her situation, she even hates the verbal sparring with Malicia. It's just the only other "right thing to do" available to her.

nimelennar

"If you do this, there is no place in Creation or beyond that will safeguard you from me, I'd sworn. Not Heavens or Hells, not even if every lord in Arcadia swears to you. The doom I promise you will have men trembling in a thousand years when they speak of Akua's Folly and the woe that came from it."

therealgridlock

Oh lawd it's coming!

Lord Haart

Yeah this is why I don't think it's going to be as simple as "Akua turns on Malicia and gives Cat what she wants as Empress and they hug."

Akua's only real choice now – the only choice that might mean storing to WHO she is now – is to set a precedent that Cat is right. That being a Villain of that caliber will utterly destroy the ambitions the Villain seeks.

I think the Tower is going to have a demon problem soon. She's the former Diabolist, we've heard about the Sahelion demon more than once now, plus the one in the Tower, and then we know that Goblinfire involves demons so enough of it together might just well conjure one...

mamm0nn

Wither: What do you want?

Amadeus: I want you to stay put, give me a smuggle route into Praes, and...

Wither: And?

Amadeus: I want to pull a Catherine.

Wither: **Sighs deeply.** Really? All of it? I don't think even Ranger can carry that much.

Wither: But I'm afraid I can't help you. See, a young lass called Warlock came and asked for the same thing.

Amadeus: And the fact that you divulge this so easily means that you turned her down. Someone else asked for it first, didn't they?

Wither: That crazy witch Sepulchal, of course, but she's just a madwoman grasping straws and copying her betters. And before her, some handsome dwarf from the Lannisters. And before him, the orcs. Those idiots wanted to smear the stuff on their axes to be extra deadly.

Amadeus: But if they don't have it, then who...?

Meanwhile, at Camp Callow

Cat: Zeze, what's that?

Masego: A smoothy.

Masego: Oh, those. Archer got them a while back, said that we're going to need them. Knowing you, I was inclined to agree. Vivs and Adjutant thought so too, so we got to the logistics while you were in prison.

Archer: Don't worry, only about three or four of the fires that broke out are blamed upon you!

Masego: And only four broke out, so I'd say we smuggled it quite effectively! Shame of all those bridges, though.

Archer: **Chuckles** Literally.

ninegardens

This whole Gambit of burning everything down with Goblinfire... I feel like... I feel like I've seen it before somewhere....

Harrent

Time to dust off the old Benevolent theory..

AbraKadabra

I am all for it. Amadeus has matured since Caf stabbed him. In fact Cat gave him a mission then, become a better person and make a better world.

After all this it would be cheap if he did not become emperor. Akua still can be Chancellor which is a fitting place for her, and it would be the same position which she occupied beside Cat. The advisor.

[Burlyraven](#)

Akua doesn't hear the call to climb the tower, because that is not her Role. The times are changing, and the wasteland needs a messiah. Personally, it's why any romantic tension between her and Cat never sat right with me, because the story she's following is typically either a chaste one, or involves a far more... demure love interest.

Deworld

Considering what Maddie is up to, by the time she gets there, there may not be any Tower at all. That actually seems like a plausible outcome: Amadeus burns down the Tower, and Akua, instead of rebuilding it, leads her people to a different future.

mamm0nn

It might also be because Akua isn't the right person for the job any more. Dread Emperors are chosen by the Gods Below for being revolutionaries or vicious backstabbers, not unmotivated and indecisive folk that might want to smooth and deradicalize the Wasteland.

If Akua is hellbent on revenge or enslaving Cat's soul for requited love, then she might hear the tune. Right now she just lacks the mindset that the Tower is a throne for her to take or a means to her world-changing ideas coming to fruition. And without those, why even become Empress?

[Liliet](#)

Dread Emps aren't chosen by the Gods Below, they choose themselves.

I feel like we've had this discussion before.

...I think we do agree on the reason why Akua isn't hearing the song though. She's too lukewarm to the idea.

Juff

Typo Thread:

The Named > The Name

enjoying to the > enjoying the
time on need > time of need

losing proposition > losing propositions

also, is her surname Kaishi or Kaisha

[Liliet](#)

Okay, so let's go over this!

1. RIP ace Akua headcanon. It was nice while it lasted.

2. LMAO @ Akua straight faced feeding Malicia disinformation to protect the people she likes. Fucking beautiful.

3. LMAO @ Akua being like "everything I deserve" instead of mentioning *wanting* any of it. No, all the "wanting" references are to Catherine, and isn't it beautiful? The closest she comes is "That old Sahelian greed, whispering again in her ear: she had left the fire for the dark, but she wanted all the pleasures of both." Pleasures, huh Akua.

4. LMAO @ Akua not hearing the song. Just admit you don't want it!

(Alternatively it's because, according to the lately-popular conspiracy theory, she was the song's protagonist all along and so is the eye of the storm of it or something, but I do think that is not the simplest explanation)

5. LMAO @ Amadeus's network of friends. Malicia is so convinced he doesn't have his hand on the pulse of Praes in wanting to change it, she really does think of court as all there is to it, huh?

6. Holy shit @ the goblins' plan. Just... wow. Viciously executed is one way to call it. Of course it fits perfectly with Robber's mentality and the like...

7. AJSKDFHSDKJFLFSKD @ the plan to burn down the Tower with all the nobility Amadeus can get into it inside. I mean, we can all agree that's what he's going to do, right? Fucking RIP.

8. Hey, who else caught the casual "army raised by Istrid's daughter alongside his"? :3

9. Now I'm picturing Akua meeting Amadeus inside the Tower like "hey I heard you want to burn this joint down, want help?"

10.)=)=)= @ Akua's upcoming killing of a lot of Callowans. Or maybe she'll manage to work around it somehow? I don't hold out too much hope no matter how much I want it.

11. AAHAHHAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH @ the whole of this chapter ♥

Liliet

P.S. "Fascination has been the doom of many a Sahelian". They're fucking fey aren't they? Like not Guideverse!fae, the traditional archetypical kind. Easily entrancing, easily entranced. Beautiful.

Cicero

Fay = Fae = Elves or faries or the Seelie and Unseelie.

As in: The Fay are not to be trusted.

Fey = otherworldly, fascinated by death, fated to die, clairvoyant (supposedly because they are closer to death they are also closer to the spirits).

As in: A fey mood has taken him, he now courts death in battle.

Fay and Fey are different things.

(This is one of my pet peeves, the way so many people use the word "fey" when they really mean "fay" and seem to think they are just using an alternate spelling. No, they are different words.)

Fey usually appears as something like a melancholy form of battle lust.

Barthumphries

Apparently the Middle English word for the fairy folk was fei from the Old English fæge. So although fey and fay may have usual definitions, they've been mixed up enough over hundreds of years by a lot of different sources that they still carry some definitions from the other. I think there's more of a small picket fence between the two than some grand castle walling off the one from the other.

Liliet

Interesting! I was under the impression that these are related concepts.

Liliet

P.P.S. Considering Catherine has already been treating with the Confederacy AND with Wither, and Amadeus has shown he already knows, the goblins' plan might end in less blood than usual this time!

Lord Haart

I kind of hope so, broken as the Goblin social system is. Otherwise it's a lot of death.

It also makes me think of the ogres who do the same, back both horses and try to fly under the radar. And the Orcs have also been pushed to a similar place.

It's funny how Malicia turned Procer into a quagmire of civil war, and Cordelia could never manage to return the favor... Only for Malicia to achieve the same in Praes herself, and somehow think she was winning from it. Now both are desperate, it's even more ironic that Malicia wants diplomacy and Cordelia wants to use a superweapon. I think the Bard must be behind this to some degree given the scale... Amadeus worried about the Calamities against her but never really thought about how Bard might twist Malicia. It wouldn't have taken much, Malicia is Named and has been around Named for a long time now.

jamesc9

Is Ime named? If so, she would be an excellent vehicle for passing pressure on to Malacia.

Earl of Purple

She is not. Malicia has noted her aging, and Villains don't age past the point they feel themselves to be. Amadeus and Alaya appear in their twenties, despite pushing sixty, and Wekesa only looked in his forties because he saw himself as mature but vigorous, and forties is far more 'mature' than thirties whilst also being more 'vigorous' than fifties.

Given Ime's position and role in governance, the Name that fits her best is Chancellor- which is illegal, further suggesting she's not Named.

dadycool

5: Malicia was only ever the "King", a solitary figure with all the power, willing to talk the talk with the vipers, but never walking the walk with the pawns, rooks, knights, and bishops. She only knows what it's like in the upper echelons where fondness and loyalty are only ever fronts to the few who grasp the concept.

8: Yeah, it's adorable how they've both accepted their Role as father and daughter. And Bard was right, it really is uncanny.

10: Whether or not she actually does it, I'm sure it'll be either a thematically devastating or euphoric moment, where she either Breaks the entire Callowan army or Takes every...

diabolist...wait, what if this is how she steals the diabolists/mages they need for the gates? If it destroys her, or at least appears to, then it'd even be something resembling "Redemption in Death".

aurikdomi

I feel like the goblins plan is just a better executed form of the ogres usual mo.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah!

Lord Haart

Yes, with special emphasis on the *executed*... :0

EvilA

Akua craves absolution, not romantic love. Her entitlement and greed is about wanting forgiveness that she doesn't deserve. She was willing to give herself to Cat romantically in hopes of Cat's acceptance and forgiveness; this is a resource that she gives to Cat to demonstrate her repentance, just as betraying her family and stealing the Sahelian library is a way to show that she is willing to do anything for Cat.

She is giving Cat everything that she thinks Cat wants (her person, her loyalty, her love, all that she has), and still Cat will not absolve her of her past.

Absolution is important to Akua because of her issues with trust. She believes that she will always be on the outside of Cat's group unless she is forgiven. She is suspicious of her interactions with Cat and the others, constantly suspecting that she is missing out on something because they (rightly) believe that she has a history of being a shit person. They won't let her past go, and in Akua's eyes that means that they don't trust her and she will always be an outsider, always vulnerable to betrayal or being betrayed. This terrifies her: she genuinely seeks and wants the group's companionship but she doesn't understand them and thus can't force the outcome.

My theory is that as Akua experiences the hollowness of her old ambitions, she will come to recognize that what she did was unforgivable. Until now, she has sought forgiveness, but at some point she will realize that even if Cat loves her unconditionally it will not erase what she has done. When Akua's actions finally sink in, when she feels genuinely bad about what she did and begins to take personal responsibility for her own repentance, when she let's go of the idea that external validation will absolve her, that's when things will change.

Cat carries the burden of Akua's judgement. Akua must take this burden for herself, and in doing so will gain Cat's acceptance. The irony will be that Cat will only 'forgive' Akua when Akua no longer forgives herself. Akua will take control of her own penance: she will set the course for an atonement that can never be truly won. She will seek to make amends, not to free her of her guilt, but because she feels genuine sorrow for what she did.

The other irony will be that when Akua is genuinely sorry, she becomes a person that Cat and the others can accept. However, Akua will no longer be able to spend her time with them going on adventures and doing all the things that she loves with the people she loves. Akua must sacrifice and forego those things; her role will be to lead Praes, transforming it into a place where something like Akua's folly can never happen again. The old Calloway and Praes enmity must be ended, and Akua's role will be to heal her people and make amends. Callow never forgets, but they could maybe accept Praes if Praes also 'never forgets' its atrocities. Transforming Praesi culture is an uphill battle, not won overnight, with high chance of failure. But it is a worthy goal if it leads to peace and for Praes to one day enjoy the richness of life that Akua tasted when she was with Cat. Akua's past will never be erased; instead she herself will help to immortalize it in Praesi culture, allowing it to serve as a reminder for why Praes must be remade.

Bonus theory: the girl who climbed the tower is about Akua as others have mentioned. But it is also a part of a prophecy about the end of the Tower. Akua will rule, but the Tower as it was once known will be no more (both culturally/spiritually with the changes that Akua will bring, and also maybe physically if Maddie burns the thing down!). The end of the Tower is the end of the old Praes, and the story of Callow and Praes as we know it will be broken. Cat's Role is somehow related to breaking and reforming stories, tempering the old brutal horrors (on both sides) into something more civil.

therealgridlock

Not to mention that if Cat becomes the new WobbleBoob and changes the continent to one with Geneva Conventions instead of "how many innocents will I flammenwerfer today?" That having the tower be physically destroyed and inhabited by a girl who fulfils the song and then writes a new chapter in that story will play right in to the Accords and the lawful warfare future.

Or, it's not her in the tower at all, the possibilities are still in the air.

[Liliet](#)

I agree with everything before "the other irony".

But I agree with it deeply and completely and think it's an excellent analysis ♥

Lord Haart

Largely agree with this, yeah.

I find the interaction at the end between Malicia and Akua to be very telling on multiple levels. Was Malicia really an outsider to the Calamities, or was she the centerpiece around which Black brought them and it's just the isolation of rulership (and maybe Bardic nudges, Bard was there when Black Destroyed the Fortress and essentially rejected her, and definitely had a role in helping that plan along) that make her feel insecure about it?

I think the thing that stuck out to me the most is the lie about timing, or at least the self-deception. Akua coming to the Woe early and THEN doing Liesse would still have put her where she is today. Cat would still hate her, and care for her, and do exactly what she's doing. Cat would do the same for Indrani, Vivienne, Hakram and even faced the possibility of having to do it with Masego when he nearly nuked Procer, and that was with effective mind control in the picture.

In some ways, Akua is more of a daughter to Malicia than Cat... I always pegged anything between Cat and Akua as more sisters than anything else.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, good analysis.

Give or take that last sentence, bc Malicia might be their shared wicked stepmom, but their attraction towards each other is not... sisterly.

They're probably going to end up in a sister-like relationship though, considering Cat is absolutely not going to indulge that other thing.

Lord Haart

Well it can't be much weirder than Cat+Indrani but yes, agreed.

[TeK](#)

So, it seems he is done with half measures.

mindsword2

Much of what I could say has already been said, but I think there is one thing that jumped out at me and no one else seemed to

notice. The 5 Calamities are the Black Knight, the Ranger, the Warlock, the Captain, and the Assassin with Scribe as the 6th Ranger.

We learned this is off because Scribe is instrumental to Assassin, but still, there's your five. Know who isn't in it?

The Empress.

Now for the real question. If you dump goblinfire on a Demon, will it die? If so, it's a way for villains to kill them. I believe in Book 2 it was mentioned that generally only heroes can kill a Demon. We have to remember there is a demon for a door guard at the tower. Amadeus isn't a hero and Ranger is hero adjacent at best; the demon might be a bit of a problem for them unless something like Goblinfire is used.

Deworld

Not sure if goblinfire can kill a demon. For all we know, it's made out of demon in some way, and demons usually can't affect other demons.

Shveiran

I think it's a safe bet that goblinfire cannot kill demons.

After all, the reason Villains cannot kill demons is because demons are made of Below and Below is what empowers Villains as well.

Considering we know goblinfire is made of demons, I don't see how that would succeed where, say, Night or magic fails.

You need Above in the mix, and I doubt the Eyres have an enemy to grind into it.

[Liliet](#)

Demons aren't made of Below, devils are. Demons are something else.

The reason only heroes can kill demons is because Below isn't so generous as to give their minions something as powerful as Light.

Deworld

What? Where did you get that? Was it mentioned somewhere? IIRC demons are as much of Below as devils – they come from the same Hells, summoned with similar rituals, and bound with similar bindings. Summoning demons and devils always was presented as things that go hand-to-hand. They may be different from devils, but ultimately they are also creations of Below.

hakureireimu

See the [WOE](#)
on demons.

hakureireimu

[More here](#)

[Liliet](#)

Repeated WoE. Erratic has clarified this many times.

> Demons never intervene unless summoned or otherwise reached towards.

The dichotomy in Creation is devils vs angels, demons are closer to forces of nature than something fundamentally evil. They're associated with Evil because only villains bring them into Creation.

> carlarc:

> I read somewhere that the conflict is 'angels vs devils, demons are something else', what does something else mean in this?

> EE:

> angels and devils were directly created by Above and Below

> very little is known or understood about demons, they're associated with Evil because Evil politics tend to be the ones summoning them

> Xinci:

> Hm...so thing I was trying to figure out. Are some of the qualities of Devils and Angels derived from Demons?

> EE:

> Demons are completely different from the rest of Creation, and technically not really part of it

> ! Chaos Kal-tron:

> Are Demons exclusive to Calernia?

> EE:

> demons are universal
(context: "no angles in Yan Tei lands")

This is about as factual as facts get... without being directly stated in the text -_-

therealgridlock

Isn't cat and masego etc technically villains? Haven't they killed several demons? I think there needs to be a most* in there, probably because most villains don't *want* to kill demons.

Liliet

No, they haven't. Villains can bind and banish demons, which Masego has probably done at Second Liesse (I don't remember exactly how he ended up handling those three). At Marchford the demon ended up recalled by Akua. At the Arsenal Cat had a hero along specifically for that purpose.

jamesc9

> I doubt the Eyres have an enemy to grind into it.

Could this be subject to change?

Cicero

I thought that was obvious. Malicia was saying that she was never part of the Calamities because she was never one of the five – she joined too late.

Liliet

And it's not even true! That's not why she wasn't a part of them, and her not being a part of them certainly has nothing to do with Amadeus forgiving or not forgiving her for things. He HAS forgiven her, personally, he just cannot abide her actions and their consequences regardless. As Akua has noted higher up though, Alaya doesn't really get the idea of her actions having consequences through, like, alienating other people by how bad they are for everyone else. So she's telling herself a story of how Amadeus isn't forgiving her because she was never REALLY one of his friends through not fault of her own)=)=)=

While it's bullshit, both about her and about Akua.

Xinci

Mm yeah that bit on Goblins fits what we have seen. We already saw bits of this with their treatment of languages and secret information like the Face tribes. Living on the knives edge like they do means they as a group cannot stand complete decimation, so they use collective actions to gain advantages for when things get near a tipping point for them being possibly annihilated. They honestly can't really afford not to.

Anyway, Cat is going to be coronated with Goblinfire for her new Name huh. Honestly burning down the Tower seems somewhat necessary to shift Praes's flow of mages to Cardinal. They would need a new focus and a new paradigm to follow, and they are very flexible about following those who succeeded against them (well usually).

Deworld

While it's true that destroying Tower is necessary for proper reforms in Praes – if not from a practical perspective, then from a narrative one for sure – it may go against Cat's immediate goal of organizing and sending Praesi diabolists to fight Dead King. Especially if the better part of nobility burns with it. After all, it's not Legion war casters we're talking about – this kind of specialized mages can be obtained only from High Lords, and you need great authority to force them to do so. Having the Tower destroyed undermines that as it's the symbol of the Dread Emperor's reign.

On the other hand, if current High Lords **do** burn, then their successors may be redundant to go against whoever claims to be responsible. So it can swing either way.

Shveiran

Now THAT was a chapter!

The goblins seems to be doing what the ogres did, only more ruthlessly; they are both ensuring they have in with all the horses no matter who wins, though where the ogres are vying for a voice, the goblins are vying for relevance... and the price they pay for that gamble is much harsher. So... really, what you'd expect of the goblins.

But the show-stopper was the first half and we all know it. Honestly, it amazes me how so many readers seem to be convinced by Akua's "betrayal"... Personally, I don't see how much more she could possibly show she's half-hearted already. And she's been gone for what, days? And getting her body back out of the deal? Besides, Akua is already musing how Malicia is backed in a corner by the reality of the situation; if I'm wrong and she actually tries for the Tower she won't attack the Army of Callow before. She JUST SAID that every idiot and their cousins who live under a rock know that you don't kill Catherine's soldiers unless you want to make an enemy out of her AND that Malicia's pit in the international scale is not a result of her managing badly but rather that Praes cannot afford to be the Grand Alliance's enemy anymore.

Akua is not stupid, whatever else she may be; she won't kill those soldiers because she knows that would seal her fate sure as dawn.

Also, really, is it just me? It's transparent!

She's just like I am when I do something that's bad for me that I was tempted real hard to do because it has been a long time since the last fix.

A moment of pleasure, the comfort of familiarity, and then the realization that it wasn't worth it, slowly mounting up until everything turns to ash in your mouth.

She'll be back the moment she can deliver something with the act, and before she is forced to actually fight in the battle.

And now, Malicia.

Gods, I think she is by far the juiciest part of the chapter. Her parting words? Brilliant. A masterful attempt to keep Akua in the fold the only way she possibly can: convincing her that there is no other fold to be in.

But also... wow. It never ceases to amaze me how much Malicia doesn't get Namelore.

It's uncanny. It's like watching Einstein fail at sudoku. You know that intelligence is not a single task, but it just bothers you, you know? Come on Alfred, it's easy!

Malicia is making such a plethora of bad choices – when it comes to Named-.

Marshal Nim is just not a threat to the Black Fucking Queen; she has fought precisely one enemy worth the name since the bloody Conquest, and that was before the Crusades begun. Heck, forget Catherine... the Army of Callow could walk over her. The only time she fought another Named, it was to beat the bloody Squire and not finish him off!

And now... make a warlock out of Akua?

FFS.

I mean, wow.

Look.

IF IT WORKS, you successfully gave a Praesi staple Name to Akua fucking Sahelian. One of the three that have reliably been used to become Empress. She has no inclination to work with you, because you just erased her progress and made her just a Trueblood. Your most powerful allies both are going to stab you and take the Tower the moment it seems feasible, do you not remember that NOT DOING SO is the reason you are the oldest Villain on the Continent?

But cheer up, that won't matter because it WON'T WORK.

You just tried to make a WARLOCK out of someone you want to have ON A MAGIC LEASH. Do you need me to spell out how that is a doomed endeavor?

If your leash works, your Warlock will be a poor asset because "Unlimited Arcane Power" doesn't match "Cannot counter the spell waved on herself by non-Named practitioners". Those stories don't go together. If your leash doesn't work, you have a powerful warlock that has no loyalty toward you, wants your chair, and has a story of broken bondage to use to take it.

But worse yet, you are throwing Akua Sahelian against the Black Queen.

Aside from the fact that she'll betray you, it was doomed from the start: Akua has no story with the rest of the Grand Alliance. She only has a connection to CAT HERSELF. So either this is a tragedy and Akua manages to kill Catherine because of friendship makes you falter before the hard choices or something like that, which you don't want because you just showed that a dead

Catherine is a lose condition (remember her captivity, Malicia? You do, don't you?) or Akua is going to be pummeled.

There is no satisfying story that gets you what you want, so you won't get it!

[*Liliet*](#)

Yep, Malicia is deep, deep, deep in the pit XD

laguz24

The difference between her and cat is that cat thrives in the pit and knows it well, while Malicia does all she can to stay out of the pit but she doesn't know how to stop digging.

[*Liliet*](#)

Fucking RIP

[*Liliet*](#)

So hey, people who were talking about how Amadeus doesn't know Praes and isn't *really* Praesi and cannot be put in charge of reforming it.

Isn't it uncanny how he knows it better than Alaya does?

Shveiran

It's almost like Malicia has spent decades interacting almost exclusively with Praesi HIGHBORNS, whose priorities tend to diverge from those of commoners.

[*Liliet*](#)

MYSTERIOUS

Lord Haart

To be fair this chapter only really speaks to Amadeus's relationship with military. And while veterans certainly shouldn't be cast aside the fact that he himself points out his use of nepotism to favor his military means that he's still more of a warlord than a statesman.

Not that I think he wouldn't be better than Malicia in many or even most ways, but he's got some serious limitations too. He honestly already hurt Praes in one of the worst ways by doing his mad dash through Procer to kill peasants and destroy farmland – now Calloway has to feed Procer instead of feeding Praes.

[*Liliet*](#)

That was a fuckup and I'm not arguing against that, but it was made a fuckup of proportions quite this colossal by the Dead King's invasion. Procer would have damn well been able to feed itself if it hadn't also needed to feed an army – multiple armies – at the same time. That was the entire point of the gambit: to force Procer to, well, stop feeding the army and disband the levies so it could feed the people whose farmland got burned.

Amadeus failed to predict the scope of Alaya's... destructiveness, which is indeed a characteristic problem, but it's not a statesman problem.

As a statesman, he knows his country damn well, and I'm not just talking about the military. I'm talking about research he did on goblins, and how the difference it made is that THE INTRIGUE SPECIALIST in their duo failed to catch a scheme that THE MILITARY SPECIALIST did.

Nepotism would be a more potent accusation, meanwhile, if the woman he'd helped hadn't been driven from her home under threat of assassination in the first place. Sure he's not playing by the rules – nobody is. These ARE the rules, effectively, at this point. He's been working to change that! Nepotism doesn't work WITHIN the Legions, if you remember.

This chapter also speaks to Amadeus's entire approach to rule: he talks about how things have gone wrong when the Tower starts losing people like this veteran. Does Alaya know this? Does she think this way? Has she checked? Does she care?

[Barthumphries](#)

That might have been part of his long plan. To truly force change, Praes had to be completely isolated with no chance of help coming from any other quarter.

WuseMajor

For the record, I'm actually a little surprised here. Akua knows the body was a trap and I figured she wouldn't want to be on someone's leash again, especially not so quickly. I thought she'd go off and do something...else, I dunno.

Joining up with Malicia who still just. Doesn't. GET. It. seems like a bad plan. Well, unless you're planning on betraying her, as one does.

therealgridlock

You heard her, she's gonna get sargon's nuts out of the vice then her own nuts, then she is free to topple everything she wants as a free man yet again.

SpeckofStardust

Well the goblins have disappointed me here.

I mean yes blackmail but uh, what exactly would be the problem to the information getting out?

Like no really, Malicia doesn't have any care if people are playing this game because it means that wither wont betray her. Cat also wont care either as long as they toe the line when the dust settles.

Other then that everyone makes me happy (even if Malicia is being truly doomed and Dum).

Earl of Purple

They did what they did so no matter what happens, the humans will have a goblin to talk to, one that has authority over other goblins- either as a matron on the council of the Confederacy or as a High Lady of Praes. Revealing that Wither is still a Matron and the goblins are playing both sides will lose them a lot of trust, and with that trust they'll lose any goblin leader that humans can look to and think 'I can work with this person, as I helped them with an internal dispute and we got on quite well'. But it's **not** an internal dispute, and you didn't help them and all the things you thought you had over them- friendships, debts, or obligations- are worthless placebos to make you feel better and stop digging into their affairs.

Shveiran

Because it reveals the goblins are much more dangerous than they appear to be, since the main weakness that has reassured Dread Emperor after Dread Empress (i.e. their depp-seated tendency to backstab each other at the first sign of trouble) is in fact a scheme to keep their race afloat.

With the secret exposed, the winner will have to do something to ensure the goblins don't ever become a threat, because they have the potential to be.

Between Malicia and Amadeus, one will neuter them and one will give them a stake; if a choice is to be made, he is the obvious one.

And besides, giving in to the blackmail doesn't force them to side with him, so it is by far more convenient than the alternative.

[Liliet](#)

Note Amadeus's comment on Wither not thinking beyond the goblin conception of conflict. In their worldview, if they are discovered they will be eliminated because that's what they'd do if someone were revealed to pulling a scheme like that on them.

ninegardens

There's also the point that revealing the secret might not just be about NOW.

Even if there is no cost of the secret being revealed now, it's a long running scheme, a generations old ploy, and having that get out will permanently weaken their position.

SpeckofStardust

Not the case though, what thier doing is the exact same thing as both the orges and Sahelians/ other great noble houses, that the goblins are more loyal to thier race as a whole is no different then any other group in play.

It fits thier world view but thier lack of understanding the situation despite all how scary the goblins where set up is well disappointing.

It cant harm them unless they show themselves to fold to keep it quite. Which is what is happening.

[Liliet](#)

It can harm them, because it means the next time they rebel, the same ploy won't work, and the rebellion might just be drowned in blood genocidally instead of left to their own internal affairs.

WuseMajor

Ultimately Malicia's problem here is that she has started to realize that she's burned all her bridges with the West and thus, ultimately, has two options:

1) Arrange for all of the current leaders of the Western Coalition to either die, retire, or "change their minds," including the Black Queen, and be replaced by someone amenable to doing what she wants.

2) Die.

The problem with option 1 is that, so far, killing or deposing Hasenbach has proven impossible. If you had a really good grasp on their politics and you picked your point well, you **might** be able to oust her in the Assembly, but that is her battleground and it's very hard to surprise her there. If Malicia still had

Scribe, then it would be theoretically doable, if still amazingly difficult, but as is...

...That said, Hasenbach is not really in a position to look a gift horse in the mouth. If she has no other options, she might actually sign on with Malicia.

Levant is certainly doable and, arguably, probably pretty easy right now...provided the current leaders all die on the northern battlefield. Again, not so hard.

Ordinarily killing the Black Queen would be next to impossible...but Malicia had her in custody for a week. So, doable.

However, that all leads into the fact that this coalition is currently being held together with string and baling wire and it has months at best before the Dead King smashes it and eats the entire continent. And one of the major pieces of wire holding the entire thing together is the Black Queen.

Which means, if she tries to suborn or scheme or do anything else to the Western Alliance...it will probably fall apart and everyone on the continent dies. Including Malicia.

So, her options are now really just

1) Die.

And I don't think she's really admitted that to herself yet. She still thinks there's something she can do, some way to scheme or plot her way out of this. And...honestly, there probably is. But I don't think Cat is gonna let her get away with it.

(Personally, I think Malicia's best chance is pulling an Irritant. If she abdicated in favor of that other one currently calling herself Dread Empress and went off and waited tables for 5 years, that might be enough time for everything involved to collapse and people might actually want her back. I just doubt she can give up control to even seriously consider the option, let alone do that.)

[Liliet](#)

Yeah Malicia's non-"die" option is just "abdicate and flee".

Deworld

She would need to flee to another continent at least, if not further. Cat is **really** angry about the Night of Knives.

[Liliet](#)

I honestly don't think the Night of Knives features in Catherine's decision making process as prominently as she

keeps insisting it does. The real arguments are what she said to Amadeus way back when: that Malicia cannot be trusted, that she's not an asset to any arrangement, that she set on fire every bridge she had and there's no reason to expect she won't do it again.

Cat just does her best to keep to Callowan mores, and sometimes to her it means insisting her motivation is revenge when she would have foregone revenge without twitching an eyebrow if it were advantageous.

Miles

Black! Planning to frame Cat by using a whole lake's worth of fire is a new low, even for you.

ninegardens

So... here's a dumb question: Do we believe that Cat has a plan. What I mean by that is... she obviously has *plans*... but at the same time is a key aspect of her plan "Do a bunch of confusing crap, and then trust that Black has three Aces up his sleeve, and can handle the rest of it"?

Its a story. Its kind of a strategic plan. But its like... got huge bits missing, and she *knows* that.

[Barthumphries](#)

It's like fighting that giant rat scourge that could redo time and see stories. They had to hide their plans from themselves to have a chance at making them work. If they have a complete ready plan then they have a story which means that the Bard can see it because she can see all stories. So they have to have something that isn't fully formed to get it to work.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat has a toolbox rather than a plan, as usual. There is a wide range of outcomes that would be satisfactory for her, and a wide range of possibilities she cannot account for because of the number of wild cards in play. So all she can do is set up and get ready to handle things as they come.

And I bet we haven't seen the whole of the setup yet, not all the ideas she has.

therealgridlock

Boy oh boy, everyone's writing long deep dives into the characters on this one!

I'm just gonna say that I was right, Akua is having a genuine character growth moment and realizing that she still craves the emotionally mature and reasonable nature of Cat and the others.

She's a hairs breadth away from realizing that good isn't something you do because it gets you something, the thing you get is the good action. That it has value in itself.

Once she does its Vader redemption train all the way, with epic yEETing Malicia out the tower and probably some other stuff. Gonna be cool.

[jefepato](#)

Being good *did* get her something, though. It got her friends and companions who weren't constantly measuring her back for a stabbing.

The main perk of being good is that people who are not tremendous assholes will be willing to associate with you. That is actually a HUGE benefit for anyone with typical social needs.

It is noteworthy that even back when Akua was totally on board with being a tremendous asshole, her favorite people in the world were her father (who not only loved her dearly but had no real interest in this Praesi backstabbing nonsense) and Barika (who wasn't good for much other than being loyal and more or less her friend).

I mean, yes, ideally people should do good because they like doing good. But there are certainly reasons why even a selfish person might stick with being good-ish.

Akua will very likely end up doing...something resembling the right thing, in the end. The real question is what her final fate will be. I doubt that Dread Emperor Amadeus (should he actually manage that) would ever trust her as his Warlock, but then, Praes might turn out rather differently once the goblinfire dies down.

(Man. It's always so tense when you finish an archive binge and have to start waiting for new chapters with everyone else. Maybe I should start reading Ward or something?)

[Liliet](#)

"Should he actually manage that" more like "should he fail in wriggling out of that" 😊

ninegardens

If you are at the end of an archive binge, and looking for things to read, may I recommend "Pale" and also "All Night Laundry" (Webcomic)

Jefepato

Thanks for the suggestions! It sounds like Pale is set in the same world as Pact (though not a direct sequel), which is interesting; I did enjoy Pact, although there was a lot going on in that story and I admittedly felt a bit lost sometimes. (As far as other Wildbow works go, I've read Worm and Pact, but not Twig and only a few early chapters of Ward.)

...although I just realized that I haven't caught up on The Gods are Bastards in a while. I should probably do that, too.

Mental Mouse

All Night Laundry is now complete including the epilogues, and it is *glorious*!

The Gods are Bastards is still on hiatus last I've heard, but Webb is fighting the burnout he incurred on that with a new serial, Only Villains Do That, which is pretty promising so far. Basically, a pair from our world is recruited as The Hero and the Dark Lord for a godly game in another world. The Hero is an utter weeb, but we're following the Dark Lord... who's kind of an asshole, but... just an ordinary asshole, who's a little put off by being recruited for Ultimate Evil. I need to catch up with that one too, but after I catch up with PGTE....

Frivolous

I'm really surprised that Akua took the body, even with all its nice accessories. I'm way too risk averse to accept such a poisoned chalice.

Some of my belated realizations:

1. Akua got friendzoned.
2. On and off, I've been musing over the possible effects of the different ways Named envision their Name. Alaya's gloves, Amadeus's gears, etc.

It came to me just now that Catherine's seeing her Name as a big mammalian beast means her Name can sometimes act of its own accord, without her direction, like any other animal.

In contrast, Alaya's perfectly fitted gloves could mean that her Name of Dread Empress only ever acts as she does.

Shveiran

Catherine has always seen her Name as a beast, even as the Squire. It never got dr. Jekyll – Mr Hyde before, so I don't see why it would now.

Frivolous

Shveiran: Oh, I didn't mean to convey that I thought her Name being a beast was a bad thing.

Having a dog who loves you is really great. The dog has better senses. The dog is awake when you're asleep. The dog has sharp teeth.

Catherine's once and future Name being a beast is good the same way.

I just hope her Name doesn't hump her leg the same way our dog sometimes does mine.

Liliet

AKSEJDFHSKDF AKUA GOT FRIENDZONED SHE DID

Mental Mouse

Ahem, Cat did not get "friendzoned". "Friendzoned" is how a horny *guy* interprets "no, I don't actually want to be your girlfriend... please don't go nuts about that and kill me!"

Abrakadabra

What? That is bullshit.

Sir Nil

""You've not simply been wandering around drinking and fucking the Lady of the Lake."

Well, he'd not done just that."

Don't die of a broken pelvis now.

Frivolous

Sir Nil: It never occurred to me until now that Ranger's aspects of Learn, Perfect, and Transcend don't just apply to the battlefield, they also apply to the bedroom.

And she mentioned in Regard that she's always tapping her aspects.

After centuries of life, she must be an unbelievably skilled lover by now. She could topple kingdoms over and over again by

seducing kings, queens, and princes. No one could resist her. It's not like she even gets tired.

There would be a whole genre of Calernian poetry and theater dedicated to her exploits. It would be called...

RANGEROTICA!!

Abnaxis

I wonder if Akua can't hear the song because Amadeus is planning to burn down the tower, and Creation has already decided he's going to succeed...?

For that matter, there is NO WAY Amadeus becomes Dread Emperor now. Never mind he's burning down the Tower and everyone in it just to get the song out of his head, he's sending every high-profile, highborn veteran from the Legions into the Tower where he fully intends on incinerating them with the rest of the nobility. There's no way his influence with the Legions survives that, and that influence is the keystone to any chance of him ruling Praes.

Earl of Purple

No, he isn't? He's told the one-armed veteran there to ensure her superior goes, not asking her to go herself. High Lady Takisha and her court of Taghreb nobles, not the veterans of the Legions.

Abnaxis

Who exactly do you think is in High Lady Takisha's "court of Tahgreb nobles"? It's the same high placed veterans who Amadeus just requested to band together to push her to go to the Tower.

Earl of Purple

Mostly, it's other Taghreb nobles. Not all veterans were exiled nobility; most are peasants, merchant's sons, house servants, and so on. Not all nobles join the Legions, either; Amadeus build the Legions so nepotism doesn't work within them, so a noble would have to start at the bottom like everyone else, and could find a Duni orphan, a Soninke servant or worse an orc or goblin promoted above them and still be expected to obey. Most nobles have a better route to power than the Legions, and most legionnaires don't. Probably most just got enough money to open a pub somewhere or buy a farm so they can do what their family did, or what they want to do.

Abnaxis

I'm not saying they're are a ton of veterans who are nobles, nor that there are a ton of nobles who are veterans.

However, the veterans who are also nobles are influential and well-known in their community. Take Lady Kaisha here, for example. She's effectively turned her holdings into a retirement home for veterans of the Legions—that's hundreds to thousands of people who will see Amadeus leading her to her death as the betrayal it is, and whose lives will be adversely affected when Amadeus cooks their liegelady in the Tower.

That's not the kind of black mark Amadeus can recover from if he wants to rule Praes. The greenskins won't hold it against him because as long as he isn't opening their throats for field rituals Amadeus is still an improvement, but greenskins aren't enough.

Earl of Purple

He didn't ask her to go to Ater. He asked her to ensure the High Lady and her court went to Ater. Lady Kaisha isn't a High Lady, and I don't think she's important enough to actually be one of the High Lady's courtiers, either. Note how she's able to meet with Amadeus with basically no warning, on her own lands. If she were a courtier, she'd be at court with High Lady Talisha.

[Liliet](#)

This ^^

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus did not place his veterans as nobility, this woman is an exception because it was already her birthright. He specifically says that a campaign to stack nobility with his people would have received a backlash. The nobility is the nobility, Amadeus's ideological opposition.

[Liliet](#)

No, he's sending the nobles there, not the veterans. He even said that there are few nobles among the veterans.

Deworld

He just sent them to Ater. There's no indication if he actually intends to burn them down as well or if he wants another force on his side. Though yes, considering it's nobles we're talking about, it's more likely former than latter, but still.

Liliet

There's clear differentiation about who they're talking about: the veteran he's talking to says that her influence should be enough to do what he wants. HER influence. These are not the people who will do things because *Amadeus* asks them.

Mental Mouse

I think she's not hearing the song because she's not actually a realistic candidate at this point. Too tainted by Cat's teachings, and being pushed toward the Warlock name besides (though I don't think she's an actual candidate for that Name either, as sorcery was never her passion).

Mike E.

I am so far behind on this series (thank you busy life), but damn it is good to see Amadeus being Amadeus in all his crazy machinations.

Chapter 12: String

"There are three decisions that can only be mistakes: trusting a peace in the Free Cities, intervening in an Alamans succession and campaigning in the Wasteland."

– Queen Matilda the Elder of Callow

It was General Sacker I'd wanted to talk to, as her informal patroness, but instead I found all three of the leaders of the Rebel Legions sitting on the other side of the scrying bowl.

That made an amusingly odd trio to look at, I must admit. Sacker was still the same old sack of wrinkles that looked deceptively half asleep, but General Mok was even larger than Hune had been on top of having half his face severely burned with spellfire. The difference in size between them somehow made the last of three stand out even more: General Jaiyana Seket of the Second Legion, a dark-haired and grey-eyed Taghreb in her late fifties. She'd been the only general already in the Wasteland to desert Malicia after the empress pulled her mind control trick a few years back. Only a little over half her legion had followed her, though, the rest sticking with the Tower.

That made the junior of the three generals in their informal hierarchy, considering that Sacker had filled her legion's depleted ranks from deserters and the Jacks had reported that Mok's own Third Legion now fielded six thousand soldiers instead of the standard four. Being the one with the relationship with Callow – and therefore its forges and foodstuffs – had put Sacker more or less on equal footing with Mok, however, so it wasn't quite as straightforward a balance of power as one might think. General Seket tended to be the kingmaker in contested decisions, after all, which was a form of influence as well. It'd all worked out as being surprisingly communal for a military hierarchy, no one making a push for primacy.

Which unfortunately meant that I wasn't negotiating with one person but three.

"I understand that the Grand Alliance has interests in Praes," General Mok said, voice rumbling, "but it doesn't get to impose terms here. Who rules in Ater is not to be determined in Salia or Laure."

I wasn't sure whether not mentioning Levante – the Dominion's capital – reflected good intel about the fate of the Pilgrim's Blood or simple dismissal of Levant, but either way he wasn't wrong. These days the Blood wasn't agreeing on much of anything, except fighting the war to the end.

"That ship sailed the moment Malicia began actively warring on us through proxies and attacking our diplomatic efforts," I curtly replied. "She is, even now, the ally of the *Dead King*. Sovereignty's all well and good, but it doesn't buy you the rest of the world pretending nothing's happened when you piss on the common table."

General Seket looked amused at the turn of phrase – not a noble flower, this one, but a former bandit who'd chosen the Legions over the noose – and Sacker continued looking at me through those half-lidded eyes. Mok was getting angrier, though. I got the impression that out of them he most believed in the Dread Empire that'd been sold to the Legions after the Reforms: a place of order and rough fairness, where peoples that'd once been left out in the cold were slowly brought into the fold instead. It'd been the mind control he objected to on a fundamental level, not necessarily Malicia calling the Rebel Legions to heel. Sacker stepped in before Mok could speak again, perhaps sensing my irritation with the ogre was rising. I had little patience for people who let their ideals get in the way of looking at what was actually happening around them.

"No one is denying that you have a right to retaliate for attacks on the Grand Alliance," Sacker said. "Our concern is that it seems few of the decisions relating to the empire's future will be made by Praesi."

"That Malicia has to go isn't even something even worth arguing about," I bluntly replied. "I will cheerfully massacre anything and anyone who gets in the way of that. If your issues are with the details of Malicia's *succession*, however, then we have a lot more room for compromise."

"We did not leave the empress' service to now defend her," General Seket said. "The matter my colleagues are tiptoeing around is different: to be frank, none of us want to raise a sword to win Dread Empress Foundling the Tower."

I almost laughed in their faces, fighting that down to a snort with great effort.

"If that's your worry, then we have no issue," I said. "I have no interest whatsoever in climbing the Tower."

"Akua Sahelian would not be a more acceptable candidate," General Mok plainly said.

Huh. First Sargon had guessed that, now the Rebel Legions. The High Lord of Wolof I could forgive, but some of these people had served in Callow over the years. Did none of them realize that if I were known to have backed the Doom of Liesse for rule over the Wasteland I'd get strung up in the streets by my own people? It wasn't like the Folly was some old wound barely remembered. Almost everyone in Callow had lost at least a distant relative when a city the size of Liesse got murdered.

"I've no interest in backing her claim either, assuming she makes one," I replied just as plainly. "If I am to support anyone's claim, it will be that of Amadeus of the Green Stretch."

"You have been talking with Sepulchral for years," Sacker pointed out.

"And we already discussed all *this* years ago," I waspishly replied. "Why are we revisiting these grounds now?"

"Years ago you were not leading an army invading Praes," General Mok replied. "We require different assurances now that battle is on the horizon."

A little rich to say that, considering that they were at least three weeks behind Sepulchral's army on the march and she was herself at least a week behind Marshal Nim. Maybe closer to two.

"I'm not interested in putting Abreha Mirembé on the throne," I explicitly spelled out. "I see no need to make war on her, however, and she was a convenient ally against Malicia. Should she surrender to whoever claims the Tower peacefully I'll even argue for leniency on her behalf."

I actually believe she might take that deal, and so did Scribe. Sepulchral had rebelled because Malicia had cornered her, not because she'd intended to make a play for the Tower. That attack from Malicia had come because High Lady Abreha had been muscling in on the empress in the first place, of course, but that was Praesi politics for you. It was Malicia that Sepulchral couldn't afford to surrender to, she wouldn't be so constrained if someone else held the Tower. And someone who hadn't been rebelled against could afford to offer her amnesty without taking a major hit to their reputation with the nobility. Looking closely at the three, I could see that General Seket was leaning the way of taking the bargain I'd offered: joining our armies to defeat the Loyalist Legions together, guaranteeing them a seat at the table in the aftermath. Mok was still very much against, and Sacker hard to read as she'd ever been.

"I cannot agree to putting imperial forces under the authority of a foreign nation," General Mok finally said. "Not even in this manner."

Sacker did not contradict him, a silence that rang loudly. I eyed the three of them coolly.

"Then it's my turn to ask questions," I said. "If not to reinforce my expedition, why is your army marching north?"

"You are not owed an answer," the ogre general flatly replied.

"You weren't owed food and steel," I sharply said. "You still got it. Careful about what bridges you burn, Mok. There are no second chances at this game."

"No offence was meant, I'm sure," General Seket intervened. "We set out to march, Queen Catherine, because if we do not the civil war will end without our having ever raised a sword."

I eyed her, distinctly unimpressed.

"So you're either foolish enough to march an army without a campaign plan or baldly opportunistic enough to want to sit out the fight and leverage your numbers for concessions afterwards," I said. "Which is it?"

"You put a hard slant on trying to avoid *fratricide*, Black Queen," Sacker curtly replied. "You blame us for not being eager to fight legions still filled with friends and kin, comrades we have fought with for decades. With the situation on the knife's edge, we will first attempt diplomacy."

My fingers clenched, then unclenched. I did not like the sound of that.

"Elaborate," I said.

"We will speak directly with the Black Knight," General Mok said. "And offer simple terms: should Dread Empress Malicia abdicate, we will return to the fold and crush Sepulchral together."

"Malicia will never take that deal," I replied without batting an eye. "Or if she does, it'll be as a trick to get you to dispose of her enemy before getting around to you."

"It's not her we're offering the deal to," General Seket said. "Nim is as good as her word. If the last legions turn on the Tower, Malicia will *have* to abdicate. All she has left in Ater are the First and the Fourth, which went skeletal from desertions."

"And should the Black Knight refuse you?" I asked.

"She won't," Mok confidently said.

Ah, so that was it. Sacker genuinely had been on the fence, I just hadn't offered enough to convince her. Mok had been against our armies joining from the start, though, because he'd already had a plan that was more palatable to him: cutting a deal with Marshal Nim.

"But if she does?" I pressed.

"Then you get your way, Black Queen," General Sacker said, showing pale needle-like teeth. "Long live Dread Emperor Amadeus. In the defence of his cause, we will seek friendship with the same Grand Alliance that recognized him in Salia."

I drummed my fingers on the table. The tremor had the water rippling, their faces rippling with it. And with that easy questions settled there was only one left to ask.

"And if the Black Knight does takes your deal," I asked, "where would that leave us?"

"The Legions of Terror are the sword and shield of Praes," General Seket said, tone conciliating, "but it doesn't need to come to blows between us."

"What it means is that there'll be no more talk of you *dictating* anything, Queen of Callow," General Mok rumbled.

Huh, I thought. This might just be the first time I'd been the hand that fed instead of the biter.

I wasn't enjoying the change of pace.

—

There was need of a fresh war council after that. Yet I found that, in practice, learning that there was a chance the Rebel Legions might turn on us did not affect our plans much.

"Being generous," Juniper said, "the rebels are a month behind the battle unless either we or Marshal Nim start wasting time. It'll be settled by the time they get there."

"If they can take the Twilight Ways they could cut ahead of Sepulchral, at least," I pointed out.

Dread Empress Sepulchral's army could not practically use the Ways, according to our spies. Some of its mages could access them, but they couldn't yet make stable portals. The Rebel Legions were another story. I glanced at Vivienne questioningly, getting an uncertain palm wiggle.

"The Jacks aren't sure either way," she said. "They have enough mages in the ranks for it to be possible, but it's not knowledge that grows on trees. I'd tend to err on the side of caution and assume they have *some* capacity with the Ways but not enough for their entire army."

"That could still be trouble," Grandmaster Talbot said. "Should we defeat the Black Knight in battle only for her to retreat in good order, a sudden swell of reinforcements could tip the balance against us. How large are their numbers, now that they're finally marching?"

"Thirteen thousand legionaries," I said. "They should have little to no goblin munitions, at least, unlike the Loyalist Legions."

For the same reason the Army of Callow had finally filled its own stocks: I'd bought theirs.

"I do not understand this hesitation on your parts," Lady Aquiline admitted. "We are yet sixteen thousand, or close, and the Black Knight commands only twenty-three thousand soldiers. I have seen the Army of Callow triumph against steeper odds than this."

"You haven't," Juniper bluntly informed her. "You've seen us beat inferior or borderline peer armies, Lady Aquiline. You have never seen us fight a force that is at least our equal and possibly our superior."

She wasn't wrong, even if she was being pessimistic. We did have *some* advantages going for us. There were five legions marching with the Black Knight – the Eight, the Eleventh, the Thirteen, the Fourteenth and Nim's own Seventh – but the Legions of Terror didn't typically field cavalry. The Thirteenth did, having been raised from Callowan bandits and rebels, but only six hundred horsemen or so. The vast majority of Nim's three thousand and

change cavalry was auxiliaries. Taghreb and Soninke light horse sent by nobles, which my Order of the Broken Bells could shred if they engaged in melee. My entire army was made up of veterans, while the Legions would have fresher recruits, and we also had a decisive Named advantage.

On the other hand, the officer corps of the Legions would be flatly better than ours and we'd be down on mage firepower as well as general numbers. It was still very much a winnable battle, in my opinion, but there would be no repeat of the Third at Sarcella or the ridiculous odds against undead my soldiers had frequently taken on. We were facing the same army that'd held the Vales against the greater strength of Procer, and I had no reason to believe it'd lost a step since then. Throwing another thirteen thousand veteran infantry down on the Black Knight's side of the scale would make for... hard odds, to say the least. At a minimum, it'd take field battles off the table.

To minimize the risks, we had to finish it before the Rebel Legions got there.

"Perhaps we should seek allies," Lord Razin suggested. "Would Dread Empress Sepulchral not be amenable to helping us against her rival?"

"It was my instinct as well," I told him, "but she's broken off talks with us. At our best guess, she's hoping we'll clash with the Black Knight before she gets there and she can pick off the weakened Loyalist Legions."

It would have been damned useful to string Abreha Mirembé along, but the trouble when dealing with people who'd survived at the top of the Wasteland for decades was that they tended to be rather hard to fool. Sepulchral had correctly assessed I wasn't going to help put her on the throne, so she'd decided to use me to weaken her enemy and finish climbing the Tower on her own. Odds were she figured I wouldn't actually fight a war to keep her off the throne, especially if I'd first taken losses casting Malicia down from it. To my distaste, she was fairly accurate in that judgement. I didn't want to march west again until my father held the Tower, but if Sepulchral dug in and offered good terms I might not have a choice.

How large a portion of Procer was I willing to sacrifice to get my chosen candidate on the throne? Abreha wasn't just a cutthroat snake: she was an *old* cutthroat snake. In Praes those were rare for a reason. She knew how to survive when the storms came calling.

"That's another twenty thousand we have no certainties about," Aisha noted. "We need to have a good grasp on the pace those force march at at before engaging, else we will be taking risks."

"Half of Sepulchral's army is levies that'll break under steady munitions fire," Juniper grunted. "But the other half is dangerous enough, I'll grant."

Like my Marshal of Callow, I could admit that I wasn't worried about fighting Sepulchral's army on the field. She had a little over six thousand household troops, which would be tough customers as that breed always was, but we had twice her horse in better quality. The thousand wavemen her allies in Nok had sent might be some trouble, true. They were supposed to be the finest archers in Praes, using great horn bows and honing their trade defending the ships of the House of Sahel. We were fighting the former High Lady of Aksum so naturally there'd be monsters too. It was what the city was famous for. But after having faced the Hidden Horror's own menagerie of nightmares, I did not expect Aksum's to impress me much.

"Unless the enemy tempo changes, it looks like our best shot at solving this cleanly remains a decisive victory against Marshal Nim," I finally said.

If we forced the Black Knight's army to surrender, the Rebel Legions would sink back into irrelevance. And Sepulchral couldn't take a swing at us lightly: it'd put her at war against the Grand Alliance. Much more likely she'd march straight on Ater instead, and I had no real issue with that. I was skeptical she'd be able to take the City of Gates, but more than willing for her to soften up the capital some before the Army of Callow took a crack at it.

"Agreed," the Hellhound replied. "I'll want reports from the Jacks about the pace of every army to ensure we give battle with the best margin possible, but in around three weeks seems to be that window of opportunity."

I nodded in agreement.

"Well," I said, "council's done, it seems. Get your affairs in order, ladies and gentlemen, because come dawn we begin our march south."

—

Even in Hakram's absence his phalanges were functioning like a well-oiled machine.

That left me in the odd position of, well, not actually having anything to do. It would be a week at least before I next spoke to Cordelia Hasenbach, Indrani was spending the evening with Masego and Vivienne was busy twisting arms are making promises through the Observatory to secure names for a plan she'd come up with that might kneecap the Black Knight in the field. Feeling restless, I took to the night and the dirt streets of our camp.

Whenever I stopped moving it felt like I was losing ground: even when I stayed still, the world kept moving around me. The first act of my Praesi campaign had been an unequivocal victory, for all that Malicia and her Black Knight had scored blood of their own, but from now on things would get... complicated.

The number of moving pieces had increased and this wouldn't be the Graveyard all over again. I wouldn't be able to predict the whole array of leadership I was fighting the way I'd been able to read the Tyrant, Pilgrim and First Prince. Too many people, not enough of them Named. Legions rebel and loyalist, Sepulchral's would-be army of conquest and hidden behind them all whatever my father's scheme for this fight would be. I knew better than to believe he wouldn't be putting a finger on the scale of the battle that would determine the fate of Praes for the coming decades. That he had yet to truly come out of the woodworks worried me more than I cared to admit. He wasn't proud, as a man, at least not in ways that got in the way of him achieving his goals.

So if he'd not reached out to me, made common cause, it was because some of our objectives were at odds. I was not so arrogant as to pretend that the prospect of the fighting the man who'd taught me did not inspire in me a... healthy amount of caution.

The sound of steel on steel drew my attention as I drifted close to drilling grounds. There shouldn't be any legionaries out at this hour, and a few steps confirmed there weren't. The two people moving swiftly back and forth across the dusty ground weren't my soldiers. The Silver Huntress deftly flicked her spear, barbed tip tickling at the Squire's shield, and as Arthur Foundling took a cautious step back she circled around him to probe his flank. I approached quietly, laying my staff against the side of the fence before resting my elbows atop it. The Squire was being careful, keeping his shield up and only venturing out of his shell to try to rush her and leverage his advantage close up, but on open grounds like this the tactic was a mistake.

I winced as I saw him try a charge, banking on the Huntress being slow to retreat her spear after a feint, only to find out that Alexis was quite light-footed of maintaining their distance. She feinted his leg, then darted back up to slap the side of his helm hard when he lowered his shield to cover himself. The boy winced at the pain but did not complain. As well he shouldn't: if that blow had come from someone out to kill him, it would have gone right through his throat instead. If Arthur was to ever to score a blow, I thought, he needed to pressure her from the start. Push forward steadily, learn to tell apart the feints from the real attacks and close the distance while she was committed to striking him.

I watched in silence as the two continued to move across the dust, the Mantle of Woe's hood warm over my head, and to my pleased surprise I saw that the Squire was learning. No more bull rushing out of him, though he wasted a lot of time trying to figure out how to parry a spear with a sword. You couldn't, really, not reliably. From Named to not, sure, but not between peer opponents. The Huntress worked him through a pretty straightforward sequence – shield edges the spear to the side, sword lunge for the throat as you dart forward – and he began trying it out. He took to it quickly. Unnaturally quickly, really, I decided as my brow rose.

His reflexes weren't getting sharper or his footing more flexible, but with every try he moved a little faster through the sequence. A little smoother. By the eighth attempt his execution was impressive enough I would have thought he'd spent months drilling it. *Name*, I thought. *Has to be*. The spar ended after Arthur finally scored a blow on the Silver Huntress' breastplate, though I suspected she'd actually allow him to land it. He was a quick lad, but Alexis the Argent was Indrani's superior in close combat. The two of them seemed surprised when they noticed I was there. Night was a friend to me in all sorts of ways. I clapped politely, to the older heroine's amusement, but Arthur looked embarrassed.

They had water and cloths on a stone near the fence, so when they came to quench their thirst and get ride of the worst of the sweat it was only natural that we chat a bit.

"I'm rather ashamed you saw that, Your Majesty," Arthur said. "I have been meaning to expand my experience fighting Named, but it is slow going."

"In terms of pure swordsmanship you're actually better than I was at your age," I noted. "Not as good as the Lone Swordsman was, maybe, but there's a reason I relied on tricks to kill the man."

"It's empty whining on his part," the Huntress scoffed. "He improves daily. The Lady's the only person I've ever seen pick up drills that fast."

"The Ranger?" Arthur breathed out. "That's... I've always admired what I heard of her in stories, truth be told."

Oh dear. I shared a look with Alexis, the two of us silently agreeing it would be for the best if he never met the woman in question. The Silver Huntress had a much harsher opinion of the Lady of the Lake than Archer. I'd learned as much because she was not shy in expressing it even to strangers. It'd made for pleasant common ground over the months of campaigning. Still, I couldn't let myself get distracted by this little detour. I'd had a nugget of information I wanted to dig for.

"Were you always this quick to catch on?" I casually asked. "It seems like the sort of thing the Order would have reported on."

He ruefully smiled.

"No," Arthur admitted. "It was after the fight with the puppet of the Black Knight, Your Majesty. The way it handled Sapan and I, then the way you stepped in and took care of it..."

His gauntlets clenched tight around his sword.

"I had believed myself a fine blade, but after that I couldn't deny I still have so much to **Learn**," the Squire said.

Ah, an old friend had returned. Was he leaning on that to improve his fighting? I'd not been able to do the same, back when I had the same aspect. Fighting had been the one thing it *didn't* help me with.

"Aspect," I noted, seeing no point in further subtlety. "Have you seen the same kind of leap forward in your studies?"

He looked baffled.

"No," he said. "Should I have?"

I hummed, shaking my head.

"It's somewhat reassuring that you did not," I said. "There's a balance to these things, Squire."

The Silver Huntress grunted in agreement.

"No power comes without a hook," Alexis the Argent said. "Beware of anything that pretends otherwise."

Still, the Gods Above liked their nasty surprises, didn't they? The Squire had gotten a flavour of the aspect attuned to martial pursuits after a defeat against the Black Knight, while being guaranteed weeks if not months of a relatively safe environment filled with veteran Named to train with. By the time Nim encountered the boy again for the continuation of their pattern, he was going to be a regular fucking monster. In an abstract sense my sympathies lay with Marshal Nim, because this all felt very much like the Heavens hooking an Evil fish and reeling her in, but in a practical sense our little Squire had my backing to the hilt. I'd put Indrani on training him too, maybe see if the Barrow Sword was amenable to pitching in.

"I know to be wary of shortcuts," Arthur promised, then sent me an almost shy look. "Perhaps we may spar one day, Your Majesty? Many consider you among the finest swords in Callow."

"My tricks are best kept up my sleeve," I drily said. "We'll see about getting you a few sessions with Archer, though. She tends to be my better close up."

The boy did not quite manage to hide his disappointment but I quashed the pang I felt at the sight. I already walked the line perhaps a little too finely when it came to teaching Arthur Foundling. An occasional distant instructor tossing a few lessons his way shouldn't be too prone to ending up story fodder, I figured, but considering he had a draw with the Black Knight coming up the last thing I wanted was stepping into a formal teacher's role. That was a good way to stumble into buying his draw with my death. The Squire retired after chatting a little longer, but to my surprise the Silver Huntress did not. Had I offended her by mentioning Indrani training someone she was already training?

No, I decided, looking at her tense face. That wasn't the tension of someone keeping a lid on their anger but the gritted teeth of someone forcing themselves to venture into uncomfortable grounds.

"I want to talk," Alexis the Argent said, then bit her cheek. "Please."

My hand found the staff of dead yew never too far from my hand, closing around the rough wood. I'd gotten used to the contrast between the Huntress' startlingly girlish high-pitched voice and her rough appearance – broken nose and plain face, the messy bun of red hair and calloused hands – but I'd noticed she tended to speak slowly and curtly to take the edge off it. No doubt she'd been mercilessly mocked for the contrast as a child: it was the kind of thing even my fellow orphanage girls would have narrowed in on, much less children as skilled at cruelty as the Refuge kids had been. This time, though, the curtness was not an affection on her part. She was fighting the words as they came out.

I couldn't think of many things I had a hand in that'd get this much emotion out of her.

"I'm listening," I said.

Her lips pressed tight, like she was trying to clench them.

"The Lady's in Praes," she said. "With the Carrion Lord. Your spies said so."

I nodded.

"You think we're going to fight her?" the Huntress asked.

"I'd prefer not to," I admitted. "But I don't think she's going to give us a choice."

At some point, my father and I would clash. His continued silence spoke to that. And when that moment came, I did not believe it would be armies that marched. It would be a war of knives, not battalions, and the Ranger was the finest knife at his disposal. On my end of things, it was not a coincidence that all the surviving children of Refuge were with my host. I had planned for this eventuality in my own way.

"She won't," Alexis roughly said. "That's not how she..."

She hesitated, stumbling over words before abandoning the sentence entirely.

"I hate her," the Silver Huntress candidly admitted. "I honestly do. But I won't lie. She didn't think she was being cruel when she worked us. She thought she was toughening us up for the real world, so we could live like she does."

"But you don't buy that," I murmured.

"We came out of Refuge fine killers, Black Queen," Alexis said. "For that I'm thankful. But she was also trying to make us all into these... she has this idea, this ideal, of 'full' persons that need no one else. That bind with others only because they want to, not because they ever *need* to."

She spat to the side.

"And that fucked us," the Huntress bluntly said. "Cocky still hasn't told a living soul her name. John got himself killed because he thought he needed to prove he was our equal. Lysander once spent most a year learning how to make shoes, when we were kids, because he thought just buying them would mean he was weak."

I watched her silently, waiting for the last two names. Named. The last of the band of five that had never formed.

"I fight when I shouldn't," Alexis the Argent reluctantly admitted. "Because it feels like backing down if I don't. But Indrani's the worst off, because of all of us she's the one that *bought* into it."

"I think the woman you knew," I gently said, "only shares so much with the woman I know."

She didn't like that.

"I know," the Huntress bit out angrily, slamming a fist on the groaning fence. "I know, *fuck*."

I let it go, this once, but my eye narrowed. It did not go unnoticed.

"She's not the same as she was when she left to pick up John," Alexis forced out. "She tries. I can see it, Black Queen, that sometimes the urge is there but she fucking bites down on it."

"You don't have to forgive her," I quietly said. "She's not owed that."

The Silver Huntress faintly smiled.

"Sometimes I still wonder if Lysander got killed because Indrani went *soft* from her years with the Woe," she confessed. "Whether it'd have gone down different, if she'd not turned into the kind of person who tries."

Sometimes, looking at what Ranger had left in the children she'd raised, I wondered what it was Amadeus of the Green Stretch had left in me. What curse, what scar. That there would be one I had no doubt: one did not learn from a madman without learning some manner of madness with it.

"She got to us deep, the Lady," Alexis tiredly said. "Even where we think she didn't. But maybe that's what we have – scars from the same fang. That's for us to handle, anyway. It's not what I came to you for."

"Then what *did* you come for?" I asked.

"When Ranger comes for us, and she will," Alexis the Argent said, voice eerily calm, "she'll strike at every weakness. As hard as she can. She'll try to break us."

My fingers clenched.

"It's how she believes love works, I think," the Huntress quietly said. "To make someone stronger, even if it hurts them. So she will come for us, Catherine Foundling, with loving cruelty. To crown us, welcome us as women. Peers."

Peers, the way she'd treated the Calamities in my Name dreams as the Squire. The way she treated those, I thought, that had not needed her hand to come into strength. There were people, I thought, that Ranger might be lovely to. My father was one of them, because there were things about him she admired. It excused none of it, as far as I was concerned.

"She is not *my* peer," I coldly said. "And I'll teach her why, should she come for any of you."

"I can take care of myself," Alexis brusquely dismissed. "But Indrani..."

The Silver Huntress bit her lip.

"That's what I want from you, Black Queen," she finally said.
"Don't let the Lady turn her back into who she used to be. That's all I ask."

A moment, as she choked on the word.

"Please."

The moon glared down at us, a full circle wreathing us both in pale.

"I won't," I swore.

[Droughtbringer](#)

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burnsh

Ranger has been such a monumental shadow hanging over the story. She's like that one optional endgame level boss that's specifically built to fuck you over in the most unfair way possible.

I really cannot wait to see Cat finally go head to head with her, in whatever form that takes.

[boballab](#)

It's worse than that, she is by far the single most OP character in the story even over the Bard. Remember back when the elven courts still had Winter and Summer, she would go into the Winter Court every time the seasons turned to it and pluck out the eye of the second most powerful Winter elf. She periodically would bust through all the defenses of Keter, just to keep the rust from forming and she fought the single most powerful Court Elf, the Summer Queen, to a draw and that being is rated "god tier" level.

Zach

Keep in mind that Ranger's ability is specifically geared towards learning how to adapt to people in fights, and the Fey can't learn. So once she manages to beat someone like the Prince of Nightfall, it'll be easy each subsequent time.

Ranger also excels the most at beating people in direct combat, so someone who fights like Catherine is well suited towards potentially defeating her.

Deworld

Plus you always need to consider the possible story. In this universe, even the most powerful beings won't survive if the narrative itself sets them up to death. And that's exactly what Cat got all Ranger's pupils for – if not to outright kill her, then to defeat her in some way if it comes to this.

[boballab](#)

IMO, Story is the one glaring weakness in Ranger and it was Blacks ability at manipulating Story that got her attention and it will be through Story that Cat will beat Ranger if they face off.

ruduen

Oof. The biggest problem with Cat admitting it's a mess is that it means options and plans are limited this early on, and that narratively it's going to turn out as an even bigger mess since a few twists are going to be involved. Black and Ranger might not be at complete odds, but it sounds like there's going to be some fighting between groups before the tower's crashing into the ground. Still, we've gotten the seeds for a few different lines of potential catastrophe and potential plots, like just what Vivienne's up to.

It sounds like there are at least 5 groups in play (Callow, Malicia's Army, Rebels, Sepulchral, and Amadeus). I think the past, it's mentioned that even armies or campaigns can have stories guiding them, so I wonder if we'll get a clearer look at any of the ones that are out and about now.

WuseMajor

Six. Bard is here manipulating things too.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The Wandering Bard still isn't just a piece on the board, she's a player competing with Cat – and except *perhaps* for the Dead King, I don't think there's a third player on their level of Story manipulation.

Itarion

A 6th group: the orc tribes. It looks like they'll end up aligned against Malicia, but they're yet another agenda on the board.

Deworld

Orc tribes are, for now, just gathering for some raids. They have no hand in the upcoming battle.

Sinead

But if they wished to show up, I am sure Hakram could Find a way.

Shveiran

Eh. I mean, you are right, but several of the contenders are a month or more away, and the envoys from the Clans left some time ago.

I wouldn't count them out, especially if another player pulls some strings. All it would really take is Masego opening the Ways for them, after all.

Sinead

Why I find the interest in having the solution to this conflict to be talking instead of a battle is because if the Clans show up, they become a very convenient Big Stick when it comes to having people sit at the table. Plus, that table is carved over with the legend of The Woe, so it's a symbolic pointed reminder.

Plus I wonder how long the talks would be for the Orcs, since Hakram would have started working on the envoys as soon as they set out, and then sitting down with them and other parties that are nominally his allies.

I really want a Hakram Interlude (probably North I?) soon. Though perhaps it'll be a Hakram and Ivah Interlude.

I just like the idea of a peace conference in the Wasteland being held by the factions that are likely all sick of this war.

edrey

i put my money that the bard is with Sepulchral, it just look like a perfect opening for her.

ninegardens

Sepulchral has no Named (to our current knowledge). Shouldn't that make things.... more complicated for the Bard?

Insanenoodlyguy

Not if she's claimant.

Deworld

Not sure if Bard can come to a claimant. We have no reference for this. Claimants aren't Named yet.

Plus, main Bard's objective as of now is to kill Cat (or at least she says so). I'm not sure how siding with Sepulchral can help with it.

Yunamed

I think she can go to claimants. Remember when Amadeus was captured by the heroes, she appeared to him and had a conversation.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

How sure are you that Bard wants to kill Catherine rather than be killed by her?

Deworld

Not very much. That Bard wants to die was established a long time ago.

However, as I said, killing Cat is what Bard herself says she wants to do. What her actual motivations are can only be speculations.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Bard can certainly come to Claimants. One interesting question is whether Sepulchral is a genuine Claimant. Wouldn't it be *interesting* if it turns out she's never actually heard The Song?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, the Emerald Swords are present, and likely to play spoiler whenever Amadeus & Ranger engage.

PapaBrogundy

Cat just swore a solemn oath under moonlight to use Ranger as a whetstone for her name and we're all here for it. When that confrontation occurs (I'm guessing Ater) it should be cataclysmic.

RoflCat

Personally, I'd like to see Black actually NOT get involved in the fight.

To play the Story game he should be avoiding all these 'it'll happen' Story setups, because them being expected means Bard/Catherine will know about it and make their plans accordingly.

So if Black know what they expect to happen, he can make his own 'plot twist'.

ninegardens

Oh god- Cat vs Ranger. Bard is going to have a field day with that, and use it as yet another chance to twist the knife in Amadeaus. 😞

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Power vs. Story-fu.

Which is more powerful, Perfection or Narrative?

Cicero

Interesting, this has the feel of a story developing, but a story different from the ones Cat usually plays. That final line feels like a very important hinge too.

Does Cat even realize she's walked into this story?

[Liliet](#)

This one might well have been on purpose.

ninegardens

That is a a *very* dangerous story to walk into on purpose.

Deworld

Well, Cat did expect to deal with Ranger using the story of her and her pupils, and I hardly can believe she thought she'll stay out of it.

[Liliet](#)

We are still talking about Catherine Foundlilng, right?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

When the only path forward requires sacrifice...

shikkarasu

Walking into dangerous Narratives on purpose? Putting her back to the wall and rolling the bones against Fate itself? Yep, sounds like Cat. That said I agree, she's not doing any of this blind. One might even go so far as to

say she lost an eye and gained Wisdom, but I could not possibly comment.

[onedollargum](#)

I think even if she did, Archer means enough to Cat that she can't afford not to take this bait.

[Adrian_V](#)

Too sleepy to said more than 1 thing: Alexis the Ardent just won my respect in this chapter, she too in a way is trying as much as Indrani even if she doesn't realizes it.

Incredible how raw that please at the end feels.

[Liliet](#)

Argent, not Ardent. Silver, as in Silver Huntress.

[Adrian_V](#)

Like i said, sleepy xD

Abnaxis

OMG how have I read that as Ardent through 2 re-reads

[Burlyraven](#)

Above are the implied patrons of Squire, and it may be that they're seeking to make a new enforcer, given the Saint's demise, Mirror Knight's unreliable nature, and Hanno's waning grip on White Knight. That said, the method Above appears to be endorsing is remarkably accepting of the aid of Below's champions. Given that the particular brand of Story Arthur is enmeshed within is the kind that would seem fated to force him into the role of a Knight, I once again have to wonder exactly what word will serve in the first position of that Name.

Linnus42

Eh I would say its more of matter of having a chicken in every pot. Squire is aimed at Cat and VIV sure but less so when Cat moves from being Callow Centric then he is Viv's issue. But primarily he is Callow Focused. Mirror Knight is Procer focused with the Drow soon to be on the border so he is setup to oppose them. Hanno though is far more internationally focused though not National. at all. As for the Name could be Knight or Paladin though the difference between Knight and Paladin is unclear cause Knights can basically do anything.

Snappy

Knights are great warriors, while paladins are usually military leaders. A knight could be one with a name like knight-commander, but unlikely. The white knight usually only leads names not troops, so there could be an opening for a Good paladin.

Rey d`Tutto

He will be Callowan as a Knight.

They are a Good people, who have developed a Cynical and Vengeful attitude towards both Evil and Good countries who border them.

Black Knights invaded them. White Knights ignored Good countries invasions.

He will be a Dark Knight (Batman), or a Shining Knight, or mebbe a Grey Knight?

shikkarasu

I think Arthur is placed to remove Catherine once she's no longer the lesser evil. Placing her in a mentor position is perfect for this, since it keeps Arthur from trying to kill her early like Mirror Knight would. Even if she does abdicate, she can't meddle in Callow too much without getting in Arthur's way. The Gods Above might even see this as a compromise: "Get out of Callow before he finds a way to re-forged the Penitent's Blade and we won't have a problem. Stick around and you'll have to face another prodigy duellist without any of the exploits you used on Saint or Lone."

Liliet

Yeah, Arthur's story sounds like a failsafe on Catherine's, to me.

Cotillion

She's squiring the successor to the Lone Swordsman, to all appearances. Learn as a martial aspect seems indicative, as are dreams of the feather. I don't think he's likely to be a "Lone" Swordsman though. Too much collaboration from too many names and resources going into training him. He's going to wind up being a sort of inversion imo.

Shveiran

Whether or not Arthur is embraced by Contrition, I really think he doesn't fit the Lone Swordsman Name.

Not unless he is brutally betrayed and gets a very edgy phase.

The guy is all about being part of a group and has established multiple meaningful relationships, for Crows' sake.

Juff

Typo Thread:

made the junior > made her the junior
that's you worry > that's your worry
I actually believe > I actually believed
that easy questions > that easy question (or those easy questions)
arms are making > arms and making
to ever to > to ever
pleased surprise > pleasant surprise
wasIndrani's (missing space)
stillhave (missing space)
he thought he thought > he thought

WuseMajor

Hmmm.... I wonder if Amadeus's main dispute with Cat is that he doesn't want to become Dread Emperor at the end?

Alternately, maybe he's staying under the radar to evade Bard and Malicia together, not because he necessarily has a dispute with Cat.

Or maybe he thinks he's being "kind" by letting her do this on her own?

[*Liliet*](#)

Definitely not that last one, Amadeus 1) knows full well how much Cat loves him and has never believed love to be weakness so this is super not his style, 2) would never prioritize kindness over practicality.

The former two are very plausible tho.

[*Liliet*](#)

* would never prioritize kindness over practicality on this scale with these stakes, to be clear.

[*Rey d`Tutto*](#)

When the "bad guy" sacrifices to achieve the "plan"..
Good writing. No. Superb.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

She might just be trying to keep the Emerald Swords out of her hair.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Clarification/correction: Amadeus would be trying to keep the Emerald Swords out of Cat's hair.

Joats

Cat just called a straight victory in the first instance of interference by the Bard. And she's heading into another situation where the Bard can act against her even more directly than setting off an alarm. Who wants to bet there will be a draw of some sort centered around Catherine after the Bard makes some sort of appearance?

[Liliet](#)

Cat and Bard already had a draw-ish interaction at the Arsenal, a pattern of three won't spring up here all of a sudden. Cat's Role has not changed since then.

Shveiran

And that's for the best. I'm all for a Pattern of Three between Nim and Arthur, but let's not have that be the lynchpin to the main plot again.

[Liliet](#)

AAAAA REFUGEE SISTERS

I love Alexis the Argent and I love so much that she cares about Indrani too ♥ ♥ ♥ and that she sees, she sees that she's trying!!!

Arthur with Learn ♥ ♥ ♥ I love how Amadeus definitely textually aimed Cat's own Learn the way he did deliberately and what this says about her story as a whole ♥

RIP the mess)=

Darkening

Huh. I guess it does make sense that amadeus may have steered learn to help her be more knowledgable rather than make her a better fighter, given his disdain for villains that lean on power rather than wits. It's interesting that we've seen learn 4 times in entirely different styles. Cat absorbing knowledge from books rapidly, Arthur learning swordsmanship, the hedge witch having some kind of active scan ability with it, and of course ranger's ridiculous synergy.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus was immediately teaching Cat to be a ruler more than a fighter :3 remember the agriculture book that baffled Cat so?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Logistics

Kage Lupus

It gives a very good idea of what Black thinks is most important for a new Squire to have. Cat learned all of her fighting skills via hard work and practice, but she Learned language and history and military theory because that was a much broader category that she needed much sooner. Remember, it was while going over old ledgers that Cat discovered Black's master plan, of breaking the cycle of Praes being the Evil foil to the rest of the continent. It would have taken her years of studying without Learn to have gotten to the point where she could recognize the pattern otherwise.

[Liliet](#)

TBF, Cat did know a lot of history, her education was good.

But yeah, Amadeus had very specific things she wanted from her.

(And it wasn't random ledgers Cat was going over, it was the specific journal Amadeus gave her when she asked what he wanted, and she didn't even figure it out, she had to ask Hakram)

Lord Haart

Hakram gets the wasteland better than most, yeah.

Dreadhand Empreror Benevolent? 😊

Deworld

Nice to see more of Silver Huntress. She always was interesting for me, but we have seen almost none of her. Unless I forgot something, it's only the second scene showing her character in some way – the first being fight with Indrani after Beastmaster's death. Any other time she was just standing somewhere in the background. We had more on Concocter and even on Beastmaster himself.

[Liliet](#)

We did have her described and talked about quite a bit in the background, but yeah this is the second time we see her on-screen and talking.

(I'm clarifying "and talking" bc there was that one raid she and Indrani went on with Cat, early in the Hainaut campaign)

Deworld

That's what I meant. "Show, not tell", you know? She was talked about a lot, but we have never seen anything about her. Cat talks about how well they come along, but it's the first time we actually see it. Hell, as I understand it, Huntress is the third closest Hero to Cat, after Arthur and Hanno. Maybe she competes for this place with Apprentice and Roland, but still, she's in top-5 for sure. And still, this is the first time we see them actually interact on a personal level.

Let's hope that this conversation is EE noticing this issue and trying to fix it.

Darkening

I dunno, she let kingfisher prince pretty close to her :p. And yeah, roland is definitely top 3 material. With Tariq alive I doubt she'd have made top 5 but she might be edging in these days.

[Liliet](#)

Yeppppp. I've noticed how little we've seen of her, considering repeated assurances that Cat gets along with her super well, too. I think it was to keep the tension in the Refugee plot – what kind of person was Indrani trying to reconcile with? Would it even work? And this is the payoff – her own damage, her own caring, the "please" and Cat's promise.

grandemic

I let it go, this once, but my eyes* narrowed.

Cotillion

You are incorrect, sir.

grandemic

I am not. EE wrote eyes, plural.

[Liliet](#)

My one eyes?

Lord Haart

Yeah I feel like if there's one particular gripe I have with this book, it's the lack of mentioning that SHE LOST AN EYE. It's hardly a small thing (well, emotionally) and it hasn't

come up nearly enough IMO. We heard much more about the limp, and she can basically cancel that out at need.

You could put this down to PTSD but then I think there should be other signs of trouble too. As it is, it minimizes the loss and makes it less impactful.

Earl of Purple

Learning how to use a sword from the Barrow Blade should be interesting. He's got the sword in his Name, so theoretically he's a good swordsman. Learning from him exclusively would be a good way to become a duelist, however. I think, at least. Although... isn't Ishaq's sword two handed? Or am I misremembering?

ninegardens

Also, "dying" is part of the Barrow sword's combat strategy. ... Like not a main component, but definitely a component.

[TeK](#)

"The boy did not quite manage to hide his disappointment but I quashed the pang I felt at the sight. I already walked the line perhaps a little too finely when it came to teaching Arthur Foundling. An occasional distant instructor tossing a few lessons his way shouldn't be too prone to ending up story fodder, I figured, but considering he had a draw with the Black Knight coming up the last thing I wanted was stepping into a formal teacher's role. That was a good way to stumble into buying his draw with my death."

"Sometimes, looking at what Ranger had left in the children she'd raised, I wondered what it was Amadeus of the Green Stretch had left in me. What curse, what scar. That there would be one I had no doubt: one did not learn from a madman without learning some manner of madness with it."

Yeah, really Catherine, what is it?

Darkening

For all that the everdark arc wasn't the best part of the series, the conversation she had with archer about how maddening it is to watch every word and action to control your story was a great moment.

Lord Haart

Personally liked that part a lot – the Drow were interesting and I loved the end with Sve Nov. The arc felt a lot like Moria and that's a very good thing as far as building mood goes. The only real trouble I had with it was the suspension

of disbelief that she'd really leave Callow behind out of contact for so long.

Liliet

Issues Catherine got as inheritance from Amadeus:

– self-sacrificial tendencies in the vein of “well I’m a bad person anyway, and you can’t make omelette without breaking at least one egg so better me than anyone else. I’m a selfish and terrible person anyway so no big loss”

– mentor story PTSD. There’s being careful and then there’s fully mentally equating mentorship with promised death to the degree you can find yourself falling into an actually more dangerous story though sheer denial

Sinead

I think Cat will stay just shy of the cliff edge here, since in lieu of herself, she’s piling on a whole lot of resources on Arthur. It’ll still burn her, but I don’t think it will be catastrophic.

I mentioned on Reddit, but I wonder if Cat’s gonna be a fly on the wall with Vivienne talking to Arthur about ‘why the knightly orders did not return under Cat’ (there are some general points there that can extend out to why Cat operates the way she does that doesn’t overstep).

Plus that would serve as a good precursor for Cat and Vivienne to talk.

Liliet

Aaaaah I want that so much!!!

Sinead

I want it both because I genuinely want to see this conversation (especially since a Knightly order could be folded into the war machine as an extension of the Army doctrine since they do not have Ogres that were part of Legion doctrine, so the issue is all the other issues around the knightly order. Arthur is an orphan, he doesn’t have the same connection of the knightly orders to nobility and the issues with it. Plus it would be interesting to have the Heir Apparent be the ‘person who understands Callowan politics’ to point out to Arthur how dangerous he is to Cat’s legacy.

I don’t know if it would be overstepping for Vivienne to point out that Cat’s legacy is forging Callow into a sharp, brittle knife (will cut all on the wrong side, but

can be broken if poorly handled). How having a military symbol as a threat will break everything more than external threats (how will the goblins in Marchford feel about this? The Praesi refugees? Any orcs that may have moved into Callow? Traditional Callow was fucking brutal about 'foreigners' . In trying to bring back 'traditional Callow' will Arthur be willing to deal with everything else?

I also really want this conversation to happen, and the more I think about, the more Vivienne is better to have it. She is the face of Callow rising, and her handling this potential future threat to her and Cat's plans for Callow would be a feather in her cap that it wouldn't otherwise be.

If this results in an Adjutant scene, that may be awkward for Cat to sit and witness, but it's also her seeing how Vivienne operates.

...Dammit, I've thought too much about this. I hope EE surprises me.

Hakram's Dead Hand

That's what I was thinking. She inherited the Amadeus's machine; the ever present gears behind his eyes. Because of this, she can never truly live without seeing the world as it is, and will always keep everyone around her at arms length. Sure, this gives them power, but also locks them into the calculating creature role forever. What a beautiful story.

Shveiran

Neither she nor Amadeus keep everyone at arms length. Both have real, meaningful relationships to which they are not afraid to show their vulnerabilities. This ain't Code Geass; they can be calculating and still, you know, a person.

beleester

It's so confusing to read about "the Black Knight's army" and realize that they're not talking about Amadeus.

Xinci

It is interesting to look at Rangers life with further confirmation on her intended methodology. It really does read as a long lived being who has had limited attachment due to pressure(ie. Hunted by the Emerald Swords), attempting to mitigate future loss through selection. So her attempts to toughen them up to what could be, let them experience struggle, etc make sense in coming from someone like her. In the long view

it can be a mercy to do so if the connection is all you have. Too bad she didn't quite take own experiences with the Calamities to know how to balance out the pressure better through cooperation. Understandable though honestly if ones perspective is more on how to survive eternitys worth of conflict.

Overall though I think Alexis gave a good underview of why Ranger acted like she did. She reminds me of that Dead King in some ways when he was mentoring Cat. A unsurprising similarity given both are fighting to live a long time.

[308924810a](#)

"I understand that the Grand Alliance has interests in Praes," General Mok said, voice rumbling, "but it doesn't get to impose terms here. Who rules in Ater is not to be determined in Salia or Laure."

Huh, they seem to have a concept of Westphalian sovereignty. Which is weird given that the continent is still fairly feudal. But I guess not so weird given that there's very strong regional cultural identities and very little permanently successful conquest of areas with differing cultural identities to muddle up question of legitimacy of one cultural group holding primacy over their territories.

Also not that weird given that Praes and Procer have to have tried these kinds of tricks before, yet been pushed back by the general conservation of cultural patterns and state of relative stasis the continent tends to fall into.

caoimhinh

What I'm wondering now is this:

If the Rebel Legions are in agreement that Malicia has to go, and they want to crush Sepulchral, but they don't want to support Amadeus's claim of the Tower unless Nim refuses them... who do they want to take the Tower?

Are they just saying "not any of these" and hope someone better rises afterward?

It really seems like these guys aren't looking much ahead. No wonder Cat showed such disdain on them, as they really seem to be just going there to be opportunistic and flex on whoever wins, but that's really just gonna earn them the disdain of the winner, it's like those Orcs initially saying to Cat that they wouldn't join her as the Tower still stands. If the Tower has already fallen or been taken without your help, you can't come later to get rewards, you are just gonna be pushed aside for not siding with the winner.

Also, they are betting their all on Nim taking their offer and turn on Malicia and then go crush Sepulchral. But surely they aren't betting on Nim becoming Dread Empress, so who will they

support? Or do they expect to turn Praes into something else that is not an Empire?

It's weird that Catherine didn't point this out to them, or asked them about this, since it seems like a logical question after they told her that they didn't support any of the claimants of the tower, and only would go to Amadeus if Nim rejects their offer.

[Liliet](#)

Maybe they ARE banking on Nim being DE. That's a classic for Black Knights, and it's never happened to an ogre before, but neither has it happened to a Duni!

Daniel E

Anyone else find it weird that Juniper is just suddenly here? Like, no mention at all since coming to Praes, and suddenly 'Hellhound is back'.

hoser2

She's been around. She defended the Sahelian counterattack and reported to Cat onscreen and served out barbecue at the fire, for two off the top of my mind.

Deworld

Juniper was mentioned being there with Cat since the very first chapter of the book.

superkeaton

I am deeply curious for what Plan she has in store for an absolute Killer like The Ranger.

Darkening

"Stop breathing," she Spoke, and then ran for her life.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Stop

john

Ranger seems like exactly the kind of person who could score an Olympic-qualitying time on the hundred yard dash, over broken ground, while carrying something heavy and sharp AND holding her breath.

Lord Haart

Yeah there is Story here, yet another hero asking a Boon of the Black Queen.

Ranger has been a bit of an enigma every since she absconded during the prologue. One can imagine that if she had raised Cat rather than Black, Cat would be even more like her than Indrani, who is a bit more lackadaisical with Wander. Cat is no doubt thinking of how she can beat her with story fu, but I hope she learned from Arsenal that there is a cost to such tactics.

Also, of all the armies, Cat can least afford a fight, she needs soldiers and mages to take back to Hainut.

Storm

Fuck, the Lady is going to break the table, isn't she?

Chapter 13: Footing

"To hold a strong defensive position is not enough. You must force the enemy to attack it, which is the difference between tactics and strategy."

– Extract from 'Considerations on Warfare' by Marshal Grem One-Eye

We made good pace.

The Army of Callow had been hammered into a host that could move on the quick by years of campaigning abroad, and for once we weren't too starved on trained officers: the combination of the First and Second Army that Juniper commanded had benefitted from the officer pools being combined. It'd be Hells to split the armies back up when it was done, of course, but that was a problem for the future. There simply weren't enough potential soldiers left back in Callow for the First and Second to be raised back up to full strength separately anyway, they'd be staying combined until the end of the war. The 'Fifth' Army, as the rank and file had taken to calling it, wasn't going anywhere for some years.

The Levantines under Razin and Aquiline weren't a drag on our pace, the way they'd sometimes been in Hainaut. Now that they were relying on our supply train instead of their own, the Dominion warriors were as cut free from a tether: they were usually *quicker* on the march than my legionaries now. The lighter

armour and years of raiding had trained it into them. The Twilight Ways made for a pleasant reprieve from Wasteland weather, even if we'd only ever tasted the outskirts of that, and we advanced faster than Juniper had anticipated. We had to slow down around the end of the first week, waiting for reports about the march of the other armies.

Marshal Nim and her legions kept to the same brisk pace they had so far, which meant in about two weeks both our armies would be forced to emerge from the Ways or face the possibility of a contested crossing should we be beaten to returning to Creation. The surprising part was that Dread Empress Sepulchral seemed to have been gaining on the Black Knight: she was in hot pursuit, still a week behind even though the Legions were using the Ways and she was not. It seemed impossible, and the Jacks confirmed there was more to it a few days later. It was not Sepulchral's entire army that'd been keeping up that breakneck pace but instead a large vanguard.

Two thousand household troops and her entire cavalry contingent, Vivienne's people believed.

"She's trying to keep up the pressure on Marshal Nim by having a force nipping at her rear," Juniper opined. "They won't engage, but they'll raid her supply lines and try to hammer any detachment she splits from her main host."

"If the Jacks have people in Sepulchral's camp able to learn this, the Eyes will too," Vivienne noted. "I have no doubt Malicia informed her Black Knight of the plan before it even began."

I snorted.

"Old Abreha's counting on it," I said, reluctantly admiring. "She's trying to goad the Black Knight into engaging us hastily."

Sepulchral had nothing but gains to make from the Loyalist Legions and the Army of Callow getting into a messy, ill-planned battle.

"It's cleverly done," Juniper admitted. "If Nim sends a force south to make the vanguard back off, she has to either leave it there – and weaken herself just before she fights us – or slow her march so it can rejoin. Which would buy time for the slower part of Sepulchral's army to catch up."

I shared a look with my marshal. It was an inspired tactic, playing to the strengths of her army and the weaknesses of the Black Knight's positions. It was, in other words, not a tactic that Abreha Mirembé or her generals had likely come up with. Sepulchral was a skilling intriguer but a solidly average battle commander, looking at her record. And as far as we knew neither

Aksum nor Nok had any noteworthy military talents in their upper ranks. So who was planning Sepulchral's campaign for her? I glanced at Scribe, who had been silently keeping notes as we spoke.

"Make it a priority to find out who's been giving out those orders," I ordered her. "The last thing we need is for Sepulchral to become a genuine threat."

"I've been concentrating on putting out the last gasps of my influence in the Wasteland," Eudokia said. "It might be possible to find this out, Queen Catherine, but I will have to burn most of the agents I have in Sepulchral's camp."

Meaning she would no longer be confident of catching anything going on there afterwards. We'd be relying solely on the Jacks, and Vivienne's spies had been playing catch-up with the Eyes since the moment they were first raised without ever quite touching that prize. I hesitated, then turned to Juniper.

"How confident are you of beating that army if you know who commands it?" I asked.

She did not answer immediately, considering the question seriously.

"Seven parts in ten," Juniper of the Red Shields finally said.

I nodded. Good enough for me.

"Do it," I ordered Scribe.

Aside from that little surprise, the beginning of our southern offensive was trotting along nicely. As the second week since we'd left the outskirts of Wolof began, it looked like as if our preferred outcome would come to pass: a decisive pitched battle with the Loyalist Legions at least a week before anyone else was close enough to intervene. There'd been no real hiccup to our advance so far, which only made it natural that Creation would then promptly snatch the ground out from under our feet. Unlike some of the past instances of the Gods pissing in my morning gruel, however, this time the snatching was not a fucking metaphor.

Half-past Morning Bell, as we marched along the Twilight Ways, the ground *literally* fell out under my army.

Great cracks spread across the ground, fast enough my officers had time to do little more than shout warnings, then great chunks of the Ways fell down into Creation like shattered glass panes. It was all the more hellish for the suddenness of it: there'd been no warning, not ominous sign. In thirty heartbeats my army had turned from a smoothly marching column into a groaning and

wounded beast, spread out in chunks in the middle of a particularly vicious Wasteland dust storm. There was enough order in my ranks that I managed to rustle up two mage lines and Hierophant to form a shaky protective ward around the column, keeping the whipping dust out of our faces long enough that priests from the House Insurgent could begin seeing to the wounded and dying.

I ran around trying to get proper wardstones in place, hindered by the fact that they'd been built to protect the shape of camps and not columns, but before I got anywhere the storm suddenly died. It'd lasted perhaps half an hour after my army fell, and just as suddenly as it had come it was gone. Clenching my teeth, I got to finding out the damage. It'd been a short fall down, at least. That'd taken off the edge some. Hardly more than four feet in most cases, and the Order of the Broken Bells had been in the vanguard ahead of the fall so it'd mostly been remounts that'd broken their legs falling.

The grassy grounds from the Ways that'd fallen with us began to decay quickly and the emanations were somewhat toxic so we had to move away and reform, but order was getting restored as lieutenants saw to their lines. Numbers for casualties and wounded quickly made it up the chain, eventually getting to Juniper and myself: only seventy-nine dead, but almost three hundred wounded. We'd also lost enough horses for the Order that their staying power was compromised for longer-term engagements. Not necessarily an immediate concern, but by the time we got to Ater any knight who lost a horse would be fighting the rest of the campaign on foot.

There'd been more painful damage in a strategic sense.

"We're paralyzed for at least two days," Juniper bluntly said. "That we still have *any* supply wagons capable of moving is a miracle, and if the healers can't fix the oxen pulling them we're going to have to kill the beasts."

Which would further slow us, for all that it'd add to our meat reserves. We could compensate by putting the Order's remaining remounts to work pulling the wagons and arranging relays of legionaries – mostly orcs, given their greater body strength – but it'd still be a blow to mobility. Hopefully our healers could salvage at least some of the beasts of burden while our sappers repaired the broken supply wagons. The only silver lining was that Pickler's obsessive care for her field engines meant they'd been insulated from shock well enough the fall had caused need only for minor repairs and replacements. We wouldn't be headed into battle with the Legions of Terror without working war engines.

"We need to find out where we are," I sighed. "And if returning to the Ways will just see this happen again."

I'd already asked Masego to look into it. Wasteland weather was infamously dangerous for good reason, but ripping an army out of the Twilight Ways was going too far. My instincts screamed enemy action, but *which* enemy?

"I've sent out scouts," Juniper said. "I'll send someone to fetch you when they begin coming back."

"I'll see what Hierophant has for me, then," I said, groaning as I got back to my feet.

I'd almost lost Zombie the Sixth to this mess. He'd broken a leg and bucked me off, but the priests seemed to think he could be made better. I'd be stuck borrowing a mount from the Order until he was fit to ride again, though. Masego wasn't hard to find, considering he was still exactly where I'd left him. The hastily raised tent was kept standing more by wards than wood, not that he seemed to notice. Earlier he'd been using scrying rituals with some difficulty, going through the Observatory, but now he was instead running spells on the storm dust he'd sent Apprentice out to gather. Though the outer ward would have warned him of my entry he did not immediately turn. I left him to his spells, waiting in silence as I leaned against my staff. He turned to me when he was good and ready.

"It was a ritual," Hierophant said.

I glanced at the dust but he shook his head.

"This is simply dust," he said. "We are near the Gust Ribbon from what I gathered while scrying, so the dust storm itself was drawn out of it by the first part of the ritual and only then empowered. There are striations in the magic saturation of the dust that make the sequence plain to see."

Near the Gust Ribbon wasn't saying much, as it was a winding and moving region that stretched across the northwest third of the Wasteland. Wasn't overall reassuring, though, considering it was called that because it was plagued by sudden and powerful storms that had a nasty tendency to spill out in every direction. It wouldn't be safe to stay here long even if we didn't get hammered by another ritual.

"So someone leashed a dust storm, empowered it with a spell and sent it our way?" I asked.

"It was quite brilliantly done," Masego said. "The dust, you see, solved the issue of air being able to hold too little magic for most large-scale ritual work. The storm was turned into an array that thinned the boundary between the Ways and Creation – which is already very thin – until it was on the very edge of shattering."

"Are you telling me that the *physical weight* of my army is what shattered the Twilight Ways?" I flatly asked.

"As I said," Masego smiled, "quite brilliantly done."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"This is Malicia," I said.

It had to be. People had been telling me again and again that weather sorcery was the specialty of Taghreb, and there was only one army out there that fielded a significant amount of high-calibre Taghreb mages. More than that, we'd known for months that while High Lady Takisha of Kahtan had played coy with sending the Tower actual troops she'd not been shy with providing mages instead. It'd take more than just a few cadres of talented mages to pull off something like this, though. I knew that and so did he.

"This is Akua Sahelian," Masego corrected, confirming my fear. "There are maybe four other practitioners in Praes capable of such a ritual, but there appears to have been an uncontrolled surge in the middle of the span – I suspect mages grew exhausted and their replacements had inadequate control – that was masterfully redirected instead of allowed to collapse the entire working."

He paused.

"I would be capable of this," he said, without a hint of a boast. "My father was, and so was Dumisai of Aksum. I would not bet on Naziha Sarrif being so capable, however, and she is the finest mage in the south. There is only one woman in all of Praes with the talent and schooling to do it."

His face was calm.

"I have already told you her name."

That was what happened, I told myself, when you let someone as dangerous Akua go to your enemy's side. She didn't stop being dangerous, it was just turned on you instead. I breathed out, suddenly tired. I had seventy-nine names to learn. I owed that, and truthfully more than was possible to repay.

"I found something interesting, however," Hierophant said. "The way the boundaries of the ritual array were defined was... peculiar."

I cocked an eyebrow at him, silently urging him to continue.

"Much more of the Ways fell than was necessary," Masego said. "Without looking at the equations myself I cannot be certain, but it seems to me that the power could have been made... narrower."

Concentrated on ensuring there would be a faller from higher up instead of such a large swath of territory."

My fingers clenched.

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"That no one capable of crafting such a ritual," Hierophant evenly replied, "would have made such a mistake in ignorance. It was a choice."

A pulled punch, he was saying. Seventy-nine dead, my entire army paralyzed, and still a pulled punch. Not without reason had we once named that woman the doom of an entire city. I silently nodded, at loss for words. Glowing, fiery eyes studied me from beneath the eye cloth.

"I do not understand why she is no longer with us," Masego admitted. "Is this about revenge? Indrani tells me that in Hainaut you had the opportunity to let her go to her death. I had thought – and she – that you refused because you were letting go of all this long prices business."

He paused.

"She is no longer here," Masego plainly said, "and so I am confused."

"One hundred thousand dead, Zeze," I quietly said. "She doesn't get to have that swept under the rug. Nobody does."

"So it is revenge," Masego mused, brightening for having understood. "Why let her go to the Tower and become the Warlock, then? It does not strike me as a very good vengeance."

"Because she'll hate it," I quietly said. "It will be everything she has been taught to want, but even as she gets it every victory will taste like ashes in her mouth. And when reaches the end of that line, of that dreadful dream, it will not be joy she feels."

It would be horror, I thought. Horror at the prospect of spending the rest of her life wearing shackles around her wrists that she would have put on herself. And the moment she understood that, understood that she wanted to be *better* than the girl she'd once been instead of simply an older, crueller version of her, I would be there. Waiting with an offer that she would accept.

"And after?" Masego asked.

"She trades a broken dream for a broken crown," I murmured.

I did not believe we could destroy the Hidden Horror, not truly. Not now and even less after we gifted him the crown of Autumn. So

he would need a prison and a warden. A box he would surely break in time, a pit he would dig himself out of, but a realm of endless paths? That might do the trick. There he would be cursed to wander forever alone, as a broken queen on a broken throne kept him imprisoned until the end of times. And that queen's throne would lie in the heart of the city she had doomed, perched atop her very folly as she kept the peace of Twilight. She would make the choice herself, willingly and without coercion. That was the retribution I owed a hundred thousand screaming souls: an endless vigil holding back a greater evil, knowing every part of it was of her own making.

I was Callowan. My prices were long, and paid twice.

—

The first scouts returned with word of a town to our southeast. Scrying wasn't working well in the region, which Masego believed to be because of the same ritual that'd brought us down. To sum up a quarter-hour explanation, 'much magic in sky dust makes magic in sky difficult'. I shared this summary with the table, which prompted him to admit he wished he had a way to disown me. On the bright side, he also believed that while it was still unsafe to return to the Twilight Ways for at least two weeks it was unlikely that we were going to be hit with a storm again. The same phenomenon that screwed up scrying would make it 'astronomically difficult' to get another ritual going. I'd intended on going back into the camp after the conversation, but Juniper had notions of her own.

"You're pacing back and forth like a tiger in a cage," the Hellhound said. "Make yourself useful instead. Take knights and have a look at the town, find out where we are."

"I'm not *pacing*," I reflexively defended, but she had a point.

I took thirty knights of the Order and Scribe too, since she was the woman with the maps. Eudokia didn't recognize the region itself, though she did note that the dusty and rocky grounds here would be a good fit for certain parts of the Cradle: a rough square of land near the middle of the Wasteland that had fairly steady weather but got the spills from more... exotic parts. We rode out briskly, finding the town the scouts had marked in less than an hour. It wasn't anything all that impressive, I saw as we got closer. A walled town large enough to hold maybe a few hundred souls, surrounded by sparse farms and skeletal orchards. We found several wells on the way, though, which was good news. Too many of our water barrels had broken during the fall.

The gates were closed when we got there, an iron-barded set tall as a man but too cramped for most carts. No great traders, then. The walls weren't anything I'd have a hard time smashing with Night if I put my back into it: six to eight uneven feet of

stacked stone and mud with wooden spikes on top. Over the gates, an old dark-skinned woman in faded robes was waiting for us. Spread out further atop the walls were maybe a dozen archers and an unarmed pair of middle-aged siblings that must have been the town mages. They weren't the ones in charge, though, as was made clear when we reined in our horses at the edge of bow range and got called out by the old woman.

"State your business," she demanded. "Are you with the army to the north?"

I blinked. My knights carried the royal banner with them, which usually got recognized and took care of most questions before the talking began. Not so this time, evidently. Seeing no point in subtlety out in the middle of nowhere, I went with straightforward instead.

"I am Queen Catherine of Callow," I called back. "I only want to talk and buy goods."

There was some consternation atop the wall, several others coming close to the old woman before she angrily waved them away.

"There's nothing worth burning here," the old woman yelled out at me. "Go away."

I sighed. Why was it never the useful parts of my reputation that preceded me? Deciding to make a point, I murmured a prayer to the Crows and let the Night sluggishly wake to my words. I went for something loud and dangerous looking over actually dangerous, blasting a chunk of the countryside in a whirl of black flames. I let silence follow in that sights's wake as it sunk in that I could wield the same power against their wall to fairly predictable results. I then politely requested to be let in so we could talk and I could arrange the buying of goods, which after some arguing between the 'warriors' was granted.

The gates swung open and we were ushered through deserted dirt streets to a hall of stone. There the old woman from earlier received us by a great fire and extended hospitality in the name of the town, Ogarin. We refrained from accepting food or drink anyway. She introduced herself as Anan, the current *haku* to the town. Bailiff was probably the closest equivalent to the title we had back home, from what I understood, as a haku's authority was centred around arranging the collection of communal taxes and work levies in the name of the local lord. The town was part of the territory of a Lord Abara, she informed us, who ruled from a fortress called Kala further to the southeast and situated at the bottom of the eponymous Kala Hills.

"I'll bargain so the town does not get sacked, Your Majesty," Anan said, "but we don't have much to trade. We already sent our

crop tax south to the fortress. There's been a food levy across the Wasteland."

I frowned.

"Who does Lord Abara swear to?" I asked.

She snorted.

"His uncle swore to Wolof, but that was in High Lady Tasia's day," she said. "Now he's sworn to no one. It was the Tower that came to collect."

So Malicia – more likely the Black Knight through her – had been emptying the Wasteland of food, to feed Marshal Nim army and make sure my own wouldn't be able to add to its supplies from the local stores. Not without starving towns and villages, anyway, which aside from being deeply distasteful to me was likely to mean resistance to my troops from locals. No one liked having the table robbed by a foreign invader, as my childhood in Laure had intimately taught me. We got a little more out of Anan about the region we'd ended up in with some wheedling. Ogarin was at the northwestern edge of Lord Abara's lands but linked by a dirt path to a better road that Anan called the 'half-road'. I asked, naturally. It was a name that pretty much demanded it.

"We're between imperial highways," Anan said. "One of the old Abara – in my great, great grandmother's day – swore himself to Aksum, and to make it stick he planned to connect Kala to the highway between Ater and Aksum. It was going to make us rich, he claimed. Only he died before it was done. His daughter instead went back to the Tower's protection and pocketed the gold, leaving the job half done."

The half-road wasn't properly paved, she explained, just made of stone. While usable for carts it tended to be rough on the axles. It went towards the southeast, eventually coming close to the Moule Hills. Those were a bunch of steep slopes, so in practice the road was nestled in a valley between the Moule Hills to the south and Kala Hills to the north. North of said Kala Hills, she continued, was the small Nioqe Lake and the other town sworn to Lord Abara, Risas. Further north than that was the southern edge of the large Jini Plateau: all cliffs there, nothing we could travel through.

The way I figured, the sooner we got on the half-road and began moving south the better. I'd suggest a detachment head out to Nioqe Lake to see to our water situation, but there simply weren't enough water sources in the region to sustain the presence of an army as large as mine for long.

As for trading, strictly speaking it was treason for the town to bargain with us while we were at war. I allowed the shadow of a

possible sack to loom over the negotiations, though, which motivated the town to do it anyway. It wasn't my intention to go through with it, but if my reputation was black in these parts then I had no qualms in using that. There wasn't much food and Anan was reluctant to part with what was left, but tools and wood were on the table – armies chewed through those like hounds through meat – and I promised to restrain my soldiers from robbing farms or entering the town. I even paid a generous fee for use of their wells, which Anan did not need to know was from the Wolof treasury.

When we were done talking I stretched, groaning, and offered her a friendly smile. We'd been at this for over an hour now, and I was ready to leave. There was still one little detail to take care of first, though,

"So," I said, "how likely is it that some of your dimmer boys and girls are outside and planning something unwise?"

Her creased face tightened.

"Not unlikely," Anan finally said.

"I still remember what it's like, wanting to put down monster to make a name," I said. "So I'll let that go."

I met her rheumy eyes with mine.

"If it ends now."

She swallowed. Anan preceded us outside, and while there was some shouting and a small scuffle it ended without corpses on the ground.

Three cheers for diplomacy, I thought, and got back on my borrowed horse.

—

We got some trouble with the locals the first night after we crashed, but not the two-legged kind. Our palisade, which had been hastily raised, was hit just after Midnight Bell by what we first believed to be enemy soldiers but turned out to be a coordinated attack by a pack of tigers. The unreasonably astute animals actually hit another spot in the palisade as a distraction while the rest dug their way under, attacking horses and cattle. Archer and the Huntress got themselves a few pelts for the trouble, but of the dozen tigers that came six still survived and ran away with full bellies. It was only to be the beginning of our troubles, I found out to my dismay.

A colony of head-sized scorpions took offence to our presence the following day and began attacking legionaries whenever they

stepped outside the vermin wards, which thankfully held them back. It only stopped when I set out with a mage line and torched their underground lair, to a disquieting amount of chittering screams. A decision was made not to openly prevent my sappers from going into the charred ruin and stealing some eggs, considering scorpion fights tended to be good for the morale of the little bastards.

Then the soldiers that went to fill up water barrels at Nioque Lake – under the wary eyes of the townsfolk of Risas, whose homes were on the opposite shore – were ambushed by some sort of shrieking freshwater squid that dragged two men under before the Squire and the Apprentice killed it. Its flesh was apparently considered a delicacy in the Wasteland, Aisha informed me, because everyone in this bloody place was *completely mad*. I refused to have a bite out of principle, though Masego assured me with guileless malice it was delicious.

Archer was having the time of her life, at least, and came dragging back the carcass of what looked like a cow-sized lion with bat wings and a stinger-tipped tail the following afternoon. Masego was delighted enough when she offered him the venom glands that he enthusiastically kissed her cheeks, which had her in a terrifyingly good mood the rest of the day. I was only glad she'd killed the damned thing while out hunting and not after it'd flown into the camp and eaten a few of my soldiers. Not that our short turn in luck stopped a flock of blood-drinking bats that spat out paralytic venom – charmingly called something that translated 'night kissers' by Soninke, Aisha said – from attacking one of our night patrols.

The entire Wasteland was a fucking death trap.

It looked like we were going to be ready to march by Noon Bell on the third day, though, so I sat with Juniper to put together a vanguard. Two thousand light foot from Levant would do, we decided, with Archer and I accompanying them. Razin Tanja, whose forces were chosen to march, was pleased to be given the front as Levantines always were when awarded the possibility of being the first to be shot by arrows. Took all sorts. The Dominion warriors had taken well to the Wasteland, to my amused horror, Lady Aquiline even admitted it made her a little homesick. Fewer trees here than the Brocelian, she said, but the animals had a lot in common.

No wonder Levantines raided so much, I unkindly thought. I'd get out of the house as much as possible if my home was full of godsdamned bloodsucking bats, and fight for the privilege too.

We set out in passably good order just after Noon Bell, largely as we'd planned and to the palpable relief of many Callowan legionaries. I rode out with Razin and Archer for company, to a surprising chill under the afternoon sun. A cold wind was blowing

in from the northeast, over the Jini Plateau. An hour got us to the half-road and from there we quickened the pace going southeast, until we came in distance of the Moule Hills and I was forced to call a halt. Not because three hours of marching had tired us out, but something entirely worse. On the steep northern slopes of those hills a fortified camp had been raised, wooden walls bristling with scorpions and catapults as six banners flew above them in the wind.

One for each of the five legions under Marshal Nim, one for the Tower.

[ErraticErrata](#)

A new map has been to the page representing the region where the events of the chapter are taking place. Have a look if you're curious, it's the last in the list!

Cloud_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)

A look where?

Gemya

Here: <https://ibb.co/0Yskpz4>

Or if you'd prefer not to hit a random link in the comments, it's on the Art, Maps and Other page

Konstantin von Karstein

On the website

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/maps/>

Aduro95

Is it just me, or does this upcoming conflict really resemble the war games at the end of Book 1?

Cat's been dumped in a disadvantageous position between several armies led by experienced commanders, most of whom want to take a bite out of each other. Also, Cat's having to join the fight after everyone else has a good chance to prepare.

I predict treachery, concluded by a mutually beneficial compromise.

ohJohN

At the very end of this chapter I was suddenly reminded of the war games too! There's even the extra parallel that

Akua's meddling messes up Cat's timing/positioning (the storm now, the delayed wakeup in the war games).

[308924810a](#)

This makes me wonder how much of a parallel this is going to be, and whether Akua has someone ready to try to assassinate Catherine again.

[Droughtbringer](#)

Go boost!

[https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/ruduen)

ruduen

Huh. Cat finally shared her plan for Akua with someone else on-screen. Well, time to panic about just what kind of wrinkle is going to show up in it now that it's been spoken.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, sounds like something else is going to happen instead now that it's been spelled out.

Damn tho, what a plan. That's high quality right there.

mamm0nn

Eh, is it? I mean, Cat is still a Villain. She apparently didn't remember what Amadeus told her: Don't make a plan with too many vital steps and moving parts, and this thing is a Godsdamned pocket watch. Hell, Akua is probably already ahead of schedule finding the title and the Wasteland politics empty on day 1 rather than first trying to get drunk off the feeling before it hollows.

[Liliet](#)

I think you're overestimating the schedule rigidity. It's not a pocket watch, it's... water poured on the ground. You know it'll make its way to the ocean, but you don't need to know when, where or by what exact route. Cat knows where Akua is going but can only guess the path, and it's already backfiring on her.

It's possible that Akua being ahead of schedule on feeling shitty will shift something in the end goals, too, but I have a hard time expecting it to be a change for the worse.

[Adrian_V](#)

I think that Akua might die before it, in a redemption story or she will die as a villain because her heart isn't in it anymore (like she can go all the way or her feelings distract her/makes her hesitate a crucial time).

Malicia, if she still has her wits with her, may even be counting on it to use her as a sacrifice of sorts, like "look we have the tragic end of a villain here so you don't need e to die anymore right Fate?" xD

ninegardens

"Any plan with more than three steps is a bad plan"

pagesbe

I mean, the plan at the Prince's Graveyard definitely had more than 3 steps but was a masterpiece. So that's not a hard and fast rule.

mamm0nn

The Graveyard had Kairos, a master schemer with tons of experience and Below encouragement to plan and perform overly elaborate plans. Kat's plan just has to:

Step 1: Predict Kairos's general moves, and throw a goat into the mix.

Step 2: Screw with Kairos's plan the right way. And paint the goat white.

Step 3: Convince the princes and Heroes to give her the crowns and form a band of five. Kairos's plan already made them more amendable, and also screwed over any other outcome that wouldn't be terrible.

After that, it's less plan and more going with the Story.

pagesbe

Sorry, let me correct that for you.

1. Pilgrim had to use shine to counter the Drow.
2. Vivienne had to accept the unconditional surrender Cat offered without contradicting it (something she was close to doing)
3. After not contradicting it, Vivienne has to make a deal with Pilgrim to "ransom" the army in exchange for fighting Kairos, and that leads to
4. Kairos has to not call Cat's bluff, and move his soldiers in to fight Procer forces.
5. Convince the Procer nobles to give up their crowns

6. Have Kairos betray the band of five in the exact right way to get her hands on Amadeus' soul while not screwing them over too badly in exchange
7. Make their way through to where possessed Masego is and free him from the Dead King's influence, preferably without more than one person dying.
8. Crown Lairat with the crown of Twilight, then use the band and allied Drow to kill him.

Every single step listed had a failure condition. Any one of those steps, if it drastically failed, would have screwed the entire plan (except for step 6, but that was still very important).

Mental Mouse

Most of those were forced by Story, and/or by the SOPs of various players – Cat had trained Viv has her trusted second (2,3), she had pretty much owned Pilgrim Story-wise (1), and she was the *only* one who actually could predict or manipulate Kairos (4, 6, and 6 was also a Story beat). #5 especially was a Story prize, as indicated by Cordy's agent coming out to back her. #7 was a straight-up "follow the Story path", and 8 actually *did* fail, leaving Cat scrambling to rescue the situation, using her prepared contingency against Saint, and losing the crown to Pilgrim.

matesbe

Yes you are absolutely correct. These were not Hail Mary plays. That's why the plan was brilliant rather than just crazy. But I was responding to the idea that any plan with more than three steps is a bad plan. What matters more than the number of steps is how prepared and how much control you have over each of them.

Joel Chambers

Hahaha, I am early! Been loving the work as usual, thanks for the chapter!

dadycool

Wow, Cat's plan is absolutely savage. For Liesse, Akua is trapped in a hell of her own making for all time. I get it, but still. Savage.

Her troubles with the Wasteland were delightful, especially considering the general reactions of everyone around her. Literally everyone except her and the legionaries were having the time of their lives in that big deathtrap.

Vyseofthesky

I was waiting for the reason Cat sacrificed Robber instead of Akua. I'm not happy with it to be honest.

[Liliet](#)

To be fair, Robber was pretty explicit about Cat not getting a choice wrt him.

Sinead

While Robber was a great character, and I miss his presence in the rest of the series, he wasn't going to survive to the end. He was either going to die burning a Crab, or setting Keter on fire.

The fact that he dies along side Tariq and Klaus sort of highlights that he was at the older side of his lifespan, considering the parallels drawn between the three of them.

edrey

Shit, just that. that is way too horrifying. Cat's plan left me with no words.

Jrm

Yeah. It leaves me with a sick feeling. I hope something goes awry and/or we get some sort of redemption in the arc, because that level of "long prices paid twice" doesn't sit well with me.

To me, cat v akua is one of the most important aspects of this story, and a revenge/ contrition resolution just feels bad after all they've been through.

TwistThatKnife

For Cat, this has never been about contrition, or redemption. She has said more than once that Akua is beyond redemption in her eyes. Everything done was to maximize the eventual pain for Akua.

I'm unhappy with the reveal for a couple of reasons:

1) Telling Masego, who doesn't know when to keep a secret, seems foolish unless part of the plan requires Masego speaking out of turn. We all know how the story goes for villains when a secret might be leaked.

2) The reveal seems to early. It seems out of place.

Silverking

...Ah, so that's why the Crusade didn't take the deal to just pass into Praes. I suppose "nobody actually wants to conquer this place" is an effective deterrent against invasion.

Also, Cat, you may want to be careful about explaining your plans like that. There's a teleporting talker who's declared war on you, and she doesn't respect the sanctity of "spoilers".

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Akua knowing what Catherine wants from her in advance doesn't really change much. It was only really spoilers before she left.

shikkarasu

I largely agree, but two counter points:

- Catherine has made no secret that Akua needs to figure out the punishment on her own. I agree that it will be all the worse if Akua gets to the height of her power before she makes the final realisation. Otherwise she might try to fight the realisation or find a third path. She is on the road to Queen of Twilight, but if she gets nudged off the rails I can see it taking her longer to get there. Possibly too long for Cat's timetable.

- Who says Bard is limited to telling Akua? She could tell *anyone* the plan, so long as they might use it against Catherine. This is, after all, war.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has made no secret that Akua needs to figure out that she wants to accept it all on her own, but she has said that she's going to make Akua an offer. She doesn't have to figure it out on her own.

> Otherwise she might try to fight the realisation or find a third path.

She's already fighting the realization!

And... I won't lie, I'm biased towards the "third path" option
lmao

> Who says Bard is limited to telling Akua? She could tell anyone the plan, so long as they might use it against Catherine.

It's really hard to use it against Catherine, considering in the eyes of literally everyone who cares it's better than what her actions currently look like?

2xMachina

The Dead King would certainly screw with it if he could.

Lord Haart

Not entirely convinced on that. He's been happy playing evil in a bottle, he doesn't actually seem to *like* going to war but the Role, and even Below themselves, demand it of him.

With this plan he gets to be basically the same but without all the pressure from Lower Management. Live forever, keep company with a mind that rivaled Triumphant, have power and no responsibility, what's not to like?

[Liliet](#)

Not power that actually lets him do anything tho
shikkarasu

What Liliet said. Named are people who exert their will on creation, and the undead are people unable to change on a fundamental level. DK is still the same person who just sacrificed an entire country to reach apotheosis and to create a new world. He will not give up the Serenity or his status as a god (and he recognises only one peer, assumed to be the Bard, among those who have reached apotheosis) for any reason. Accepting defeat? Letting someone else control his fate? It's not about the pros and cons; he *can't do it*.

LarsBlitzer

The plan was laid out in an internal monologue, so there's no way anyone aside from Catherine knows her plan for Akua unless we get meta with it. Narrativewise, it still decreases the chances of it happening, just not as much as outlining it to someone else. Cat is no fool. Makes it more of a wish on a monkey's paw rather than dooming it to fail.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The last part she spoke aloud was:
"She trades a broken dream for a broken crown," I murmured.

Benjamin Huang

Weaver of wonders, maker of spells,
Sovereign of a twisting, frozen hell,
A city of ghosts and moat of bones,
A crown of Night over broken throne,
Hands bloodred forever stained,
Till dawn fails on the Long Price paid,
Twilight's spawn shall twilight beget,

A decision made without regret,
Weaver of wonders, maker of spells,
Golden warden of a prison realm

NerfGlaistigUaine

Hmm has anyone heard of the Unspoken Plan Guarantee?

To quote Tvtropes, that unholy well of addiction, "The chances of The Plan succeeding are inversely proportional to how much of the plan the audience knows about beforehand."

I'm gonna guess that Catherine's plan for Akua is going to have a few kinks at best and go horrifically wrong at worst.

[Liliet](#)

I'm going with "something else happens" rather than "goes horrifically wrong".

Lord Haart

Not a bad very given we know Cat doesn't really have a good pulse on Black who is probably still better understood by her than Akua is.

Cat's strength isn't really her plans, it's her backup plans.

ninegardens

>Cat's strength isn't really her plans, it's her backup plans.

This. This quote is a perfect explanation, and I love it so much. Thank you.

Someguy

Maybe turned into it's opposite? DK sitting on top of Akua forever?

[Liliet](#)

Effectively the same thing so long as he's not conquering Calernia?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"Catherine's plan for Akua is going to have a few kinks"
(◡ ◡ 5 ◡ ◡)

[Liliet](#)

No, that's Akua's plan for Catherine!

jamesc9

Akua's current plan, or Akua's former plan?

[Liliet](#)

-waves hand vaguely-

dadycoool

Cat actually made very good use of this at the Graveyard, only ever revealing bits and pieces to anyone, and it made her feel like a god.

Finn .-. .

Oh... Goddamn Cat, that is quite the long price she'll make Akua pay. I would say it was too much punishment, but those 100,000 dead...

[Liliet](#)

Liesse is gone forever, and Akua gets punished forever. It's kind of symmetrical.

Lord Haart

I'll admit though, I didn't see it coming that the plan was for Akua to reside in the husk of Liesse, never being free of it in a much more literal way. That's definitely a Callowan Long Price.

shikkarasu

Don't forget the Mercenaries and Slaves that she killed in First Liesse to open the Minor Breach, or the civilians killed by the demons summoned with said breach. I can't think of any other mass murders that she is responsible for off hand, but the 100 000 in 2nd Liesse was just the single Evilest day of her career. She is responsible for so much more.

Linnus42

I assume Black is helping Sepulchral cause I cannot think of any other Generals we know of who could be. Maybe she is getting consulting from the Free Cities. Anyway this battle is going to be a mess at least 4 Factions involved and probably a few turncoats and surprise additions.

As for Cat I don't think you can guilt trip Akua enough to guard DK on a throne for a century much less for eternity. Even if she doesn't notice Cat's hypocritical double standard on war crimes from say Black or Kairos' Favorite General. This storyline fails when even the most morally pure types like say a Grey Pilgrim or

Saint of Swords is the one guarding the Evil for Eternity much less someone who was guilt tripped into it and is far from morally pure. I trust Akua in the tower more than I trust her to guard DK lol.

Liliet

I actually think this fits Akua's temperament well.

I've been saying since the end of Book 4 that a key beat of Akua's character is that she's *dutiful*. She likes to have a purpose and to fulfill it well, and she doesn't really have the mental machinery for pure pursuit of pleasure. Cat's pulled the rug out from under her feet for two previous purposes already (Making Praes Great Again, atonement finite version), and is about to offer a new one. Akua will know what Catherine is doing, and there will be genuine incentive for her to accept – and then to keep at it, because as Akua has demonstrated, she's not a *quitter*.

I do expect something will go differently now that we've heard the plan spelled out, but it is not a bad one.

(I mean, sure, something would eventually go wrong and a plucky band of heroes – or a plucky mixed band of heroes and villains, considering the scope of the threat – will need to fix it, but it won't be the current scale of difficulty and also won't be Cat's problem)

Feenor

Calling it. Akua does not end up as the Dead King's jailer. My money is on Cat becoming the dead king's jailer, holding the world and the gods to a higher standard upon pain of an unleashed autumn-crowned king of death.

Jrm

Now that is a twist I can get behind. Cat's current plan leaves an ashy taste in my mouth, but Cat choosing to take that endless throne would be much more fitting.

Lord Haart

I think fighting Above and Below is actually what the Dead King is doing too, in a twisted way – he's really been refusing to play the game. I don't think he sees the Intercessor as an enemy because she's an agent of Above, but because she works for **both** sides and enforces the Story Rules that bind sentient life on Calernia.

In that sense, Neshamah is like Amadeus, trying to tear down the Tower, while Cat is more pragmatic like Malicia and just wants to make things more liveable.

Curious how much Above and Below will directly feature by the end of this book.

chris S

Here's a thought I had from this: Without The Lone Swordsman rampaging through Callow, killing the Imperial governors and trying to incite a rebellion, Akua as the Heiress may never have been given governorship in Callow. With one point of view, ypu can reasonably draw a line between Cat letting Willy go at the start of book 1, and Liesse.

You might then argue that Liesse was ultimately Cat's making, when the chain of events is tallied.

Also, note the wording. It's not the retribution *Akua* owes them, it's the retribution Cat does.

jamesc9

> It's not the retribution Akua owes them, it's the retribution Cat does.

Yes. The long price is Cat's morality, so it's Cat's responsibility to arrange it, if it will be arranged at all.

[Liliet](#)

So, hmmm.

– Akua pulling her punches, probably relying on the fact nobody short of Hierophant will be able to tell she did so. Awww ♥

– Cat feeling guilty for the soldiers that died because of Akua's creation. That's, yeah, that's super reasonable. Cat's long price plan is having nasty side effects, and all of them are on her head.

– The plan. Wow. That's, that's definitely high quality. I don't think it'll happen this exact way, now that we know what it is, but wow, damn. That could work.

– The Wasteland is amazing ♥ ♥ ♥

Wonder

For gods sake, just when everything was going well, then this happens.

I hope Cat and AoC fuck up the rebel legions , especially Sacker. I get it's bread and water to betray allies in Praes, but supplying a whole fucking renegade legion not your own with weapons and food for a long time has to be hell on the country Treasury.

Fuck Sacker up.

Lord Haart

They haven't outright betrayed her yet, they just aren't going to take orders from her.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And we actually got to see a bit of the sentient tigers!

somni567

The Wasteland is Australia.

Juff

Typo Thread:

not ominous > no ominous
studied be > studied me
Nim army > Nim's army
with was left > with what was left
translated 'night kissers' > translated to 'night kissers'
horror, Lady > horror; Lady

mamm0nn

Me: Hey, remember the sentient tigers? I wonder if EE remembered them and that we'll see them soon. Nah, they'd probably wouldn't attack a full army like that. Sad me.

Half a chapter later Sentient tigers, bitches!

Shveiran

Really, I feel that was on you, mate.
Anything in the Wasteland would attack anything else; no matter if it is suicidal, no matter of it is stupid, and no matter if it is actually detrimental to all they ever loved and wanted.

"wouldn't attack a full army", ah!

shikkarasu

I have been waiting for Sentient and/or invisible tigers for years. You don't just list of a bunch of things that have been released into the wasteland and never show them on screen. EE

has been taunting us with tales of the Gigantes, Assassin, horrors of former Warlocks, and Dread Empress T. (maysheneverreturn) and I am so stoked to finally be seeing them.

Sparsebeard

Those sapient tigers though! I expect the tapirs next...

[Liliet](#)

The tapirs were never sentient and also got executed)=

shikkarasu

A great loss for all of the Empire.

[Liliet](#)

T00 TRUE

Sparsebeard

I mean, animals are sentient by default. Sapient is the word you are looking for if you are referring to humanlike intelligence...

#pedantry

[Liliet](#)

Pardon me, wrong word)=

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Counterpoint: Ghost Tapirs! Or alternatively, severely-decayed undead suicide tapirs. It'll be how Amadeus delivers the goblinfire payload.

[Liliet](#)

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Deworld

Well, Cat's plan is certainly interesting. However, I still find the possibility of Akua becoming Dread Empress (or lead Praes in some other way) quite likely. And not only because the author just disrupted Unspoken Plan Guarantee.

Akua is, by far, the best candidate to make some significant reforms in Praes. She isn't just some Highborn, she is a former Heiress, the living embodiment and, well, heiress of Praesi culture and ideals. And who can be better at changing culture than its embodiment who has changed herself first?

I can forgive Cat for not seeing this. Not only it would go against her revenge idea – because no matter how much unpleasant it would be for Akua, it would hardly be a torture Cat wants – but also she is still putting too much trust into Amadeus. Mainly because she doesn't have hits about his plans as we do, but still. He may sound like a good fit for changing Praes, but I tend to agree with Malicia here – his methods won't work. Even if he is willing to take the throne (which I doubt), at max he will achieve some short-term boons.

Shveiran

Uhm. Akua is pulling punches but is still killing fools. "less than I could have" won't cut it if she returns to the fold, Malicia was right about that. I'm still completely convinced she won't actually become an enemy again, so my money is on her handing Catherine the battle. Afterward will likely be too late.

Although... well, Razin Tanja killed her soldiers, and still became an ally. So did many others. But there is a lot of difference between turning an enemy into an ally and forgiving a betrayal.

Ugh, that plan was so very awesome. It would still have fit after her actual betrayal, in a way that returning to the fold just won't.

But now it doesn't sound likely it will work. The emotional journey there would still be interesting, but it would have been more interesting without knowing; this suggests a branch will get in the wheels.

Anyway. Battle time!

Which won't be decisive, of course; Arthur needs a draw and if Nim is defeated soundly the 4D chess game that's going on with the armies kinda ends early.

But still. Battle time!

Deworld

Well, Cat did expect and even plan for this betrayal. She even admits in this chapter that those dead by Akua's actions are on her shoulders. Akua killing Cat's soldiers is one of the lesser problems, unless she goes all-out on it.

Clmineith

Pretty sure it won't work as Cat intend, but supposing it does:

- Akua become the Dead King's jailer
- Time pass (centuries, mileniums), and tales are known about the Immortal Guardian of the great evil
- At some point, Good decides Akua has done enough penitence. A group of 5 heroes come, needing something from the Immortal

Guardien, or maybe from the Prison Realm itself, for reasons – Akua sacrifices herself for the plan to work, which somehow include the final extermination of DK

Earl of Purple

So that lion thing sounds like a manticore, but Lysander had one of those and Cat didn't recognise this one. Game of Thrones uses manticore to mean a kind of large scorpion thing, but mostly they are winged lions or tigers with a poisoned tail. Sometimes also a human face.

ninegardens

I just... don't really see how Cat's plan for Akua is going to work. It's... too specific? It falls under the category of "any plan with three or more steps is a bad plan".

It also relies on using the twilight ways (you know, that main piece of infrastructure you built) as a prison and like... DK not talking his way out vs the guardian... or navigating good... or learning how to run really really fast.

The "box" doesn't feel secure enough, and even if it did, Akua doesn't feel like a secure enough jailer to hold it.

That's not to say she can't BECOME that person... but if she can change enough to become that person then in time (say... a couple centuries) she can also change enough to STOP being that person.

It just... doesn't feel right as a complete story. I can see why Cat might think it makes sense, but it just... kind of doesn't.

If anything, I'd be tempted to park Remoena (whatsername? Drow general) up on the throne. The Drow were interested in the throne. They have demonstrated ability to remain grumpy across numerous centuries, and honestly, just giving twilight to the drow just seems like a solid plan.

Jarl Zarl

I think the point is that Twilight isn't a box. There aren't walls to batter at or defensive spells to worm through, just endless paths and planar barriers that require blood sacrifice to breach (something the DK notably doesn't have). Now you'd definitely need to destroy any lingering Gates and strictly control the knowledge of how to make more but I don't think it's terrible as a prison. Not that it'd last forever but I'm not sure anything would and if it lasts long enough that the DKs mark on the world shifts from "the original undefeatable evil" to "trapped evil released to wreck havoc" that's much easier to deal with

ninegardens

Okay, but like... Akua just showed that it was perfectly possible to shatter through Twilight using a ritual. Admittedly from the outside but... DK is *very good* at magic. And the ways AREN'T shatter proof, as we have seen numerous times.

And they contain a number of previously established PERMANENT gates, that the Titans *melted* the edges of. (oof).

Now... if all these gates were closed somehow, and you managed to get it to "0 gates", that might work, assuming you stopped using the thing as infrastructure for travel.

...that said, I do agree with your story point. If you can get DK from "Original undefeatable evil" or "sealed evil in a can"... yeah, probably you'd only need him stored up for a couple centuries before that story took hold, and he became very very much defeatable. Hmmm... hadn't thought about that.

Konstantin von Karstein

Give the **Twilight** Ways to a people whose power and goddesses are linked with Night? Bad idea. Furthermore, they were interested in the Twilight Crown, not in the Ways themselves.

Also, you would give control of the Ways to an Evil polity, and the Good members of the GA would never accept that. Even Cat wouldn't want another nation controlling such a vital road.

And giving the role of warden to Rumena just looks wrong to me. There's also no chance he would accept to be his warden for all eternity.

Deworld

Didn't Rumena die at the end of Book 6?

[Liliet](#)

No.

Deworld

Nice to know. I apparently missed confirmation, but with mentions of drow going unruly I thought he was gone. It's a thing I'm happy to be wrong about.

agumentic

You confuse "specific outcome" with "complicated plan". Plans with more than 3 steps and such are bad because they rely on several things outside of your control going exactly like you want them to go, which is unlikely in real-world conditions. But Cat's plan relies only on a single thing – that she understood Akua well enough. It doesn't matter what else

happens as long as that understanding is true, because it's going to lead to her preferred outcome no matter what. It's not a Rudy Goldberg machine but a pinball – no matter how the ball bounces, it will eventually go down the drain.

Now, I think Akua has it in her to surprise Cat, but it's not a bad plan because of its complexity.

ninegardens

You are right here.

I'd probably call it more like "Threading the needle" than like a rube goldburg machine.

And... Cat seems think this is a fairly wide needle, or (as you say) a pinball machine with only one outcome (due to story).

I'm more inclined to call it a very very long bowling alley.

With a curved floor. And a cross breeze. and only 1 pin standing.

Konstantin von Karstein

So Cat's army is outnumbered, no? That's bad. The GA has the advantage in Named, but the Legions have anti-Named tactics.

shikkarasu

So, to be clear, Nim, your plan is to fight Catherine with Five Armies and One? Yeah, I don't see that backfiring horribly. She's never pulled off a major upset in a battle like that before.

Hmm? Oh, just popcorn. Don't mind me; carry on like I'm not even here.

Xinci

The wasteland sounds like a wonderland of possible magical adaptations. I kinda want to read about a naturalist Named just like catalogueing stuff in it. I wonder how well the descendants of the Sapient Tiger army are doing population wise. They could honestly have pretty good numbers given they appear to be in a pride like/communal structure.

Seems Cat learned from the previous time at liesse where no one good could take the Crown and die. Its long term a very practical solution for her needs.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Perhaps a sapient-tiger naturalist?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

EE has mentioned that the modern descendants of the original tiger army aren't smart enough for that, being only moderately cleverer than regular tigers, but if tigers were

uplifted to human-level intelligence once it could happen again.

Jefepato

Speaking of those, something just occurred to me. Is it possible for a sapient tiger – or more generally, a sapient member of a species that isn't *normally* sapient – to develop a Name?

Or would the tigers need to be around long enough to develop a recognizable culture in order for a Name to make any sense?

(On the third hand, if an orc can be a human's Adjutant and an ogre can be the Black Knight of Praes, it should be possible for a sapient tiger to join an existing culture and obtain a relevant Name, right?)

jamesc9

I wonder who has to witness a culture, in order for its Roles to become Names.

[PhadosZahn](#)

You know EE has trained their readers well when everyone in the comments says something along the lines of "Well now that we've heard the plan that DEFINITELY not how it's going to go down!" lol

Deworld

It's more about general tropes of fiction, not something EE specifically 'trained'. There's even a name for this particular trope – Unspoken Plan Guarantee. If a plan was told in advance then it's much less likely to succeed than if not. Plus people already have different theories about Akua's future.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I'm really looking forward to the battle. It feels like it'll be a huge mess which is precisely when Cat and Juniper shine most. It'll be great!

What I really want to see is how the Army of Callow matches up against the Legions. They're so similar and yet they have distinctive strengths and weaknesses. It'll be cool to see how they match up.

SpeckofStardust

See's cats thoughts/plan.

..

...
Cats been corrupted. The dead king is fully killable this plan isn't going to work because the dead king will in fact be wiped out.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's still the Severity in reserve. And possibly the angel corpse.

Criminalupper2200

So, does Kat just think she's invincible or something?

Like I get her whole absurd revenge plot against Akua because she's obsessed with the idea of punishment, but of ALL TIMES to do this, she chooses now? when she's neck deep in hostile territory, isolated from her other allies, with the dead king breathing down everyone's neck, and she chooses now to force Akua's hand and get her to join the enemy?

we literally just saw how Akua could have potentially DEVASTATED her army with a quick gesture if she wanted to. Has Kat just allowed her Callowan revenge lust to overcome her basic common sense or what?

ninegardens

I mean... Akua kind of picked the timing herself. Cat saw it coming, but she didn't CHOOSE the timing.

[308924810a](#)

I think this is some shade of the same thought process that led her to let the Lone Swordsman go, on some level she believes she could defeat this former enemy of hers again.

[plantsbeans](#)

Praes is Australia?

Barrendur

@plantsbeans

Yes, Praes is Australia: A huge, inhospitable expanse of land where the weather, the terrain and the wildlife – oh most assuredly the WILDLIFE – are perpetually trying to kill you (horribly).

empire 1

Hey, I actually got through the captcha to boost! Wonder of wonders, since I had to guess at several.

jamesc9

eg is the poll under a set of traffic lights part of the traffic lights or not?

"No Time" Toulouse

Looks like Nim is making mountains out of those Moule Hills...

[ErraticErrata](#)

That physically pained me. Good job.

Onos

Now that's some nice foreshadowing right there!

"the prospect of spending the rest of her life wearing shackles around her wrists that she would have put on herself"

"She trades a broken dream for a broken crown"

Absolutely sublime.

Chapter 14: Nock

"The right kind of defeat can be more useful than a victory."

– Dread Empress Prudence, the Frequently Vanquished

The two of us reined in our horses a prudent hundred feet away from the bottom of the slope.

A fortified camp looked down at us from the heights of the Moule Hills, raised grounds with a palisade and a dry moat. There were artillery platforms looming beyond the wooden rampart, at least two that I saw, and more than a dozen scorpions glaring down at the Army of Callow's vanguard from atop the palisade. My lips thinned as I took into consideration the steep slope leading up and the length of it going up – at least a few hundred feet – and how bloody taking that camp was likely to get should we try. I'd lose a hundred men for every foot, I darkly thought, the moment Marshal Nim brought out her crossbows.

"That wasn't there yesterday," Archer muttered. "I didn't come too close, Cat, but I would have seen it in the distance."

"They did it overnight, maybe?" I guessed. "Goblins can work during the dark, we've pulled that trick before. Then they bring in orc and humans after sunup when the foundations are laid."

That might mean they'd not finished the works too long before we arrived. And possibly that the defences weren't as thorough as it would seem from down here. Archer was visibly itching to ditch the horse and go have a closer look on foot but she restrained herself. Instead I felt the world shiver ever-so-slightly as she drew on an aspect, leaning forward on her horse.

"Moat's not even," Archer said, eyes distant. "And there's still goblins working on the side of the camp to make it go fully around."

I wouldn't be able to match her sight without drawing on Night and I'd rather not draw on that frivolously under the afternoon sun, so I simply took her word for it.

"Definitely overnight, then," I mused.

That made what they'd gotten up in time even more impressive. Much as it stung to admit it, the Army of Callow wouldn't have been able to manage the same. We lacked the sappers and the expertise: a lot of my legionaries had spent no more than six months in training camps before being considered ready for war. The Legions regularly trained and drilled their soldiers in ways the war against Keter had simply not afforded me the time to do. My people were veterans, but they were veterans of a very particular kind of war.

"Your rider will get to Juniper soon," Indrani noted. "We waiting for her orders or heading out to tickle the devils up early?"

I grimaced. Taking light foot up a hill into a hardened Legion position wasn't going to achieve much except corpses. She'd not meant taking the Malaga troops, though, but the two of us. Thing was, I wasn't sure we should. Not when the Marshal Nim would have a bunch of high-class mage cadres waiting and Akua Sahelian leading them. The odds of something nasty waiting for us up there were about the same as those of the sun rising tomorrow.

Might be it wouldn't, but I wouldn't bet on it.

"I'm not touching that camp without a bigger crew than just the two of us," I said. "And I'll let you loose to scout, since I know it's a lost cause to stop you, but I want you to promise to keep your distance."

Indrani considered me a moment.

"Worried about the mages?" she finally asked.

"They know which Named we field now," I reminded her. "Nim and Malicia aren't idiots, they'll have spent time and coin figuring out how to kill all of you."

"I'll be a good girl, then," Indrani drawled. "Promised."

I rolled my eye at her, feeling a pang of discomfort when I realized I was facing the wrong way for her to be able to see it. All she had to look at was an eye cloth over a hollow socket. It was the little things that distressed me the most, somehow. Wounds I knew, had learned to live with. Limp along with. Losing an eye had been... more than that, in a lot of little ways. Archer waited until we'd returned to the ranks of the vanguard before passing off her horse, wandering off to find a way to sidle into the Ways. Though it was still dangerous to travel those and it'd still remain that way for the better part of two weeks, it was the sort of environment she thrived in.

A broken-down patch of the Ways where a single misstep might see her falling through the sky? Archer would take to that like a fish to water. It was when she'd be back in Creation that worried me.

Not that I had a lot of time to spare on that. The Levantine warriors that made up the vanguard of the Army of Callow had been advancing in a broad column until we'd caught sight of the enemy camp, going down the half-road, but when I'd called a halt Razin had pulled them out of marching order and begun ordering them into warbands. It was the right instinct, because right now the army behind was spread out along that road like a snake. Juniper would put the column into battle order soon enough, I thought, and I didn't think that the Black Knight would have staked out that position in the heights to then abandon it at the first opportunity.

But there were troops Marshal Nim could throw at us without abandoning her position, and sure enough as I rode through the throng of Levantine warbands I heard exclamations of surprise from the ranks. From the eastern face of Moule Hills horsemen were pouring out in neat ranks, though where they'd emerged from was hidden by a large fold of rock. Hundreds, I counted, then more than a thousand. Fuck, was Nim throwing her entire horse at us? If so, we were in deep shit. The last reports had her at three thousand light horse to our vanguard of two thousand and a half-thousand of heavy horse from the Thirteenth to throw in should she feel like it.

"Razin," I shouted over the din, forcing people away with my staff. "*Razin.*"

The sound of my voice caught his attention over the din, drawing his eyes to me and away from his advising captains.

"Shield wall *now*," I called out. "Pack it tight or we're all dead."

If Nim had sent goblin skirmishers I would have advised we retreat instead, but we wouldn't outrun cavalry on flat grounds. To Razin's honour, he wasted in time in following through. Shouting in Ceseo he got his captains moving, the quick-footed Levantine warbands gathering into a fat uneven circle. I dismounted, heading for the front as shields were raised. In the distance, across the grounds, the enemy horse advanced at a brisk trot and formed into four slender wedges. They were long and thin, so it was hard to tell how many riders there were. More than a thousand, at least, but how *many* more? I found good solid ground to stand on, slightly away from the shields up front, and after making sure the warriors around were giving me a wide berth I closed my eyes and began to pray to the Sisters.

"Wake up," I murmured in Crepuscular. "We have a war on our hands and I need a miracle to teach the enemy to fear me again. Wake up, carrion crows. There's blood in the air."

As I continued to murmur the Night began to move, lazily slithering into my veins, reluctant to brave the heavy sun. I kept drawing it in, murmurs flowing freely as the power began to accrue. There were shouts in Ceseo as the Levantine captains whose men had slingers among them – a lot of Dominion warriors had picked up the habit of carrying slings as well as their usual arms in Hainaut, since they were so useful against the dead – told them to get ready. A few heartbeats later the enemy closed the distance, Taghreb and Soninke in vividly coloured scale and cloth. War cries sounded on both sides, and though a few stones split open heads it was nothing to what we suffered in return.

Our shield wall was tight and packed, which I'd asked of Razin to discourage the enemy charging us. Light horse wouldn't want to get mired in our ranks, it'd be like a mud pit for them. The downside was the same as the upside, unfortunately: the shield wall was tight and packed. So when the enemy cavalry began throwing javelins with all the strength of a charge behind them, those steel-tipped killers found their marks and then some. Shields splintered and broke, men fell with screams and I got my first good look at well-trained Wasteland horse making war. All four of the wedges that'd threatened a charge stopped well shy of our ranks, instead splitting to the sides and riding backwards smoothly.

The riders at the front threw their javelin and then retreated, making room for a fresh horseman to toss their own. The impact was... bloody. Worse than arrow fire would have been, if not as sustained.

I'd gathered power enough to give an answer, though. Night flared up, wreathing me in shadow, and above the enemy horse I began to

gather specks of black flame. I wasn't going to bother with subtle here: if I could burn through a chunk of their cavalry today the Loyalist Legions would be significantly easier to handle going forward. To my surprise the horsemen did not disperse at the sight, continuing their deadly javelin fire, and I saw why a moment later. There was a great surge of sorcery up on the heights, two transparent but roiling rings beginning to form. I stole away a sliver of the Night running through me, sharpening my eyes, and almost cursed. That was raw kinetic power they were gathering; I'd seen the likes of it before.

If that hit the ranks of the vanguard javelins would be the least of our problems. With the shield wall broken, we'd just get run down by the cavalry like animals.

Whoever had designed that trap had an uncomfortably good read on my abilities. I couldn't abandon my working with the Night and rustle up another to handle this, not at this time of the day, which meant I'd have to break it apart and remake it. Gritting my teeth, I did. The black flames gutted out into smoke, the power instead expanding those puffs into great tendrils of dark mist. The kinetic rings flew out, the sound they made comically wobbly, but I moved the mist in the way. The working devoured the sorcery as it went through, leaving little more than a short burst of wind to reach our ranks. That wasn't a victory, though, when the horsemen had been hammering at us all the while.

At this rate they'd run out of javelins before we gave an answer.

The Levantines were itching to ditch the shield wall and charge, given how close the riders were – another trap – but discipline held. Razin went through the ranks giving encouragement even as I began gathering Night again, his captains forcefully pulling back warriors that began to break the ranks. I'd have to let the Levantines take the hit, I realized. We could probably survive the magical bombardment, but if I didn't hit the horsemen they were *definitely* going to overrun our position the moment they got done softening us up with javelins. It was a shitty choice to make, but I didn't have a better one on the table. Best make my miracle count, then.

I had an idea or two in mind and I took to weaving even as power began rising atop the heights again – only to suddenly fall apart. I blinked in surprise, confused, only to then let out a sharp laugh. *Archer*. Archer had put an arrow into whoever had been leading that ritual. This was as close to an opening as I'd get.

Then the ground behind us began trembling. Yet it was not cries of dismay that greeted the change. I glanced back, finding the banner of the Broken Bells flying tall in the wind as they rode hard to relieve us. Juniper must have sent them out before we even caught sight of the enemy cavalry, for them to get her so

quickly. The arrival of other horsemen saw the Legion auxiliaries lose their taste for the skirmish, unloading another few javelins our way spitefully and then smoothly pulling away. My knights began pursuit, passing by our position at a gallop, but they weren't going to catch up to light horse and they knew it.

Brandon Talbot pulled the Order back when the enemy was driven most of the way back to their camp. I kept an eye on the heights all the while, waiting for magic to erupt again, but no ritual followed. I released the Night, feeling a wave of exhaustion, and the bloodied vanguard began its retreat back to the rest of the army. We'd survived, I told myself. Marshal Nim had given us a black eye, but we'd survived.

It wasn't much, but it was something.

—

"The best we can say is that it stopped shy of being a disaster," Juniper bluntly assessed.

Three hundred and sixty-three dead, almost twice that wounded. Over half of our two thousand strong vanguard had been shredded over the course of a skirmish that'd lasted maybe half an hour. There would have been a lot more corpses on the ground if we'd not been able to retreat to healers, but that was cold comfort considering we were unlikely to have all the wounded back on their feet before nightfall.

"The Black Knight caught us with our trousers down," Aisha admitted. "Our scouts had no idea the Legions were here, much less camped above the only road. It is a major failure of our forward elements."

That was a very polite way of phrasing 'we stumbled in blind and got spanked', but the lovely Taghreb did have a way of doing that.

"We turtled up after we got hit in the Ways," I said. "And it cost us. Now two ways about it."

I wouldn't pretend otherwise.

"But now we know Nim's here, so she's shot her arrow," I reminded them. "She won't catch us out like this again."

It'd been less than an hour since the enemy cavalry had retreated. We'd used that time to form up the Army of Callow and its auxiliaries in a battle line across the half-road, facing the fortified camp in the hills, but the Legions of Terror showed no inclination of coming down to fight us. It was just Juniper and Aisha here with me here in the field tent, General Zola being charged with handling affairs on the front, so none of us

bothered to put a better face than was true on our current situation.

"We can't attack that camp," Aisha said, voicing an opinion we all shared. "It would be throwing an egg at a wall."

"We need to turn her position," I said. "Either to the east or west. So long she's the one sitting on top of the half-road she can keep bringing up fresh supplies and water to her camp while we'll be eating into our own reserves."

"That's the trap, Catherine," the Hellhound growled. "She's making it seem like she's ceding us the initiative by staying up in her camp, but she hasn't. We can't leave through the Ways and we'll slow to a crawl if we leave the road."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"The grounds are too rocky west of Moule Hills," Aisha told me in her stead. "Unless we put the sappers to making a path for us, we'd just be wrecking the wheels we just got done putting back on."

Might still be possible to do it if we moved really slow, but if we did we'd get hit. She'd harass us with skirmishers and cavalry from a safe distance, bleeding my army out one cut at a time. And while it would be possible for the Army of Callow to advance ahead of its supplies at a quicker pace, it would be a *very bad* idea. We were tethered to those wagons, because the alternative was the Black Knight's three thousand cavalry sallying out and torching the wagons carrying all our food and water. Marshal Nim was living up to her reputation as one of the three most decorated officers in all of Praes: she'd found a way to hem us in without even setting foot outside her fortified camp.

"That leaves only the half-road," I said, openly unenthused.

It'd mean marching down the valley between Moule Hills and Kala Hills with a larger enemy force on our flank that was set up in entrenched high grounds. We'd be doing that on open grounds all the while, while the enemy had their war engines pointed at us from above. It had disaster written all over it.

"It might be possible to keep close to the bottom of the Kala Hills and make it south without a battle ensuing," Aisha argued. "It'd be a risk for her to try us: in an enclosed space like the valley we could maneuver to negate her advantage in numbers."

"And on tight grounds the Order would punch much harder than her own horse," Juniper grunted. "But it won't work, Aisha. She'll just decamp and use the road to outpace us going south. Then she'll set up at Kala Fortress with stone walls to defend from and her supply line still safe at her back."

Which would just be moving the problem a few hours south, assuming it even worked. Which I was significantly less inclined to believe than Aisha was.

"We could march back north," I suggested. "Go around this entire region, find another way through."

"We'd be rolling dice," Aisha grimaced. "We can't go back into the Ways and if the Gale Ribbon spits out a storm at us the results could be almost as bad as a defeat."

She wasn't wrong, though it might honestly still be better than engaging the Black Knight on her chosen grounds. Unlike the Legions of Terror, after mauling us the storm wouldn't *pursue*.

"North is right," Juniper gravelled. "But into Kala Hills. Northeast."

"Those are a dead end," I frowned. "Even if we set up a camp on those heights facing hers, all we do is run out our supplies while she watches us."

Nim wouldn't be any more eager to attack our camp than we were to attack hers, we wouldn't bait her into making that mistake. Especially not when Malicia and her Black Knight were well aware that I could only spend so long settling affairs in Praes. It was to their advantage to wait me out without even giving battle, since without a decisive victory against the Tower my bargaining position was weak.

"Are they a dead end?" Juniper replied, clicking her teeth thoughtfully.

She went looking through her papers, eventually taking out a parchment sheath she pressed into my hands. It was a report, I saw, from the captain that'd overseen the detachment that had gone to Nioqe Lake to fill water barrels. A significant chunk of it was spent going over the freshwater squid attack and praising the two young heroes that'd killed the creature. I glanced at Juniper, unsure why she'd hand me this. I'd already told the kids they'd done well.

"What am I looking for?" I asked.

"Captain Henry mentions seeing locals on the opposite shore," Juniper said. "Fishermen, as is to be expected of a lakeside town, but also those bringing cattle to drink."

I scanned for the line, eye narrowing when I found it. The officer had mentioned seeing sheep, specifically, and I finally found my marshal's line of thought.

"Goats they could feed on scraps, but they'd need grazing lands for sheep," I muttered. "And we haven't seen any suitable grounds on the other side, so you think they're-"

"In the Kala Hills," Juniper finished. "And that means shepherd paths, maybe all the way through."

Even if we found those paths they wouldn't be broad enough to let our army cross, but that was why we had sappers. Should we cross the hills and march south it was almost certain that the Legions would still beat us to Kala Fortress, but it wouldn't matter as much. We wouldn't be bottled up in the valley anymore, we could swing wide to the east and go through the rainlands until we eventually found another stretch of the half-road to march on. Marshal Nim would *have* to come and fight us on our terms; otherwise we'd cut her supply lines and have freedom to march on a lightly defended Ater even as Sepulchral caught up to the Loyalist Legions.

"It is already too late in the afternoon for giving battle to be anything but risky, regardless," Aisha noted.

No one argued with that. The Black Knight had the Eighth Legion with her, the Trailblazers, and General Wheeler's ranks were heavy on both goblins and skirmishers. If fighting continued after dark we'd be at a stark disadvantage.

"Kala Hills, then," I agreed.

—

The slopes weren't as steep here as they were on the Moule Hills to the south, but the stone was softer. Easier to use as foundations. The Kala Hills were also covered with brushlands and Pickler assured me having local wood to cut made building the camp much easier. The work only began midafternoon, which was uncomfortably late, but the Black Knight hadn't just sat in her camp looking pretty as we moved. Skirmishers were out and about with the hour's turn, harassing our retreat as we marched away. Juniper sent out the Levantines and our own Army skirmishers to match them, but the Order stayed put. We needed the knights ready in case Nim sent out her own cavalry, we had nothing else that'd be swift enough to stop her from chewing up our light foot.

This once the fight went our way, at least. I was done fucking around after the mauling we'd taken, so I sent out Named in force. The Silver Huntress was like a thresher in a wheat field, fighting skirmishers, and she had a lot of anger to work out. The Squire got himself two crossbow bolts in the stomach after getting cocky but with the Apprentice at his side it was far from enough to kill him. He'd eat only broth for a week, I thought, and be a wiser man for it. Just because goblins were half his size didn't mean that charging crossbowmen on foot was any less

foolish. The Empire had designed those things to punch through plate, knight-killers.

The enemy broke off shortly before nightfall, their cavalry having never come out. Another hundred dead on our side, but we'd inflicted easily twice that. Nim would think twice about testing us like this in the future and the Malaga warriors raised their heads for having avenged their honour in the rematch.

I stayed back to level hilltops with Night so our sappers would make progress quicker but it was still frustratingly slow-going. There'd be no dry moat for us and the palisade was patchy in places: we'd put a priority on getting the wards in place, since the last thing we wanted was to suffer magic bombardment in the middle of the night. Nightfall saw the Army of Callow retreating into its half-done camp, tents raised and fires roaring. Come morning I'd take Archer and the Silver Huntress out in the hills, looking for paths, but after the exhausting day I just wanted to sleep. My head barely hit the pillow before I blacked out.

Cruelly, I was awakened what felt like a single heartbeat later.

Alarm wards were pounding away at the night air. I dragged myself into trousers and hastily put on my armour, snatching my sword and staff as I exited only to almost stumble into a large orc sergeant.

"Report," I ordered, tightening my sword belt.

"Under attack ma'am," he gravelled.

I rolled my eye. Yes, I'd deduced as much somehow.

"Who, where?" I pressed.

"They came from the hills, behind the camp," the sergeant said. "Staff Tribune Bishara claims it's the Eleventh Legion."

It took me a moment to place that. Cognomen 'Tenebrous', led by General Lucretia. The sole officer that'd been a general in the Legions before the Reforms and stayed one after. Also a vampire, some sort of flesh-eating undead. Her legion had been under Grem One-Eye during the Conquest, attacking the Wall, but I couldn't remember anything in particular that'd distinguished it. The Eleventh stayed in the Wasteland ever since, so I'd never had to deal with any part of it. My belt was comfortably set, so I laid a hand on the pommel of my sword and straightened my back.

"All right, sergeant," I said. "What's the situation?"

"Marshal Juniper requests that you head to the breach," he said.

"Let's get to it, then."

The camp was in decent order, considering we'd gotten attacked right after Midnight Bell. My legionaries were gathering briskly for a counter push, the element of surprise having passed. It was only when we got to the breach that I winced. The Eleventh hadn't hit the Army of Callow, I saw, but the *Levantine*s. The chunk of the patchy palisade that'd been broken through with now-abandoned rams had led straight to where the day's wounded were kept. The same warriors that'd bled down on the plains. Legionaries with shields painted in green and black had overwhelmed the tents and slaughtered the surprised Dominion force, but by the look of the bodies and scorch marks a force of Lanterns and Osenas slayers had stopped them in their tracks. By the time I got here, the Legion incursion – a mere five companies, by the looks of it – was being driven back even if most of the Dominion warriors were only half-dressed.

The trouble came from further back: deadly crossbow volleys were being poured into the shield wall from a hill in the distance. We'd stemmed the tide, the camp was in no danger of being overwhelmed, but bodies would keep piling up until we cleared out that fucking hill. That'd be my job, looked like. Razin and Aquiline were easy to pick out from the throng, just by the way their people rallied to them, and I saw that both the Silver Huntress and the Barrow Sword were with them. Deciding I could use the help, I limped my way to them. I quickly exchanged greetings with the lordlings, then the Named.

"Black Queen," Ishaq greeted me, grinning. "Nice night, isn't it?"

"They disturbed my beauty sleep," I flatly replied. "Someone's going to die for that."

Some chuckles, but Alexis was grimly serious.

"Orders?" the Silver Huntress asked.

"I want you two and a good line of twenty killers," I said. "We're going to silence those crossbows."

"It would help," Razin admitted. "Marshal Juniper is sending crossbowmen of our own but they have yet to arrive."

"I'll go," Aquiline said. "My retinue will serve."

I wanted to argue, but that glint in her eye told me she was going to be obstinate and we didn't have the *time*.

"Fine," I grunted. "Lord Razin, you have the command."

He nodded, then snuck a kiss to his fiancée.

"Do try not to get another scar," he teased her. "You know how jealous I get."

"No promises," Aquiline grinned.

Ugh, young love. I shared a disgruntled look with Alexis, though for some reason the Barrow Sword was looking rather fondly at the pair. I didn't want to take slayers with us, I made clear to Aquiline, so she drew twenty sword and board men from her retinue instead and we circled the melee at the gap. The Barrow Sword opened a path through a weak patch of the palisade with a mule kick, large enough for us to make it out onto the hills. All three of us Named could see in the dark at least decently, so we guided the Levantines through the sloping brushlands. Several times we had to outright climb up, so I had to kill the pain in my bad leg with Night, but we made good pace anyway.

The enemy had chosen a tall, flat-topped hill to position their crossbowmen so they weren't difficult to spot. Two hundred of them, firing in rotation to obscure their numbers. They were probably hoping to bait legionaries into exposing themselves before unleashing proper volleys, I thought. I was not much enjoying fighting the Legions of Terrors. I'd much preferred having that particular war machine on my side. Still, the reason I grimaced and gestured for our warband to crouch into the bushes wasn't the crossbowmen: it was the few skulking shapes at the bottom of that same hill. Goblins. *Sappers*.

"We have to hit the hill from here," I whispered.

I got odd looks for it.

"There's sappers afoot," I flatly stated. "Every approach to that hill will be mined to the Hells and back. We try to walk through a field they set up and *maybe* two of us will make it there."

Maybe. If the sappers were having an off night. Names helped you against a lot of things but stepping into a gout of goblinfire wasn't one of them. We found defensible grounds, a dip between two hills that had just low enough a rim that I could look at the enemy crossbowmen and aim, and Aquiline's men spread out around me in a loose circle. I silently gestured for Ishaq to keep an eye on the Lady of Tartessos when she wasn't looking but kept the Silver Huntress close. She had sharp reflexes and I'd not be able to move much while weaving Night. I breathed out, looking at the sky, and struck my staff against the rocky ground.

"Sun's gone, Sisters," I spoke in Crepuscular. "Let's play, yeah?"

The power came eagerly when I called, as if to make up for its sluggishness during the day. In a low murmur I spoke my prayers, shaping the working as I drew more and more Night into myself.

I'd expected the enemy to catch on to our presence sooner or later, but that wasn't exactly what we got. Suddenly – when I had gathered enough Night into one place, I guessed – there was a ripple of magic in the air and a red circle of light formed about two hundred feet above our position. You know, revealing it to anyone looking. I paused in my incantation.

"Fuck you," I feelingly told the sky, and also Akua Sahelian.

The enemy must have been expecting us because it couldn't have been longer than a hundred heartbeats before they struck. They came out of the night like ghosts, a single line of twenty legionaries. But these were not regulars or heavies, I thought. Their armour was light, leather and breastplates, and none of them wore helmets. Their hair flew freely in the wind, long and dark and oddly animated. Each bore a single sword and a long spear. They... didn't move right. They were beautiful, I thought, dark-skinned and dark-eyed but with impossibly smooth skin. My mind was being clouded, I recognized. After I bit my lip hard the beauty waned. Their skin was smooth as corpse's because that was exactly what they were.

Not a single one of them breathed.

They struck in silence, three warriors dying before Alexis could warn them we were under attack, but I kept whispering my prayers. Almost there. Aquiline and Ishaq took on one of the enemies together, the Osená hooking his spear and dragging him close enough the Barrow Sword could take off his head. The legionary exploded into a spray of dust and rotten flesh, armour falling into the rocks. The Silver Huntress parried a spear tossed at my side then threw her own with a flash of Light, slaying the sender without batting an eye. The proximity of Light almost destabilized my working, but with a soft curse and desperate haste I compensated. Just a moment now, aligning it just right...

"Burn them all," I hissed in Crepuscular.

The circle of black flame erupted around the crossbowmen, rising the height of three men before spinning inwards. The crossbowmen died screaming, but I was not done. The circle kept spinning on itself, until I snapped my staff against the ground and it exploded outwards in a wave. I heard screaming from legionaries not mine as munitions began to explode, the brush burning bright as the wave of incineration continued outwards until it gutted. I breathed out, brow touched with sweat, and drew my sword. The animated corpses that'd been attacking us – vampires? – were retreating, I found. Half the Levantines that'd come with us were dead and Ishaq was bleeding from a bite mark on his face, but otherwise we'd made out decently.

Eye scanning the night, I found that in the hills there were glints of steel under moonlight. More legionaries. *Pulling back,*

I realized. And so were those that'd been fighting in the breach, though the Dominion pressed them close and the crossbowmen Juniper had sent took their toll. Maybe a fifth of those five hundred would make it out. But why were they retreating already? It made little sense. If they feared what I could do with the Night, why attack after nightfall in the first place? Feeling like I'd missed something I led us back to camp in a hurry. And there was something wrong, I noticed it immediately. Too many legionary tents were empty, and those that weren't were being brought down. Packed away.

I found Juniper and with her my answers. My marshal looked wretched. I thought it was a wound, at first, but her body was fine.

"She played us," Juniper got out, words tumbling out of her fanged mouth like a confession. "She left her camp, Cat. The Legions are marching on us right now, they're most the way across the valley, and we can't fight. Not with the entire Eleventh out in the hills waiting to flank us."

My fingers clenched.

"You're saying we need to retreat," I slowly said.

"We're in disarray, flanked and our camp fortifications are incomplete," the Hellhound said. "If we fight, we'll lose."

I rocked back in shock. She knew, and I *knew* she did, that a retreat at night with the enemy nipping at our heels was going to get bloody. Goblin skirmishers were going to scrape off our rearguard raw, and we'd be both slow and vulnerable on the move. That she was still arguing we needed to retreat could only mean that she was genuinely afraid that our army was going to get destroyed if we did not.

"Where would we even go?" I got out.

"Further north," she said. "Near the Jini Plateau, close to Nioqe Lake."

That wasn't a strategic position, I thought. Or even a tactical one. There were no real gains to be made by going there except not being crushed. That was how bad our situation had gotten. Numbly, I nodded my permission. I needed a drink, I thought, before we got going. Gods but my leg hurt.

I could not remember the last time we had been this brutally outmaneuvered.

—

We cut our losses and ran. It was not as hard a retreat as it could have been, Marshal Nim perhaps wary of engaging in a full pitched battle in the dark, but it cost us more than I cared to admit. As we fled I looked back and froze, for in the distance I saw the Black Knight's fortified camp was burning bright under the starry sky. It took me a moment to understand. Of course she was burning that camp. She no longer needed it, after all.

She'd just taken ours.

Stormblessed

Oof that's a lot of consecutive losses. Turns out facing the hand that trained you can be rough.

Anomandris

Nah, if the real hand that trained her had turned up, it would have been a mauling far more severe.

Interestingly, this also plays into Daddy's hand. Cat may have the raw power and the names, but who better than Amadeus of the Green Stretch for her tactics? Especially AGAINST Praesi? Ergo, more concessions into whatever he wants (which more or less seems to be something Cat will not approve)

shikkarasu

My money is on Amadeus (Crows, I miss just being able to call him Black) wanting to put Catherine in the Tower. Why else would he wait until she showed her face in the Wasteland to make his move? And if he wanted the tower himself he'd have reached out to her; it's no secret that she wants him for the job.

There's also that last line from the Book 6 Epilogue: "If the song refused to leave him, then he would *silence* it." That does not sound like someone embracing their destiny. That sounds like someone who has finally found a way to break it.

Abnaxis

My bet is on him wanting to wreck the Tower and the Praesi nobility so thoroughly it will destabilize the region for the next five generations. A Praes that's completely collapsed in on itself is not what Cat wants either if she's wanting to create a lasting trade relationship with Praes and use their Legions against the Dead King.

Ciel Morgenstern

Hey, maybe he wants to install democracy instead? =P

[Liliet](#)

Boost the vote and vote for hte boost!

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

[Droughtbringer](#)

Thanks!

Benjamin Huang

Ahhhh, competent villains. Delightful.

Raivshard

Indeed, perhaps even practical.

edrey

nice, i couldnt help but remember the war games in book one, more brutal too.

Lord Haart

Bet Nim has Snatcher doing her fortifications too.

Cat might need to go for a draw again, if she can make that work for her one more time. Though I think this time Amadeus wants to try to throw that story at the last.

That's one reason why he might not have reached out – he's more valuable story-wise as an unknown who could swoop in at the last minute. He might not even mind dying in that story if he gets what he wants out of it.

[308924810a](#)

Makes me wonder whether the decision to attack at night was because they thought that vampires and goblins(/a better officer corps, because night fighting disrupts the transmission of commands, amplifying that advantage) is a better comparative advantage than the superior use of Night, given that apparently Cat didn't bring a bunch of Drow on this campaign for whatever reason.

Or whether the whole thing is somehow centrally decided by the features of Vampires that Cat is unfamiliar with, as they are uncommon on this continent, namely that they are hurt by the sun and they can turn people with bites. Makes me worried about the Barrow Sword.

Also I wonder just how long this vampire general has been serving Praes. Is it relatively recent or is she truly ancient?

mamm0nn

The drow were very specifically only coming to the surface to fight the Dead King and conquer themselves a new land out of his dead nation. Conquering Praes is not part of the package, so they wouldn't come. Even if there would be drow to spare, which right now there aren't, the Sisters are under no obligation to do so.

So, given that, it makes sense for the army with more goblins and darkvision folk to use the night as cover. Cat's still just one Named.

Shveiran

That's not the main reason, in my opinion.

The drow conquering the land of the dead is very much tied to actually winning the war, and winning the war is bound to actually sealing the breaches the DK opened into the hells: it's not like Cat is here on her own time, however many personal reasons she may also have.

Much like the drow fighting on the southern front, they would have very good reason to help here.

If they aren't, it likely means they can't. The drow were crippled by Masego Ruining the Sisters to save them from being usurped by the DK, and if it had such a stark effect on goddesses, I can't fathom how hard the drow were hit.

Even being generous, they might simply not have strength to spare if they need not to fold on the northern front.

mamm0nn

You're assuming the drow, a race of thieves and cutthroats, are the kind of honourable and selfless folk that would spread themselves thin and bleed on foreign grounds to fight enemies of their allies for potential gain predominantly to the Hellgate-riddled south of the Kingdom of Dead where their city and troops aren't.

There's also a very logical reason for the drow to not send help to fight Praes. They have no reason to, it's a bother and it's not part of the bargain. Remember how obstinate the humans can get about their desires and what they're asked to do, the drow can most certainly afford to be just as prickly and selfish here and not stand out as evil bastards.

Shveiran

The drows are a race whose goddesses inhabit their own living flesh.
The goddesses Cat is the avatar of.
Goddesses that know either Praes is taken over or the war is lost.

If Sve Noc say march, the drow will. If they haven't there is a reason, and that reason is not pettyness.

Roke

> If Sve Noc say march, the drow will.

This is incorrect, or rather, yes, but even the drow have limits of what they will do for their goddess. One of the generals is already starting to hint at rebellion against Sve Noc.

Sve Noc's sway over the drow explicitly isn't absolute, and Catherine has already had to learn to navigate that her authority as FUtN isn't anywhere near absolute either. She's already made decisions in the past to avoid entering a situation where her request is way too heavy, the drow refuse, then her influence over them erodes.

mamm0nn

Which is assuming that the goddesses, which have very stated and been stated that they are not just Cat's patsies or friends, would just send Cat drow just because. They too are people with their own will, agendas and such, similar to Pilgrim, Cordelia and the likes. Just because they're not Good and/or human, doesn't mean they're just a tool to be abused.

[onedollargum](#)

Of course the Barrow Sword was bitten by a vampire. That slides into his name so well =D

[Burlyraven](#)

Honestly just feels like a fated power up.

Anomandris

This seems very weirdly out of character for Cat. Not the tactical outmanuever by Nim – that happens in wars – but rather the whole set of 'unexpected' tricks that Akua keeps catching her with.

She knew the betrayal was coming and what's more she condoned it. She had to have contingencies for Akua and her magic put in

place, yes? Seems a lot like she didn't (or couldn't be bothered to – which is worse as it keeps costing her soldiers!). If you know Person X is feeding info to your enemy, you feed Person X misinformation. That's warfare 201.

[Liliet](#)

The reason Cat's trick with Akua is a bad idea from every level except the story one is that Akua would have caught on to any misinformation and any stinginess with information. Catherine had to put full trust in her in action *for real* for Akua's decision to leave to be motivated *solely* by her own issues and not by being pushed out. Stories don't work cleanly if you hedge your bets, because then it becomes a story about hedging your bets.

Catherine had to genuinely put herself in the mindset where Akua was no threat, and it would take one hell of a lot of mental flexibility to pivot that 180 after she left, especially when the leaving was not a surprise and so came with no shock.

This is just straight up an inevitable downside of her plan being what it was; has to pay off later, though, because the upside is that Catherine played this by the book and Did The Right Thing™ every step. Creation rewards that, even if – especially if – it cost.

Anomandris

But doesn't a misinformation story by the hero also factors into being, well, a STORY?

The wily, conniving villainess out thought and outsmarted by the plucky hero would have still worked. Didn't need to have hedged at all.

[Liliet](#)

That's not the story Cat is playing though. A misinformation story by the hero is not a story about being genuinely welcomed with the only limit drawn by the past. Akua is not the conniving villainess in this but a lost soul looking for salvation yet finding only walls in her path.

RoflCat

Not to mention Catherine is Callowan, they are known for going to ridiculous degree for their revenge even at the unreasonable risk/cost to themselves.

I do wonder if Akua plan to Praes uno reverse that though. By getting Catherine what she want, but not in the way she want it.

If Catherine wants Akua as eternal seal to Evil in a Jar that is DK willingly, I can see Akua do a twist on that by just going to work for DK.

Like becoming a warden for his Creation stronghold and DK himself go chill in Serenity and just remotely manage things from there.

With some agreement that as long as Akua is still around, DK will keep on chillin (not like old age is an issue for him)

Then Akua can add on top that as long as Catherine remains nearby, she won't send any forces out (again, it's not like DK need to conquer the world asap)

She can possibly even guilt Catherine into accepting it "if my punishment for the 100,000 souls is this, then THIS is yours for all the lives lost in your pursuit of revenge"

[Liliet](#)

I really can't see this working. Removing DK's ability to build forces is key to Catherine's win condition.

shikkarasu

Something that bothers me about this plan, and it just slapped me in the face last night after my last comment on Ch.13, this requires that Akua, an undead, manage to grow as a person after her death. Isn't that supposed to be, y'know, impossible? For this setting in particular.

It's been mentioned repeatedly that one of the few weaknesses of their enemy is that an undead can form new memories, and learn after a fashion, but not meaningfully improve/heal/grow. Isn't that exactly what Akua has been doing all this time?

Not trying to nitpick the story, but I'm genuinely unsure if I've missed something or if I've misunderstood what the actual limitations of undeath are in the Guideverse.

sadfan

Akua is alive and was never dead. She was a "shade" because, like a lich, she had carefully separated her soul from her body and put it in a phylactery, which was later tagged onto the Mantle of Woe; but unlike a lich, she did not die in the process. As a "shade unbound" she was basically an alive person who needed a body. Now she's just a normal person albeit with Malicia's magic leash. Given her beauty and the Sahelian comfort with blood magic rituals I wonder the last time she had a vanilla basic human body.

[Liliet](#)

Oh yeah, also the part where she can just inhabit a suitable body and be a regular alive person again. Villains aren't capable of resurrection, ergo, Akua wasn't dead in the first place.

Liliet

I get the impression that Akua is not undead in this sense – she doesn't have the [Limited Learning] condition. She'd separated her soul from her body while still alive, which did not make her undead, and her body dying did not meaningfully affect the soul. She really did dodge death.

shikkarasu

Of course, the Anaxares gambit. I can't believe I forgot about that. What kind of fan am I?

mamm0nn

Cat's not a Hero though, or plucky. She's both an A-tier Named no one underestimates any more, and a Damned regardless of what she does.

caoimhinh

Not only that. But she also seems to be considering her soldiers as inferior to Nim's troops, deciding that a confrontation would doom her.

The weirdest thing is how Cat is not using any of her current resources, simply running away while being bloodied. Not even a thought about using Archer and Silver Huntress to kill soldiers from a distance or to intercept the skirmishers. Surely those two could cause heavy damage before Nim's troops approach Cat's troops.

Not even a thought towards using Masego for an attack or a counterattack, not even a ritual to prevent chase or to delay pursuit.

No Drows, since she apparently didn't take any to Praes.

As a last resource thing if it is such a desperate situation, Cat should use a bit of the Goblifire she has left to prevent chase. Sure, it is valuable, but so are her soldiers' lives, at this rate she is going to get her army mauled without even a proper fight. Mauled *while running away*.

it has been stated that they are in a valley between the two groups of hills and there's only one proper road that the armies can use, so using Goblifire to prevent pursuit should be viable. It burns for 7 days and consumes even sorcery, so if done properly and in the right position it could buy her important time to march away.

agumentic

>Not even a thought about using Archer and Silver Huntress to kill soldiers from a distance or to intercept the skirmishers. Surely those two could cause heavy damage before Nim's troops approach Cat's troops.

Now that is a nostalgic book 4 feeling. Named matter on the battlefield, but they can't turn a lost battle around, not against the Legions of Terror Amadeus made. Silver Huntress was specifically mentioned skirmishing and they were undoubtedly helping during the retreat, but they can make it less painful, they can't win it.

>Not even a thought towards using Masego for an attack or a counterattack, not even a ritual to prevent chase or to delay pursuit.

Akua and much more skilled mage lines (and also highborn mage auxiliaries) mean that any avenue of magical action will be rather contested.

>No Drows, since she apparently didn't take any to Praes. Drow had their power source crippled and are locked into a battle of Evil vs Evil against the Dead King. That there are any alive at all is a small miracle.

>Goblifire

We've seen how long goblinfire lasts against high-class Named wizards during the Vales, and the answer is "not long". Even leaving that aside, Nim most probably has some artefact from Tower vaults that can deal with it. Leaving even that aside, goblinfire might slow an army, but it wouldn't do much against goblin skirmishers.

mamm0nn

Named can bolster morale and fight Named, but even before Amadeus's reforms it was repeated regularly in Book 1 that Named cannot singlehandedly defeat entire armies. They can fight small vital parts of an army that are dramatic, but even the strongest Named vs an army of regulars will see that Named dying by being outnumbered.

And she didn't take the drow with her, as her agreement with the Sisters was very clearly to defeat the Dead King and conquer a country out of his dead nation. They have no obligation or reason to send drow with her to Praes, and with the recent developments there's no drow left to spare either.

And goblinfire is a risk for everyone involved, plus I think that it's not actually that infinite as long as it can spread as we may think. If it were, Cat would be using singular drops instead of whole buckets of the stuff when she needs something burning. It's likely that the true green fire of

chaos part of goblinfire equates to the amount of goblin oil used.

Even if it wouldn't be like that though, goblinfire seems like the kind of borderline letting loose demons that would be a warcrime that would severely harm her Narrative and political power and influence.

Shveiran

The numbers from the tenth Crusade marching on the Vales made it clear what happens to Legion soldiers trying to march past half a dozen Named: they achieve it, losing SIGNIFICANTLY more soldiers than the force they are pursuing. And that was pursuing levies and fantassins, not a disciplined force.

Which would be QUITE ENOUGH to turn the pursuit in a tactical advantage, because Nim's doesn't have that many more soldiers than Cat.

Note that none of those heroes actually died during the crusade, and these are Named trained not to overcommit and used to fighting together.

Agreed on the drows.

However, Akua is NOT the Warlock yet, merely a claimant. And that fucking matters.

Yes, she has better sorcerers, but Catherine has TWO Named practitioners. I wouldn't bet on a cadre of warlocks managing to find a new solution to a new devilry developed by a Named.

As for the goblinfire, deploying it not even on enemy troops but as a barrier would destroy precisely zero narrative or political consequences for her; why should it? She never even hinted that might be the case.

Bottom line, maybe neither of these would actually WORK, but it sound like they all would have a shot at it. So it boggles the mind that she instead chose a FIGHTING RETREAT as her best option.

agumentic

Named at Vales were not only heroes on Crusade, which has its narrative strengths even with all the footnotes attached, they were Named holding off an army in a relatively narrow passage. But that wasn't the problem here – the bulk of the casualties will be inflicted by skirmishing, which Named can't simply hold off, even if they undoubtedly helped. And if you suggest them trying to hold off the entire Nim's army while Cat's prepares, then not only they might well die from one thing or the other,

they wouldn't buy enough time. Armies don't go out of disarray quickly.

Akua backed up by highborn mages and well-trained mage lines is more than enough to contest Masego and Apprentice, even leaving aside artefacts from Tower's vaults. Goblinfire is just not terribly useful for this situation.

So, no, a fighting retreat was in fact the best option here. Sometimes you just get outmanoeuvred by a very good general – Nim was specifically pointed out as being pretty close to One-Eye in skill – and need to make like Sir Robin.

caoimhinh

But it's skirmishers, not the whole army.
I don't think you are getting what I and Shveiran are saying, or you have a mistaken idea about what skirmishers are.
And that's only in the case of the retreat that Catherine pulled here.

But it's still weird that she is straight-up saying she can't face Nim's Legions and so chooses to run away. Nim's troops do not far outmatch Cat's own, neither in quality nor in quantity. Plus Catherine has many Named with her. Yet Cat seems to be afraid of direct confrontation with Nim's legions.

Staying where they were would have given them a defensive position from which they could set up and fight in an organized manner, and Nim's whole army would need to sally forth to face Catherine's army. It's not like Nim could attack Cat's camp from far away from her own camp. Heck, Cat's camp was so good that Nim burned her own camp once she occupied the one Cat had just abandoned.

The only reason the groups of skirmishers are effective is that the army is marching off and thus not in a defensive formation that can prevent them from being harassed. And because Catherine is not using the cards that she could be using as a response to them.

agumentic

Nim's troops do outmatch Cat's in quantity – they have six thousand more soldiers. But even more than that, Cat's army was caught out of formation and flanked with the rest of Nim's army already closing in. Giving a field battle in such a situation would be suicide, which Juniper plainly stated.

Again, Named can't stop all skirmishers. That's still thousands of troops hitting Cat's army from multiple directions. They helped, but they can only reduce the death toll, not eliminate it.

[Liliet](#)

Why are you assuming she won't be using goblinfire in the fighting retreat? Or Named?

These aren't factors that would let her keep the camp, but they can very much reduce casualties on her side, that's very true.

Owl

Goblinfire is definitely an option to limit the opposing armies' ability to maneuver, but I have a bit of a different take on this.

Right now, she's fighting an offensive war deep in hostile territory, both in the sense that she's unlikely to receive support from civilians (and unwilling to completely make enemies of them, as she indicated earlier) and the environment itself is hostile, not exactly a place where a large army can sustain itself for long.

That means her resources are extremely finite; any resources spent are likely gone for good, which means she has to be extremely careful with how those resources are deployed. On top of that, both engagements were fought on grounds of Nim's choosing under conditions disadvantageous to Cat's armies. Committing to anything more than a fighting retreat means committing more finite resources to the attempt, and doing so under conditions in which the opponent already controls most of the variables of the encounter.

Basically, she's fighting an extremely competent enemy with a potentially superior army and vastly more resources, in a conflict where a single disastrous engagement likely means the end of her campaign. It's not a situation in which I think taking the first gamble available is a wise decision, sometimes the best choice is to cut your losses and maneuver for better conditions to avoid a disaster!

caoimhinh

But I didn't say use the Named to beat the army, I said use them to fend off the skirmishers sent to harass Cat's moving army. That's a whole different thing.

Cat's army was not fighting but rather running while being hit. The weird thing is how Cat didn't seem to put her resources and her special units into fending off that threat.

Suppose, for example, that Akua and the mages under her command can face off against Masego and whoever supports him. The clash of their sorcery would be enough to impede the chase, or at least delay it. Even if Akua covers Nim's troops and Masego is unable to strike at them directly, just that confrontation would be enough to prevent them from advancing.

And there's no shooter on the other side that has any way to match Archer and Silver Huntress shooting from far away. I'm not saying that they would slaughter the Loyalist Legions, but they can surely discourage the skirmishers and prevent them from hitting Cat's army, or make them pay a bloody price if they try.

Yet Cat did none of that, not even considered it.

agumentic

Well, for one, Cat didn't know Akua will get access to magic before seeing the body Malicia prepared, which was only a week from betrayal. But that really doesn't matter, because the main problem is this – Akua is a dozen times better at the betrayal game than Cat, so she would see any contingencies a mile away, which would both damage the story and also not help all that much, because Akua is smart enough and placed high enough to see through any contingency.

Juff

Typo Thread:

orc and humans > orcs and humans
the Marshal Nim > Marshal Nim
gutted > guttered (occurs twice)
wasted in time > wasted no time
get her so > get here so
Now two > No two
long she's > long as she's
attack ma'am > attack, ma'am
Eleventh stayed > Eleventh had stayed
smooth as corpse's > smooth as a corpse's
bad out > bad our

[Liliet](#)

Welp, this was brief yet deeply unpleasant.

Rey d`Tutto

Sometime the enemy ain't dumb.
That usually results in pain .
Does the pain inflected change the plan?

Sun Tsu.
Autocurrupt fought me spelling his name.
Fancy That.

Liliet

Isn't it Sun Tzu?

Anyway yeah this p much had to happen, dramatic pacing wise.

Lord Haart

Cat's learning that it's not just against the DK that you sometimes just... lose.

A sobering return to reality after the captivity arc. Pride cometh, etc.

Also goes to show that story-fu only takes you so far. There's almost a conservation-of-ninjitsu thing here too where Cat is in some ways stronger on her own than with her army. But you need an army to get an army sometimes.

Liliet

There's also the fact that the story-fu ended up being a tradeoff – Cat set up the Akua story flawlessly, except for all the side effects she's now "enjoying".

We'll have to see if it was worth it, though my bet is on "yes, but not in a way Catherine expects". This is a very not-killing-Gollum setup.

dadycool

Oof, it has to hurt, running from the Legion with her tail between her legs. The way things are going, especially considering the Power of Narrative, it looks like the only way she'll be able to proceed will be by going directly into the heart of the storm.

Lord Haart

I hope not – save the "Last Ditch Attempt" card for the DK.

dadycool

Well, it won't be a "real" Last Ditch Attempt. Think of it like in the movie "Australia", where the cattle ranchers trek through the desert following a medicine man in search of water. Sure, nobody WANTS to have to give up, abandon everything and disappear, but the only way to go forward without truly catastrophic losses would be the crazy trek through the region that everyone "knows" is unpassable. This is still survivable, and it always was, in a way that a fight against DK isn't, so a "Last Ditch Attempt" here isn't in the same league as one there.

R

Interesting chapter... It feels like this book's theme is Cat taking short-term losses on the assumption she'll win big later. The whole idea of invading Praes is a massive gamble in the first place. And then pushing Akua to leave – it's hard to see how a strategy that only pays off *after* she's beaten the dead king is worth giving up such a crucial advantage.

Perhaps the story logic of Akua's betrayal will make it easier to defeat Malicia, since it undermines the importance of her role as arch-villain?

Earl of Purple

These vampires are interesting, I wonder if they are harmed by sunlight. Also, what does Ishaq's sword think of them? It prefers Binds to bones, and revenants to binds.

Xinci

I personally wonder if they are infectious and if so, if they may enable him to do a ritual that lets him gain from other souls than undead. Or at least gain from the flesh of other beings in some new manner, perhaps raw essence now? A broadening of the pallet as it were

[Liliet](#)

Palate?

jamesc9

<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/palette>

Clmineith

Does that count as a motif of three? One victory (wolof), one defeat (here), and then the Tower?

Shveiran

No. Not everything is a Pattern of Three; and besides, a Pattern of Three needs a draw in the middle. That's how Cat broke out of the one with Pilgrim by willingly losing at the Princes' Graveyard.

shikkarasu

We still have Nim/Arthur's Po3 to play, at least. It was a little dubious with only one encounter, but then Arthur got an Aspect out of it. No way he doesn't get a rematch now, and the Gods Below would have to be fools to try and steer it away from a draw at this point. The Gods Above would make them pay dearly for such a misstep.

Shveiran

Whiel creation will try to steer things toward a draw, it is no easy thing. It is still avoidable, if Nim is savvy. Though it doesn't seem likely.

The Pattern is not yet set in stone, is what I'm saying.

Vlatko

This chapter in summary: the protagonist losws repeatedly with nothing to show for it.

Vlatko

This chapter in summary: the protagonist losws repeatedly with nothing to show for it.

Shveiran

That's a lot of dead ultimately caused by Akua. I... really don't like where this is going, but I'll take that as a sign that I'm thinking along the wrong path. By this point I've learned that when I see an unsatisfying shape developing in the story, it is because I'm looking at it wrong.

Although on the military side... I must say I'm kind of disappointed.

I mean, sure: Akua's trick was precisely the right move to throw an opponent into disarray and into a killing field. I get that. And yeah, that means the opposition now has a lot of priceless insights on Cat's force. I get that too.

My problem with that is that, well, Catherine knows all this. Here we see a series of clever maneuvers from Nim, but the opposition just... takes it. That's what I have an hard time coming to terms with. The moment Akua Sahelian threw them out of the Ways rather than killing them, it should have become apparent that the major objective achieved was blinding them and throwing them out of their tempo: of course it was a logistic nightmare,

but it seems Cat and Juniper did next to nothing to prepare for a vicious blow they had to know was coming.

I don't know what they could have done, but they have a dozen Named and just as many superb tacticians, so having them just march on feels... a bit stupid.

I wouldn't mind if it wasn't for the fact that Nim doesn't really sound like someone that should be able to play them like a fiddle, vampires or no. She has done little more than drills and garrison duties for twenty years! I'm sure she is competent, but competent is not quite what is being shown here. Ranker's contributions were not this good, and to be honest neither were One-Eye's during the tenth crusade.

Rey d`Tutto

Story-fu.

Draw, loss...

Shveiran

Aside from the fact that this is not really done on purpose on Cat's part, so it doesn't look like story fu, I believe a Pattern of Three has to start with a victory, continue with a draw, then end with a victory for the other side. Not start with a draw.

Lord Haart

Well, Nim **is** Named now, plus Bard is in the picture. She might be... nudging things.

I wonder if Bard will have another shot at manipulating Akua, maybe more directly this time?

Shveiran

Oh I'm sure Bard will nudge things, but on the story side. Here we have TACTICAL DEFEATS, which is why I'm grumbling.

Burlyraven

The Barrow Sword just got a dose of raw Edge(tm) if that bite was enough to turn him. He could go full Dracula after this is all finished, proving he survives. Of course, his Name was partially forged as an undead killer, so turning may be one of the few things he consider a sin.

That might be the only "good" to come out of this, though. The enemy has too much knowledge and experience on their side for it to be a coincidence that Cat's army is being funneled into a location.

Lord Haart

Now I'm imagining Ishaq being played by Wesley Snipes.

Scott Schluter

Now enters Amadeus of the Green Stretch who Cat has been silently counting on to show up and unleash his brain.

Bad@games

Ahh, how practical of him.

beleester

Next chapter is going to be Loose, I guess?

Sykomantis

My guess would be Pull first, then Loose

Sykomantis

No wait. Draw instead of Pull

[Liliet](#)

Nock, Draw, Release?

Nock, Draw, Aim, Release?

Maybe Loose instead of Release like you said

[Sugar Roll](#)

The Black Knight: "Mistake."

superkeaton

Oh hey, the vampires came back! I remember they were mentioned way way way back, but for all the undead we've seen, this is the first direct encounter. Neat! I hope that facebite doesn't come with any Consequences.

[Liliet](#)

I hope it does. Ishaq's due for a neat powerup!

Sinead

He is seeming to be building up to be the Second in Command at Cardinal on the Villain side of things, and at least in line to inherit that Role from Cat. The Woe are mostly doing their own thing, with Maseago and Indrani mostly hammering down the 'recluse' and 'wanders' that still gather around the Accords, while Vivienne and Hakram are going to be much more involved in other political theatre.

[Tohron](#)

The situation with being driven out of her camp by a surprise night attack seems reminiscent of Cat's first encounter with Juniper way back at the War College. I wonder if anyone will take note of the parallels.

Shveiran

I have, but I don't much nlike them.
Cat was inexperienced and Juniper was a tactical prodigy. The Black Queen has a number of prodigious tacticians in her staff and is herself the veteran of more wars than Nim ever fought in. Putting down Tasia was her first real action ever since the Conquest, for Sisters' sake. This... idea that Cat is somehow the greenhorn between the pair really bothers me.

Lord Haart

She's not. But she is on Nim's home turf, her army is smaller, and despite their experience they also have lost many of their top talents like Hune and Robber while Praes has been the most stable country on Calernia for years if not decades.

Cat is normally one who favors chaos but sometimes that means the enemy prepares better and if you get caught on the wrong foot thru may never give you time to recover.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Epic.
Thanks.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

An interesting match up so far. It seems like both Cat and Juniper will need to start thinking outside of the box. Even without Akua, Nim must've been preparing to fight Callow for a long time, so it's not surprising Praes has an upper hand so far.

The one weakness Praes does have is that it lacks a commander with a comprehensive, practical understanding of both Namelore and strategy. In essence, they lack Amadeus or Cat. As good a Marshal as Nim is, I doubt she's as accomplished at story-fu. Considering the upcoming battle will decide the fate of Praes, that's a serious shortcoming. It's no good to win an engagement only to walk into a story trap (not that it happened here, but it likely will in the battle proper).

Tropicana

I believe we as readers should probably discard the notion that High Marshal Nim is blind to the story-fu. If you look at all the major conflicts in this series, you would notice that each

side in any major conflict have someone with a working knowledge of the story (although competence varies widely).
First Liesse was Wandering Bard vs Black and Catherine vs Akua
Second Liesse was Akua vs Catherine and Black with others like king of winter and queen of summer thrown in.
The free cities war was Black vs Bard vs Karios
Tenth crusade was Cath vs Pilgrim and Black vs Hanno
Everdark was Cath vs Sve noc
Princes' graveyard was Cath vs Pilgrim vs Karios
War on Keter was Everyone vs Dead King vs Bard
So for war in Preas, who is going to challenge Cath?
It could be that the need for such an individual was one of the reasons for Akua's defection or Akua was only needed as a high quality mage to oppose Zeze and Preas already has someone with Story-fu regardless of proficiency.
My reasons why Marshal Nim might be competent in story-fu
(1) During a discussion between Catherine and Black in book one, it was mentioned that some Orges have had Roles despite their numbers compared to Orcs.
(2) We saw General Hune make sacrifices to some Deity and this Deity prevent Catherine from resurrecting Hune in book 6, implying that Orges might have a strong sense identity and culture in their city.
(3) Marshall Nim served under Black, which means that she will take the name dreams from Amadeus very seriously and this might be imparting some knowledge about Story-fu.
(4) In the ambush on Catherine's campus in Wolof, the body controlled by Nim tried a last ditch effort to kill the Squire after Catherine attacked and mostly disabled the body, which would have stopped a pattern of three from forming.
So it's possible that Marshall Nim is proficient in Story-fu but is also possible that she is blind to it and Akua will use it to screw her and the empress. Either way, it will be interesting to see.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Nim knows a decent amount about Namelore for sure. For one, she worked with Black but also she's not an idiot and having just recently come into a Name, I'm sure she tried to learn as much as possible.

The thing is, story-fu is like painting. Regardless of talent or knowledge, you need practice to be good at it. Knowing about colour theory might help you learn how to paint but you only get to learn it by painting a whole lot.

Consider that Nim's only been Named for a year or so. She's never fought against another Named, she's probably not used to viewing battles as stories. She might know what to do in the abstract but I doubt it'll translate to actionable tasks.

It might not matter since Bard is after Cat but I do think story-fu is the area Nim will suffer a decisive defeat in.

DC

Now see, if you'd rigged up your camp with goblinfire this wouldn't be an issue.

sadfan

I am not really sure what the point is of marching an insufficient invasion force into enemy territory. I'm thinking of that Charles Joseph Minard map. Cat came unprepared and she should have realized that hemorrhaging her forces means a Deus ex Machina ealamal will be needed to have a remotely happy ending to the story.

This strains my credulousness. Cat should know better on multiple levels, she was trained better than this.

morroian

Replying to this over a year later but this is kind of my reaction as well. Its straining my credulity to breaking point, taking me out of the story. Not just the tactical defeats but the whole Akua situation as well.

[James Felling](#)

Two comments.

First: Cat is uncharacteristically on the back foot here. Her force was caught by surprise and dropped into unexpected circumstances. Her toes are capable, well armed and on their home ground. She's going to be on the defensive, and will suffer losses while she is forced to confront a prepared enemy who had opportunity to plan their strategy knowing the situation, and she is forced, at least in the near term to play their game. But the rules of the world are such that named are strongest and luckier when things look bad, so this might just be a Genre Savvy move on her part.

Secondly Cat has been getting !ore and more Odinesque. I think Cat's name new name is similar to Odin (a gender swaped version). A one eyed, limping person wearing a cloak (mantle) who carries a staff and is accompanied by two dark birds. Who is a strong ruler, and a master strategist with a reputation for being unpredictable..

Chapter 15: Pull

"Only a child pretends there is value in defeat. Fool they who praise a bleeding wound."

– Dread Empress Massacre

Since we'd come crashing down into this godforsaken region three days ago, we had lost one thousand six hundred and thirty-two soldiers.

The last count came in from the Dominion midmorning, as they were less used to counting their dead. The Levantines had borne the brunt of those losses, almost a quarter of the men they'd brought east now dead. In the exchange we'd killed maybe a quarter of that number in enemy soldiers, mostly through skirmishes that had gone our way. The best that could be said of the last few days was that we'd avoided a rout, not that this narrow avoidance meant our situation was anything less than terrible. We'd camped near the northern shore of Nioqe Lake, beyond the long shadows cast by the Jini Plateau, and while we were somewhat safe at the moment our strategic situation had taken a sharp turn for the worse.

The mood was grim when our war council assembled. The usual few slunk their way into the tent: Vivienne and Brandon Talbot, Juniper and Aisha, Zola Osei. Of the two lordlings only one showed today, Razin Tanja. Aquiline was attending to their captains, who were not pleased with the way this campaign was going. It'd not escaped anyone's attention that the Legions of Terror seemed to be focusing their efforts on the Dominion, which had brought old tensions to the fore – there was some talk in Levantine ranks of my Praesi legionaries being traitors, of there being some conspiracy afoot, and it needed to be stamped out. Aquiline tended to be more popular with their warriors, so it was only natural that we'd ended up with Razin.

"It is no longer feasible to take back our camp," General Zola crisply said. "I can only argue in favour of retreat now, west to the half-road and then further north to grounds less at our disadvantage."

"That marches us straight into the Gale Ribbon," Aisha said, shaking her head. "Even with wards prepared we'll take losses."

"We could attempt to take the burned camp in Moule Hills for our own," Brandon Talbot suggested.

"They'll have mined that," I grunted. "If not worse."

It was against Legion regulations to use devils but I wasn't sure how closely followed a rule that would be without my father

around to enforce it. A lot of high-placed officers had shared his opinion, but many of those were now dead. I wasn't sure the Black Knight would push back if Malicia insisted, which she might. The Empress would prefer burning contracts to losing men, at this stage of the war.

"And even if we swing wide away from Kala Hills to avoid giving battle, there is nothing to stop her from simply marching down and getting into a position to flank us," Aisha said. "Lady Black has made it clear that she will not let us entrench."

"Is a ramp to access the plateau feasible?" Razin asked. "We could avoid the valley that so troubles us entirely by accessing the heights."

Looks were shared. That was the closest thing to a good idea we'd heard so far.

"I'll consult with Sapper-General Pickler," I said.

"Even if it is something our sappers can accomplish," General Zola began, "Marshal Nim will not leave us to build that ramp unmolested. We would need to stake out a more defensible position."

I glanced at Juniper, who sat at the other end of the table in silence. She had been following the conversation attentively, but there was a peculiar look on her face. She had not once opened her mouth to give an opinion this entire council and did not break the streak to answer Zola.

"Send out riders to find one," I ordered the general. "Even if Pickler says it can't be done, it'll be useful information to have under our belt."

"I will see to the roster," Aisha volunteered, smoothly rising to her feet.

She threw a worried glance at Juniper, who did not meet her eyes. The council ended without much ceremony, the tent emptying until there were only three people left: Vivienne, me and the still-silent Hellhound. Brushing back a strand that'd slipped her braid, the princess was the first to speak up.

"You haven't said a word all morning," Vivienne stated.

Juniper let out a long breath, chair creaking under her.

"I haven't," she said.

A moment passed. She did not continue.

"We've had setbacks before," I finally said. "And we're far from defeated, we just—"

"I should resign," the Hellhound interrupted me. "I can't, I know it would be a bad look in the middle of a campaign, but I should. Command should informally be passed to Zola regardless."

I balked.

"That's not even slightly a good idea," I said. "Zola's solid, but she doesn't have the spark. Nim will eat her alive."

Hakram had been right when he'd warned I should temper my expectations of Zola Osei, as he often was. Hune's replacement was not her equal, much less Juniper's. She was the kind of commander that made for a respectable general but fell short of marshal talents.

"Nim is eating *me* alive, in case you hadn't noticed," Juniper barked out. "How many times are you going to make excuses for me, Catherine? *I'm losing.*"

"I'm not making excuses," I flatly replied. "We've made some mistakes and paid for them but-"

"I should have asked you to send Named out in the hills, not just scouts," Juniper growled. "The Eleventh wouldn't have caught us out. The Order should have been out near the vanguard, not near the supply wagons – they could have chased Nim's horse *before* they shredded the Levantines."

"You're not an *oracle*, Juniper," I bit out. "We'd be having a very different conversation if she'd sent the horse after the wagons instead, and she might have attacked the moment we flushed out the Eleventh so-"

"I am not," Juniper of the Red Shields quietly said, "equal to this task."

I slammed my open palm onto the table.

"What the fuck is this?" I snarled. "She played her cards better, Juniper. We lost a few hands. So what? The goddamned pot is still on the table for anyone to take."

I heard her hands creak as large fingers tightened into fists.

"I'm not sure it all came back," Juniper hoarsely said. "After Malicia pulled her hooks. That I'm still *all* of me."

And just for that look in my friend's eyes, I wished I could kill Alaya of Satus twice.

"It did," I flatly said.

The Pilgrim had told me as much and I had no reason to doubt him. There'd been physical scars it would take her years to overcome, but her mind was fine.

"I will not be another orc cripple for you to lug about, Catherine," Juniper hissed. "Don't you see it's even worse if it's all there? It just means I was never in the same league. If I'm no longer fit, if I ever was in the first place, and-"

"Do you genuinely believe I wouldn't have advocated your removal if I believed you unfit for your office?"

Vivienne's voice cut through our rising anger like a knife. Juniper rocked back like she'd been slapped, but she was listening.

"Catherine loves you like family," Vivienne calmly continued. "She might excuse weakness out of sentiment. Would I, Hellhound? We have an understanding, but we both know I would not put you above Callowan lives."

"You're not a general," Juniper replied, but it was weak and by the tone of her voice she knew it.

She just wasn't convinced. Didn't want to be, maybe couldn't be. I grit my teeth. Though I was not unfamiliar with the flagellant's whip, this was not the time for my marshal to indulge in it. We were already in deep enough trouble without losing our finest military mind halfway through a campaign.

"Neither are you, at the moment," Vivienne evenly replied. "Perhaps you should attend to those duties before further defeat ensues, Marshal Juniper."

The orc's voice was stilted as she excused herself, almost fleeing the tent. I slumped back into my seat. Vivienne rose to pour two glasses of wine, pressing one into my hand.

"Fuck," I eloquently said.

It'd not been good in the first place, but I suspected I might have made it worse.

"I can't fix this," Vivienne told me. "It's not who we are to each other. She doesn't call me Warlord, or ever will."

I drank, biting down on my first answer. It was bitter enough on my tongue it almost spoiled the wine.

"I'm not sure how to fix this either," I said. "Winning? If we could beat Nim so easily we'd already be doing it."

"There are some who agree with her, you know," Vivienne murmured. "Not just our countrymen, who sometimes mutter for the wrong

reasons. Officers that were brought in from the Legions. They say she came up too quick, more out of closeness to you than merit. That a few College tricks and being Istrid Knightsbane's daughter aren't enough to warrant her being raised so high."

I scoffed.

"I didn't pick her name out of a hat, Viv," I said. "Just yesterday she saved us a rout. How many officers would have figured out the Order needed to be sent to relieve us before the enemy cavalry even came out? It's not her that's the problem, it's that we're fighting the Legions of Terror on their picked grounds with the deck stacked in the favour. This was never going to be easy."

I'd ridden Legion war doctrine like a warhorse over the back of half the fucking continent. It wasn't going to stop being effective just because I wasn't the only one on the field using it.

"I know that," Vivienne said. "So do most people who matter."

My heiress paused, offering me a wan smile.

"Does Juniper?"

—

"You might as well be asking me to build a ramp to the moon," Pickler bluntly told me.

"I'm sure Ol' Sorcerous would appreciate the way down, but my ambitions are slightly more grounded," I easily replied.

Well, more or less. I only wanted to bind the entire continent to a treaty that would fundamentally change how Named would operate. You know, summer fair gift stuff.

"Funny," my Sapper-General said, tone dry as sand. "I can't do it, Catherine, at least not in the time you want it done. We didn't have the wood to build a ramp that size in the first place and we lost too many of our stakes when we abandoned the camp last night. Unless you want me to build it out of stone we cut from the cliffside, it can't be done."

I eyed her with alarm. I'd not known our situation was so bad with the *sudes*. If we lost too many of the large stakes my legionaries carried to easily raise palisades then we'd be dependent on local wood. Of which there wasn't much. The most we'd seen was the brushlands in the Kala Hills, which the Loyalist Legions now held.

"We can still raise palisades properly, can't we?" I asked.

"Camp size's been reduced. We're toeing the line for sanitation," Pickler admitted. "If not for the priests we'd be at risk of sicknesses."

Well, it'd been a day for pleasant surprises so far. Why break that lovely trend?

"We need to do *something*, Pickler," I got out.

"We're not reaching that plateau, Catherine," she said, then hesitated. "But I have an... idea. I need to look at some things first, though. See if it's truly viable."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"You're not going to give me more than that?"

"No point in raising false hopes," Pickler said. "I'll find you when I'm sure."

I was inclined to poke at her for at least a few scraps, but she was saved by the appearance of a phalange. The young Taghreb informed me that Archer was back in camp and she'd brought a package with her, which spurred my curiosity. I met with Vivienne as I limped my way back, as she'd been sent for too, the pair of us entering the tent together to the sight of Archer dumping a large cloth sack on the carved table. I paused.

"Is whatever's in that bag breathing?" I bluntly asked.

"I would hope so," Vivienne said. "That's one of the abduction bags for the Jacks, if she got blood all over it I'll be cross."

Ah, Vivienne. Sometimes she said these things and I acutely felt the loss it was for my gender that she was only interested in the other one.

"Why, hello Archer," Indrani brightly said. "Lovely to see you, how did your night go?"

I raised my staff then poked experimentally at the bag, ignoring her entirely.

"I think it's a person," I mused.

"She might have finally snapped and done in Masego," Vivienne suggested. "There's only so many times a woman can have her words nitpicked before blood ensues."

"If you don't stop I'll put him back where I found him," Indrani threatened.

I had to bite down on a 'Masego? It'd be a walk, but I suppose you could' that very much wanted to wriggle its way past my lips.

It was rare that I got to gang up on one of the Woe instead of getting ganged up on, so it was only with reluctance that I moved on to business.

"And where would that be?" I asked.

Theatrically, Archer opened the bag to reveal the bruised face of an unconscious dark-skinned man in what I'd guess to be his early twenties.

"Kala Fortress," Indrani said. "You're looking at Sokoro Abara, third child of Lord Abara of Kala. Caught him while he was serving as a go-between between the fortress and the Legions."

My brow rose. That was quite the catch. More than enough to make up for her absence last night, considering she wouldn't have made much of a difference in the fight. I stayed silent a little longer, choosing my words.

"I know that look," Indrani accused. "I did good but you want to insult me anyways so you're moving around the sentence."

"Of course not," I lied.

"You did good, Archer," Vivienne told her with a warm smile.

Indrani preened.

"You know," my successor casually added, "for a sullen wench."

I grinned even as wails of Callowan treachery began filling up the tent, already thinking about all the answers we were going to get out of that man.

—

Sokoro Abara was going to be a hard nut to crack, I figured.

Akua had once told me that a lot of Wasteland nobles trained their children in methods to resist torture and in my experience Praesi aristocrats needed to be made brutally aware that their situation was desperate before the veneer of arrogance even began to break. So we did the works: put him in a tent enchanted for darkness with the sole magelight facing him, had the Concocter feed him something to keep him slightly dazed and I handled the interrogation personally with only Vivienne at my side. Sokoro Abara woke up, blinking away the sleep, and then took in the sight of my being seated across from him and Vivienne standing behind me.

There was a pregnant pause.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," he swore.

Well. I was feeling a little cheated, but there was a saying about gift horses. The young noble was quite frank about how he was not even slightly interested in dying or being tortured for his family's sake, and instead offered information quite freely when asked. His position as the envoy between the fortress and Legions – he informed us quite bitterly that such a task had of course been *beneath* his elder half-siblings – and his confessed tendency to open sealed scrolls to read them meant he'd been in a good position to learn about the unfolding debacle.

"The Eleventh was in the hills for two days before you marched there," he told us. "They went through Risas, using the shepherd paths. The Black Knight wanted them in position to strike at your army from behind should you fight in the valley."

It was an odd feeling to know that our disastrous vanguard action had still been better than the likely alternative: picking a fight with Marshal Nim in the valley and getting smashed in the back by a full legion. Though it'd been a costly thing to learn that General Lucretia was hiding in the hills, better we learn it now than when a battle was on the line. He also had actionably useful information, of the recent kind.

"Lady Black ordered that the wells to both the east and west of the Kala Hills should be poisoned today," Sokoro told us. "She had to ask us permission first, as it is still father's land, but he bent over backwards to agree. Lady Warlock has offered to broker entering under Wolof's protection on very favourable terms, so there's little he won't do to please her."

My lips thinned. I could deduce why Marshal Nim would give the order easily enough. She wanted us to be stuck near Nioqe Lake, knowing that if we strayed too far from those shores we'd have no water source to draw from. Now that the Black Knight had put us in a corner, she meant for us to stay there.

"What do you know of Marshal Nim's plans?" Vivienne asked.

"Not much," Sokoro admitted. "She was raised under the Carrion Lord, you know. Like all his old soldiers she has high-handed manners even in the lands of her betters."

I doubted this man was Nim's better in any possible sense of the word – except passing through small doorways, maybe? – but I'd gain nothing from telling him that.

"Not much is still *something*," I smiled.

He smiled back and asked for assurances about his captivity. I guaranteed him absence of torture and fair treatment if he talked – which he already had, but apparently did not know – yet when I offered right of ransom he scoffed.

"Father won't pay," Sokoro said. "I'd rather you promise wine instead, I imagine being a prisoner will be dreadfully dull."

"We can arrange that," Vivienne promised.

'Not much' hadn't been him playing coy, unfortunately. He'd overheard useful bits but no plan. Nim's legionaries were apparently convinced that she wanted to avoid giving us a pitched battle, which I had no trouble believing. The most interesting morsel was that apparently General Wheeler had been asked about raising field fortifications that would hem in the Army of Callow around Nioqe Lake. It was not a sure thing, but in my opinion it seemed likely she actually intended to try. Malicia did not want to wreck my army, just put me in a position where I was forced to negotiate. Bottled up against the shores of the lake with a larger force or impassable terrain encircling me as my supplies ran out would achieve that.

The best possible outcome of being forced into that corner was managing a stalemate until Sepulchral and the Rebel Legions arrived, but I had my doubts we'd manage as much. Besides, if it was the fight Marshal Nim was after then it was the last one we wanted to give her. Which meant moving before we got cornered.

Time to see if Pickler had a way for us to slip the noose before it got tightened.

—

"I told you that I can't get us on that plateau," Pickler hissed out in irritation.

"But you have something else," I pressed.

"It's a gamble," my Sapper-General admitted. "But I believe it'll work."

She showed me to the inside of a tent where a tenth of sappers were chattering away as they worked, cutting away at wood and hammering in nails. It took me a moment to realize what I was looking at: one of our supply wagons, stripped of its wheels and bound tighter. Was that wax I was smelling?

"I can't get you on the plateau," Pickler repeated, standing at my side. "But there's another way east. Nioqe Lake."

"You want to make a pontoon bridge across," I realized, then frowned. "We have enough wood?"

"If we use every supply wagon," she replied. "And a significant portion of our stakes."

She'd not been underselling it when she'd called that a gamble, then. If the enemy sunk that bridge, or even just prevented us

from recovering it after we crossed, we'd be in heaps of trouble. As in, might seriously have to consider cutting a deal trouble: without wagons to carry our supplies we'd slow to a crawl even using roads. Out there on wild land, where there weren't any, we'd be snails to the Black Knight's hawk.

"How long would it take you to get it done?" I asked.

"We made a pattern, so I could have it ready for deployment by sundown if you don't steal any of my sappers," Pickler said. "Trouble is, Catherine, I don't have a way to prevent *them* seeing us make it."

Which would allow Nim to contest the crossing, the last thing I wanted. I clenched my fingers then unclenched them. There was a way. I didn't like using it as a ploy, it felt disrespectful, but I'd do it anyway. The question was, then whether it was truly our way out. Sure, it'd get us out of Marshal Nim's planned encirclement and on the other side of the lake if things went fine. What would we *do* once there, though? Taking a gamble to flee blindly was exactly the kind of mistake the Black Knight was waiting to capitalize on. She'd pushed her army hard, striking at us repeatedly over the same day and night, because she knew that our officer corps and general staff were of lesser quality than hers. We were, as an army, simply more prone to making mistakes when time grew short.

That was the difference training made.

The way I saw it, the point of crossing Nioqe Lake would be marching south afterwards. I'd been Juniper's original plan to do as much, if from a significantly better position, and I still believed it was a sound notion. The problem now was Kala Fortress. It was a certainty the Loyalist Legions would move to cover it faster than we could get there – needing to fish out and rebuild our supply wagons ensured as much – so Nim was likely to entrench by the walls. That'd been true in the original iteration of the Hellhound's plan as well, but our answer to that had simply been going around the Legions by marching further east before cutting south. That was no longer an option, because as I'd recently learned from our prisoner the Black Knight had ordered all the wells east of Kala Hills *poisoned*.

I wasn't sure how far that order would be applied in practice but given that Nim had light cavalry to spare I wouldn't bet on it being a small slice of land. We could last maybe two weeks without refreshing our water supplies if we began rationing immediately and nothing went wrong, which made risking an eastern march rolling the dice. If we got lucky it might rain and be the drinkable kind of rain instead of the brimstone kind that burned – a legitimate worry in these parts, Aisha had informed me – but that was a large *if*. Especially when the mage cadres of the Loyalist Legions had shown they were capable of large-scale

weather manipulation rituals. Even if rainstorms gathered, there was nothing to prevent the Legions from just dispersing them.

No, the reliable water was south and down the half-road. And there was a set of fortifications on top of that road: Kala Fortress. If we could take it before Nim got there, we'd be in a very defensible position and sitting over *her* supply line. We'd be putting her in a corner instead of the other way around. I could maybe sneak a small force to that keep before the Black Knight got there, I finally thought, but nowhere large enough to actually take a well-defended castle. Which meant I needed to figure out how to bust open that lock before we got started on this plan.

"Catherine?" Pickler hesitantly asked.

I *had* gone silent for a long while, I supposed. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. Taking Kala Fortress wasn't really the issue, was it? As in, it did not need to be in the Army of Callow's possession. I just needed it not to be in the hands of the Loyalist Legions. And *that* was something I might just have the tool to achieve.

"Get started on the work," I said, then bit my tongue. "Talk to Juniper and General Zola first, but you have my full backing for this. Unless they object stridently, it's happening."

Leaving her quite bemused at the sudden turn, I set to talking around the key to the lock.

—

Sokoro Abara widely smiled, showing slightly yellowing teeth. His breath smelled like the wine we'd promised him and Vivienne had evidently delivered on.

"I do have some friends behind the walls, Your Majesty," he said. "Though it behooves me to ask why I should introduce them to you. I am, after all, a prisoner."

"You misunderstand me," I said.

He flinched, as if preparing for a blow, but none followed.

"There would be no need for an introduction, as you would be the one speaking to them," I idly continued.

His eyes narrowed.

"You'd release me?" he asked.

"Release is a strong word," I thinly smiled. "Tell me, Sokoro, how would you like to be Lord of Kala?"

He stayed silent a moment, considering. If the Army of Callow put him in that seat Malicia might take offence in the aftermath should she beat us, but that was a relatively distant concern. He could place himself under a High Seat's protection should he grow too worried of retribution.

"Part of the castle and the soldiers would back me over my siblings," Sokoro finally said, tone even. "Not over my father. He is a well-respected man. I also have... concerns about my mother's safety."

"Your father is an eminently mortal man," I said. "And we can whisk away your mother before we strike."

Scribe had gotten to make her latest Assassin. We'd use it. The dark-skinned man's eyes brightened at my words. It was what he'd wanted to hear. Wasn't like he was ever going to rise high except through my good graces: everything he'd said about his half-siblings implied a degree of enmity. He might get cast out after the death of Lord Abara, and that was assuming none in the castle decided to... err on the side of caution.

"And what would you have of me in return?" he asked.

"All I want is a friend ruling that fortress," I smiled. "Perhaps your help in learning the lay of the land. Nothing onerous."

He looked hesitant. Right, Praesi. I'd get more trust out of him if I bled him some.

"Full use of your water is what I want most, of course," I said. "I'll not require your soldiers to fight by the side of the Army of Callow."

"I might be amenable to such an arrangement," Sokoro Abara lightly said.

"Good," I smiled, and to his alarm the darkness began thickening around us.

Faint sounds could be heard, almost like cawing, and my smile broadened.

"I'll want an oath out of you, my friend," I said. "Just in case, you see. Trust is hard come by in these troubled times."

"It is only natural," he stiffly replied. "On what would you have me swear?"

Night began filling the room, Sve Noc granting this a sliver of their attention, and I answered him.

In a ring outside our camp, one thousand six hundred and thirty-two corpses were dragged out on the plains and assembled in great piles. Mages came out in lines, setting fire to them with what little wood we could spare for this – which wasn't much. As a result they had to stay and keep feeding more mageflame to the dead bodies, which took powerful flames to burn. The result was plumes of thick, guttering smoke that rose up into the afternoon sky. Enough of them that it was as if a curtain had been pulled in front of the camp.

Pickler's sappers had their cover.

Meanwhile I set about giving the enemy something to react to, instead of leaving them to operate unhindered. I first picked a place on open grounds with a good view at the Black Knight's fortified camp. Hierophant came with me, in expectation of the enemy's answer, and the two of us stood out like black-plumed birds out on the rocky plains. A bodyguard of twenty knights had ridden with us, but I'd refused more. There would be no point. I took the lead, pulling down my hood and beginning to murmur under the pounding sun. Night was like a lazy brat refusing to get up, but I had time to spare. I coaxed it out properly and the Sisters helped me with the alignment. Zeze could have done it through the Observatory, but I wanted him free to act.

The same ring of red light as last night appeared over our heads, but I'd told Masego to leave it. No need to warn the enemy of his presence too early. Once I'd gathered the power to me, though, I told him to get ready.

"I am all eyes, Catherine," he replied.

High above the enemy camp I ripped open a gate into Arcadia. There was a reason we'd not tried to keep moving through the faerie realm after being stranded: out here it was a nightmarish mirror of the Wasteland. Impossible storms that toppled mountains, landslides that charged like armies and rains that drew furrows in the ground. That was without even getting into the... fauna. Maybe a few Named could slip through, but entire companies? It'd be madness to even try. There was no lack of water, though, and that was what I'd been after. After a few heartbeats a flood began pouring, just in time for power to begin rising in the enemy camp.

Time to see what Akua had cooked up to handle my signature trick. I let out a startled snort when, instead of some fancy spell, what appeared was instead another gate. About the same size and placed below mine, like a bucket for the flood to be poured into. Well, that was certainly a solution. Nice sorcery, it'd be a shame if something happened to it.

"Zeze?" I asked.

"Wrest," Hierophant replied, and the world rippled.

The enemy gate rippled but did not break. I saw Masego frown and dimly felt power bloom in the distance again.

"Clever mage," Hierophant murmured. "They are feeding the gate further magic so that I cannot fully wrest it-"

"Keep them stuck, then," I grunted.

I was not without tricks of my own. My gate began to pull together, like a ball of twine being rolled up, and the flood of water ended. But with a grunt of effort I dragged the 'twine' to the side and down, only to begin unfolding it again. Sweat soaked my back and the gate was noticeably smaller than my first, but before long the flood began pouring again. About a hundred feet above Loyalist Legion camp, it hit transparent panes of sorcery. They buckled but held. Water began sliding down, revealing the broad shape of a dome. Masego tutted.

"The structure is too simple, Sahelian," he said. "Here is why we want more intricate escapements."

His hand whipped out, the ripples of his aspect strengthening, and the enemy gate blew up in blinding flash of light. The air thrummed with power as there was a sound of thunder, the enchantment protecting the camp shivering – and, in patches, failing. I'd kept my gate opened, and like an avalanche of bricks the water fell down on the enemy through a doze holes. Mages patched up the hole quick enough with shields, but not before we did some damage. I kept the gate open as long as I could, Hierophant swatting down a few other attempts to block it, but their mages were focusing on protection so there was no further break.

Didn't matter. I'd got what I came for: I'd rattled their cage and something else they'd not notice until it was too late.

"The angle for your adjusted gate was far from the best you could have used," Masego noted. "Too much to the east of the camp."

"I aimed at what I wanted, don't you worry about it," I smiled.

I'd emptied half a lake on the eastern part of the camp, and though it'd rolled off the dome the important part was *where* it'd rolled off. Into Kala Hills, into the same paths the Eleventh had used to attack us last night. The same that Nim might be tempted to use as a shortcut to attack us when we crossed the lake.

Now they were a mess of mud and water, impossible to march an army through for at least a few days.

We launched a night attack.

It was the best way to cover our crossing, General Zola said. Marshal Juniper did not object. Five thousand of the Army of Callow and a thousand Levantine skirmishers marched out, every Named at hand save for me going with them. They were to shake the enemy and then retreat, actually fighting as little as possible. I even poured Night into a trinket and left it for Hierophant to wield: that ring of red light was a good way to feign my presence where I wasn't. The Loyalist Legions would be very wary of attacking me after dark now that I'd had some time to prepare.

It was nerve-wracking to watch them march out without going with them, but I had other duties. Sokoro Abara was put on a horse and we kept our most mobile force in reserve: the moment the pontoon bridge was finished, the Order of the Broken Bells would ride across in full force. The knights were our change to get to Kala Fortress before the Black Knight could, much as they might be needed in the small battle about to take place in the plains.

It took hours, to my rising restlessness, before the bridge was done. We didn't wait until it was; as soon as Pickler told me they'd reached the shallows on the other side, I saddled up and led the Order across. There'd been no news about the battle in the plains yet. We rode through the shallow water and then up the beach, the townsfolk of Risas barring their gates and hiding as we rode past. After that, the hasty ride in the dark was surprisingly boring. Sometimes a horse fell and a knight had to pull back and change their mount, but otherwise we went untroubled.

We rode down the eastern length of the Kala Hills, then swung around west to approach the keep itself. We rested the horses before coming into sight, not only to allow the beasts to catch their breath. Scribe and her almost-Named had come through for me: waiting for us in a fold of the rocks was Sokoro Abara's mother, as I'd promised. I gave him a moment to reassure her – and confirm through someone he trusted we truly had assassinated his father – and then we saddled up again.

Kala Fortress was a grim old thing propped up against the side of the eponymous hills, with tall and thick wall of stones surrounding the small town at the bottom of a squat castle. Sokoro went in ahead with Assassin secretly shadowing him and contacted his partisans. There was some violence before they seized control of the outer gates, but once they were swung open my knights flooded into the town. We struck quick enough the castle gates were overridden before they could be closed, and with Sokoro serving as our emissary a surrender was not overly difficult to secure.

I had to blow up his sister's head, she was the fight-to-the-end type, but the sight of that cooled ardours among the hardliners.

Within the hour he was Lord Sokoro Abara and his half-brother in a cell, which was when I finally left out a breath of relief. Our part of this, at least, had gone well. It was past Early Bell, but we'd taken the fortress. Now all we could do was *wait*.

I got the news in waves. The first rider was sent by Juniper once the force we'd sent to stir up Nim had begun to retreat. The skirmishing had gone well and it looked like the Black Knight had preferred marching out with her full strength arrayed rather than pursuing us half-baked. She must have thought we were baiting her into a trap. The second rider informed me that the Loyalist Legions had sent out their entire horse to harass us when they'd realized we had raised a pontoon bridge but that our rearguard was holding. The crossing had begun and it was expected that the Army of Callow would be across before the enemy infantry arrived.

The third rider wasn't from Juniper at all, it was from the Black Knight. We caught the man and killed him, but all it'd do was slow the realization that we were now at her back. The fourth rider brought harsher news: the enemy cavalry had set fire to the pontoon bridge before the last of my men crossed, leaving three companies stranded on the wrong side of the lake. General Zola had ordered them to surrender, which they had. The rest of the Army of Callow, however, had crossed. A detachment would stay to try to salvage as much of the bridge as possible, but the march to Kala had begun. The Black Knight sent a pair of companies to check the fortress, in the hours after, but I sallied with the Order and rode them down.

There were no survivors and Marshal Nim did not try us again.

By dawn my army was camped beneath the walls of Kala Fortress, the few sappers Pickler had been able to spare looking into setting up defensive positions. By Morning Bell our supplies had caught up. By Noon Bell horns sounded to call the beleaguered Army of Callow to fighting positions, because our forward elements had brought word: the Loyalist Legions had formed a battle line in the valley and were now beginning to march towards us. Lady Black had decided she'd rather fight than let herself be cornered.

An hour past Noon Bell, as I sat on Zombie's back, I looked at the retreating Loyalist Legions and laughed until my belly hurt. It wasn't us that'd given them pause, no. We were in good battle order, ready to receive them, but it was a banner that'd done the trick. Atop Moule Hills, on Nim's left flank, a banner had been raised: a vulture cradling a white skull, with green and yellow lines emanating from it. And under the colours horse and infantry stood, poised on the heights and looking down at us.

Sepulchral's vanguard had arrived even earlier than expected, and now everyone's plans were merrily burning under the afternoon sun.

[Droughtbringer](#)

Look, I'm practically a broken record at this point, I've told you this so much that I probably don't even have to say anything at this point. Here's the link:

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

[Liliet](#)

(And bless you)

Steven Silver

It is getting a bit repetitive. Maybe you could spice it up? Like, take a line from the chapter and replace a word with "vote" to make a slightly humorous reminder?

[Liliet](#)

I WIILL murder you

Anomandris

You know, for all the praise I give to your story-telling EE, I haven't given much to pacing. Rectifying that – It's sublime.

String's taut, and so is my anticipation. Can't wait for Tuesday.

Zggt

"Everything is a mess lets improvise" is definitely a much more comfortable situation for Cat. One could even say that things have turned from Nim winning to a draw.

edrey

who knows, maybe the Squire had his draw in the night attack and Nim would be defeated in the next battle.

Deworld

No. Pattern of Three works for direct confrontations, and Squire didn't meet Black Knight. Battlefield outcome may count for some commander Names, but Squire isn't one of those.

edrey

But are you sure they didnt meet? Cat's night attack had Named but it wasnt show.

Mental Mouse

Given the plot and Story significance, I'd have to say that if it wasn't mentioned it didn't happen.

ohJohN

It is decidedly possible that Arthur met Nim in single combat:

...but not likely:

Deworld

As was said above, the second fight of Squire vs Black Knight is too significant to be just missed. It theoretically could happen if we think only in-universe, but we're reading a book. Even if our PoV character, Cat, misses it, we as readers should still be at least notified of such event happening, preferably present via Interlude. If such an event wasn't mentioned, it didn't happen.

mamm0nn

And Cat won the first battle, so that would actually be really bad.

Matthew Wells

Cat's not the one who counts.

DC

Wait a minute. Could they not use the lake-dumping trick to supply the army with water if the need arose?

Burlyraven

It's water, but I imagine calling it potable would be something of a stretch, especially if it's sourced from the dark mirror of the Wastes.

DC

Look, if you can't handle a little bit of your own intestines tearing their way out of your stomach to try and strangle you, you don't belong in Cat's army in the first place.

caoimhinh

Maybe Arcadia's water is weird, or maybe Arcadia's water in that part of the Fae's land is weird, given that it is a reflection of the Wasteland.

What I find weirder is that Cat is worried that in 2 weeks they would be running out of water, but two weeks from now they can already return to using the Twilight Ways safely so they can get out of there and get to somewhere with clean water.

hakureireimu

Wouldn't Akua simply drop them out of Twilight again if they did that?

caoimhinh

According to Masego, it was a very specific ritual that did it taking advantage of a weather phenomenon, so it can't be easily replicated. Besides which, they would be getting away from that region if they ever enter Twilight Ways again, so the risk is minimized.

Akua managed to pull it off before because she pretty much knew where Cat's troops were heading and thus prepared in advance. The same shouldn't be so easily done again.

[Liliet](#)

It's possible Twilight Ways do not provide a good source of water.

caoimhinh

True.

But I didn't say get water from the Twilight Ways, did I? I said using them to get out of there.

Cat's worry is "in two weeks we will run out of water" but by that time it will be already safe to cross into Twilight and get out of the region.

Apollo

The issue there is that Cat has a war to win. "Getting out of the region" isn't acceptable, since if she doesn't succeed, the Hidden Horror is wins, and "live to fight another day" won't matter.

caoimhinh

True.

But getting out of the region is not the same as leaving Praes. She needed to reposition herself, that's all.

Daniel Masters

I think the problem is two fold, one one side they then have to go for water because they will start to be needing it. Remember they said two week if they ration it.

the other point being they have then let the Lady Black take control of the paise of the battles.

[Liliet](#)

...and they will also be out of water already.

Steven Silver

I think it was mentioned when Cat was dumping water on Nim: the part of the ways they would enter is too difficult to move through, right now. If it was traversible, then yeah, they could probably just wait out the disruption then do a short and quick jaunt through the ways to get to fresh water.

caoimhinh

That's not the Twilight Ways, what Cat was talking about was Arcadia.

The Twilight Ways are fine, but due to the ritual that Akua used it's dangerous to use them in the area for two weeks because then the people would fall back to Creation.

On the other hand, Arcadia (the land of Fae) is treacherous in this region, because it is a twisted mirror of the Wasteland, so entering Arcadia from where they are is a great danger.

Though Catherine and those under her command have safe passage by the King of Arcadia. She probably means that there are monsters, poisonous things and terrible weather on the other side anyways.

Steven Silver

Oh, yeah. Too many alternate planes for me to keep track of 😊

I guess the water situation wouldn't be that big an issue, then, if they could ration and Nim wasn't actively breathing down the army's neck.

[sengachi](#)

Ways water is probably fine, though inaccessible right now.

Arcadian water from the fae side of Praes? I'd sooner drink poison, that at least might have an antidote.

caoimhinh

Plus, the antidotes in Praes are even created to taste fine with wine. So there's that in their favor.

'Ladi Williams

Two weeks if nothing goes wrong.

Now our Cat knows that a villain planning on nothing going wrong is writing a letter to the heavens daring them to do their worst.

Not to mention an arch-villain. The heavens would fall over themselves trying to rush to mess up her plans if she left that obvious a weakness

Unrecovered

Not safely. Nothing really prevents Akua from using the same trick again.

ohJohn

I wouldn't call "a lack of sandstorms" nothing; the ritual only worked because the sand allowed magic to suffuse the entire area, as the magical capacity of air alone was insufficient to do the same. The sandstorm was pulled from the Gust Ribbon as the first part of Akua's ritual, the second part empowering the sand in the air to thin the boundary with the Ways.

Based on the times given in these past few chapters and the map provided, it should take half a day at the absolute most for Cat's army to get from the fortress to the Rainlands. We've next to no information on it, but I'd imagine it rains fairly frequently there, which would probably disrupt a leashed sandstorm. Thus it seems plausible that escaping into the Rainlands and then into the Ways would prevent Akua from pulling the same stunt again. (I'm open to the possibility that rain could be used in place of sand, but we know that water screws with at least some particular applications of magic.)

Mental Mouse

When they were making the Unravellers back at the Arsenal, they were using Arcadian water as a *magical component* I dunno that they want to be drinking it, especially from a Wasteland reflection. I'm still wondering about the long-term effects on various terrain of Cat's past lake-drops.

Benjamin Huang

EE you dang goblin stop teasing us! WE WANT BL0000000D!!!!!!!!

edrey

Great as always.

i have a feeling that guy was Below helping cat. just too perfect. lets see what happen with Juniper now. and a very good cliffhanger at the end.

A great chapter as always.

[Liliet](#)

Providence helping Indrani help Cat, more like.

Note: providence is used a non-denominational sense in this. It's the same force for Good and Evil Names at its core.

sadfan

No, Providence is only for Heroes. Indriani is a Heroic side of the fence Named. She isn't in service of a choir or gods but neither are Kingfisher or Roland. Her fixation on liberty makes her seem like Below's but she doesn't have an interest in changing anything in her image. She's a Hero in a mixed (borderline neutral) Band of 5.

Earl of Purple

No, Providence is for everyone. What else could have led Cat, Akua and Beastmaster to Tancred the Scorched Apostate at the start of book six? A new villain, fresh into their Name, a pile of corpses at their feet, and the people who come to tell him of the Truce and Terms are the Black Queen, foremost villain of the age, the Doom of Liesse who killed more people for less reason and a third self-identified villain whose abilities are what alerted Cat et al to Tancred's presence. Providence is how the Gods act upon Creation, and both Above and Below have their hands on those scales.

[Liliet](#)

...Providence is mechanical to the point that it can be and routinely is gamed to achieve a specific outcome. It certainly represents the Gods' will for how things in Creation should go because they were the programmers in the first place, but it's 100% automated with no planning-ahead element to it, because otherwise tricks taking advantage of providence would frequently not work due to elements of Gods' plans the trickster in question is unaware of (and Gods do not communicate with their faithful, this is pretty explicit in the text), but they don't. Providence acts on a purely local basis, without attention to broader implications or inevitable consequences – sure, there'll usually be *another* part of Providence taking care of those, but these two stories won't “coordinate” any more than gravity and

electromagnetic forces coordinate for specific outcomes. Any coordination comes from in-universe sapients seeing the patterns and taking advantage of them.

Even the thing at Thalassina was WoE-confirmed to not, in fact, be attention of the Gods Above.

The leverage Gods have upon Creation is:

- in automated rules and incentives they'd provided at initialization time (how EXACTLY providence, roles, names etc work)
- personally Bard, apparently (and possibly other Named in analogous roles in other places on Creation)
- when someone does in fact manage to reach them with a petition they can accept or deny (not a routine thing, considering Thalassina was not that) (probably requires setup proportional to impact – Kairos's whole thing was to get to ask them one question, the answer to which no-one but him would ever know)

Steven Silver

Isn't the Scorched Apostate the kid who died? I thought Cat was angry at the world after Above's counterpart to the Scorched Apostate got to live 😊 I forget the counterpart's title, but Cat was upset because she felt that Above got to tip the scales to keep their hero

Earl of Purple

He did die. Cat stepped away from him to avoid falling into a mentor story, and didn't have any other Named keep an eye on him. The Stalwart Apostle (I think that's her Name) encountered the Grey Pilgrim and the White Knight after her Bestowal. Tancred died not because he wasn't saved by providence, but because the villains weren't willing or possibly able to step into the stories that would have helped keep him alive.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also Cat was exhausted and didn't think to leave a Named or spell to watch him and the mortal knights – as someone noted above, villains don't get to assume nothing will go wrong.

[Liliet](#)

Fine, let's replace providence with Narrativium.

[Liliet](#)

(Also, Indrani is Neutral/Fence-Hopper with a villain-ish lean due to her explicit allegiance with Catherine and counting herself as being one of Catherine's subordinates under the T&T)

Burlyraven

Well, I think we're seeing why Juniper hasn't ever gotten a real Name. Imposter syndrome can be crippling, especially when circumstances grant it evidence, weak or no.

Liliet

I think it really is just because there are no stories about backline generals in Calernia. Imposter syndrome is not something Named are unfamiliar with.

Burlyraven

There have been a few mentioned in passing that might have set a precedent, but it's very true that it's unclear at best. If she can begin to master her imposter syndrome in this arc, we may very well find out for sure.

Abrakadabra

Imposter syndrome? Isn't that what Abigail got?

Lord Haart

Not at all. It's more a combination outright denial, utter haplessness and abject horror that fuel her arc than a crisis of self-worth.

She knows she keeps stepping into the breach and hates herself because she's *good* at it, not the other way around.

Liliet

Mmm, at least in Book 5 Abigail as a general is terrified she's going to fuck up, which I'd say is pretty imposter syndrome-y. Notably she wasn't afraid of that as a captain and a tribune.

knockoffnikolai

Roland definitely deals with imposter syndrome (and in fact he is a literal imposter), so that would indicate that it doesn't prevent you from becoming Named.

Sinead

That may be true. Archer is also good for catching Heaven's eye as well though. She plays pretty heavy into Heroic Roles at times (look at Liesse for a similar behaviour of timely arrival).

Koi

"I am all eyes, Catherine," he replied

Which is funny because they actually only have 1 eye between the two of them.

edrey

"in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed woman is Queen"....

LictorMagnus

Going by the trend in recent chapter titles I'm looking forward to reading "loose" on Tuesday.

This battles going to be great. It's not going to be the end of the campaign though. The squire and the apprentice need their draw with Nim before they can have a true final confrontation. She might be named but she hasn't been taught name lore the same way Cat was.

Revenant

"Loose" was my first thought, but I wouldn't be surprised by "Hold," either.

[Liliet](#)

Oh fucking bless.

Catherine's officer contingent is coming in clutch – still the original stroke of luck from the Rat Company.

wec

'Course it wasn't really luck at all, eh? Amadeus was in the background pulling all the strings to give Cat a leg up.

(I remember Cat having a thought along those lines, but I don't recall exactly where. There's this in Book 4 Chapter 31: Spectation: "I wasn't unaware that Black had been arranging things quietly in the background so that opportunities would land in my lap ever since I became his apprentice", but if I remember correctly there's a different line that alludes to Rat Company / the War College specifically.)

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure Rat Company was genuine bona fide Named luck.

Of course, Amadeus activated the RNG by throwing Catherine into the wargames on no notice in the first place... very much on purpose.

Seriously tho, between his plans being insta-changed by the Red Letter and his later investigation into Cat's officers (including missing Nilin because he didnt technically have highest level clearance) it's pretty clear that one wasn't arranged.

Vlatko

Don't think it was entirely luck, more like Creation surrounding the soon-to-be-scarily-competent Squire with some very soon-to-be-competent individuals with martial abilities.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, that's luck. It's just... non-random luck ♥

hoser2

Fun chapter. Interesting and seemingly plausible escape from potential stalemate. Nim maneuvered into a trap of her own devising?

So I focus on a minor detail. Three companies ordered to surrender. That seems unusual. I imagine we see them again, but how? Murdered horribly? Turned to vampires? Ransomed?

mamm0nn

Probably more a way to show us that 'Hey, this is not a sudden landslide victory but a narrowly eked out draw after a hasty plan to save our butts only narrowly worked.' Narratively it would be to show that this isn't a Win, practically it's because no one ever wins perfectly, and to the real audience it's to show that things still aren't going too smoothly.

mamm0nn

Nim: Ha! I've planned out a master strategy to keep you locked near the lake and be stuck there in an encirclement of environment and troops! Victory is mine!

Cat: I went to the sentient tigers and we're now allied. Oh, and I'm the head priestess of two religions now.

Nim: You can't be f*cking serious.

Cat: You're right, I'm just messing with you. I did conquer fortress Kala with virtually no losses in the taking while you weren't looking, though.

Nim: Daughter of a bastard! Didn't your father teach you to fight with proper and rational Legion tactics, girl!?

Amadeus: *Sneezes and looks up wondering who was talking about him, before shrugging and continuing to lug way too much goblinfire.*

Velrix

Goblin Fire burn sorcery really well, I'm wondering how the Tower will fare.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Didn't Amadeus teach her to stop trying to win WITH the rules, but despite them?

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I'm really hoping Juniper comes through in the clutch and this is just a moment of weakness.

Oshi

I'd have been more interested in this if there was some establishing from side chapters of Juniper's doubts. As it is it feels reasonable but out of the blue, so I don't really care much.

Juff

Typo Thread:

to flanks us > that flanks us
last one we wanted > last thing we wanted
I'd been Juniper's > It'd been Juniper's
were our change > were our chance

Earl of Purple

Hah, aiming a lake at the paths to pin Nim down, and making it look accidental. That's great. And Akua just sent the lake back into Arcadia, or possibly a hell. Maybe the Twilight Ways.

Abrakadabra

I still don't get why Cat does not make a deal with Malicia. She can easily kill her when they are face to face.

Oshi

Malicia might believe she is all of Praes but Cat knows better and besides she is the Madness atop the tower. Not something you can deal with, not as she is now.

[Droughtbringer](#)

My thoughts:

One: Malicia probably won't meet with Cat in person, and would probably use a body-double

Two: Narratively, I feel like that wouldn't work out. Breaking a truce tends to not end well.

superkeaton

When dealt a bad hand, flip the table and torch the inn.

Helpful

It's kind of a dumb nitpick, but is there a reason the Loyalist faction is using messenger horses instead of scrying? I'm sure something could be handwaved about not wanting the Hierophant eavesdropping on every communication or whatever, but I was wondering if something specific had been mentioned that I missed.

Lord Haart

IIRC it's hard due to regional weather and only Masego can really do it with the Observatory, but he needs to be at hand for both the skirmish plus to conver against "Lady Warlock".

Sinead

I do find it interesting that Juniper used the phrase 'another orc cripple to lug around'. Especially since Juniper was the one to point out that the loss of his hand in Book II was a sign of prestige.

Yes the damage is more severe, but it is interesting that Hakram, who is now out and functioning under his own power, still fell under that gut reaction judgement.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The loss of Hakram's hand is one thing, losing half his body is pushing it. In any case, it's not just that Juniper was injured – she's also grown unused to fighting someone on her own level, much less losing.

[Liliet](#)

It's a hard difference between "can still fight" and "can no longer fight". Orc culture is not nice.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Guess you could say that it's not easy being green.

Frivolous

I expect the elevation provided by Kala's walls and/or towers will make Hierophant more powerful and dangerous.

Enemy mages will have to be very careful to avoid coming within line of sight of him, lest he Wrest (or as Malicia and Nim believe, Devour) their magic.

I wonder what and who the captured Callowan companies were. Just basic infantry, I guess?

Hope they don't get eaten.

[Adrian V](#)

Ok like Cat said earlier in another chapter just who is leading Sepulchral's army because she clearly can't manage her army to be that efficient or smart.

[Liliet](#)

I'm betting on Amadeus having a hand in this. The troop movements match both his expertise and his motivations, and he's just been established to have *the widest* connections all over Praes.

Lictor Magnus

Given the naming trend of the last couple of chapter I'm looking forward to "Loose" on Tuesday.

Lord Haart

Really nice chapter. Still a bit tell over show but there's enough previous chapters of stuff to have built up credit to get away with that, and it keeps the focus on the strategic level which is good for pacing.

Nice lines from Vivienne there, good to see her filling those shoes and a bit of potential Name showing.

Poor Juniper – some signs the killer of her mother will come to light soon (very likely Matrons but I still wouldn't put it past Black to have done it to "free" Juniper to oppose the Tower).

Good to know that Cat and Masego can still work around Akua to some degree.

Definitely some Providence at work here. Bard maybe? She's good at giving Cat options that look like wins but at really just the best option to salvage a loss. Didn't let her win too much either with Sepulchre showing up.

Seems like the smart move now is to up and leave in such a way that the loyalists and rebels have no choice but to fight or stay

encamped. They could pursue under “truce” but that would leave narrative open for “mistakes” that lead back to an all-out fight.

But I think instead Cat will negotiate with Sepulchre to attack Nim at the same time as her. Wonder how to guarantee that though...

Finally, Cat – **always** look the gift horse in the mouth!

Kennedy

I don't know if anyone's said this already but it seems like the last few chapters are following generally the steps of archery. I learned them as feet, draw, anchor, level, aim, release, follow through. Though this was for a compound bow so for a longbow stringing it would have to happen first. Basically what I'm saying is my guess for the next couple chapter names are going to be something along the lines of anchor, level, aim, release, follow through. Probably not level since they don't exactly have scopes in Calernia.

[Liliet](#)

Ooh thanks!

Interlude: North I

“You cannot flee from fate, it is the road beneath your feet.”

– Levantine saying

The grass was coated with dust, blown in from a southern storm. It made for slippery footing and that was Borghold Bluesmile had tried her luck: she'd thought the dust would make it harder on his prosthetic leg. As if Masego would ever make such shoddy work. Hakram slapped away the other orc's axe with his own, nimbly letting her pass by him, then flipped it in his hand and tapped her shoulder with the butt from behind. There was raucous laughter from the circle of warriors around them, fists thundering against shields. It'd been an insult to hold back the blow, a sign of disdain.

Adjutant had implied he was teaching a child, not duelling an equal.

“You fucking tame dog,” Borghold furiously snarled, turning around. “Servant to wallerspawn, whore for-”

She struck at him when he took a step forward, hard and blind, but he didn't even bother to avoid it. He adjusted the angle of his steel limb, let the blow bounce off, and his dead hand snatched her throat. He squeezed hard enough the insults replaced by a gurgling choke, raising her high enough her feet left the ground. He met her eyes with his own, patient, and let the fear seep in. Then his bony fingers *tightened*, a hard warning, and he dropped her. Borghold fell in a sprawl, coughing spittle through her blue-painted teeth.

"Howling at the moon doesn't turn a hound into a wolf," Hakram snorted, then spat to the side.

Fists on shields, the sound drowning out even his opponent's coughing. He did not bother to help her up, as he had some other foes. The Brass Wings Clan was no enemy of his, this was not a test or declaration of enmity. Borghold Bluesmile had just wanted to raise her reputation as a champion by bloodying him in the wake of so many more famous names failing. Hakram left the circle, shields parting for him but even as a few eager young greenhorns sought to offer him celebratory aragh he caught sight of a man waiting for him.

There were few orcs as tall as Hakram and even fewer still that were taller, but Oguz the Lamé was one of them. Juniper's father had been known as Oguz Sharphand once, one of the most famous champions of the Steppes until both his legs were broken in a fall. Even with a shaman's attention they'd never healed quite right, ending the warrior's stride just as he hit his pride. Still, he'd kept the edge he'd had when he'd given Grem One-Eye his sobriquet and served as the chief of the Red Shields in all but names for decades while General Istrid served in the Legions.

He'd been proclaimed her successor, after her death, which Hakram counted as a blessing. Oguz the Lamé made as useful an ally as dangerous he would have made an enemy. Adjutant drank a mouthful of aragh, slapping the stripling's shoulder in thanks as he returned the skin and heading straight for the chieftain before warriors could try to rope him into a bout of celebratory drinking. Oguz, leaning on his slender blackwood stick, eyed Borghold with scorn.

"Kids," Oguz the Lamé rumbled, shaking his head. "There are times to make a reputation. A *taratoplu* is not one of them."

It was an old term, that one. In translation it would mean truce-gathering but that would be missing a crucial nuance. In Old Kharsum, what the clans of the far north still called the noble tongue, *taratoplu* was the first of a pair of bond-words. The second was *ordutoplu*, which meant camp-gathering. The Miezens had only ever bothered to learn the first and in their records they'd matched it to one of their own words after unwarrantedly making it a masculine: *turbelus*. *Horde*, in Lower Miezan. Though it had

been laziness that'd led the conquerors to make that mistake, they'd stumbled into a partial truth. Taratoplu was as day to the night of ordutoplu, the gathering under truce meant to lead to the making of a great war camp.

Not even when the Steppes had been filled with talk of breaking ties with Ater under Grem One-Eye had a taratoplu been called. If the tales were to be believed, none had been called since the day the Broken Antler Horde was smashed into dust.

"We are what we are," Hakram grunted back.

The older orc scoffed.

"They put too much in your heads, at the Carrion Lord's college," Oguz said. "Too many words meaning too little. The Blackspears aren't wrong about that, even if they're the bloody vulture whoresons."

"The Blackspears would sell a wolf to a goat and boast of it," Hakram snorted.

A favorite expression of his mother's, implying terrible bad faith and shamelessness.

"And it's serving them well," Oguz the Lamé replied, sucking at his fangs in displeasure. "Walk with me, Deadhand."

Around the tall walls of the fortress of Chagoro, a sea of tents had spread out. Once the great warring clans had called a truce and gathered for talks, the others had flocked from all over the Steppes. Even some of the faraway clans who'd only ever known the Golden Bloom and other orcs had come, drawn by the rumours of a Horde gathering in the south. Never had Hakram ever seen so many of his people in one place: over two hundred banners reached for the sky, more than a hundred thousand orcs swarming under them. Not all warriors, but many. Hard to find out numbers when the camp was violent mayhem, not a semblance of organization to it.

Just finding your way to where you needed to go was a struggle: there was a reason the talks between the clans were held within the fortress, none allowed to set tents within.

"The Winter Hooves changed sides," Oguz briskly said. "Their champions now drink with Troke's and swear his fights will be theirs."

Troke Snaketooth, chieftain of the Blacksphear clan, was proving to be a problem. Hakram had not anticipated that the man would be so able at making allies, much less as ambitious as he was proving to be. The man had ridden the story of being the maker of this truce to greater influence, painting his greatest rivals – the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves – as warmongers who would

rob all the Clans of the wealth of the south. Worse, his deeper game was only now starting to emerge. There had been no chief that could unite enough of the clans to have a claim at being acclaimed Warlord, not even Troke whose clans still had many enemies, but the Snaketooth had traded axe for arrow. He had put it to the clans that, in the Praesi way, a High Lord of the Steppes should be elected to lead the Clans into war south. Avoiding the title of Warlord, couching it all in terms of *Praesi* authority, had made the affair more palatable to clans who would have balked at proclaiming a Blackspears their Warlord.

Many had taken up the banner in the weeks since. Too many, and more were rallying by the day.

"The Winter Hooves were friends to the Howling Wolves," Hakram quietly rumbled. "What changed?"

"They were friends to Grem One-Eye," Oguz corrected. "They wanted him as Warlord, in the old days. Now there is no getting him back: even if the Tower returns him, how are we to be sure it is not just some creature riding his skin?"

There was an undertone of relish to the other orc's word at the ruin of his old foe's reputation, Hakram noted. That enmity had never quite faded, not helped by the old rumours that Grem was Juniper's true father. Empty words, as far as Adjutant knew, but it was too tasty a slander not to be kept moving from mouth to ear.

"You're saying they care more about the throne than who sits it," he slowly said.

"Talk about thrones and you'll get your throat ripped out," Oguz warned. "But they're looking for a stallion to ride, that much is true, and Troke's the one prancing. They're not the only ones, Deadhand. Praes is looking ripe but no one wants to try the Tower without a firm axehand to follow."

On Rule, the fascinating treatise on politics that so many Procerans treated as a second Book of All Things, described this very phenomenon. *In times of crisis, it wrote, authority will move from the periphery to the centre. In times of plenty, it will move from the centre to the periphery.* Hakram had seen it unfold with his own eyes, the way a parade of enemies had pushed Callow deeper and deeper into Catherine's embrace. Now, to his displeasure, he was seeing an opponent sail the same current. Clans would back Troke Snaketooth not because they were ardent supporters but because he was looking like the rising candidate.

The deed wasn't done, though. And Troke had made that old and most unforgiving of Wasteland mistakes: you never wanted to be the one looking closest to claiming the Tower until you were ready to actually take it.

"The Hooves will bring over maybe three clans with them," Hakram said. "That brings Troke to over sixty backers, by my count."

"Just about," Oguz said. "If he gets to eighty the tide will carry him over, mark my words. No one wants to be the last to proclaim a Warlord."

That Troke would be High Lord of the Steppes instead would matter not a bit in practice, Hakram knew. Once he was in the chair, people would obey. It was what orcs *did* when someone was raised above. The Blackspear clan would make promises of lesser authority, of limits and restraint, but the moment Troke Snaketooth had a few victories under his belt he'd begin taking it back. And the Clans would let him, so long as he kept their axes red and their bellies full.

"Sixty is enough that the Weeping Arrows will be scared," Hakram said. "They're going to start bleeding clans and Inge Farsight knows if she drops under forty she's done. She'll negotiate now."

"You want us to back her?" Oguz said, tone unconvinced. "Dag is still our man."

"Unless you want your clan to serve as Troke's footrest for the next twenty years, you don't really have a choice," Hakram bluntly replied. "Dag's a hawk with lead wings, Grem's cousin or not. He's a solid champion but he's not even chief to the Howling Wolves."

The Howling Wolves clan was still led by Grem One-Eye, who they refused to name dead, though in practice much like the Red Shields had spent the last two decades led by Oguz in his wife's name Dag Clawtoe had led the Howling Wolves as chief in all but name for his cousin.

"That lot is prickly," Oguz warned. "They won't like going from rider to wolf."

"So we marry Dag to Inge," Hakram said.

"She killed her last husband," Oguz the Lamé flatly replied.

"I'm sure Dag will enjoy the challenge," Adjutant lied.

It needed to be done. The alliance between the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields was holding steady at forty clans but it'd not grown in days. Dag was respected but seen more a steward than a lord, to use Callowan parlance, and Oguz couldn't be put forward because no one would follow a cripple. Their clans were by far the two largest of their alliance, and the warriors would not hear of putting forward the chief of a weaker clan as the figurehead for the alliance. Hakram knew there was no point in

forcing the matter. Even if it worked, challenges would see the chief slain by his own allies before the day was out.

The bloody Blackspears were making gains, in large parts due to the skilled diplomacy of their Split Tree Clan allies. Hakram had been somewhat disposed to making peace with their ascension, as his and Catherine's plans did not necessarily require the Wolves or the Shields to be raised as the highest of the clans, but Troke's plans were a problem. The Snaketooth did intend to burn a swath through the lands of Okoro, but he'd called it madness to try the walls of a well-armed and forewarned High Seat. He had promised instead to keep raiding southwards, towards Nok.

Whose defences had been weakened by an Ashuran sack and who had sent many troops out west to fight with Sepulchral.

No doubt it was just happenstance that such an attack would cripple a rebellion against the very same woman who'd raised Troke to the rank of Lord of the Steppes and might just make her inclined to confirm him as High Lord of Steppes should the war end in her favour. Most of the Clans didn't give a shit about that, though. What they saw was that Troke wanted to take them after a softer but still rich target, which was a pleasant song to the ear of many.

"I fucking doubt that, boy," Oguz snorted. "But let's ask him."

Dag did not, in fact, enjoy the notion of that challenge. Hakram sold him on it anyway by pointing out that if he wed Inge Farsight even should his cousin return to become chieftain of the Howling Wolves he'd still have a high position as husband to the High Lady – or Warlord, depending on how things fell out – of the Steppes. Ambitious bastard, Dag, though personal loyalty to his famous cousin had kept that in check. A chance to step out of Grem One-Eye's shadow, though, was not an opportunity to be lost. All that remained was selling to Inge and the Weeping Arrows.

She'd see reason, Hakram thought. Like most of the prominent chiefs, she had to know that food was beginning to run out. The countryside had already been stripped bare, Okoro no longer sent patrols that could be slain to eat and the clans had brought only so many herd with them to butcher for meat. Much as the chiefs would like to argue forever, someone would need to be acclaimed in Chagoro before the month was out or simple hunger would force the gathering to disperse.

Within moments of getting to the great tent of the Weeping Arrows, Hakram found trouble. Trouble looked back at him with a come-hither glare, going by the name of Sigvin of the Split Tree Clan. One of the twins that'd come as speakers for their clan to Wolof, Hakram had gotten to know her better since. She had these long fangs and wore tunics that prominently displayed ritual scarring on her shoulders, and Hakram had always had a weakness

for dangerous women. It'd only made the fucking better to know that they both knew she was trying to turn him to her side, which might have been while they'd kept doing it.

Not that hers was the only bed he'd rolled in. Being the first Named of his kind in centuries and an unbroken streak of duelling victories had made Hakram a desirable orc. He wasn't one to say no when the question was asked right.

Sigvin was leaning against a marking post outside the tent. Inside was a lot of shouting, not a pot he wanted to dip a toe hastily, so he came to lean on the other side of the post. Silence held between them, Hakram pricking an ear to try to discern what was happening in the Weeping Arrow tent. Names were being shouted, but also oaths and insults.

"If I didn't know better," Adjutant said, "I'd say it sounds like the acclamation of a chief, in there."

The early part of it, at least.

"You haven't heard?" Sigvin said, flaring her teeth provocatively at him. "Inge Farsight got killed. Some feud with a Black Tongue champion that went hard."

The Black Tongue weren't backers to Troke Snaketooth, from what Hakram recalled. At least not officially. How many knives like that had the Blackspears kept in wait?

"No telling who they'll raise now," Hakram said.

Inge had led the clan almost twenty years but had no clear successor. Those kinds of acclamations always got messy and often left clans divided in their wake.

"Except that it won't be Inge Farsight," Sigvin laughed.

She met his eyes boldly.

"One step behind, Deadhand," she said. "Might be time for you and your queen to talk with Snaketooth instead of keeping lead weights on your feet."

Swift as a doe, she pushed away from her side of the post and swatted at his buttocks.

"Don't worry," Sigvin said, "I'll not kick you out of my bedroll even after you lose. It'd be a waste."

Hakram took the time to enjoy the sway as she strolled away, for he was only mortal, but as soon as she was gone he turned cold eyes to the tent. That was a setback. The Weeping Arrows were done, their alliance would collapse. The practical thing would be to take the offered branch the Blackspears had sent through

Sigvin and have private talks with Troke. He would only pull further ahead in the coming days, and even if he couldn't be turned against Malicia he still needed to be sounded out over... other matters. As the Adjutant, that was his duty. Much as it irked to have been outplayed, he had been. Now he needed to make sure Catherine's plans were not too heavily damaged. Yet Hakram found his feet refusing to move. He thought, suddenly, of Scribe. Of the look she'd had on her face, that night he had taken her by the throat with a ghostly hand he could no longer make. How the glint in her eyes had scared him for the way he could so easily understand it. He looked down.

The grass at his feet was coated in dust, blown in from a southern storm. Tricky footing.

Just a few more steps, he decided.

—

The night sky would have been beautiful, were it not for the plumes of foul smoke clawing across it. The Dead King's devilish machine, the dragon-furnace that had been meant to incinerate the armies that'd held Hainaut, had not ceased burning after being toppled. Miles of land had turned into a sea of fire as black pitch spread, and though the fuel was running out it was as if a curtain of black and pungent smoke had been drawn across the world. The kind of sight that would make men mutter about the end of the world, had they not already all known it had arrived.

"In Ashur, Speakers do not like to deal in simple truths," Hanno of Arwad said. "Simplicity is a brittle thing, they claim. What lessons they have to share, they prefer to share through stories. To let us find our own meanings."

"I hatred riddles," Rafaela admitted. "And poems. Even Hidden Poets. Words trying to get clever."

Hanno shifted in his seat, wincing as the bandages pulled tight against his wound. The priests had seen to his impalement as best they could but the enchantment on the Revenant's spear had fought the Light. It would be days before he was truly fit to fight again.

"Cleverness isn't the point," he told his old friend. "It is a mark of respect, I always thought. A recognition that few truths are true for all."

"Stories not about truth," the Valiant Champion chided him. "They about glory and sex. And killing. Sometimes Gods, but mostly other three."

He chuckled.

"But you can speaking bad Ashur story," Rafaella allowed. "I am best of friends, will pretend to listen."

"Convincingly?" he teased.

"Am not that best a friend," Rafaella replied without batting an eye.

But he knew her enough to see she was curious, under the ribbing, so Hanno idly thumbed the stumps of his missing fingers and chose his words.

"There is one that I cannot seem to shake, lately," he admitted. "It is a story about the Patient Man."

"He villain?" Rafaella asked interestedly.

"I am not sure," Hanno murmured. "Which I suppose is the point."

In the distance, red lightning crackled across the sky. The aftermath of Antigone's duel with the Archmage had left great scars on an already devastated land: power still lashed out wildly where they had clashed.

"In the far land across the sea, in the city of Akra, there was once a Patient Man," Hanno said. "He was a man of faith and wisdom, who had grown wealthy before retiring and raising his two daughters. In time Akra went to war with the city of Yane, and so his eldest asked his blessing to fight. The Patient Man hesitated, for war is a dangerous trade and he did not want her to perish but neither did he want to shame the courage that made him proud. Knowing not which was the just course, he kept silent."

The cadence came back to him easily, tradertalk having enough of High Tyrian to it that the tales he had learned a child could be recited to the same beats he had once learned. Hanno had never found the tale put to writ anywhere, and not for lack of looking. Like much of the wisdom of the Speakers, it was estranged from ink. Tales were living things, to the masked priests of Ashur, and the corpse of them on parchment would be almost as sacrilege.

"The eldest went to war without his blessing, captaining her ship, and though the city won the war her ship was lost," Hanno gravely said. "Dead, they said, but the Patient Man did not yet grieve. His younger daughter grew wroth and cursed his silence as heartless. She blamed many for the death of her beloved elder sister but none more than the rulers of the city whose greedy ways had led to war. So that no sister would be lost again, the younger daughter sought to become a ruler herself."

Rafaella had never been one to hide her thoughts, for all that she delighted in feigning false ones, so it was easy to see how

she approved of the eldest daughter who had gone to war and less so of the youngest who sought to rule. Violence was familiar to the Valiant Champion. She had won her Name triumphing over others in honest battle, but it was no coincidence she had then left the hills of her native Alava. To stay in the lands of the Champion's Blood would have seen her drawn into the feuds and schemes of the dynasties of the Blood, made precious by her inheritance of Bestowal.

It was a hard irony, that the same character that had made her the Valiant Champion had led her to want little to do with the Valiant Champion's Blood.

"The younger daughter sought the Patient Man's blessing and the help of his riches. This would be a long and arduous path, the Patient Man knew, for rulers do not like to share their power," Hanno of Arwad said, with a wry twist of the lip. "Yet he held in esteem the conviction of his daughter and desired not to stand in the way of it. Knowing not which was the just course, he kept silent. Once more his daughter cursed him and rose to rule without help, but in rising she forgot her conviction and grew wicked."

Hanno paused.

"To punish him for his silence she swore never to hear a word from him again, but the Patient Man did not yet grieve."

"Good," Rafaella grunted, speaking of the daughter and not the father. "Silence for silence. Honour in balance. Good girl."

Rafaella had never once, in all the years they'd known each other, spoken of her family. It was not unusual for heroes to be born of tragedy but Hanno had long suspected that was not the truth of this. Sometimes he wondered at the kind of mother and father it would have taken, to raise a woman like Rafaella. Who could claim and hold such a hallowed Name at the age she had: seventeen, barely a woman grown.

"There came a day where a man came from the city of Yane," he said, ignoring her guffaw and muttering of Yanu, "who was from there a prince, and he sought audience with the Patient Man. The man had been a captain for his kin in the war and found the shipwrecked eldest daughter. Falling in love, he wed her and had spent time gathering great gifts to bring the Patient Man to ask his blessing. A ship was sailing, with the eldest daughter and the gifts among it, and the old man sent a messenger to his younger daughter to tell her of this wonder. It was a merry day, but the Patient Man did not yet rejoice."

Rafaella's brow tightened. Heroes did not live as long as either of them had without learning to catch the scent of tragedy in the air.

"The following day his younger daughter sailed into the harbour, bringing with her what she claimed a great war prize," Hanno said. "A ship whose hull had been filled with great gifts and hated enemies from Yane, which she had all slain with her own hand. She had refused to hear the Patient Man's messenger, keeping to her oath, and so in ignorance slain her own beloved sister. The prince was furious with grief, named her a kinslayer and swore revenge. He asked that the Patient Man condemn her, to show not all Akra was wicked, but the old man kept to his silence and so there was war."

He'd told Antigone the story once, long ago in an airy city where they had been the only humans to be seen, and this had been where she balked. *The Patient Man is made wicked by this*, she had insisted. *He and his daughter both deserve to be slain as reparations to Yane, for one committed a great crime and the other abides it.* Rafaella did not balk, for her world was a vastly different one. The Dominion was bound as much by ties of blood as it was feuds between families: many a time would Blood forgive or ignore their trespasses of their own while the same dealt by the hands of their foes.

The Ashen Gods of Levant were not as the benevolent Hallowed of Procer or Callow's stern Heavens. In the Dominion, the Gods were partisans. They had favourites, they took sides.

"Yet the younger daughter, broken by her crime, found her old conviction again," Hanno continued. "She offered herself to the city of Yane as a penitent, and the truth of her earnest grief moved the hearts of the people. In time she was wed to the prince, who forgave her, and the cities of Akra and Yane were bound in peace and friendship. The Patient Man died in his bed, father to a grave and a woman estranged."

His voice trailed off, leaving thoughtful silence in its wake. Rafaella was frowning, then eventually she sighed.

"Fucking hate riddles," the Valiant Champion said. "Patient Man fool, good daughter dead bad daughter should have become priest?"

"That is an answer," Hanno agreeably replied.

She sharply elbowed him.

"Is it right answer, though?" Rafaella asked.

"I was once told there are as many answers to that tale as there are Faces," Hanno smiled, thinking of the masks hanged in the temples of Ashur and the priests who wore them. "You're not any more wrong or right than any of us."

Rafaella looked skeptical.

"So what's *your* answer?" she seriously asked.

Hanno breathed out, looking at the marred sky.

"I don't have an answer," he quietly admitted. "All the story ever taught me was a question."

He felt her eyes on him even without turning to look.

"Is it a greater evil to act unjustly," the White Knight asked, "or not to act at all?"

The Patient Man might have saved his daughters great pain, even death, had he spoken. Had he grieved or rejoiced. Yet in keeping his silence, in trusting the Heavens, he had lived to see the birth of peace and friendship between once-warring cities. Was that great good worth the little evils caused by silence? The Choir of Mercy would say it was, had made a sword and law of that belief. But Hanno of Arwad was not the Sword of *Mercy*. And there had been a time where he had held an answer to the story, the one shown him in the depths of that unearthly place where he had become the White Knight. Mortals could not be just, he had been shown. Not truly.

They were flawed, blind creatures and even their finest intentions were blades without a handle. He could trust instead in the judgement of the Seraphim, impartial and farseeing. There was justice, beyond the fallibility of men. Hanno of Arwad palmed a small silver coin, one side bearing crossed swords and the other laurels, and deftly flipped it. It went spinning, a glint of silver in the dark, but it held no answers for him.

The Seraphim were yet silent.

"It true the coin woke?" Rafaella quietly asked.

Hanno caught the coin, snatching it out of the air.

"For a moment," he said. "Would that it had not."

The hope had burned, after the years left adrift. And burned harsher still when Hanno had understood what had truly happened: somewhere in the south, hidden away, Cordelia Hasenbach had ordered that the corpse of an angel be desecrated. *Ealamal*, such a corpse was called in the Dominion. Priests and mages in the service of the First Prince had meddled with something beyond mortal understanding, tried to turn the remnants of a Seraphim into a weapon. And the shadow of a shadow had woken for the barest of a moments without calamity ensuing. It had lit up like a beacon in an empty place within Hanno's soul, blaring to him a warning of how far and fast the First Prince was falling.

Twice over her had been stung, in the Arsenal, and much had he thought of those days. Considered how he might have done things differently, looking into past lives for guidance – for the man he could have been and had failed to be, the one who would have passed that test. He had found no answers, the search only dwindling his power in the Light even as he warred against the dead, left to study only with his own meagre eyes. Catherine Foundling had startled him out of their pleasant détente, that day, but his anger there had waned. What wisdom was there in blaming a scorpion for striking? He would not allow himself to be lulled into complacency again, but neither had he misread the Black Queen as he'd once feared.

He had simply never been at odds with her before. It had been a lesson well worth learning, and cheap at the price.

Yet Cordelia Hasenbach had been looked upon with approval by the Choir of Judgement once. Her convictions been judged worthy, even as she denied the Name was her rightful mantle to bear. A scant year later and the same woman had been reduced to someone feeding people into the grinding gears of the Principate of Procer so that the machine's wheels would be kept wet. Hasenbach had no ideals, only an ideal Procer. And though that land would be a beautiful thing to behold, Hanno thought, it would be grimly built and as Evil made it slip further and further away the First Prince was dipping her hands deep in the red.

Already she was up to her elbows, how long before she began to *swim*? Conviction and despair had been mothers to many a horror.

"Truth then," Rafaella grunted, studying him. "Talk of ealamal."

"It is," Hanno simply said.

The Valiant Champion weighed him with her eyes.

"That why you been middling?" she asked.

He blinked.

"Meddling?" he suggested.

"Middle, meddle, muddle," she growled. "Tradertalk is fool tongue. You understand, Hanno. Now you finger on scales."

Her face grew serious.

"Time was you did not."

He did not deny it.

It had begun as a small, simple thing. But then was the same not true of the first pebble before the avalanche? There had been trouble in the army, after the Black Queen left. The Lycaonese

had begun to elect their own leaders, after the death of the Iron Prince and Mathilda Greensteel, of marching to fight with their kin in the north. The leading captains all agreed in this. And Hanno could have stood aside and watched, as he had when the Iron Prince had hung mutineers, for it was not his place to meddle in the affairs of Procer.

But he had glimpsed the shape of it, how it would unfold. They would leave and there would be no stopping them without a battle. Hainaut would weaken, then fall. So instead of standing aside, he instead had stood to the side of those captains who shamed the others for speaking of leaving the fight. And though he had said not a word, his presence had spoken volumes. The White Knight agreed. The Sword of Judgement, like the Ashen Gods of the Dominion, had picked a side.

Once he'd dipped a toe, it had seemed pointless to balk when the Alamans princes began to bicker and their hosts to desert. He'd brokered a truce between Beatrice Volignac and Arsene Odon, exhorted the levies of Bayeux whose shame about routing at the Battle of Hainaut had been eating away. It had seemed almost just to him to speak to those levies, balancing the scale of the way he had done nothing as Klaus Papenheim slew and imprisoned their officers. He had not expected for them to look to him for command, after, but he was a high officer of the Grand Alliance – he could serve as a commander if he chose, he simply had not. They had fought like lions since, to regain their pride.

They called him Lord White, and meant it not as a courtesy.

Hanno had remembered the clarity he'd felt, when he had been fighting to the north to destroy the bridge, and then the sickening feeling when he had heard about the bloody battle at Hainaut. And with those memories following him around like loyal hounds, he had found his hand moving again and again. Stiffening General Abigail's spine when she began to consider retreat further south, killing the dispute through a scrying ritual when the Red Knight and the Myrmidon almost came to blows in Cleves, advising the Kingfisher Prince to retreat long before the Morgentor came at threat of being encircled.

Small things, all. But many of them. And others had noticed. There was a deference to the way the princes now spoke to him that had not been there before, and it was slowly passing to Named. Many now looked to him for advice who had merely taken it when offered before.

None had noticed that his power was waning all the while, save for his closest friends. That troubled Hanno, for it would have been easy to decide from this that the Heavens were frowning on his action, but for all that he was weakening he did not feel... shunned by the Light. But it was his doubts, he suspected, that were behind it all. The end of his certainties. For Hanno of

Arwad had once believed himself as a Patient Man vindicated, but as the silence of Judgement lingered his own was beginning to break. These days he often he dreamt of the story he had told Rafaela, the question burning in his mind as he woke.

The Valiant Champion had been watching him through his long silence, the sky above them alive with writhing smoke.

"Is it a greater evil to act unjustly," Hanno quietly repeated, "or not to act at all?"

And he could not shake the fear that he had not heeded the warning of the story. That he had seeded a doom at the heart of the Grand Alliance by his action. Would Cordelia Hasenbach grown so desperate, if he had not begun to step beyond his old lines in the sand? He had proof, ruinous proof, that his actions and hers were interlinked. Yet some part of him balked at the notion that simply acting, trying to do all the good that he could, would be a seed of doom. What had he done here, save try to keep the dark from blowing out the last trembling lights in the west?

"Not fighting Evil," the Valiant Champion said. "*Rolling over.* That is greatest evil. You cannot be others, only you. That is what you owe the Ashen Gods."

He thought on that, for a moment.

"I could do more," Hanno of Arwad quietly confessed. "Even now, I stay my hand."

Rafaela smiled gently, and pressed a kiss against the side of his head. He looked at her in surprise, for love or lust she had never been shy in expressing but affection was rarer.

"It's end of the world," his friend said. "When, if not now?"

The words lingered long after she departed, leaving him to silence and the smoky sky. *When, if not now?* Was she wrong? He felt as if she should be, but he could not say how. And that left only a broad, terrifying expanse ahead of him. One that could be filled with anything.

"I could do more," Hanno of Arwad said, voice pensive.

Then perhaps he should. He already knew how to begin. Speaking with Antigone, so that she might lead him to the one who had taught her. The sole man who could bring the Titanomachy fully into the war, the last of the ancient Titans. The thought fixed, firmed, became a decision. And in that moment, Hanno felt it fully for the first time. Not in parts, in moments, as he had until now. Like a beacon. The claim that was stirring in him, to a Name he could not yet grasp. He had his suspicions, however. He was feeling another claimant, after all, to the south.

If Hanno had to put a name to where, it would be Salia.

Jircniv

WARDEN OF THE WEST!

Teopicana

If Warden of the West turn out to not be an exclusively procerean name, I think that would be it very stable in the long term. Just imagine, a team made up of the the warden of the west, warden of the east (or whatever Cath's new name is), Hierach, High Priestess/Priest of Drow and Herald of the Dwarves meeting to discuss a continental threat.

Someperson

Also Warlord, maybe.

Although, some of these Names are very clearly Named rulers, and we have yet to see if such Names will actually survive the Accords in some form or not.

Cpt. Obvious

But who would be the Warlord?

Right now it could be that Hakram somehow manages to claim that title for Catherine. That way making Juniper's use of the title prophetic.

On the other hand I think it's more likely that Hakram claims the title of Warlord. The the question is if it will become a Name. Whatever the case he can't be both Warlord and Adjutant, so Catherine will no longer have him to lean on, and unless his new title becomes a Name Hakram will lose his aspects and a lot of his strength. I worry that it would also play havoc with his prosthetics.

The way he has created a organization that's been able to take over the day-to-day work that he has done for Cat tends to suggest that he might be leaving her immediate side. But at the same time his Name haven't shown any signs of preparing for a transition or him losing it.

Now as the Adjutant is a new Name created out of Hakrams desire to help Catherine it could be argued that him becoming the Warlord is fulfilling the Names purpose,

especially as he has an organization in place to handle Catherine's needs.

Much to ponder...

Linnus42

Seems likely I say one of the major differences between Hanno and Cordelia is that Hanno is a Globalist and Cordelia is a Nationalist. They both want to win the war but Cordelia makes a lot of her choices based purely on what is good for Procer and if Procer seems lost would have no issue firing that laser even if the War itself is not lost. Hanno on the other hand cares more about people in general not any one nation especially.

agumentic

That is very unkind to Cordelia, especially considering she already said that Procer is basically dead no matter what anyone does. She is not going to risk half the continent just because of her homeland, she is only going to do so if she honestly believes there is no other way.

Deworld

...

Would it make Catherine Warden of The East?
Or something other East-related. There should be a reason why Grey Pilgrim felt that her Name will be born East, not somewhere else.

Reader in the Night

I'm thinking in taking the Tower, or at least forcing it to fold, Cat will truly earn the Name Arch-Heretic of the East. There's an interesting dichotomy between the Warden of The West (Good-aligned) and the Arch-Heretic of the East (Evil-aligned), and Catherine has a narrative of telling Choirs to shut the fuck up, and has been named Heretic in the past.

She'd just have to out-heresy the Dread Empire of Praes to earn that name, and considering Catherine's stance on Gods and the presence of Hierophant, she very well could pull something like that as a last-minute nuke.

Shveiran

I don't think Cat wants to be the Arch-heretic, because that would make it very hard to talk with anyone in the west and she is aiming to establish a new order in Calernia.

It's possible, mind you, but considering how careful she's being with her new Name I deem unlikely she'll end up with something she really, really doesn't want like Dread Empress

or Arch-Heretic of the East.
Now, Warden of the East...

Tenthyr

Oh that's... Not good. That's not good at all.

I can't help but feel Catherine's going to come back and down that the heavens really couldn't help themselves. And then someone's going to find out what being in the way of what she wants ends when she isn't trying to be nice.

edrey

yeah, no good at all. scaring abigail and helping princess mathilda (wasnt she dead?) is one thing, but being a ruler Named is other, and this is war, way diferent than normal times.

Matt

Yeah, Hawk killed Mathilda at the Siege of Hainaut. I guess Erratic forgot lol.

Velrix

A Zombie Spy !

[onedollargum](#)

It's the price she had to pay for the Grey Pilgrim raining down the star on Hainaut I think.

TheHerald0

Don't only Villain Names do the rival claimants thing?

Earl of Purple

No. Rafaela also had to kill Claimants, though Valorous Champion's an unusual Name in that regard I think. Two mages may contest the Name of Wizard of the West, but the loser may survive or even get another wizard Name, rather than get slaughtered like the Praesi do it.

Juff

Typo Thread:

that was Borghold > that was when Borghold
insults replaced > insults were replaced
his, this > his; this
and heading straight > and headed straight
more a steward > more as a steward

selling to Inge > selling it to Inge
so many herd > so many herds
have been while > have been why
learned a child > learned as a child
and the gits > and the gifts
while the same dealt (missing word)
of a moments > of a moment
Twice over her had > Twice over her had he
he often he > he often
Hasenbach grown > Hasenbach have grown

My very own name

I read it as

that was Borghold > that was why Borghold

Burlyraven

So Hakram is a Named, and liked, but he's also out of the running for leadership of the clans because of his injuries (from a traditionalist stance), should he even want to pursue such. The thing is, I can't really see the story setup going any other direction than him claiming the throne, unless his secret plan is to bed every orc woman and tie the clans together by a web formed of his love children. That'd probably take too long, though.

hakureireimu

I'm not sure Hakram is out of the running actually.

Him taking over seems like a simple solution.

Linnus42

I think its most Hakram is like Hanno they dont want to rule. But they could if they wanted to at least on paper.

Sykomantis

That seems at odds with his Name though. The servant can become the master, but I can't think of any stories where they willingly go back to being the servant.

dadycool

Except would he become The Master, or simply a lesser master to his sworn Master?

Mental Mouse

Mhm, I don't think an "Adjutant" can reallly be a secondary lord like that.

Insanenoodlyguy

And that's why he keeps thinking about Scribe. About understanding her immediately and probably grasping himself a little better, and how "a few more steps" to get this plan accomplished might take him away from that. He is a man of dulled emotions that finally has contentment and fulfilment. He doesn't WANT to rise higher than Adjutant. Yet doing his duty might require him to, and it will end something between him and Cat he was able to keep during more a more personal crisis.

[308924810a](#)

There's no guarantee that he's going to stay Adjutant if he is confirmed as being in command of the steppes. He's sorta vaguely a successor to the Cursed/Captain, and Sabah also went through a sudden Name transition as a result of her achievements in the Steppes.

Bad@games

Hes obviously getting his whaaaaaaaaaag together to back cat up in the empire struggle against the demons The demons of cha.... Preas

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

GET YER CHOPPAZ, BOYZ!!!!

WAA

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

They should paint their boots Red.

Finn .-. .

This comment made my screen more than double in size..

Abrakadabra

Thats all folks.

snapplefacts

Why am I hearing airhorns?

Big I

So Cordelia's going to be taken out by the White Knight, and the final battle of the Guide will be between Cat and Hanno as Wardens of the East and West respectively?

Johnny's Freight

And then they bang!

Matt

I think Cat is more Warden of Named the. Just the east. But there's a chance, yeah.

[Liliet](#)

Won't be that specifically I don't think, though I suspect you're closer than the people talking about the Final Band Of Five Against The Final Boss Dead King.

shikkarasu

Warden of the East does sound like the most likely Name for Cat I've heard so far. My guess was some sort of Arbiter, but that feels weak for how much buildup she's getting. I think the Final Band of Five was killed by the whole business with Larat two books ago.

[308924810a](#)

Empress of the East instead of Dread Empress?

[abstractandpolish](#)

I really like Arch-Heretic of the East. Worshipper of dark goddesses of theft and murder. Angel defier and rejector of the Gods Above. Does good... nontraditionally. Cat's a Heretic if I've ever seen one.

Shveiran

She's not about ruling. She is about preventing idiots (within and without her charge) from making a mess. She'll be the shepherd of the villanous of the nasty, both to protect the world from the worst of them, and to protect them from a world that doesn't want to listen to their merits and just isn't fair.
Warden of the East.

[Liliet](#)

My bets are split between Warden of the East and Black Queen atm.

(And like 10% to "other")

Matt

Didn't Hawk kill Mathilda at the end of last book? How'd she come back?

edrey

Viv will be Queen of Callow, heiress of cat. Hakram will be learder (?) for the Clans to help cat, Catherine wants to replace the ruler of Praes, teaching two lords of levant and backing the new empress of the free cities. the Pattern is obvious now. even the first prince needs her aproval. her new Name/role is going to be really big now.

now i am sure Hanno will die, he is a martial hero, politics is beyond him. that chaos is not something cat would ignore.

Sinead

I honestly wonder if Cat's Name will be Black Queen with the secondary epithet of 'the Lawmaker' since she has weight on most of the crowns of Carlernia. Hell she has some form of relationship to every crown on Carlernia in one fashion or another (though with the Dwarves and Elves it is quite minor).

nick012000

Hakram the Warlord? If that's where his story was always meant to go, it's no wonder that he was the first Orc to get a Name since the founding of Praes. The Orcs had always been oppressed enough that a proper Horde could never arise, until Black's reforms changed that.

Shveiran

I think there is simply no way the Warlord can kneel before someone else, and Hakram's core is being Cat's aide.

That's why Grem, who once had a shot at claiming the Name, never actually got it.

Sinead

If Hakram takes a revised Role that sees the concept of the Warlord change, that may be different.

If the Accords go through, the Warlord would be subject to the Accords, and Hakram was a co-author to them. I could see that Hakram carves a new groove for the Orc nation, especially with the elements coming to a head here.

Amadeus' Reforms allowed for the Orc nation to stand up for the first time since the War of Chains, but it also changed how their self image as a backbone to the Legions compared to the old Horde. There is room for an newly emerging Name, much like we see with Hanno (and perhaps Vivienne as well).

ninegardens

This is... good? Maybe?

As in, we don't WANT Cordy to get the Warden of the West Title. She didn't want it, and the moment she gets it, Bardo has a better avenue towards the Angellazer.

Hanno getting it takes the weight of Cordy's shoulders. And he is the person LEAST likely to use the Angellazer, and also likely to tell Bard to piss off.

I... don't see this as a problem? Maybe I'm missing something? (Oh, unless one of them has to die for the other to get the title. Hmmm...)

SpeckofStardust

Ya the problem is hanno and cordy coming to blows before getting the name. Which would happen while cat isn't thier to defuse it, because she's busy settling the east and wont see it coming.

Aston Whiteman

Red Letter at last?

Angel Lassr..

mamm0nn

I think Red Letters are specifically and only for technology, reproduceable and upscaleable technology. So something that requires a literal angel corpse to use is probably not going to trigger one, unlike making radios and guns or whatnot.

shikkarasu

I think it's also only the non-magical variety. Goblinfire and Liesse are properly terrifying, but both required access to hell/devils to work. It's been implied that Goblin Alchemy only stays off the radar because it is somewhat magical in nature.

Insanenoodlyguy

She doesn't have to die, I don't think, but they do have to clash. You can't have two claimants without them having some sort of contest. Might be entirely taking place over politics, but it's going to happen. One will have to thwart the other, or one must concede to the other before the name can form.

Matt

Didn't Mathilda Greensteele die last book to the Hawk? How is she still around?

hoser2

Wait. So he did nothing, seeing all choice as evil? But then he starts to do good things because he is tempted by resentment of those who had the courage to act?

Glacian22

More like he doesn't trust his own judgment to be Good enough, which is why he used to rely on the Seraphim. He could ask them, and then act on their decree. But without them, he's scared that any action he takes would be based on his own flawed human judgement, and might make things worse.

dadycoool

Well, the resentment is because of bad things happening due to his silence. For the longest time, the answer to his "unjust action/no action" question was that unjust action was far worse, but he's seeing bad things happen because of his silence and good things happening from breaking it. Bad things that he could've easily prevented and good things that wouldn't otherwise have happened.

Wonder

Wait ,is Hanno getting a ruler Name?
That's going to set him on a clashing point with Catherine!!!!

Raivshard

Nah. Cat's doesn't even have her Name yet and she's already demonstrated that she can fully defy and command a Dread Empress. Cat's above all the ruler names.

Earl of Purple

I kinda hope Hanno doesn't get Warden of the West. Or if he does, that the title is disassociated from the offices of the First Prince. Otherwise, Hanno becomes the First Prince despite not being a Prince of Procer and the Grand Alliance loses its premier negotiator and diplomat.

Linnus42

I doubt Hanno would be First Prince...he doesn't care about Procer like that lol. I don't think Warden of the West is intrinsically tied with Procer.

shikkarasu

Warden of the West is 100% a Procer thing, but I agree it could be split from First Prince. Hanno can't gain the position by virtue of not being a Prince and not being elected, but if he had the Name then he would be like the Auger: no official power, but too much sway to be ignored.

Likely he could nominate a new First Prince and a full third of Procer would immediately back his choice by virtue of "no one wants to be the last to proclaim a Warlord." It would be considered an unofficial requirement for the First Prince to have the backing of the Warden.

Shveiran

...No?

Warden of the West has so far been a title of the First Prince of Procer, yes, but that is precisely it: it wasn't a Name.

Procer doesn't defer to Named the way the Dominion and Callow do. It answers to nobility and laws.

If the first Warden of the West will not be a Prince, the Princes will simply give it the respect due to a powerful chosen. Not elect him First Prince.

That's just not how they roll.

shikkarasu

You are largely correct. Procer doesn't have the same culture of deferring to Named and Warden of the West has never been a Name before. Procer prides itself on these facts. That said, Warden of the West carries a lot of weight, culturally. If it didn't, then it wouldn't be able to become a Name. People won't defer to the Warden *just* because it is a Name, but because it has been synonymous with First Prince for centuries. Once it is split from the position of First Prince no-one will like the idea of backing one over the other.

As for Procer not respecting Named...

•Heroic Interlude: Riposte

"Had she still been a mere branch member of the Hasenbach family Cordelia would have chided her for it, but Named got to live by their own standards. If she wanted to go around naked and covered in blood, there was not a man or woman in Procer who would dare to even comment on it."

•Warden I

"And then one day Agnes had casually predicted a ratling raid at dinner, absent-mindedly referring to herself as the Augur. Overnight people began bowing to her and seeking her advice, to her confusion."

Procer does respect Named, they just don't get to style themselves Lords and Ladies like in Praes and do not have Ruler Names, like Tyrant, Queen, Empress or Hierarch. Named are respected and heeded the world over, but not every country gives them automatic political power. The authority of the Warden of the West would not exist on

paper, and Procer would balk at legitimising it, but their influence would be very real.

Insanenoodlyguy

He won't be First Prince, but that won't matter. When the Warden of the West speaks, even the First Prince will have to listen.

Earl of Purple

This is you and Linnus, here but: Currently, the title Warden of the West is one held by the First Prince, in the same way that Malicia is both Dread Empress of Praes and the Tyrant of the Tower. The King of Callow also likely had other titles, as well. Royalty have a lot of titles, even if the most important one is usually the 'King/Emperor/Prince' but the others do exist. So Warden of the West is not yet a Name, except it's the Name Cordelia dismissed when Auger beat Bard, but it's a Name she could have held because it's already a title she holds.

jamesc9

I wonder if Procerans could cope with having a Titled Warden of the West and a Named Warden of the West simultaneously.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Everyone is writing memoirs and commentaries, meanwhile Hakram's going to write "On the applicability of Proceran political theory to Orc statecraft". Love it.

I do hope that Hakram becoming more independent is a larger trend for Orcs as a whole. Feels like now is the time for them to reclaim their cultural identity as a people. I mean, even now their only way to obtain power is through the army and violence, and that's after substantial reforms. It's pretty sad tbh.

It's fine to enjoy the violence but there doesn't seem to be much room for shamans or poetry, or any of the other good shit they used to engage in.

Burnsy

So in Praes we have a battle between claimants to the Tower. In the Clans there is a battle for who will become High 'totally not a War' Lord. And in the west we have two possible claimants for Warden of the West.

We have a White Knight who's losing his Name, and a Squire in a pattern of three with the Black Knight. We have a princess who could become a Shining Princess or an Heiress or something entirely new. We have Cat's nebulous 'Name' and the imminent death/defeat of the two oldest terrors of the world.

This is the end of one era and the beginning of another right across the board.

Insanenoodlyguy

The Tyrant wasn't being melodramatic when he said he was killing the Age of Wonders.

shikkarasu

Tyrant's drama was many things, but never mellow. 😊

iamnuff1992

"To act Unjustly or to not act and allow Injustice to be done?" What a stupid question. Act justly instead, obviously.

I can't really blame Hanno though, Judgement really did a number on him. Broke him pretty badly.

He needs someone to sit him down and explain that even if mortals can't be perfectly Just like the divine supposedly can, they can still try to be good enough.

inglessiejek

And luck once again by somebody trying to be "truly good ", is true evil done, I find it hilarious how he calls Cat evil for what happened in the Arsenal when his choice would have been far more so

Also is it just me, or in the vast majority of cases are the good guys in this series much closer to evil (at least my Definition of evil, a bit too hard to explain here but hopefully you can catch my drift)

Christian Oaks

Thats half the fun of the series. Pointing out how following capital G "Good" isn't always in line with good or moral. We like Hanno white knight as a hero character because he looks at many different cultures and understands different people have different lower case good guidelines. We like Catherine because she wants to curtail the worst lower case evil/s of both Evil and Good.

Interlude: East II

*"I will do better, said the man,
than the tyrant, who said I will
I swear, do better than
the man I kill.*

*the man I kill
swore to do better than
his tyrant, and I say I will
do better now than either man."*

– "Better Than", Ater folk song (couplets meant to be repeated)

It would have been a mistake for him to watch the swords.

It was her feet that warned him, when he had any warning at all. Amadeus circled to the side, shield raised and sword low. Hye darted forward, striking high, but he did not bite. Arm tightening, he took the real hit – come by the side, a blindingly quick swing and flick – on the shield and shot into a riposte. She stepped to the side, let it pass her, and turned to swing at the arm. Cursing in silence, he struck out with his shield. He wasn't quite swift enough to withdraw, her blade slamming into his wrist harshly enough he almost dropped his sword, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. The shield slam forced Hye to step back and abandon the killing stroke she'd been setting up.

Amadeus took two steps back, his back drenched with sweat from the hour of sparring now coming to an end. He was slowing, losing his edge. Old age, he supposed, though the now grey-haired man knew he was closer in shape to a man in his forties than this true age. For now, at least.

"You get baited into that riposte too easily," Hye said. "You got too used to being able to kill people with it when you were Named. You're slower now, you can't keep using it."

"I'm still used to being able to correct midstroke," he admitted. "I collected too many habits that relied on Name reflexes."

She snorted, bringing her blades back to the sheaths with a purely unnecessary twirl. Her long hair was kept in a braid today and he'd always loved the look on her – especially when she had a

blade in hand. Which she was perfectly aware of, from the sly looks she kept sending him.

"You're too hard on yourself," Hye told him. "In terms of swordsmanship, you're still one of the most impressive opponents I've had. In the finest ten, at least. You just have more practical limits to deal with than before."

"I did have a skilled teacher," Amadeus smiled.

She smiled back.

"I speak, of course, of my mother," he casually continued.

He got a clump of dirt tossed at his head for that, ducking away laughing. Since early in their acquaintance Hye had insisted that there be wagers to their sparring, which had never lost him much coin but ensured he'd cooked most of her meals on the move for decades. Tonight was not to be exception, though he'd been farsighted enough to get the stew going before they began. It was mostly ready by the time he went to check on it, needing only seasoning. Only roasted greens for side dish, as... Amadeus felt his heart clench. He forced himself to finish the thought. As Wekesa was gone and would no longer assembled a makeshift oven to help him make fresh bread.

Hye sat at his side, silent. She knew how to read his moods, and so stayed close but did not impose touch. An invitation. He leaned into her side, enjoying her arm going around his waist as he leaned his head on her shoulder.

"Who?" she asked.

"Wekesa," he said.

"He went out on his own terms," Hye said. "For his son. Remember that as well as the rest."

Amadeus allowed himself to enjoy the comfort a little longer then moved away. Neither of them spoke more of it. Hye was one of the people he'd met who were even more private than him by inclination, she well understood that for some the light of day burned more than it cleaned. They sat with the stew, the old lacquered bowls – whose cracks were filled, oddly enough, with silver – that she'd been using longer than he'd been alive warm in their hands.

"I did miss your stew, and that damned lentil soup," she laughingly told him. "My pupils were nowhere as fine cooks, even though Cocky at least should have been better by sheer divine mandate."

"The Concocter?" he asked, cocking a brow.

It was not common for her to talk of her old students, but not uncommon either. She still had much fondness for her years in Refuge, even though she had left that part of her life behind much as she had once parted ways with the Calamities. He'd always admired – envied – that in her, the capacity to walk away. He was not so blessed.

"Feral little thing," Hye fondly said. "Never seen a Crafter that much bite to them before."

The Teoteul, her father's people, called Named whose Role tended to creation 'Crafters'. In those lands they were held in great respect, she'd told him, often greater than martial Named.

"The way you raised them likely had something to do with that," Amadeus mildly said.

She cast him a sideways look.

"You can just say it outright," Hye said, amused.

"You already know my thoughts on the affair," he replied. "I can understand what you meant to accomplish, but when one's means involve cruelty to children they are best reconsidered."

"What I *did* accomplish," Ranger calmly said. "They left my tutelage with all they needed to survive and thoroughly discouraged from banding together. I didn't coddle them like you did your girl, Amadeus, but they came out stronger for it. Named that get tucked in at night get killed in their first decade. I've seen it happen to more heroes and villains than you've put in the ground."

"Wealth of experience tends to mean more powerful aspects," he conceded, "and personalities less brittle. But you only painted in black, Hye."

I'd been painfully obvious the few times he'd encountered her pupils, never more so than when he'd spoken with young Indrani. The Archer, who'd thought the way to tame the evils of the world was to make herself and her Name into the Ranger's shade.

"It's what I know," she frankly replied. "And it's what sticks."

He shrugged, seeing no point in further speaking of it. He'd already told her his thoughts before and she'd disagreed with them then too. She respected his opinions but had never felt bound to heed them in the slightest – which was, he would admit to himself, half the reason he was in love with her in the first place.

"I suppose you think your student-"

"My daughter," he corrected calmly, evenly.

Pointedly, too. She winced.

"Look, I've already apologized for that talk in Arcadia," Hye said. "I wouldn't have been so hard on her if I'd known she mattered to you as more than an apprentice."

An apology which she meant, and he'd accepted, but it would not mend the broken pot. Catherine was now singularly predisposed to seeing Hye as an enemy, which might just end up being a massive headache before this was all over.

"She does," Amadeus said, "which is why I see little point in comparing the deeds of our former students. She would not have gotten so far without your Indrani at her side."

Hye's lips quirked at the mention. Ranger was not a particularly fair woman and she'd never shied away from having favourites. Of her little band of Named, Archer had been the one she most liked. Not out vanity, though one might be forgiven for believing that, but because Indrani had in her belly a rare sort of fire.

"Your little queen might still kill you, before this is said and done," Hye plainly said. "She won't like what you're scheming."

"Neither do you," Amadeus teased.

She rolled her eyes and let it go. Eudokia, for all that he loved her dearly, would not have. It was not in her nature to leave details unattended to, to embrace the unnecessary risk. That attitude had saved his lives many a time, over the years, but it should not be taken as the iron law habit had slowly turned it into. They'd gotten old, set in their ways even as their bodies stayed the same preserved statues of wax. Hye, while older than any of them by centuries, never stayed still long enough to rot. There were lessons to learn in that. In embracing impermanence. Amadeus should not have presumed he would stay the same under the face because the face did not change.

Or believe the same of Alaya.

"She brought the last of your pupils east, you know," he said. "I am not the only one who might face a rough end."

Hye's face was serene as a pond, the shadows of their fading fire clawing at her cheeks.

"Have they grown enough for that?" she asked. "I wonder. I will have to see, Amadeus, who it is they have become. One last test for the children of Refuge."

They went to bed early, for they were to begin moving before the dawn. Northeast of them was an old run-down inn owned by the cousin of a friend, and there letters waited for him. A

confirmation from one of his people in Ater that Grem was still alive and writing, growing fat in his house arrest. Alaya did not seem to suspect. Yet it was the other letter, the one from the south, that set him to smiling. Nahiza had corresponded with Wekesa for decades, back when she'd still lived in Kahtan instead of retiring to her tower, and it was only out of courtesy for that she'd accepted his first letter. After that, though, it had been out of curiosity.

The problem he'd put to her was one too fascinating for such a mind to resist, and the possibility of eternal glory a temptation to her pride.

It can be done, she wrote in that terse way of hers. *But only with the Tower. No one else has the mages and coin.* The formulas she'd sketched out as a proof of concept he could not understand, not even after all his years of trying to understand more than the barest edges of Trismegistan sorcery, but he tucked them away in his doublet anyway. They would have a use. What he'd needed of her had been confirmation that it was possible at all: the rest was only a matter of finding the right place and right time. The last letter he read twice, to commit the words to memory. Nim had ambushed Catherine out of the Wasteland but the Army of Callow had held fast and now all the vultures were drawing in. Good, rather like he'd thought it might go.

The game he'd not seen coming was the release of Akua Sahelian to become the Warlock, but then he'd been consistently blindsided when it came to Catherine's treatment of Tasia's girl. That she'd not been publicly and brutally executed years ago remained a source of bemusement.

With the loyalist Legions and those that'd deserted coming ever closer, the moment of truth was drawing near. He'd sown the seeds but done nothing more than that, could not do more than that. As he'd told Layan down south, the last thing Praes needed was another banner raised. When the time came, when the blades were out, what was it that would win – the mud or the orders? Amadeus of the Green Stretch had spent most of his life betting on the mud and he had no intention of ceasing at so late an hour. Leaning forward, he put the letter from Kala to a candle. It burned bright and quick, smoke curling upwards. He caught sight of it disturbing a spider, which crawled to a corner of its webs on long legs. Smiling, he dropped the last smouldering remnants of the letter and stepped on them.

Were he a superstitious man, he might have called that a good omen.

—

High Lady Takisha Muraqib of Kahtan was to come to Ater, along with most the nobility of the south.

It was an unusual and unforeseen decision, so Malicia investigated. What dearest Takisha had wanted out of gathering the entire Hungering Sands to her court had become plain enough after a little digging: she'd been trying to rally houses to her banner for an attempt at taking back Foramen. She could have made such an attempt without such pageantry, of course, as Malicia was in no position to stop her. Yet Takisha, for all that she was an intelligent woman, was prone to dithering.

It was a learned error. Kahtan had the most vassals out of all the High Seats, which made large scale enterprises for it difficult unless time was spent wrangling support. Takisha had heeded that lesson a little too well, to Malicia's eye, and come to avoid bold action even when it would best serve.

Yet she was skilled at wrangling, and with the traditional rivals of the Muraqib for prominence in the desert – the Banu of Foramen – dead and gone Malicia had expected her to find a measure of success. That not only she had found none but that she had been driven to take her court north had been a noticeable enough reversal that it must be looked into. Even if this was not the action of a player but instead of an undercurrent of popular feeling, clarity was required. The empress' plans had arrived at too delicate a stage for interference to be permissible.

Spies came and went, scrying rituals crisscrossed the land. Ime was busying herself chasing Amadeus' trail, which she had finally caught, but Malicia left the matter to her capable hands. Instead, as she sat in a comfortable salon tea in hand, she poured over lists of names. Those who had petitioned High Lady Takisha to journey to Ater and formally petition the imperial court for intervention in the south. Some of those names she well knew.

Lord Feisal Rahab, whose great silver mines made one of the wealthiest men in Praes. Lady Nawal Morcos, whose kin had skirmished with the Tribes for centuries. Prominent names, at first, but they had met with Takisha late. And more importantly, they had little to gain from the decision made. She sent for earlier reports. The first to speak with the High Lady of Kahtan were less known to her. Lady Layan Kaisha, Lord Habid Tannen, and on it went for a dozen names. Lesser aristocrats, all of them, with few common interests that she could grasp.

She sent for the files the Eyes had on them. Layan Kaisha was one of Amadeus' veterans, it turned out. So were two of the rest, but most were not. Yet Malicia's mind itched with intuition. This had been done in accord, she grew convinced as her Name began to swell. There was something to **Connect** those names even if she did not yet understand it. Her aspect had never failed her before, even though the leaps of intuition it sometimes leant her were

the fickliest part of the boons it granted. She set the Eyes to digging deeper at the nobles.

Behind closed doors, alone, Alaya would admit that the aspect's blooming was a deep relief. After the encounter with Foundling in Wolof, she had feared... Her fingers clung desperately to the cup of tea she forced herself to drink with decorum. *Be silent*, the Black Queen had ordered, and Alaya's soul had obeyed. As if to be able to declare silence was the girl's due Alaya had found that she could no longer Rule. Not in the simulacrum she'd worn, not in her own body, not *anywhere*. It had taken days for the aspect to return, and even now it was weakened. She could feel it in the people around her, through the connections that **Connect** allowed her to instinctively understand.

Her authority had thinned.

It would come back into its fullness, she thought, that was the trend. But after how long? Another month, year, decade? She'd been told that the Black Queen was not yet Named and already she could do this. The thought was... frightening. As was the memory of the girl's mad grin as she was wrestled down by a dozen men, Alaya tasting blood in her mouth as the little monster cackled. There's always next time, the Black Queen had laughed. Foundling was coming for her head, Malicia now understood. She would settle for nothing less if she were not *forced* to settle otherwise. Practicality and gains would not be enough to sway her, Malicia had misread that very badly.

Spies came and went, scrying rituals crisscrossed the land and her Black Knight ambushed the Black Queen in the depths of the Wasteland. Akua Sahelian was proving worth the investment.

"All is in place with the deserters?" she asked Ime.

"It is," her spymistress confirmed. "We've prepared the scapegoat."

Good, that was one worry in hand.

"Sepulchral?" she probed.

"We still don't know who plans her campaign," Ime admitted. "Not anyone openly in her service, at least. It's slickly done, Malicia. It's possible whoever is doing it isn't even with her army."

That seemed... unlikely, from what Malicia understood of military affairs. Perhaps a Named would be able to work through such constraints, but there was none around to provide such guidance.

"Best prepare for a bloody end," the empress pragmatically said. "She has served her purpose, the time has come to pull the curtain on her rebellion."

"Troke Snaketooth is on track to win the election as High Lord of the Steppes," Ime said. "And he's reiterated to our agents that the terms still stand: if we confirm him in that title he'll lead the Clans against Nok."

Which, combined with the destruction of Abreha Mirembe's field army, would be enough to bury the cause of Sepulchral. The Sahel of Nok and the Mirembe of Aksum would turn on their ruling kin the moment they thought the cause helpless, and Malicia was willing to offer relatively mild terms of surrender for their return to fold. No need for soulboxing, it would be overplaying her hand. Increases on a selection of taxes would hamper their economic recovery for long enough that the empress could smother them out instead of wielding an executioner's axe. Perhaps an expansion of the Green Stretch at the expense of Aksum, she mused, as pointed lesson.

Treachery was treachery, but no one should swing at the Tower and miss without proper admonishment.

When the in-depth reports on the few nobles she'd asked for came, she finally connected the dots. The lords and ladies that were not veterans were nearly all from border or trade holdings. The kind that would be negatively affected in a direct way by the kind of civil war that'd afflicted the Empire for the last few years. *Ah*, Malicia thought with a smile. It was a faction she was looking at. A very discreet one, difficult to make out on parchment, but a faction nonetheless. One that was hostile to her rule of the Tower. A rash of assassinations would not be overly difficult to arrange, but Malicia restrained herself. When one got rid of weeds, it was best to burn them out root and stem.

It was too early for blades, and she could make use of this for other purposes.

She had letters from Wasteland lords that expressed concerns about the Clans being on the move, and those concerns were slowing her attempts to put together one of the measures that would keep her head on her shoulders and her crown atop her head. The ritual that might solve the Hellgates that terrified the Grand Alliance had exhaustive resource requirements, the kind that not even the Tower's vaults could see to. She'd had to rely on drawing on the resources of northern lords for some of the substances. It needed to be ready soon, she knew. The ritual would bind the gates to open only once every decade for seven days and seven nights, an ideal solution, but it needed weeks of preparation before it could be implemented.

"Send word," Malicia ordered Ime. "We are holding a formal court session in the Tower. As the nobility of the south is coming, so will the nobles of the north."

The Taghreb play had Amadeus' signature all over it. He liked to move pieces towards the centre, were they could be more easily dealt with. He'd get his wish, Malicia decided, and more. Much more. Using the gathering of the Clans as a reason for the court session would see even the most reluctant of lords and ladies come, the empress knew, and with them would come an army's worth of retainers. Another assurance to have in her pocket, should it come to the worst. With the Empire tended to for now, Malicia could turn her attention to further measures that would preserve her life and reign. She needed leverage on the Grand Alliance, not only Callow, and there was only one place left to acquire it.

The Free Cities, where General Basilia's attempted unification of the League was beginning to worry the cities yet to be conquered. There was potential in that, but none of the rulers involved were willing to engage in talks with the Tower. Between Hasenbach and Foundling, the costs of dealings with Praes had been made too steep for any there to still be willing to pay them. How fortunate, then, that Malicia had replaced the Merchant Prince of Mercantis with a creature of her own.

Alaya was the Dread Empress of Praes. Should weather this storm and emerge from it triumphant, as she had all others.

—

It ought to be an exciting sort of war, but somehow it was not.

Dear Sargon had offered Akua the use of the Amaranth, a sure indication he was looking to get rid of the Tower's leash around his neck. The necklace was a splendid thing, a collar and trailing generous expanse of beads in polished gold and onyx. Each bead held a small sliver of power, at the fingertips of whoever wore the necklace. Yet it was the pale purple precious stone set in the hollow of the throat that made the Amaranth such a powerful artefact, for within it lay a Titan's tear turned to crystal. The purity of the overwhelming grief it emanated allowed a caster to free themselves of all feelings and doubts, leaving one's will the sharpest it could be. Akua's ancestors had used the artefact to make even the most middling of their sorcerer-lords seem skilled, in the past, as the Amaranth was enough to turn even a middling fool into a passable battlemage.

Having been a prodigy herself, she had found instead that the Amaranth not only ended the difficulties she'd had in acclimating in her new body but that it had allowed her to surpass some of her old limitations. The swiftness of her recovery had made spawned many a murmur that she was becoming the Warlock in truth, as was only to be expected, but Akua knew it to be otherwise. She

had been Named, once, and not forgot the sensation of it – the warmth of unbroken certainty settling on her shoulders like a cloak.

It had not been difficult to prove her value to the Black Knight, though the stern Marshal Nim had treated her as a hissing viper at first. Detailed information on the spellcasting capacity of the Army of Callow and Catherine's own limitations – which were ever-shrouded, but Akua had deduced to some extent – had bought her a place at the table. From there, it had only been a matter of finding out the Named's weaknesses and presenting herself as a remedy to them. The auxiliary cavalry that had been assembled from highborn sons and daughters from all over the Empire had been defiant of the ogre's authority, at first, but Akua had eased the burden. She was of the greatest of lineages herself and rumoured to be Named: within days she had them eating out of her palm.

She took one of them to bed, on a whim. A Taghreb captain with a crooked smile and dangerous manners, whose large rough hands had appealed. Not so after she fucked him. She'd had her due of pleasure, more than once, but it had not sated her. It had... lacked intensity, somehow, though she knew that to be absurd. She'd been a shade for years, the sensations should have been almost overwhelming. Akua was careful not to think of what hands might have better pleased – smaller, knuckles always half-scuffed and, no, she was not this *weak*. There were better uses of her waking hours than chasing the never-be.

Settling the highborn cavalry had not given her a foothold with Nim, only ensured that she was now being treated as a mildly useful rattlesnake. Organizing the auxiliary mages into proper casting circles, however, would be a step in the right direction. Akua did not even have a rival there, as the only person of Praes who might have contested her – Nahiza Serrif, widely recognized as the greatest mage in the south – had declined service in war due to her age. Dubious, that, but Serrif was famously reluctant to ever leave her mage tower and Malicia had little to gain from throwing stones at the wasp's nest. After a few brisk duels fought under the pretence of practice, Akua broke the ringleaders of the most important cliques to her service. Most gave way with good grace, as was custom, but some did not.

Kendi Akaze fell to his knees, panting and covered in sweat. The last wisps of his spell faded away, shattered at his feet. Swaths of the ground had burned, but Akua was well-learned in curses and he had not studied them deeply. His blood was slowly boiling.

"Surrender," Akua ordered.

"Did you even know her name?" Kendi hoarsely asked.

She cocked an eyebrow.

"Of course you didn't," he laughed, wetly. "Just another mfuasa. A servant. We don't even know if she died as your dog or if the Black Queen nailed her to a cross. *We weren't important enough the question was asked.*"

Akua studied him for a long moment.

"Your sister?" she quietly asked.

"And two of my cousins," Kendi snarled. "All for your pride. So you could go on serving the enemy. We're all just games to you, aren't we?"

Murmurs of disapproval. It was one thing to bear a grudge for the death of one's kin, respected even, but for a mfuasa to question their place was... disgraceful. If they had been fit to be more than servants, jino-waza would have ensured that they were.

"Surrender," Akua repeated.

He spat to the side, struggling to rise on shaking limbs.

"Her name," he croaked, "was-"

The roar of the flames he formed, not even voicing an incantation, drowned out his own words. There was an irony in that, she thought. A lesson, for those who cared about such things. The spell was at her fingertips in an instant, quicker than even his despair. The flames were smothered in darkness, rot writhing its way up Kendi Akaze's arm. He howled in pain, dropping unconscious, and Akua knew he had to die. He would try again, otherwise. Some grudges could not be set aside. And still she ended the spell. Ordered him dragged to a tent. They thought she would order him tortured, she saw in the eyes of the watchers. Made an example of.

She had him healed instead. The hatred was not gone in his eyes when he woke.

"This changes nothing," Kendi hissed. "*Nothing.*"

"I did not expect it would," Akua quietly said.

There was a long moment of silence. She looked outside the tent, hearing his steady breath.

"Why?"

She turned, met pale brown eyes with golden ones. *Because you are my past made man*, she thought. *There is no pit in Creation deep enough I could bury you in it. Because I loved a girl as a sister, once. I murdered her, and a thousand other sisters since. Where does it end? If no one kills me, where does it end?*

"Why not?" the Doom of Liesse replied.

She dreamt of her father, that night, and woke up with red eyes. Iron sharpens iron, the other mages praised her. She kept to the old ways truly, to have a kept a man who wanted to kill her alive just so she would remain sharp. Bile rose in her throat even as she smiled. This what who she was now, wasn't it?

She did not regret sparing him.

With the mages in line, she proved her value to the Black Knight. A ritual to bring the Army of Callow forcefully into Creation, to deny retreat through the Twilight Ways. It was an inspired piece of spellcraft, she thought. And she found her hand, moving again and again. Adjusting numbers. It was pointless, Akua thought. Even if the blow was softened she would never be forgiven for it. And still. The hand moved. Some had hated her, in the Army of Callow. Many. Others had been... kind. In their own way. How many of them would she kill with her ritual?

A few less, she thought. If she could.

It worked, and the battles that followed saw her prove herself. Then there was that hard night where the Army of Callow reminded them it was still the same mule that'd kicked in the ribs of half the armies on the continent, slipping behind them. And there would have been battle, but Sepulchral surprised them all. Instead there was a tense, hesitant stalemate and Akua was at last invited to dine in private with Marshal Nim. It was a stiff affair, almost begrudged, and there was no dessert. The marshal proved remarkably forthright, by the time the plates were taken away.

"I can smell it on you, you know," the Black Knight rumbled.
"Ambition."

Akua smiled easily, drinking of her wine.

"It seems like a singular curse to be able to smell such a thing while living in Praes."

"You're only charming to humans, Sahelian," the Marshal glared. "Malicia saw use in you and she's been proved right in that, but I still question her judgement to have taken up such a hiltless sword."

"Do you often?" Akua asked.

The ogre eyed her in silence.

"Question the empress' judgement, I mean," the Doom of Liesse idly continued. "Idle curiosity, I assure you."

"Highborn," the Black Knight said, tone disgusted. "He was right about you all, B- Amadeus. Even if the sun fell down on us you'd jostle for the nicest place to die. You don't know what loyalty means."

Oh my, but what an intriguing mistake she'd almost made. Telling, too. She would not be the only to change the word halfway out of her mouth: the Carrion Lord had, for better or worse, been part of the backbone of the empire for decades. That was not a legacy easily cast out. Did it weaken her Name? It likely did. Enough, perhaps, that Catherine's little Squire might be able to slay her given the right opening. Something to ponder.

"Interesting, this talk of loyalty," Akua said. "There are some who would say you've broken faith, following the Empress over your predecessor."

"That's because you think like a child, Warlock," the Black Knight scathingly replied. "Like loyalty can only be about people. You want to know what I follow? There's no need for games, mageling, I'll tell you. It's not like I hide it."

"That would be most helpful of you," Akua agreeably replied.

"I believe in the empire promised us in the Reforms," the Black Knight bluntly said. "A Tower that holds to law and order, that does not cater to the whims of the High Lords. A realm that is not a mangy pack of alley cats fighting over scraps."

"And Malicia offers you this?" she asked, genuinely surprised.

Though the Empress was certainly of a mind to gather the power in Ater, she had never been one to mind a bit of intrigue. It would have been like a prize champion being shy of the arena.

"You're not listening, Warlock," the Black Knight bit out. "This isn't about people. You know what the cornerstone of that dream is? The Legions of Terror. An army that can cow the High Seats, professional and modern and most of all *loyal*."

Akua studied the other woman with open fascination.

"This isn't about the Tower at all," she said. "This is about the Legions."

"You think half my officers, half my men, don't want him on the throne?" Nim said, tone hard. "She's been good to us, Malicia. Better than most. But she's not known. She's the stranger in the Tower."

"It would kill the Reforms, if you rose to help him climb the Tower," Akua slowly said.

"We wouldn't be an institution anymore," the Black Knight said. "The bedrock of stability. It would make us into just another High Seat to please and defeat the entire purpose. Do you think it's a coincidence that he's been skulking about scheming instead of calling on the Legions of Terror? Soldiers would come if he raised a banner."

"I have read the reports," Akua delicately said. "That decision might not be one of principle, but driven instead by the Emerald Swords-"

Marshal Nim laughed, leaning over the table. Her breath was unpleasant.

"You think he's the kind of man who'd flinch at killing elves?" she said mocked. "He's got Ranger at his side. Don't be a fool. He knows it too, what it would do to Praes to call. Just like he knows we'll fight him tooth and nail if he comes for the Tower."

"You sound like you admire him," Akua said.

"I do," the Black Knight said. "I don't like him, Sahelian. I don't love him either, and I fear what kind of an emperor he would make. But I do admire him. Even now, he still believes in the same dream that I do."

The ogre bared her teeth.

"And he'd agree it matters more than any single man."

And there it was, Akua thought. The Black Knight thought herself a fortress for her principles, unassailable to temptation because her loyalty was to something above the dross of petty ambition. She was wrong, of course. Idealists were no less fragile than anyone else if you knew the lay of their castle.

"Oh dear," Akua sighed. "You really are going to get yourself killed, aren't you?"

The Black Knight scoffed.

"Repeat that threat and-"

"It won't be *me*, you fool," Akua sighed. "Warlock. Black Knight. Scribe. Captain. Ranger."

"The Calamities," Marshal Nim said, impatient. "What of them?"

"Where are they now, *Black Knight*?" she asked.

A moment of startled silence.

"Gone," Akua said. "The Dread Empress of Praes does not long tolerate other Named at her table. Even the band that made her

bid for the Tower was broken and sent out in pieces, Nim. How long do you think you'll last?"

"Captain died abroad," Marshal Nim flatly replied.

"On whose behalf?" Akua laughed. "Come now, you ought to know better. Did you truly think yourself so different than me in the empress' eyes? You, too, are a hound raised to run down a particular trouble."

The golden-eyed mage pleasantly smiled.

"And Dread Empress Malicia is not the kind of woman who keeps a hound at the table when the hunt is finished, Black Knight," Akua said. "It is a waste, to her. She *puts them down*."

The Black Knight laughed mockingly.

"And you'd never, of course," Marshal Nim said. "So I ought to back you instead, for fear of my life. You've only listened to the parts you wanted to hear."

"I have listened to everything," Akua sharply said. "It is you who ignores the reality around you. Do you think Malicia cares a whit about your little dream, save in how it helps her maintain control?"

"Wind," Nim dismissed, "she benefits from-"

"Not enough," Akua snarled. "Gods, when are you all going to understand? It will not be enough, because when you hold the Tower *it can never be enough*. There's always another enemy, another doom, another doubt. She'll cut open the Legions to make what's left her creatures. She'll hobble them so they can't ever raise a hand against her. Because you have ideals, you fool, and *she doesn't share them*. In the back of her mind the whisper is always there: is this the line that makes them turn on me? Is this the order they will refuse? She doesn't make decisions because they are lawful or fair or they bring stability. Malicia cares about being in control. That's it. That's all of it."

She had risen to her feet, at some point, but she did not recall.

"There's no place for your dream in that Dread Empire," Akua said. "And there's no place for you either, Black Knight. For a Named that will get in the way of making the Legions safe. I have a spell that will kill me, somewhere in this body, but Gods burn me if there is not a sword hanging above your head just the same. We are meant to be *temporary measures*."

The armoured ogre watched her in silence, still as a statue.

"I rode that black doom to my end, once," Akua said. "I know the look of it, Marshal Nim, and the empress is a woman in the deep throes. There was a time where I thought-

That I spoke words like these so they would trust me, she thought. So they would love me. So that I would have a seat by the fire, until they saw through it and turned on me. Her nails bit into the palm of her hand.

"It doesn't matter," Akua got out. "It is all scrapped iron, that's all. Pointless."

"You are," the Black Knight slowly said, "perhaps the finest liar I have ever known."

"You want truths?" Akua asked. "You want proof? Fine. Ask someone you trust to inquire as to what a pattern of three is, Black Knight. You who fought a Squire and won."

She smiled mirthlessly.

"Because I know," the Doom of Liesse said, "and I assure you the Empress does too."

And she had not, Akua knew bone-deep without even have looked, said a word. And though tomorrow they would return to war, to the bitter fruit risen of the bitter seeds Akua had lain, she knew from the look in the Black Knight's eyes that she had just cracked the stone with the blow.

And still, curse all the Gods who listened, she was not hearing the *damned song*.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Steven Silver

I miss when people used to do this, so here goes:

"Do you often?" Akua asked.

The ogre eyed her in silence.

"Vote, I mean," the Doom of Liesse idly continued. "Idle curiosity, I assure you."

And to you, reader: what would your answer be?

[Liliet](#)

Please don't do this.

Poring

Why not? It's fun to read.

inglessiejek

Yeah, it's much better than just a dull comment saying go vote, at least this way it's amusing as well as tiresome instead of just tiresome

[Liliet](#)

This way it's nauseating instead of just a helpful reminder.

Weemadcanuck

How the fuck is it nauseating?

[Liliet](#)

Factually.

[Liliet](#)

Not to everyone, and to those it's not, it's *fucking awful*. I guarantee you that reading a "dull" voting reminder does not ruin your day the way some of these "clever" ones ruin the day of those who dislike them for the same reason I do.

fp

If reading a silly line someone wrote for a meme ruins your entire day, I'd suggest avoiding the internet entirely, as it's pretty unreasonable to expect everyone else to cater to your very specific tastes.

I have no idea how you're managing to get so worked up over something so harmless and mundane.

[Liliet](#)

Well, you suggest avoiding the internet, I suggest not making these specific jokes in this specific place. I know for a fact I'm not the only one who dislikes them.

inglessiejek

You could just not read this part, and truthfully if reading a small pun is able to ruin your day to such

a great affect then I'm sorry but that's not the problem of the people who enjoy them either

[Liliet](#)

It's fucking hard to consistently not read it when it's there EVERY TIME (it's not now, but it had been for a while) and when it's ONE OF THE FIRST COMMENTS.

Look, it just tends to ruin the impact of the part of the chapter it quotes. Why keep doing that?

inglessiejek

I mean honestly there's always something in the comments on most online books that shit, for me the boring version is far more annoying than the Version I can draw at least some amusement out of, so if one is going to be put then either way somebody is losing out so it might as well be both

Honestly I get your point some things in the comments can detract from reading the story but at the same time while this might be the thing that bothers you and you're fine with the other one it might be the opposite other people or something completely different so unless somebody is putting comments with littoral real-world problems in it it's generally best to leave people alone to have their fun, for example thanks for the Chapter comments on Royal Road for some books take up like three pages and it's really annoying if you want to actually talk about something but going off on a rant isn't going to help

[Liliet](#)

It at least makes me feel better -_-

(And from how it felt to see others' commentary on the same topic, I know it's not only me it'll make feel better)

therealgridlock

So instead of taking personal action you want everyone else to curb their speech to please you.

Look, you're cool and all, but you need to deal with your underlying health issues if that's how you react to things.

People everywhere are always going to do things you don't like. Can you control them? No. Can you control yourself? Yes.

If you can't control yourself, you have bigger problems to address.

[Liliet](#)

Instead of taking personal action? What do you mean? I'm not going to leave the fandom over this, and what I do with my personal health is, shockingly to you (apparently), my own personal business. Are you envisioning mental health as "take a big MENTAL HEALTH tablet once a day and see all your problems dissolve" or what?

therealgridlock

It is clear to me that you are going through some shit, or you wouldn't feel the need to lash out at harmless puns.

If you aren't going through some shit, then why are you acting the way you are? Your personal health becomes our business when it affects us. Nobody here hates you. Nobody here wants anything but the best for you. If something is causing you to be irritable, we understand, that still doesn't give you free license to demand nobody on the internet make puns.

No one here is causing you to act, you are choosing to act. If you do not like a comment, you may simply ignore it. Or, don't read the comments. Corny vote reminders aren't illegal, yet, and I hope it stays that way.

I would never suggest you stop enjoying a book you enjoy.

I will however suggest that what is within your power to control, such as your own speech, your reactions, and your own life/health, is eminently more important to you than what other people say on the internet. This is why I said that if you cannot control how you act, you have larger problems than internet comments.

I hope you feel better.

[Liliet](#)

I am, quite obviously, not suggesting that corny vote reminders become illegal. I am also not asking you to act as my therapist (wtf dude). I am simply participating in the discussion on what this comment section should look like. I'm not sure why you're taking it so personally, are you okay? Why are you still continuing this discussion? I'm not exactly raising this topic every single chapter. I'm just expressing one opinion (not only mine, I have seen other people agree with me and occasionally speak up with the same thoughts) on how to do vote reminders. Is it so important to you that this opinion not be there? This isn't even the latest chapter anymore.

I control how I act quite well. Do you?

luuuma7

Jesus Christ, I swear you've been complaining about the same thing for literally years. Get over it, no body agrees with you.

jamesc9

There is at least one person who is coming to agree with her, who is me.

Are there spoiler (self-hiding) tags or similar in wordpress? If so, would people be open to putting the parts of vote reminders that re-word the story into them?

zucced

Oh stop being dramatic. If a bit of dumb humour like that ruins your day then you've got issues.

[Liliet](#)

Oh stop being dramatic. If someone has issues and requests that people avoid a very specific bit of dumb humor, why make a big deal of it?

zucced

Ah, the gaslighting tactic, nice.

Don't pretend like you're not the one repeatedly starting kerfuffles over this in previous chapters.

Anyway, to answer your question: it's because the "issue" you have is simply that you're overly

attached to the wording of a Web serial. In other words, it's petty and unreasonable.

[Liliet](#)

I'm literally just repeating how you talked to me, note.

zucced

Sure. Doesn't change my point.

Autochthon

You know what does ruin my day?
Your constant whining about these.

[Liliet](#)

I don't complain about them when they're not there. And even when they are I mostly don't. This is just a discussion of whether they should come back, and I'm expressing my opinion.

lennymaster

Old time reader that took a break here. It is coming severely late but this reminded me why I originally stopped reading the comments of this fantastic webseries, the corny vote reminders. I just want to let you know I support you on this.
Every time I start reading one of those I think for a moment that there is some clever insight incoming, instead I am disapointed.

50_Shaeds_of_Fae

I agree with Liliet on this. It's jarring, takes me out of the story, and never half as clever as it's meant to be.

(Yes, I *am* aware that I'm a year late to be weighing in on this)

Mnemonic

I like these please keep doing them!

Arracor

"You are," the Black Knight slowly said, "perhaps the finest voter I have ever known."

ruduen

Hoo, boy. There's a whole lot to process in here.

It's good to see Amadeus again, and be reminded that he and Ranger actually have some working name lore. It's also interesting to see just how he and Ranger now treat Cat and the general familiar relationships are handled. It's going to lead to quite to a conclusion when things come to a head.

I believe this is confirmation of the second of the Dread Empress's aspects, as well as insight into just what Cat did. Of course, a villain thinking they'll always win is just asking for trouble.

And ah, Akua. I wonder what it says, that she has access to an artifact that's supposed to free someone from all doubts and feelings, and yet still have all of the current thoughts and burdens. It's interesting that she's not even feeling the pull of Warlock at the moment, despite the rumors going about. It seems likely that she doesn't have the clarity or certainty necessary to fall into the name right now.

If Cat's plan does come into fruition, it seems likely that a different name would pop out of all of this – acting as a permanent gatekeeper's hardly a light role. If it all comes down to how Cat interacts with named and with her own name forming, I'm kind of amused by the long-shot possibility of her new position helping to guide her way towards Naming others. One more thought to add to the giant list of crazy possibilities that might ensue.

RoflCat

> It seems likely that she doesn't have the clarity or certainty necessary to fall into the name right now.

A part of me jokes that her refusal to accept that she's hella thirst for Catherine is what's holding her back, and thus it's only when she leans into that feeling that her Name will finally form.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, Akua is fully aware of her thirst for Catherine. She just refuses to give a single thought to the implications of... like, approximately anything that's happening right now. Willfully.

[Liliet](#)

The artifact is only designed to be used while casting. Having "the purity of grief" clear your thoughts at other times sounds counterproductive.

[onedollargum](#)

Yeah, it seems like a good way to either get yourself bewitched or addicted.

naturalnuke

Oh lord Akua is going to turn into the Red Skull, making generations of young heroes ask 'Why is a Nazi guarding soul stone(read: Twilight Ways)'.

Benjamin Huang

see, this shit here is why EE is a better writer than Wildbow.

thecorinthianman

That's a bold statement. I love this story, don't get me wrong, the meta aspects are unbelievably satisfying and the sheer quantity of storytelling and historical knowledge that one would need to write it is absurd. But emotionally, I've never had a story tear at me like Wildbow at his best.

They aren't comparable, is what I'm saying. They're both peak fiction, but in different ways.

aurikdomi

Well said Thecorinthianman.

AbraKadabra

For me it is the wandering inn.

Zach

I'm not nearly as harsh on wildbow as a lot of other people (who seem to have gotten really negative about him due to the popularity of Worm during the early years of web serials); he's still probably better than most other web serial authors at writing stuff that makes you want to "turn the page," and I would rank his writing over something like Wandering Inn (something about Wandering Inn's writing fundamentally makes me incapable of "buying into" the story – I can't suppress the knowledge that I'm just reading something that an author is making up as they go along, and it constantly feels like I'm reading a fanfiction of another series that contains all the Wandering Inn characters). Wildbow is very good at creating distinct and memorable characters and page-to-page action/events that make you want to keep reading, but cracks start to show when looking at the broader narrative. Like there are entire swathes of Worm or Ward where I think "was this really necessary?" even if they were enjoyable to read at the time.

I would generally say that PracGuide is more or less the pinnacle of “page-turner” fantasy/action web serials. It’s exceedingly good at crafting memorable and easy to imagine characters and scenes. I have a very poor memory and usually have a difficult time mentally picturing fiction that I read, but it’s very easy for me to recollect the story of PracGuide along with the various “major scenes” in each arc (which is particularly appropriate given the actual metaphysical weight those scenes have in the setting itself). Nothing about the story particularly stands out as “unnecessary.”

A person

A big part of it for me, is that wildbow clearly is a discovery writer making it up as he goes; and so his stories are pretty well written, and we’re decent “page” turners but just lacked in foreshadowing or feeling like it properly led into the larger parts.

I don’t get that as much from Wandering inn, even if it’s not quite as enthralling of writing.

[sengachi](#)

The irony is that the most recent chapter of Pale is actually a lot like this one.

ninegardens

The most recent chapters of Pale are amazing

Branwen

I don’t mean to be rude, but comparing authors and vaguely demeaning their peers is never going to be taken as a compliment. You can talk about what you love without feeling the need to explain why it’s better than something else popular, and I in fact highly recommend it 😊

[portionofthecure](#)

They are different people who are both very talented at what they do? Twig is my favorite story, ever. That’s just kinda rude and I don’t think EE would appreciate that.

zucced

Not sure the dunk on Wildbow was necessary fam, it’s not a competition.

aurikdomi

I love watching Akua squirm and hate everything she has now. Everything she ever wanted

dadycoool

I wonder how much of Zuko's arc she'll experience now.

Razender

Considering PGtE is basically a (justified!) novelisation of the entire contents of TV-tropes? All of it. Cats' cemented her so thoroughly into the story of redemption-beyond-death nothing short of divine intervention will pull Akua free from its grasp.. and the Gods Below really aren't the type.

nick012000

Now I'm wondering what the Black Knight is going to do, now that she's realized that Malicia's gotta go for her ideals to become reality. Is she going to declare neutrality in the conflict over the Tower?

Tenthyr

My god Catherine was exactly right about what would happen to Akua. If she hadn't done what she'd done I'd almost feel sorry for her.

Alaya doesn't seem to fully grasp what Catherine is becoming if her nacent name has such POWER over a Name entirely dedicated to rule. I wonder what Catherine's power will be when she finishes it's gestation.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Oh I think Alaya knows. She fears her now and is starting to get desperate.

[boballab](#)

No I don't think she does, because she hasn't seen what the Bard was able to do as the Intercessor, if she did Malicia would be scared out of her mind that Cat might becoming into a Name similar to that.

[kaldurak](#)

I suspect that Catherine is going to somehow become the next Bard!

[boballab](#)

Or something like it. What got me thinking this way is the when Bard had to discard an incarnation after not getting her way in the Arsenal when she stated she would have to do it the hard way. From there you don't see Bard until in Praes

and she isn't drinking. It was like she lost a part of herself.

therealgridlock

You know, I just now realized.

What's the opposite of a wandering Bard?

A stationary queen of some sort? She's going to hold the center of the continent. She may still wander... But if she's a grand deciding rulemaker and rule keeper, wandering queen doesn't work the same way to me.

It'll be interesting to see.

Zach

Didn't Catherine's plan involve Akua climbing the Tower and then, after doing so, realizing that she's unhappy and taking Catherine's offer to seal the Dead King?

It's sounding like Akua isn't even going to make it to the Tower. I'm wondering if Catherine actually underestimated how much Akua has changed. It's particularly notable how Akua deliberately limits the damage she causes to the Army of Callow, without any real justification for it beyond just not wanting to do it. And she also spares that guy without any excuse for how it might somehow help her become Empress. She seems to be doing a very poor job of fooling herself, and I have doubts that she even has what it takes to climb the Tower as she is now; she's already pulling her punches.

At the very least, I feel like we can confidently say that Catherine's exact plan for Akua won't happen. By explicitly revealing her plan to the reader, she basically guaranteed it won't work out that way – her successful plans are almost always hidden, or at least not fully revealed to that extent.

Frivolous

Zach: Yes, agreed. Akua has changed so much compared to how she was as Diabolist, and even compared to how she was before she left Catherine.

Look at how she tells Nim the truth about her situation and about the pattern of three. Look at how she called Nim a fool twice.

Past Akua was always smooth and sophisticated with her peers and superiors. She didn't reveal secrets unless it was to her advantage, unless she was paid to do so, or unless it hurt the other person in some way.

This Akua is raw, and her educating Nim here and her calling Nim a fool has a lot of frustration behind it. Her motive isn't to put Nim down but to illuminate her. Her motive seems to be at least in part for Nim's own good.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed on p much every part of this.

Xinci

Hm, so I thought Ranger had failed in her teaching due to being inexperienced with having a group of people have compatible cooperative frameworks but it was more multifaceted than that. She induced their competition on purpose so as to specialize them as singular generalist. Due to her experience she is more used to anti-social qualities that allow an entity to maintain itself long term. Basically she went for the "Evil stays" route since she has overall had more of a understanding of it, rather than "Good compounds". A flaw, since it may have made them weaker, in ways that just led to them dying in other places (like Hunter joining up with a band and dying, possibly due to inexperience with such).

Also surprised that she was actually sorry about the bit at Arcadia, since I had thought given how her aspects seem to have her under a kind of hyperfocused state that she was being pretty restrained while basically building herself up to hunt the Summer Queen.

The portrayal of Akua's own lies and overview of why Malicia won't stop is quite nice. As is Nim noting down how the Legions of Terror are to serve institution wise.

[Liliet](#)

She's sorry about almost upsetting Amadeus more than she meant to -_-

'Ladi Williams

Could someone point me towards the chapter where she had "the talk" with Cat?

Thanks

Frivolous

'Ladi Williams: Close.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/18/chapter-32-close/>

[Liliet](#)

Book 3 Chapter "Close"

caoimhinh

I think another factor might be that she purposefully made them individualistic so that they would *NOT* become a Band of Five. So that they would grow strong and be hopefully safe on their own, but never rally together against her.

Hye is a centuries-old immortal warrior who wanders in solitude pursuing her own thrill, if she raises people, it won't be teaching them the joys of living in society, relying on others, nor about the advantages of teamwork.

Zach

She's only sorry because it upset Amadeus.

Catherine is basically right about Ranger, though I think the reasons she hates Ranger probably apply to her own circle more than she'd be comfortable admitting. Catherine and Vivienne are basically the only members of the Woe who give a shit about murdering random people (and even Catherine was a huge hypocrite about it earlier in her career, like when she threw Callow into civil war for personal advancement). Similar to Ranger only apologizing because she misunderstood how important Catherine is to Amadeus, the same applies to stuff like the Woe reining in their own worst behaviors just out of respect for Catherine (early on I'm pretty sure I remember Archer literally just murdering people to steal their alcohol, lol). To be fair Archer, has actually genuinely changed with time, and the same might be true for current Masego; they both grew up with terrible influences.

[Liliet](#)

Masego does want to do good for people in general where he can, he just fails to see how murdering people who annoy him is contradictory to that. It's not like it's *mass* murder.

Indrani murdering someone to steal their alcohol was actually from book 5, and made me go 0.0 okayyyy, too.

Hakram is actually someone who supports Catherine's principles, I think. He did stop her from killing a bunch of people that one time. "We were better than this, when we started".

superkeaton

Oh Akua. What a creature you are.

dadycool

Cat can utterly dominate fully developed Ruling Named, with neither an Aspect, Name, or even an idea what the Name she's

developing could be. And it's terrifying. To shut down an entire aspect of an old Dread Empress for a significant amount of time? Malicia isn't scared enough.

Shaerick 68

I hope that by the end of this she will be.

[pirateddesigns](#)

Nah, she won't be scared.

She'll be dead.

[Casey Glick](#)

She will have her name stripped from her, and return to being Alaya. She is Dread Empress now, no longer Alaya, and this can be restored. Princess rescued from the Tower

Death Knight

Hahahaha, Gods the IRONY if Cat uses that Story to defeat Malicia 🤡🤡🤡

flashburn283

It's an upbringing thing, she legitimately believes she can hurt Cat enough to make her sue for peace, then help out and all will be forgiven.

Cat is going to crush her, potentially without a name.

jamesc9

I wonder if Cat can be permanently non-named with this level of story power.

It would be unprecedented, but pretty much this whole thing is.

Juff

Typo Thread:

theory acquaintance > their acquaintance
to be exception > to be an exception
no longer assembled > no longer assemble
Crafter that much > Crafter with that much
I'd been painfully > It'd been painfully
out vanity > out of vanity
Or believe the > Or believed the
only she had > had only she
it must be looked > it had to be looked

salon tea > salon, tea
mines made one > mines made him one
as pointed lesson > as a pointed lesson
made to steep > made too steep
Should weather > She would weather
had made spawned > had spawned
a kept a > kept a
This what who > This was who
said mocked > said, mocking

Frivolous

Hah, I was right. Catherine really did neuter Malicia.
Temporarily anyway.

Malicia's thoughts were ambiguous about whether she could still Speak. Speaking isn't solidly linked to Rule, because Catherine and Amadeus both could Speak and they didn't have Rule.

Finally another of Malicia's aspects. Connect, a very political aspect. I suspect all her aspects are like that, dedicated to politics. How boring.

Akua's analysis of Malicia's character was interesting and probably correct.

I believe that Catherine isn't at all like that, is she? She isn't afraid of conflict or of disagreements. She enjoys chaos and she's not a control freak.

For instance, she let Scribe live and recruited her when a shrewder person would have killed her.

That's one way Catherin exceeds Malicia.

I really like that Akua showed mercy to Kendi Akaze. It means Catherine's scheme for her is working. She's really becoming Good. An Evil person, or even a rationally cautious person, would have killed him.

Two dozen snakes

Cat is absolutely a control freak actually. The difference between her and Alaya is that for both, the need for control was shaped by their experiences in childhood: Cat's need for control stems from watching Mazus and his ilk plunder Callow's cities out of sheer greed. It was an impersonal, abstract thing, the need to be in control so that the mazuses of the world won't be. So in a situation where giving up control is likely to get her what she wants, she is able to do it. Case in point, her alliance with the sisters.

Alaya on the other hand was a young woman who was brutally kidnapped to be the sex slave of a mad emperor. Her father was nailed to the walls of their tavern. Her need for control is very much personal, it's about making sure no Nefarious could ever do that to her again. Alaya needs to be in control because that's the only way for her to feel safe. That's why abdication and exile are simply non-starters for her. She can't not be in control, that need is the core of who she is

Zach

This is basically what I was going to post. Catherine even admits at one point that, even though she says "I'll give up power the moment I can!", she's actually more reluctant to do so than she lets on. Her alliance with Sve Noc was basically a pivotal moment where she at least acknowledged that this tendency was working against her, but it's still a part of her personality that she has to actively account for.

Hune also notices it way back when Catherine tried to "have a talk" with her. Catherine feels (or at least felt – Catherine has matured a lot over the series) an obsessive need to have a deep personal relationship with the people under her command and is uncomfortable with that not being the case (because there's a lack of control with all your generals not having deep personal loyalty towards you).

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, the thing is that Catherine unlike Malicia does at least try to keep this in check -_-

ninegardens

Ohhhh boy.

Malicia's new aspect.

... its taken her THIS long to get the aspect apparently.

And....

I can't help but think that this aspect is going to kill her.

It's like a shitty Thinker power. It gives insight, but given its been granted by the Gods Below, its just a compass that is going to lead to her own destruction.

And at the same time, with Cat coming in fast, she feels like she "can't" back down. Hasn't even considered the possibility of exile, of running away....

I do like that Nim is apparently the character who most GETS Amadeaous. Who actually seems to understand him, and what he's doing, and not doing. Had not expected that, but seeing Nim as ... true believer... that's nice.

And at the same time, Akua's perfect understanding of Malicia... very cool.

Frivolous

ninegardens: I don't believe that Malicia's aspect of Connect only manifested now. That seems impossible. She's been Dread Empress for 40+ years. She should have received all 3 aspects a long time ago.

I think the verb 'bloom' here only meant that the aspect operated instead of failed. Note these sentences:

– There was something to Connect those names even if she did not yet understand it. Her aspect had never failed her before, even though the leaps of intuition it sometimes leant her were the ficklest part of the boons it granted. –

'Never failed her before' implies she's had it a while.

Darkening

She's definitely had it for ages, she described something similar in the chapter where she was in her fancy office that looks like it's outside and she had pictures of significant people pinned up on the invisible walls.

Liliet

> Malicia's new aspect.

>... its taken her THIS long to get the aspect apparently.

It's not new, we're only just now learning about it.

ninegardens

Hmmm... I was perhaps reading too much into the quote: "Behind closed doors, alone, Alaya would admit that the aspect's blooming was a deep relief", assuming she was talking about *Connect* blooming.

In that case, if she's had it for ages, I would posit that this aspect may be one of the things driving her paranoia. Hell- practically the definition of paranoia is seeing connections that aren't there.

How much of her fear of Black, of her set up of Liesse 2nd etc was brought about by her leaning too heavily on an aspect which gives "Accurate" information... but may also tend towards creating self fulfilling prophecies?

caoimhinh

Yeah, she was relieved that **Connect** activated, since **Rule** is out of question for now. She was afraid that Catherine's use of authority over her had been a blow to her very Name.

And yeah, Connect seems like the kind of thing that would set all kinds of alarms on Malicia (who is already a control freak) as it would show her all of the connections Amadeus had made and how deep his influence ran, how many people were devoted and loyal to him instead of to her.

Sykomantis

Now let's see if Nim can get out of the Pattern as well as Catherine did with Tariq

[boballab](#)

I doubt it. I got a feeling the draw is coming up soon followed by Nim making the classic Black Knight blunder of attacking an out numbered opponent on a hill that has a hero on it. Nim has never studied like Amadeus did in how not to get story locked or has a group with the ability to think outside of the box on countering a Pattern of 3 that Cat has. Nim will blunder into all the classic mistakes because she doesn't know better and as she more embraces the Name and Role it will become harder to avoid.

Zach

I don't think it will come to this. It's strongly implied that, in the end, Nim is taking what Akua said seriously. She will likely at least be aware of the Pattern of Three.

[boballab](#)

She might be aware of it but she won't know enough to stay away from it. If she is anywhere near the next battle between her forces and Cat, creation will make sure that Squire and her confront each other. The only way to avoid it would be to go nowhere near the Callowan forces and we know Malicia won't stand for that.

[Casey Glick](#)

Nim can also surrender, unconditionally. If that isn't a Villain Attacks When Hero is Off Guard, then it probably sticks.

Shveiran

She sure can. Pattern would be broken.

On the other hand, then she has surrendered.

[Liliet](#)

Akua will probably help Nim out of the worst of it. She seemed invested in Nim's continued wellbeing, if only, I

imagine, for the reason that Nim is someone both willing to talk to her and not a highborn schemer.

Cold Cyberia

Nim didn't know about the pattern of three? That's much worse than I anticipated.

It's sad that Akua's reading of Malicia is mostly correct now. We even see this in her plan for the hellgates. I'm guessing having them open for seven days is a feature to prevent Procer from growing too strong rather than a sorcerous requirement .

Whether she was always like that or if she had a proper fall is an interesting question. One could interpret her desire to dismantle the power of High Lords and destroy the Age of Wonders as centralising power in the arena of politics, of which she was a master.

Next chapter: South I? Could check up on Mercantis and Basilia. Maybe see what Ashur is up to?

Darkening

Eh. Even warlock, an expert on the hells could only redirect the portal to a different part of a different hell, not close it. There's a price to everything, and even closing it to that degree is pretty incredible.

That Other Guy

Another great chapter. Thanks, EE.

Compounding on the previous Warlock's resolution to the permagate issue, how about redirecting each portal directly into the next, creating a kind of infinite call forwarding hell? That'd take anyone/thing ignorant enough to use the gateways out of commission indefinitely.

There would be a slight chance that this arrangement would just be kicking the can down the road a bit, as eventually the amount of magical energy required to keep the portals stable would grow immeasurably due to all of the traffic ricocheting through the aether.

The feedback causes the weakest one to detonate catastrophically, triggering mass annihilation of the rest.

The trick is to contain the energy of this calamity in the hells (because who really cares what happens on that side of the tracks), otherwise the outcome for 82.7% of Caledonia would be reasonably poor, for a broad definition of "poor", and a broader definition of "reasonably".

Darkening

Just need to open another greater rift facing each greater rift a millimeter away lol. Sure, some stuff might leak out, but cat can open a gate to a volcano or something and bury them in lava until they're buried under a huge pile of volcanic stone and it'll probably be fine. Course, without a pile of souls to harvest for power recreating the liesse gamemaker would be difficult. But I'm sure praes has options.

Liliet

I think the seven days opening is a hard requirement, not a security feature. Closing them permanently is impossible, this is more like... draining water through a single pipe. You still need the pipe.

Two dozen snakes

Akua can read Malicia so well because she is her mirror. For both of them, the heart of their ambition was the need to be in control, as a self-defense mechanism. If I am in control, nobody can hurt me. Nobody can order me to kill my sister, or kidnap me and rape me. Everything else is gilding, a bonus of sorts

At the end of the day, their ambitions were nothing more than a desire for safety

The empire really tends to do a number on its people. That's Evil for you i guess

MephInBlack

Wild prediction: Amadeus destroys the Tower and Cat is upset because that is a new fire alight instead of the profitable new regime she intended for Praes. So he teaches her a new lesson about some old monsters like the Tower just needing to be put down, in order for Creation to move on. And his allusion is about the Dead King, but the joke is on him because that's exactly the opening Cat waited for. So she render him silent and possibly unseen and force him to watch as she confronts the Ranger on her pupils' behalf. Hye strikes at Cat, maybe assuming Cat having killed Amadeus for tearing down the Tower, and Cat then builds up a story about the orphan child and the wicked stepmother. We have been shown that Hye is not a skilled storyteller (the way Amadeus, Tariq and the Wandering Bard are I mean) and so get herself killed on that story. Bonus point if Cat develops the aspect Outgrow for matching with Learn, Master and Transcend.

Captain Amazing

I suspected at the last East interlude but I think this confirms it. Akua Sahelian is becoming a Hero of Contrition. Honestly, holy shit. I think all those italic lines is the forming Name whispering in her ear and they're asking her about the consequences of her actions and reminding her about her conscience. Her sparing that vengeance guy mirrors with Catherine killing the goblin back at the War College. She's siding with the "justice" faction over the "more" faction. Catherine wanted her to repent and Creation is taking it literally.

[sengachi](#)

Oh shit, if we come full circle from William's arc like that, that would be amazing.

Sinead

I still hope it's Compassion rather than Contrition. The champions of Choirs end up seeing people through that lens. Contrition has no issue using people, since in Contrition's eyes, every mortal is fatally flawed and irredeemable and should be purged (otherwise, why would it break an entire city down to the children to turn into a suicidal army?)

Compassion is an acknowledgement that the harm that Akua has done is terrible and unforgivable, but that one can still work to do Good to not balance the scales but for the sake of doing Good.

Granted, I also wonder if instead of having Malicia killed, she get's her Name broken and is bound under ward by Akua like Cat has done for Akua. Malicia is a lot like Sarauman from Lord of the Rings, and I always found his death horribly tragic.

[iamwaitingtocompile](#)

I agree that there's pretty good chances she realizes how much she hates what she's become, and wanders into what's left of Lisse to die. Then, after seven days and seven nights, she walks out again, the Penitent's Blade in hand and a chior whispering in her ear, and she heads out to Keter to fulfil Cat's plan perfectly.

Frivolous

Note that Malicia referred to Catherine as a monster in this chapter.

Let me repeat that: Malicia referred to Catherine as a monster. Malicia, who used mind control on her own troops and used Still Water on people. Malicia, who allied herself with the Dead King.

I'm not sure if that shows Malicia's horror and terror of Catherine or a stunning lack of self-awareness.

sutortyrannus

Both? Both is good.

Steven Silver

I think "monster" is more derogatory coming from Malicia. Yeah, she knows Cat is strong, but every one of the Praesi has a certain disdain for the "uncivilized" rest of the world. Cat, to Malicia, is violent, mean, and unmannered. She doesn't call Cat a "terrifying beast," Malicia calls Cat a "little monster," yeah?

Frivolous

Steven Silver: I suppose it's possible, but I think little in this case denotes merely Catherine's lack of height rather than her youth or anything else.

For that reason, I believe the word monster is the important word in that description.

In comparison, Malicia refers to Ranger of all people as merely "that rabid dog in Refuge" in Interlude: Dreadful. Malicia doesn't seem very afraid of Ranger or Scribe, though she and we have reason to know they are very very dangerous.

Yet she's afraid of Catherine. At least, I believe monster is a stronger term than that rabid dog, yes?

shikkarasu

Agreed. I think she's using 'monster' in the same sense that both Beowulf and Grendel's Mother were 'monstrous.' It's not a qualitative statement, but an acknowledgement of what they can do and what would be necessary to put them down.

This isn't the first time that EE has used 'monster' to refer to someone simply being in on Ranger/Dead King/Saint's level, either.

[*boballab*](#)

I think she does that because she can't predict what Cat will do. Malicia is a plotter that has studied people and from that predict what they will do via their motivations. However with Cat she doesn't understand her motivations because they are things that Malicia could never think herself. While both started out with no power and both ended up with it, Malicia wanted the power for herself while Cat just wanted enough to help her people and that notion does not compute for a Praesi

plotter like Malicia. That is why at every turn she is surprised by what Cat does and the fact it works. Since Cat doesn't react like all the other "players" which are people to Malicia she has to be something else...a monster something you can't know what it is thinking.

Tuvarkz

Aqua cast bloody Detect Alignment already beacuse you certainly aren't pinging Evil anymore.

sidehammer

nooooooooooooo! i've just caught up! what am i supposed to do now?? how can u guys do this, read week to week?? this will be torture!

and i'm still really angry about zombie the third! DX

anyway, i've caught up and so can now participate. is there a discord for us at all? a subreddit? i've been to the wiki, it... could use some tending.

so what are the theories on what cat's new Name is going to be?

Daniel E

Best horse, the goodest of girls. I too remain salty about how arbitrarily she was off'd. My only consolation is that there remains a non-zero chance she will be reincarnated with Spring or Autumn.

sidehammer

oooh! i hadn't thought of that! i was playing with the idea that maybe her remains could be Inscribed somehow, but i like ur idea a lot more!

For real, though? Those little moments with Zombie were a real balm for the soul for Cat, in my opinion. With Robber gone, Cat's running dangerously close to losing all the sparks of light in her life. I honestly can't see anything happening to Mesego, he's too great a literary tool for explaining the magic system, but I'm not so sure about Indrani. Too many emotional wellbeings ride on her safety that it just primes her as a target. Less so for Vivi, but it would still be a tremendous blow. Hakram I think has taken about as much abuse as he's going to take, yet the distance that now exists between Cat and her Adjutant is already tragic—I hope it can be mended. Amadeus is too mysterious at present to really count as something that brings her joy, in my opinion, though I'll say torturing Abigail won't be going away, so there's always that, lol. Cordelia would be a blow,

but more politically, whether she dies or uses the weapon, and Hanno has already shut himself off from her. I think Akua will find her way back sooner rather than later, and nothing says Cat can't drop by the Ways for a quickie every now and then once she's taken up Twilight. It's Arthur I'm worrying about, I think. I know with Hanno moving toward a new Name it's looking like Arthur will be the new White Knight, but I'm hoping for some kind of Gray Knight, if I'm honest. I know being a mentor is a great way to get killed, but Cat needs something to baby, damnit.

jamesc9

How would she do with a puppy?

[Liliet](#)

<https://discord.gg/UMzAub69>

This is an invite to the discord's wiki channel :3

<https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/>

This is the subreddit link!

Welcome to the fandom.

Jefepato

I find it amusing that Nim's only real chance of getting out of this alive is by listening to **this** callous manipulator blatantly trying to tug at her puppet strings and not, uh, the other one.

Mengha

I have to say it, since I didn't see anyone else do so.

Malicia's thoughts at the end of her section there: "She'd wheather this storm and emerge from it TRIUMPHANT..."

It's these tiny little details that I sometimes wonder if they're a coincidence, but they're placed so deliberately, and the show up so often I know that they're all carefully crafted.

Brilliant.

Frivolous

Mengha: I think it's probably a coincidence. Triumphant is a common word in that context.

But that may just be me thinking Triumphant would be the sekret weapon unleashed by the Dead King to destroy the Alliance army at the Battle of Hainaut, and sadly that didn't happen.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I think it shows that she's going ever further off the deep end.

jtebb2

Anyone else want a prequel of this series chronicling the rise and fall of Triumphant?

I think it would be fun.

Jtebb2

So, I've finally caught up after 3 months. This is probably the most fascinating web serial I have ever encountered.

To address this chapter in particular:

First, I'm truly disappointed in Alaya (as a person, as a character she's amazing), she had so much potential and now she's lost everything that set her apart. Now she's just another cackling lunatic in the tower waiting for the dagger in her back or the hero's sword.

Second, I think I'm coming to hate Cat just a bit for what she's done to Akua, for what she wants to do. She should have given in in the cave, cast aside this ridiculous obsession with atoning for what in all honesty truly was not that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things. 100,000 dead, forgive me for being crass but... so what? How many died in the Liesse Rebellion because Cat let William go? How many died in the wars she's waged to achieve her objectives? How many would have died had her bid with the dead king succeeded over Malicia's? How many have died to Black and Ranger that she feels no compulsion to avenge? Akua has redeemed herself 5 times over at this point, but Cat deliberately drove her into treason and sabotaged the Praesi campaign for this moronic long price business. I truly will not be happy if someone at some point doesn't slap the shit out of her and point out the stupidity here.

jamesc9

Hmmm...

You don't get to see the counter-factual, and I don't know who Malacia's second choice for Warlock was.

Chapter 16: Anchor

"To suffer defeat is not to be defeated. One is an occurrence, the other a state of mind."

– Dread Empress Sanguinara, the Shrewd

It was as if our armies had played a round of musical chairs.

The Loyalist Legions had been camped at the tip of Moule Hills, south of us, but they'd burned that camp to force us out of our camp in Kala Hills. Then we'd gone around those same hills and stolen a march south of them, taking Kala Fortress and setting up over their supply lines. The final bit of surprise, though, had been when Marshal Nim had marched her army south expel us from our new position and instead been forced to retreat north: Sepulchral's vanguard had popped up atop Moule Hills, threatening to flank her if she gave battle. So now here we were, the three of us staring at each other as the afternoon sun pounded down on our helmeted heads.

The vanguard set up shop at Nim's old camp in Moule Hills, in what I could only call a fit of irony. Not without paying for the nice campsite and half-filled dry moat, though, going by the detonations and screams that'd followed the rebel forces moving there. Looked like I'd been right to think that the Black Knight had trapped the area with goblin munitions before leaving it. We were keeping an eye on both the other armies in the region, scouts out and about, but not going on the offensive. The unexpected arrival of Sepulchral's three thousand had bought us time and we intended to use it to the fullest.

See, even after having outmanoeuvred the Loyalist Legions none of us thought it was anything but stupidity to try to go and attack them in their – formerly our – fortified camp in northern Kala Hills. And given the disparity in our numbers and the fact we'd taken some bruising losses, none of us were particularly eager to face Marshal Nim in a fair pitched battle either. The chances were high that even if we won the costs would make it a strategic defeat. If Juniper had been herself I might have risked it, but as she was... The Hellhound was still largely silent during the war councils she was supposed to be leading.

On the other hand, we couldn't just let the Black Knight slap us out of our superior position either. We could cut off her supply lines from here and ensure we wouldn't run out of water. So Sapper-General Pickler had given us our solution.

"We raise a wall," she said, leaning over the map. "Between Moule Hills and Kala Hills, at the narrowest part of the valley."

And so while half our army had gone in the rest to shade, the rest had spread out across the valley. Sappers and regulars were digging trenches, going from east to west, while palisades were being raised. Our main camp was still next to Kala Fortress, where we could use the wells and the walls, but out in the valley two makeshift forts were already under construction behind the trench line. The Legions hadn't taken that lying down, of course. The auxiliary cavalry had come out in force the moment it'd become clear what we were doing, but we'd been waiting and ready. It'd not been lightly armed Levantines facing down the riders, this time, but a proper shield wall with crossbowmen behind it.

After a hard reminder of the difference in range and power between javelins and standard-issue Legion crossbows, the enemy horse had beaten a retreat. They kept harassing us all afternoon, though, even as the Loyalist Legions mounted their answer to our new stratagem. I was standing next to Pickler as it began to play out, sighing.

"We should have seen that coming, really," I admitted.

She spat to the side.

"They'll get their fortifications up faster than we will ours," Pickler warned. "We're outmatched in both sappers and labour."

In answer to our containment of them with a trench and wall, the Legions of Terror had begun building their own to our north. Not even that far, damnably enough. About two hundred feet beyond our furthest crossbow range, with their cavalry waiting out in the valley just in case we got foolish enough to try a skirmishing war. Pickler was right, I grimly thought, as she tended to be when it came to sapper's work. I could already see the gap between the capacity of our armies in action: the Legions had begun working three hours after us yet already they'd caught up to two thirds of our trench length.

"Theirs are more vulnerable," I noted. "They still have Sepulchral's three thousand on the wrong side of the walls."

Which might actually be part of the plan, I thought. The Black Knight would either bait them down from the hills in an ill-advised attack or fortify around them until they became irrelevant. That might explain why she wasn't being more aggressive in trying to get us off her supply lines. She wasn't digging in to stay so much as putting up defences to prevent being flanked before she hammered away at us. From her point of view, this battle would be settled long before her stores of food were at any risk of running low.

"I can't speak to that," Pickler shrugged. "You know my interest in tactics is limited. What I can tell you, though, is that we'll need our best skirmishers in Kala Hills tomorrow."

I had to crane my neck more than I wanted to so I could have a look at her. She was standing on the side of my missing eye. I felt my fingers clench. It was always the little things that got to me.

"Why's that?" I frowned.

"We don't have enough stakes to make a wall the length of the entire valley," she said. "And neither do the Legions. So we're going to have to cut wood, Catherine, and the only place in the region that has any in the quantity needed-"

"- is Kala Hills," I finished.

Plenty of brushlands in those rocky hills, some proper trees too. With this having turned into a war of entrenchments, those bushes and trees had just become as precious a commodity as water. We'd begin by cutting the wood closest to our camps, of course, but then they'd need to go south and we would need to go north. Closer to each other.

"The moment we both run out of *sudes*, the easiest way to slow the other side from building up is to harass the soldiers cutting wood," I said, rubbing at the bridge of my nose. "Shit. That's going to get *messy*."

"That's a word for it," Pickler snorted.

She seemed amused, but her face suddenly stilled. She looked away, biting at the inside of her cheek. A long moment passed, a silence I did not dare to break. I knew whose memory had struck her like a punch in the gut.

"He would have loved it," Pickler finally said. "The mess. The chaos."

"The danger," I ruefully said.

She nodded, then returned to silence. Honest emotion was not something that came easy to goblins, so I let her choose her words at her own pace without sticking my foot in it.

"After Ratface died," Pickler said, "I thought we were done losing them. That we'd paid our due to the Gobbler, that the rest of us would make it."

"Nauk," I quietly said.

"He was gone long before they killed him," she said, shaking her head. "The Warlock... didn't bring much of him back. Not enough for it to count."

I did not disagree, keeping my shame to myself. I'd thought, once upon a time, that Night might have mended that. These days I was not so sure, but I had clutched that hope close in the early days of my return from the Everdark.

"Then they got Hune," Pickler continued. "That was..."

"I didn't think you two were close," I said.

"We weren't. She wasn't the kind that made friends. But she was one of *us*, Cat," the goblin quietly said.

Over the years, somewhere along the line the veil that'd once separated the Rat Company cadets from the Fifteenth had fallen. There just weren't enough of us left for the distinction to matter. With every fresh war I dragged us into, every hard stand, another body had dropped. We were a dying breed, those few that'd been in it from the start.

"She was," I acknowledged.

Hune had not been my friend and I had never trusted her entirely. But she had been one of us anyway, in that intangible way they only ever quite became real when it started feeling like loss.

"And somehow I still didn't see it coming when Robber died," Pickler said, tone bitter. "He used to go around telling us he was invincible, that he just couldn't seem to croak-"

My throat tightened and she stopped herself, looking at the men raising walls in the distance.

"I guess I believed him a little, even when I rolled my eyes. I thought that even if we all died, Catherine, he'd be the last one to bite it," she said. "Somehow. It just never felt real that he could be... gone."

"Sometimes I still feel like he'll pop out from behind a stone," I admitted. "Grinning, making fun of us for having gone soft."

"But he won't," Pickler harshly said. "He *won't*. And there's so many things with him I left half done, because I always thought there'd be more time. After this battle, that plan, that book. I waited until the Gobbler took him because I was too... lazy to talk to him."

"We always think we could have done more, when people die," I said. "Especially people we loved. It's not fair to either them or us."

"What does fair ever matter?" Pickler tiredly said. "'It won't fix a thing. It's not wood and steel, I can't take out what's broken and make good again. Instead what I have is regrets and a letter I'm too afraid to open."

I breathed in sharply. Hakram had told me Robber had left her a letter, but I'd not known she had yet to read it.

"Why?"

"I know what's in it," Pickler said, then snorted. "Or maybe I don't. I don't know which scares me more."

Robber had loved her, once. When we'd been little more than children he and Nauk had both courted her attentions and fancied each other rivals, not that anything ever came of it save bickering. She'd liked the attention, but she'd never been all that interested in romance. Besides, goblins thought of love differently than humans. It didn't mean the same things, didn't carry the same expectations even when it was returned.

"Did you love him?" I quietly asked.

Hesitation.

"No," Pickler replied.

Then she chuckled bitterly.

"Maybe," she admitted. "It was... messy. I thought he'd want more than I wanted to give, so I never let him ask."

I breathed out, hand itching for my pipe. I restrained myself.

"I think you did," I murmured. "At least a little."

Her shoulders tightened.

"After the war," Pickler finally said, "I wanted us to go to the same place."

It was as close to admitting affection as she would ever get, I thought.

"I expect we all will, Pickler," I softly said. "He's just gone on ahead one more time."

She laughed, a little grimly but genuinely. Goblin humour tended to run even darker than my people's. There was a reason they got on so well with Lycaonese, whose gallows humour was black enough even Callowans balked at it.

"It feels like unfinished business," Pickler eventually said. "That's all. And I don't know how to finish it."

Sometimes you don't, I thought. You keep walking with that weight on your back, knowing one day you'll buckle. My instinct was to lay a hand on her shoulder in comfort, but it would be no such thing to a goblin. Instead I gave her the sole courtesy I had to offer: work to disappear into.

"Prepare our builders for skirmish," I said. "Draw on our reserves for regulars if you need to."

"You're going to hiss at the snake?" Pickler asked, sounding surprised.

Poke at the bear, I decided, only for the Grey Eyries. It always surprised me that even after all these years there were still expressions from east of the Wasaliti I'd never heard. In Lower Miezan, anyway.

"Something like that," I said. "I figure that we've got one asset the Legions have no answer to, so it's about time to use it."

I wasn't going to be sending skirmishers out to fight theirs in the space between our trenches, I wasn't that much of a fool. They had crossbow companies waiting for that mistake, same as us, and my men were a lot more tired than Nim's anyway. The Army of Callow had marched all night and not had a full eight hours of sleep since, it was on the ragged edge. Instead I sent for two people: Archer and the Silver Huntress. My instructions were straightforward.

"You see these people?" I asked, pointing north.

The two of them eyed the enemy legionaries and sappers raising a wall and digging a trench, a swarm of ants just outside the range of our crossbows.

"Sure," Archer shrugged.

"I do," the Silver Huntress gravely replied.

"You've got bows and I want corpses," I bluntly said. "Have at it."

That got a delighted laugh out of Indrani and a measuring look out of Alexis. Neither of them bothered to use the elaborate bows they'd received as gifts from the Lady of the Lake, instead stringing good yew longbows from Daoine after ensuring they were well provisioned with arrows.

And then, easy as breathing, they began taking lives.

The enemy were maybe seventeen hundred feet away, well out the range of even the longbowmen of the Watch. But these two were Named, sharpened to a razor's edge in the greatest war of our time, and so they began killing their way through the enemy as if

were not impossible. Archer went for officers, Huntress for the sappers. It took a while before the enemy even realized what was happening: they scrambled about looking for skirmishers that weren't there, at first. And even when they did realize, the response was slow. Archer had killed the people who should be shouting orders. Within half an hour the regulars were in a full testudo and sappers were either huddling in their trench or gone.

At the hour's turn the sappers came back having assembled rough mantlets, wooden walls on wheels they could bring forward and take cover behind. It was a mixed success: the two archer Named first bled the regulars that broke cover to put them in place and then ignored them entirely, curving their arrows to fall down from above. Those shots weren't anywhere as lethal, but they still disrupted the sappers trying to get back to work. It was only half an hour after that the situation came to a close, when mage lines were sent out to raise shield spells around the sappers to protect them entirely. In the distance I recognize the woman who led them. Tall, dark of hair and with strange golden eyes. Akua looked our way as well, but nothing was spoken.

It was still too early.

"We could have at the mages," the Silver Huntress said. "If we start using our proper bows and our stock of mage-killing arrows."

I shook my head. I might have considered it if they were mfuasa and nobles, but these were Legion mages. We did not have enough mage-killer arrows for this to be a good trade.

"Better to let them win now," I said. "Let them feel safe and get sloppy."

Indrani eyed me amusedly.

"You're sending us back after nightfall," she said.

My smile was cold.

"Get some rest, you two," I said. "You have a long night ahead of you."

And I needed to get back to camp. The fortifications were a good measure to take, Pickler had been right to suggest them, but they weren't a plan.

If we were going to win this, we needed one of those.

—

Vivienne wasn't alone in her tent when I went to see her. I'd been about to enter anyway when I overheard the voice of who she was speaking with. The Laure drawl wasn't rare in my army, but I

knew the timbre of that voice too. I was curious enough about what had brought the Squire to her that I decided to... actively overhear. It wasn't called eavesdropping when it was a queen that did it, there were laws about this stuff.

"-did a number on him," Vivienne was saying. "I know there are parts of Callow where he still has a good reputation, but they tend to be the ones that saw little of him."

"He was chosen by a Choir, I am told," Arthur hesitantly said. "Can that truly be a harmful thing?"

"Angels are a lot of things," Vivienne said. "Most of them are good. But do not ever, for a moment, believe them to be harmless. Even their kindness has teeth, and Contrition has little other than the teeth to offer."

"Yet you fought with him," the Squire said, voice daring her to deny it. "At his side."

"Some of the things we did back then were right," Vivienne said, tone gone quiet. "But some of the others... we weren't fighting the right battles, and not against the right people. Doing good's not always the same thing as doing Good."

"There's priests who would call that heresy," he said.

"Heard lot of that talk, when I was your age," Vivienne said, and I could hear the hard smile in her voice. "Heresy this, blasphemy that. What did the Praesi care? Wasn't priests whining that got the Empire to leave. Keep to Above of you want, there's nothing wrong with that. But like Jehan the Wise said, prayer and a sword work better than prayer alone."

A sentiment I could get behind. The sword part of it, anyway. Deciding I'd eavesdrop- actively overheard for long enough, I made my presence known by loudly approaching. Fuck, I thought as I entered the tent, but someone was going to have to teach the kid to hide his thoughts better. He looked like I'd just caught him with his hand in a honey pot, it was painfully obvious he thought he'd been doing something bad. I wasn't too worried about talk of the Lone Swordsman, myself. Contrition had been trying to hook the Squire from the start, but William was not a great angle for them to take. A lot of Callowans hadn't been fond of the man.

That tended to happen when you carved messages into people's foreheads, even when those people were Praesi.

"If you'd excuse me, Your Grace, Your Majesty," Arthur said, bowing.

I shrugged and Vivienne waved him away. She waited until he was gone from the tent to cock an eyebrow at me.

"So how much did you listen at?"

I put a hand over my heart, deeply wounded by the implication.

"How dare you," I gravely said, "and when you started talking about the way people remember William."

"The end, then," Vivienne said. "Kid's been dreaming, but they're all over the place."

I frowned.

"Still the broken sword?"

I'd broken the Penitent's Blade and good luck to anyone trying to – no, Catherine, that was a good way to get stabbed with pointed irony in a few years. Let it simply be said I had been thorough in dispersing the shards of the angel's feather.

"He has a whole array of them," Viv replied, shaking her head. "Different Squires. He does get the sword dreams, but I'd bet that's Contrition trying to nudge him down that road."

"Those nosy fuckers," I grunted. "They need to learn when to quit."

I wasn't above asking Zeze to look into the practicalities of a pointed lesson for those vultures when this was all over. Malicia and Amadeus had outlawed the Name of Chancellor, when she climbed the Tower, so maybe I should look into outlawing the Hashmallim getting their sticky fingers into any of my countrymen.

"He's not like William was," Vivienne frankly said. "Nowhere enough self-loathing. I imagine they'd like him on the throne instead of you or me, but he's a lot more interested in knighthood than crowns. That bodes well."

"He's still a wild card," I said. "Different Squire dreams means he's not settled, Viv. No telling what kind of a Knight Name he'll end up transitioning into."

It sounded a lot to me like the Heavens dangling shiny paths in front of their newest Callowan hero to find out what might stick. And there were some that I simply wouldn't be able to tolerate. Rebel Knight, for one, Eleanor Fairfax's old Name that'd popped up in Callowan history whenever a tyrant needed toppling. It irked me how much Name lore about the days of the Old Kingdom had been lost. I understood why my father had destroyed pretty much all he could – legacies were dangerous things when you'd destroyed the last iteration of them – but it still left me more knowledgeable in the ways of Praesi Named than those of my own kingdom.

Maybe it was for the best, I told myself. Using old tools and old means tended to lead to the same old ends.

"Lots of that going around," Vivienne admitted. "Yours is so close I can almost taste it, Cat. You're already starting to get the coincidences again – what were the odds of you stumbling into this talk?"

Low, practically speaking.

"I think it'll take shape when we settle the Tower," I admitted.

I'd know for sure if I started getting the reflexes again.

"You're not far either," I said. "Or he wouldn't have been having that talk with you in the first place."

She grimaced.

"I'm not sure what it is," Vivienne said. "And there's... something missing, I can't quite put it into words."

"You need something to take you over the top," I said, tone clinical. "You've got your Role and the will, but you need weight. A story that people will talk about."

That famous charge at the Battle of Hainaut had not been quite enough.

"I thought you might be angry," she admitted. "I know you wanted Callow to be ruled by someone without a Name."

I sighed.

"Those provisions of the Accords are essentially dead," I said. "And in the end it's not a theoretical candidate I'm entrusting that throne to, it's Vivienne Dartwick. I stand by that choice whether it comes with a Name attached or not."

Her eyes shone and I looked to the side.

"Thanks," Vivienne quietly said.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably.

"I did come for something," I said. "Your scheme in the Legions?"

"Won't work if it looks like we're losing," she replied. "I'm still looking into getting in contact. It's ready, I just need my foot in the door."

"Hurry it up," I asked. "I'm not sure we'll be getting a decisive battle before Sepulchral arrives. If the rest of her army arrives in time, I want our finger ready to pull the trigger."

"I'll see it done," she firmly replied.

I nodded. I was about to take my leave when I saw hesitation on her face.

"Viv?"

She brushed back an errant strand that'd fallen out of her braid. It still looked like a crown, her milkmaid's braid, even when she did not wear the silver circlet that'd become hers when I formally named her a princess of Callow. She bit her lip.

"The Name," Vivienne quietly said, "I do not know if it will be..."

She trailed off, hesitating again.

"I don't think it will be one of Below's," she said. "Cat, I know that-"

I limped forward a step, leaning over the desk, and even as her eyes widened in surprise I pressed a kiss against her forehead. She looked up, startled, as I drew back.

"I didn't name you my successor so you could keep making my mistakes," I said.

There was nothing more to say, as far as I was concerned, and so on those words I left her.

—

Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara still brewed what was probably my favourite tea in the world. Herbal Wasteland stuff, nothing like the horrid imported leaves that Hasenbach was so wild about, and I'd yet to ever dislike a mug she'd made me. Not that the pleasant taste made what we had to talk about any more pleasant.

"I've never seen her like this before," Aisha said. "In her first year at the College she had moments, before she found her footing, but this is different."

I grimaced.

"I didn't see it coming," I admitted. "I know Nim pulling one over us twice in a row had to be a shock, but we've had hard rides before. What makes this different?"

Aisha elegantly sipped at her tea, which was the polite Taghreb way of gathering one's thoughts without being uncouth.

"It has been coming for some time, I think," Aisha finally said. "Looking back now. But I am afraid that the tipping point would be you."

I froze in my seat a moment, taken aback.

"I thought I'd made it clear I still had full trust in her abilities," I slowly said.

"Yes," Aisha gently said. "Which made it sting all the more when she failed your trust by being defeated so starkly."

Fuck, I eloquently thought. Had I been turning the knife without even realizing it?

"She said things, after you left," I began, hesitant to continue.

"She's afraid it didn't all come back," Aisha murmured. "Yes, she has confided as much in me before."

"The Grey Pilgrim himself said she was all there," I told her. "It wrecked her body to extract the commands, the hooks were deep, but the weakness is purely physical."

"You trusted the man, which weighs on the scales, but not all of us are eager to take the word of the Peregrine for anything at all," she replied. "It is doubts, Catherine. She believes she was either lessened by Malicia's spells or never on even footing with the Empire's marshal, and cannot believe in either without loathing."

Aisha sighed and then, for one of the few times in all the years I'd known her, slumped into her seat.

"And she loathes the indecision too," she continued, "which makes even standing still a defeat. It is... tangled, Catherine. And perhaps this was a long time coming. We all rose swiftly under you. Some might say too quickly."

I sipped at my tea.

"I'm not one of those people," I said. "And unless someone else has taken to wearing my crown, that's the only trust in need of keeping."

She met my eye, then slowly nodded. Aisha had always been hard to read, her lovely heart-shaped face ever showing anything she did not want it to.

"I am proud, you know," Aisha quietly said. "Of the army we built, all of us. The kingdom. It was bitter and often thankless work, Catherine, but you did not pretend otherwise when you asked us to follow you. And looking at all we have done, even after all it cost us, I am deeply proud."

She slid a finger around the rim of her cup.

"I would not let that legacy bury us," Aisha said. "Juniper... if she fails you here, it will haunt her to her grave."

"I don't know how to make her eager for the fight again," I admitted.

I'd never had to, before. Never learned to.

"I might," she said. "I looked through her papers as she slept."

My eye narrowed but I did not interrupt.

"She has been sketching out theories," Aisha said. "And one stood out. I would have us show her, Catherine, that she is not blind and lost."

"I'm listening," I said.

And we planned, the two of us, how to follow the plan my Marshal hadn't given me.

—

For a bit, it looked like we'd accidentally started a night battle.

Archer and Huntress had come out to reap another harvest of lives, but when they began shooting at the legionaries sleeping in forts exactly like those we'd raised — it was the same damned pattern both sides used — it looked like we'd kicked a hornet's nest. Not only did goblins and regulars come out in force, but so did a large force we hadn't anticipated. The entire Eighth Legion had left the camp in Kala Hills and begun marching towards the trenches. Our watches and horns did their job properly, calling for a brisk assembly, but it was clear that we'd not get to our fortifications in force before the enemy did. Not that it mattered, I thought, because the Eighth wasn't actually there to attack us. Juniper had believed it would be two legions, but she'd written that a delaying force at least one strong would march our way.

Now there were two more of her predictions left to come true.

The first came true within a quarter bell. In perfect marching order, the Eleventh and Fourteenth Legion crossed the valley to begin an assault on the camp in Moule Hills where Sepulchral's vanguard was now beginning to wake in a panic. Eight thousand legionaries marching against the three thousand mixed force of household troops and cavalry. If the Black Knight closed in before they were ready, and she would, it would be a slaughter. I was rather proud of how quickly the Army of Callow began gathering in the valley facing the Legions. By the time the Eighth finished living up to their cognomen of Trailblazers and

took over the Legion fortifications facing ours, our own vanguard of three thousand was on its way to our side of the trenches.

"I think we took them by surprise with the harassment by Archer and Huntress," I mused. "At a guess, because of the dark they thought it was an attack on their position."

"Then why did the Eighth march out so quickly?" Vivienne asked with a frown.

"Dedicated response force," I said. "Nim had them waiting for something like this. Which is why there's only one other legion marching to reinforce them."

I pointed in the distance, where the Thirteenth was marching to bolster the Eighth in their defensive position. The Black Knight's own legion, the Seventh, was staying back. Serving as a reserve, most likely.

"And now the Legions gamble on our being too slow to stop them from wiping out the Askum troops," Vivienne muttered. "Isn't Marshal Nim afraid we'll overwhelm the eight thousand she's putting in our way? Sepulchral sent household troops, not the sort of men who die quickly. If we gather enough soldiers here, we could break the two legions in our way and perhaps even defeat her army while it's divided."

"Good instinct," I praised. "She's very much afraid of that. It's why she's kept her own legion as a reserve, it keeps her options open. That way she can either use the Seventh to shore up the defences in the valley or to give second breath to the assault on Sepulchral should it stall out."

"It still seems risky, especially trying it at night," Vivienne said. "What if we gather quicker than she anticipated?"

"Here's where it gets interesting," I mused. "See, what we sent to reinforce our trench was our readied troops. Night watch, soldiers on duty. It was a pretty solid number for an army our size. But the second wave of our soldiers is going to come slower. They'll need to wake, put on armour, find their officers and muster before marching out. There's going to be a beat between the two waves."

"So she attacks us when she still has more soldiers on the fronts than we do?" Vivienne guessed.

"That'd be a blunder," I said. "If she tries to overwhelm our trenches, she risks our people holding and her men being out of formation when our second wave does arrive. That could go *really* badly for her, the kind of disaster you were talking about earlier."

"So what does she do?" the sole princess of Callow asked. "Why are we here, Catherine?"

"Because the Hellhound believes that Marshal Nim is going to make use of that beat between the waves," I said. "Not to overwhelm our position in the valley, no, but to delay the reinforcements. To make sure that we can't threaten to overwhelm *her* position in the valley while she deals with the Askum camp."

"And how would she do that?" Vivienne asked.

I wasn't the one who answered her. It was, instead, the thunder of thousands of hooves against the half-road. Three thousand auxiliary horse rode down the sole road of the valley, well to the west of the standoff between the Eighth and our vanguard. They weren't heading there in slightest, after all: they were going to continue doing the road before taking a brisk turn east towards Kala Fortress, to strike at my soldiers before they could properly form up into a second wave. They'd retreat soon enough, light horse couldn't handle the Army of Callow in a lasting fight, but all they had to do was sow enough chaos and death to slow us down before running away.

It would buy the Black Knight long enough to do achieve what she was after, removing Sepulchral's vanguard from the board.

Of course, there was just one little bit of trouble with that. Three thousand light cavalry, packed in a tight column so they could make the best use possible of the road, were a fearsome force. But also a fragile one. So I wanted until they were in deep, too late to easily leave, and then I turned to Grandmaster Brandon Talbot. He'd been waiting all this time, listening with an eager look on his face.

"I'm going to pull down the veil," I said. "Ready?"

"At your word, Your Majesty," he replied.

It'd been a pain to get Masego to anchor the Night-working in a stone and meant it had been a pretty basic illusion, but it'd allowed me to get around that little trick of Akua's with the red light circle. The Legions had gotten too dependent on that for sniffing me out, they really ought to have known better. With a murmured prayer I tore the Night out of the stone, feeling it crumbled to dust in my hand, and suddenly the moon shone pale above the glinting ranks of the Order of the Broken Bells. Lances down, shields up, the knights were in broad flanking positions just ahead of the largest cavalry force left in the Wasteland. I glanced at Vivienne, grinning and gesturing at our foes. She grinned back.

"KNIGHTS OF CALLOW," she shouted. "FORWARD!"

Once, twice, thrice the horn sounded.

Death followed.

kitebroken1

"VOTERS OF PGTE," she shouted. "FORWARD!"

Once, twice, thrice the horn sounded.

Votes followed.

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Vote!

Steven Silver

"Prayer and a vote work better than prayer alone" 😊

Linus42

Good Juniper getting back on the horse, granted she is not wrong even before Malicia mindscrewed her the military choices were a mess.

EE is playing Musical Chairs With Named, who is going to be left without a chair when the Music Stops. Arthur is playing wheel of fortune with Knight Names, Cat balances with the Tower, Viv is looking at a Heroic Named (which should help with an Arthur coup), while Hanno and Cordelia size up the same name. And who knows how it shuffle out in Praes in general.

emperorirritant

Our dear friend Amadeus may also be playing around with Names,
you never know with that guy

Miles

I think Amadeus counts as a pretty good Name already. It even comes with a theme song.

<https://duckduckgo.com/?q=amadeus+song&t=fpas&iax=videos&ia=videos&iai=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com/watch?v=9vYUwX8e06c>

Just watch, the last epilogue chapter will be some rookie antihero or antivillain thinking methodically and then

getting the name Amadeus while the theme song plays in his head.

[Liliet](#)

Military choices a mess? What do you mean?

Linnus42

Their campaign in Procer when Cat was dealing with the Drow was going not well at all.

shikkarasu

That was more “no-one expects the Hierophant” and less a mistake by Juniper. She couldn’t have known that Arcadia would start crumbling and admitted that the cause of the poor performance of Callow was over reliance on Gates. Even Cat started softening once she heard Juniper’s reasonings. Juniper has mostly been out of the limelight for narrative reasons, giving Cat a chance to be a general instead of a Warlord. She hasn’t been unfit at any point, except when she was having the effects of **Rule** carved out of her.

[Liliet](#)

That was a fuckup on story level: militarily speaking, Juniper had no reason to expect the gates to stop working on her all of a sudden. And story stuff is not really Juniper’s responsibility, in her partnership with Vivienne.

I mean it’s valid to say that if she’s a genius then yes it is, but it was still a single mistake. All the following trouble just resulted from how she’d not meant to have a campaign there at all, in the first place.

Sinead

And even then, Juniper agreed that the Gates were a critical point of failure that could theoretically be broken.

Not in a ‘how could I see this coming?’ but in a logistical sense of ‘never assume 100% reliability’

So if that is a mark against her, she has met it and resolved it.

This current issue is self inflicted, which is infinitely harder to excise.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah precisely.

Linnus42

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Lousy

"Nim, give me back my cavalry."

Tenthyr

I'm glad for Vivienne and Catherine, Viv for being ready to take up a new mantle and Catherine for being happy, in maybe a sad way, that her country can have a ruler free from her pains.

Steven Silver

It really was a sweet moment.

Arctusshade

Awesome! Wonder if Juniper will feel worse since she didn't have "the guts" to do the plan.

Definitely feel the workings of "named" here since none of this would have happened without the "conincidental" conversation

Sinead

While I am happy with everything in this chapter, I love the detail with Tabolt at the end.

He just has such great energy in these scenes.

[sengachi](#)

Tabolt only ever wanted to serve Callow and kick Praesi and Proceran ass. And by gods he has gotten to do that.

Sinead

And I guess what I like about Tabolt is that he's sort of an 'upgraded' version of John Farrier in the sense that his general mood can probably be a reflection of a facet of Callowan's view of Cat. I liked the chapters we had from his

perspective of Cat not being perfect (and doesn't exactly fulfill his vision of Callow as he has envisioned it) but she and those she brought with her in her rise do do well by Callow and the Callowan people.

I would love a chapter from his perspective now. Post Regals, and ~3-4 more years of working alongside the 'foreign' elements of the Army of Callow.

I joke about his 'energy' in simplistic terms, but he's really an interesting character in terms of perspective.

The Knights of Callow is essentially the Callowan equivalent of the ogre heavies in terms of what the Army of Callow has that no one else has. I would love to see his potential thoughts of integrating the concept of the knightly orders into the AoC doctrine.

Heck, it would be interesting if it's Tabolt himself who makes the critical argument to Arthur regarding the limited development of the knightly orders. He strikes me as a man who is both smart and wise enough to at least appreciate the reason Cat made the choices she has regarding the knightly orders, even if he may not always agree with them.

Liliet

I got the impression that Cat hasn't so much made choices regarding the knightly orders as *not* made them. She did not prioritize restoring the multitude of them, and it would have been a bad idea for a variety of reasons *if it had occurred to her at all* but in the first place it really looked like it didn't. She restored a single one and stuck with that, with no incentive for further reform in that particular area – it wasn't on fire, which made it priority number last compared to everything else going on.

So Talbot talking to Arthur would, I think, not be in context of "why hasn't the queen done this" ("when would she have gotten around to it" is the answer to that, and I think Talbot has the perspective to fully appreciate it), but in the context of "so what happens next".

And yeah, I agree – Talbot would probably have the whole political picture there.

Sinead

Good points all around.

I guess what it comes down to is that I think Tabolt is able to appreciate the long view now that he is seeing Callowans rise in influence alongside the Praesi

influence. On top of that, there is further integration of cultural exchange (thinking of the 'trick plays' and the other cultural trades at that fesyival) so that some boundaries between all the nations within Callow are lessening.

Plus with Vivienne keeping to the ties of the past more so than Cat did, I don't think Tabolt is as uneasy about Callow's future. Probably explains why he is much more relaxed in some ways than he was in earlier books. It's not just familiarity, it's vindication of having made the right choice with backing and supporting Cat for the past 5 years.

[Liliet](#)

Mm!

Frivolous

Sinead: I love Brandon Talbot; he's one of my favorite secondary or tertiary characters.

I imagine he's very handsome both in and out of his armor and that he hoists a big... lance.

Sinead

There is nothing fake about his ceremonial codpiece that's for sure!

DC

It has suddenly come to my attention that Sepulchral might have a Chancellor; it might explain some of what she's been pulling off, and there probably isn't much competition given the whole "anyone who tries to claim it gets executed" thing.

[onedollargum](#)

I wouldn't be surprised if Amadeus is becoming a Chancellor. He's certainly playing enough games in the background.

[laguz24](#)

I'm not entirely sure, having a chancellor is more for dealing with the nobles and keeping the tower not claiming it. So maybe she doesn't have one but it would be a nice ace in the hole and it would work wonders to see just why that name was outlawed.

R

I think it's Grem pulling the strings from behind the scenes (based on Amadeus mentioning him in the interlude).

Steven Silver

Does anyone know what a Chancellor's role typically is? Is been too long for me to have a good feel for it 😞
And the dictionary definition isn't helping me much.

agumentic

Deal with nobility and often day-to-day rule.

ohJohn

The archetypical Dread Empress orders the hordes forward from atop her flying fortress, cackling maniacally, as the opening move of some fever dream of a plan; Malicia very conspicuously does not do this type of thing, and infamously does not have a Chancellor, so presumably a lot of her day-to-day has historically been the work of Chancellors: being the biggest, meanest viper in a particularly nasty pit of them, collecting taxes, putting down rebellions, managing spy networks, and just generally keeping Praes together while its armies go invade Callow.

I think Her Most Magnificent and Spooky Highness, Scion of the Blood of the Original Murder sums up the roles of the foundational Praesi Names best:

"Praes is a story," she said. "A Tyrant to lead us. A Black Knight to break heroes. A Warlock to craft wonders. A Chancellor to rule behind them. And an Empire like clay, to shape into the tool they need: an entire nation built to empower the ambitions of a single villain."

Book 3, "Villainous Interlude: Chiaroscuro": <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/villainous-interlude-chiaroscuro/>

dadycool

Oh, I've been waiting so long for the Broken Bells to ride against the Legion. Ever since the story turned westward, it hasn't felt quite right seeing them in action. But now they're going against their traditional enemies, so it's only right for them to get at least one good charge in.

Vivienne sees the signs of things coming together for her Named. Personally, I wonder if Queen's Knight would be a good name for Arthur. His QUEEN took him under her wing, his QUEEN is ordering him into battle all the time, but specifically against an enemy Named commander he has a Three with, and it's a neutral Name, with its alignment dependent on the resident Queen, which will be a Good Named when Cat retires. Who knows, maybe it'd happen in the same instance as Cat's retirement/ascension.

It really is tragic how few members of the Fifteenth are left. By my count, Kilian, Cat, Hakram, Pickler, Juniper, and Aisha. That's six out of, what, twelve?

Damien /

A kind of Servant Knight (as oppose to a Ruling or Adventuring Knight) might be reasonable giving Arthur character and history as a squire in the Army. It would also reinforce the fact that knights are soldiers now, not lords or independant military forces. I think the fact that this is exactly how Cat and Viv have been using the knights of Callow gives ground for the blossoming of this kind of Role. Especially when you consider that service (to the crown, to a lady, to the innocents) is a staple of knights in Middle-Age Europe but it is a kind of knights never mentioned in the history of Callow (so far anyway).

Juniper and Aisha were not part of the Fifteenth, but they would be considered one of them as Hune was (and even more than her). Originally, there was 8 named members of the Fifteenth I think (Ratface/Hasan, Cat, Hakram, Kilian, Nauk, Nilin, Pickler, Robber), and only four of them are still alive (and we didn't see Kilian in a while).

caoimhinh

You are mistaking Rat Company with the Fifteenth Legion.

Juniper, Aisha, and Hune weren't part of Rat Company, whereas the 8 you mentioned in the end were, but they all were part of the Fifteenth Legion.

M0och123

The robber hurts me every time.
He was my favourite character, to the point where I was surprised he didn't come out on top of the character poll last year.

Zach

It isn't inconceivable that Arthur could end up White Knight. We've seen how Hanno is increasingly deviating from his Role and weakening in the Light as a result of it, and it would leave that Name conspicuously unoccupied.

Juff

Typo Thread:

south expel > south to expel
capacity of our armies > capability of our armies
as if were > as if it were

I recognize the > I recognized the
Above of you > Above all you
listen at > listen to
"You trusted the man, (extra space)
face ever showing > face never showing
Askum > Aksum (occurs twice)
there in slightest > there in the slightest
I wanted until > I waited until
stone and meant > stone, which meant
feeling it crumbled > feeling it crumble

Lowinternetspeed

in the rest to shade > in the shade to rest

mamm0nn

Robber, sitting behind a rock hearing about Cat and Pickler talking he's never going to come back ever, giggling and smiling like a naughty imp waiting for the big surprise.

Oh, just you wait. One bottle of goblinfire left, waiting for a good place to light itself. And with my Name being immune to the stuff, I'll probably get killed some other way once I light it, I will.

Meanwhile I'm not seeing a mass ritual worthy of Praesi combat in this fight yet, thus Akua is probably going to turn the tides at least once because that's what Praesi do rather than rely on Legion superiority.

Steven Silver

I think part of the Legion reforms was getting rid of big rituals in favor of more standard spells, and Nim is all in on the reforms.

But, yeah, Akua is there. A big magic wrench in the gears wouldn't be surprising, especially after she and Cat faced off like they did.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Yeah, but then again, it's Akua, rumored Warlock. Just like the Legions under Cat in the first books started relying on rituals when a Mage Named was around

[Burlyraven](#)

The whole Pickler conversation reminded me that while I do believe Robber is dead, there was the mention of fields and a warm breeze at the end of his death scene, which could be an afterlife, or it could be the Twilight Ways, somehow. Just a thought.

I wonder if the Heavens are going to show Arthur any of Cat's more monstrous moments as Squire, context or no. A few of her tricks with necromancy come to mind as potentially galvanizing. Of course, that might give Below license to show the more mitigating moments to throw some turmoil into the mix.

Velrix

Hey, you're right, what are the Goblin's Named ? They're unknown, nobody know shit about them...
Soooo "Robber"...

[Liliet](#)

We had WoE specifically saying Robber isn't Robber's Name ♥

Sinead

I wonder if Cat will have her own moment like King Edward VII. She cannot call on the Callowan ghosts in Leisse, because she was not the queen of those people, not deep in their bones like the Fairfax would have been.

However, she has always been a soldier's queen. And after a short stint as Winter's Queen, her necromancy for a time had an...interesting touch.

What would be interesting in this case would be absences. My guess that Niln (and any other spies purged from her ranks) are absent, and Hune declines but sends her regards (in the sense that it's a respectful refusal in that she did her time, but Cat has no claim on her loyalty). Perhaps some of the other Villains that have died may show up as well, but I suspect not.

Then you might see some form of closure for Pickler between Robber and Nuak.

[Liliet](#)

HELL YEAH

- more details on Arthur and his Name dreams!
- and he's doing his research by finding out what had happened, hell yeah!
- a conversation with Vivienne about her Name ANNND YEAH I was right it's gonna be a heroic one! I think this was a fairly widespread prediction
- AISHA SCREENTIME and awww ♥ @ the plan to show Juniper she's good. I mean obviously first and foremost it's the plan they needed for the battle lmao but it's also a plan to show Juniper she's good!

– ALL KNIGHTS CHARGE

– More clarification on the vanguard and the relative positions.
Army musical chairs ♥ ♥ ♥

– so... what are you going to do, Akua? :3

Unrecovered

Hah! So Hanno would be Warden of the West, and Kat as his counterpart Warden of the East 😊 Remember me, I called it first 😜

Liliet

First?

Autochthon

Yeah, that is my feeling as well. Just Hanno has to claim the name over Hasenbach, that will definitely be interesting.

shikkarasu

I love Hanno, and I don't begrudge him his promotion, but if Cordelia is killed/ousted before the end of this war I will be salty with him.

kinghaart

+1, Hasenbach has put in more miles, Hanno has not been idle but has had a Name to lean on.

Piromin

It's been called quite a lot of times, ever since she started mirroring Hasenbach, the unofficial warden of the west, together with the bard trying to guide her away from the forming name.

daniel

Um... If by calling it first you mean more than 18 months after Liliet then sure.

Or is Kat != Cat? 😜

And I'm assuming you're not claiming credit for calling Hanno as Warden of the West since after the interlude practically everybody is.

Zach

Hanno as Warden of the West is possible because we know he's likely losing White Knight and we know that "Warden of the West" has some sort of precedent as a Name, but I'm confused

where this "Warden of the East" idea comes from. There's no precedent for that role, and the most noteworthy indicators of Catherine's future Name are things like her exercising "Name authority" over someone like Pilgrim, who is not part of "the East." Nothing about being "Warden of the East" would give a Named authority over a major Western hero. Nothing about Catherine's long-term goals involve her ruling over "the East" (since any future authority she has would likely be centered in that proposed Cardinal city). I don't even think Callow is considered part of "the East."

Whatever happens with Catherine, it is clear that her Role is one that involves some sort of authority over other Named. The main actions shaping her future Role are those during the war against the Dead King (that's when her Name began to take shape, long before she even thought about going to Praes). It makes no sense for her to begin developing the Name "Warden of the East" over the course of a war in the West against the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

I started this theory back in book 5, when Catherine... did not have the setup she has now, yet (but Cordelia was showing signs of developing the WotW Name).

No comment on how plausible it is now, just, a historical fact. So to speak.

kinghaart

Yeah I don't buy Warden of the East.

Empress of the East though...

Autochthon

I have finally caught up to this amazing story.

Steven Silver

I'm so sorry 😞

Autochthon

Thank you very much, ErraticErrata for these awesome characters and stories. It has consumed my life for the past three months. Some random thoughts (sorry, enter somehow does not work here: Sometimes I hate Cat's actions, but that seems to be the point, all of these characters are quite deep and multifaceted. I find it hard to follow the troop movements on the strategic level, those are the only parts I found myself skimming. I would need not only the map but also all the figures for the armies and a military advisor :D. I know this is a large and unforgiving world

but I was quite upset by the offscreen deaths of the court in Laure, especially Ratface :'. He was one of my favourite characters and I would love to see either his demise or some other interlude with him included. Similar with some named as well, the Sage showed up only to get killed, would love to see more of Lysander and The Rapacious Troubadour. Love the different perspectives of the prominent heroes, especially Hanno and Tariq, less so Laurence contrasted with Black's pragmatism and our very own Cat and the other, more traditional villains Like Akua , The Barrow sword and the like. Actually, now that I think about it, almost every named (and Named) character has his own philosophy. I look forward to the conclusion. Hope it doesnt end in some eternal sacrificial service either for Cat or Akua, Cat in particular just seems so TIRED. She deserves some rest.

M0och123

You know... the phrase ready kick ass and take names is oddly appropriate for this story.

Graeme Jardine

Honestly reading the most upto date chapter honestly creates such a buzz on each and every single update, truly amazing writing and such a good story, thank you

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Prediction: the Rebel Legions will arrive before the battle gets properly going

shikkarasu

Counter prediction: the threat of them will hinder Nim and Catherine will do that "taking advantage of the chaos" thing. By the time Sepulchral's forces arrive in full Cat will be the only player left in the valley.
Catherine then uses her other trademark: **Dictate** terms.

hoser2

I love the denouement. The seemingly ignorant questions and events coinciding make the story flow beautifully. But there is no way Vivienne is giving the commands without knowing the deployment of the Order of the Broken Bells and understanding the plan already.

If she were mounted and leading the charge, I could hope that this would be the encounter that will put her name over the top. But I fear that it will take heroic action in even more dire straits to set her up for her name.

Sinead

Agreed. Perhaps if Apprentice was along to help manage the illusion, complaining about Arthur grinning like a fool but not saying anything, that would work as a better moment. Especially with Vivienne as a second voice near the end.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Catherine gave Vivienne the signal, which is obvious in context, because Vivienne is quick on the uptake. And because it's really obvious what Catherine has prepared for.

"Be armed, armored and mounted" is I take it the default for Vivienne-outside these days.

Sinead

That is also a good point. I guess my confusion is that wouldn't Vivienne be explicitly aware of the plan at her level of planning?

I also like Sapan, and wish she had more screen time.

[Liliet](#)

The latter is an excellent point and I bow to your wisdom.

As for the former, Vivienne had her own task, whatever it was she and Cat had alluded to during their conversation, that Cat told her to "hurry up". I can see her being too busy with that to really be kept in the loop of military preparations.

Sinead

You make a good point, so I don't have much of an objection for that ending point.

I still like the idea that Sapan complaining about Arthur walking around with a grin and not explaining anything. The only thing to make it better (though I know it wouldn't be likely) is if it was established that Sapan had some rapport with Tabolt, and that he's being worse than Arthur.

However, that's really just my mental image of Tabolt just before a cavalry charge, as already established.

[Liliet](#)

Just write it. Just write itttttt. You clearly have an excellent shortfic scene in mind D000 IIIT 😊

Sinead

In this particular instance, I don't think I would just inject Sapan into the end.

I may write from Brandon's perspective on the last few years (as he reflects on them before this charge).

Cat comments on not knowing any of the stories of the Old Kingdom.

However, she knows someone who through his station and age would be very familiar with those.

And he is keeping his mouth _shut_!

I think that means something. And not just that he's worried about losing his tongue. He knows/understands Cat way better than those days in Marchford.

There are a lot of interesting things around Sir Brandon Tabolt. I really hope we get an actual Interlude from his perspective. He's full of so many interesting secrets!

[sengachi](#)

Remember though, Name lore. Those cavalry coming around the bend right in cue was a Name thing. By turning this into a teaching lesson between two Name claimants Cat ensured the timing would be perfect.

kinghaart

Oh that's good thinking. That's my headcanon now at any rate.

zucced

Happy to see those poor Levantines get some justice. Though it would be unfortunate if Nim or Akua planned for this, however...

Sinead

Akua isn't particularly military minded outside of having the initial intel. Look at how Cat was able to use the walk through of the Battle of Lazon's Hallow to outplay Akua. And I cannot see how one can have both a fast moving light cavalry and also have a counter to having the side of your column caved in. The Knights of Callow are immune to direct sorcerous attention unless Nim has enough mages to send with that column to attack the ground on either side of the road.

Also, we know 'Death followed' so this was a success. This isn't Nemashah with endless resources where everything is a baited trap.

[sengachi](#)

So now Callow has uncontested cavalry supremacy again. That's got to be all kinds of not good for Him.

[Liliet](#)

Her

~~yes I know what the typo actually is but I had to~~

jamesc9

"half our army had gone in the rest to shade,"

There is at least one Word macro virus that swaps two words in each document, each time it's saved. EE, would you know if you had it?

Chapter 17: Aim

*"To be great one must stand on the shoulders of others.
The difference between rule and tyranny is whether they
raised or you stepped on them."*

*– King Edward Alban of Callow, best known for annexing
the Kingdom of Liesse*

I'd not seen that many dead and dying horses since the Graveyard.

Casualties were a haphazard game, when one tried to count them in the wake of a bloody melee in the dark, but I trusted my eyes. At least half the force of three thousand that'd proudly thundered down the road now lay dead in the dust, torn through like parchment by Callowan lances. The rest had fled, panicking as my knights butchered their way through the tightly packed column, and there'd be no more fighting out of them tonight. It'd been a massacre: we'd caught them flat-footed and in the wrong formation. Even after the casualties the Order of Broken Bells had taken, I suspected we now had more cavalry left than the Black Knight. That meant we'd killed at least three horsemen for every lost knight, the kind of exchange rate utter routs were made of.

Yet as the stink of blood and shit filled my nostrils, as the death cries of men and horses joined in a strange elegy, my eyes stayed on the horizon. The Order had not pursued the fleeing horsemen, Talbot had known that it was a fool's errand and it'd

put us at risk of running into an enemy trap. The orders given had instead been to send away the few prisoners taken, execute the dying and change mounts in anticipation of another ride. It seemed, though that there would be no need to send my knights into another melee. Marshal Nim, from her perch, had decided she did not like the growing shape of the battle. Too many risks, especially now that her horse had routed in the dark and the Army of Callow's reinforcements were marching unhindered.

If my vanguard tried to take her fortifications in the plains with the support of the Order, she might face an outright defeat here. Her forces were still split and I was the one with the cavalry advantage now. So the Black Knight did the smart thing, the prudent thing. What the Legion doctrine she'd helped write would have advised: she retreated.

The assault on Sepulchral's soldiers in the heights was called off and the Seventh prudently moved to reinforce the two legions already gathering to face my army by the trench. Marshal Nim wouldn't attack, though, and neither would I. Taking trenches, even only half-finished ones, would be messy. Too risky, given the exhaustion of our armies and the lack of coordination that came from fighting in the dark. Her officers were better than mine, sure, but she wasn't going to bet on the same army that'd slugged it out with the Dead King for years being the army to break. When the going got rough and the fighting became about who had the iron to pull through? There was no beating the Army of Callow.

So instead of a battle, what we were going to get was two armies standing in battle array half a mile from each other in the dark for a few hours before both retreated. I pulled off my helmet, shaking free my wet hair. I wasn't great with a lance, but I'd gotten in close with my sword after sowing further panic in the enemy with Night. There was blood on my armour that wasn't mine. I looked up at the starry sky, breathing out slowly.

We'd made it through one more night.

—

Aisha had thought that following Juniper's plan successfully would shake her out of... whatever this was, but the following morning I saw differently. I'd taken it as a good sign that she had headed out towards the frontlines, but it wasn't to our fortifications she went. She didn't go to inspect the trenches or the forts. Instead Juniper had headed further west, near the half-road that it would take us days to build all the way to — about six, Pickler believed, at our current pace. I found my marshal's escort milling about uneasily on the valley floor while Juniper herself stood alone beneath a tall sycamore tree. It didn't give much shade, its branches skeletal and bare of all leaves.

The Hellhound was one of the tallest orcs I'd met, taller than any in the Army of Callow save Hakram, and she'd always had a presence. Even as a cadet, the broad shoulders and ramrod straight way she stood had made the military in her visible to even a casual glance. I tended to have a hard time placing the age of orcs that were between their twenties and forties – before or after, the signs were pretty distinctive – but I'd known Juniper for years. Seen her grow as I grew, the lines of her broad face harden and her fangs thicken. Her eyes, black like most orcs', were deeper set than when we'd first met. The skin around had grown greyer, too.

Yet in all these years I'd never really seen her... sag like this. It was a little subtle, could have been taken as just leaning against the tree in someone like Indrani, but to someone who knew her it was plain. Her shoulders were hunched, her expression exhausted. She didn't greet me after I limped to her side, eyes still on the growing lines of fortifications in the distance. Dawn had passed an hour ago, both the Legions and my army were back to work in the cool morning air.

"There are better places to take it in," I tried. "If we go near the foot of the hills to the east, we can make out the Aksum camp as well."

She did not answer. I waited, at a loss. Juniper had never been one to swallow her feelings, so these long silences she'd taken to hiding in had me on the back foot.

"I recognized the plan," the Hellhound finally said.

"You should," I said, "it was yours. And it worked."

Not my subtlest of approaches but sometimes blunt was the way to go. A surprisingly large amount of the time, really. Yet instead of what I'd been looking for, her shoulders further hunched.

"It wasn't," she roughly replied.

"Juniper, we literally cribbed your notes," I flatly said.

Finally she turned to me, jaw clenched tight and eyes hard.

"You took my read of the situation and you made it yours," the Marshal of Callow evenly said, the growl kept low in her throat.

"I predicted some decisions Marshal Nim might make, like half our general staff could have had they been asked. You took those guesses and made them into a functional battle plan."

My fingers clenched but I forced myself to stay calm. It was like she was trying to be obtuse.

"Using the Order was -"

"I wouldn't have used the Order, Catherine," Juniper angrily said. "I wouldn't have fought at all. I would have moved half the army closer to the trenches so that the Black Knight would be forced to do the same and it became too much of a risk for her to attack Sepulchral."

I blinked, then hid my surprise.

"That would also have worked," I pointed out.

"Your solution was better," she growled. "You won the same prize, forcing her to back off from Sepulchral, but the Order's ambush cost her half her horse as well. If I had given you advice, if you had taken it, it would have been *an inferior result*."

I bit on my tongue before I could tell her it would still have been a good one, knowing she'd take it as a slap in the face.

"If you hadn't predicted Marshal Nim was going to attack none of it would have been possible," I said instead.

"General Zola believed she would as well," Juniper said. "You simply never asked her, because you insist on pretending I am something I'm not."

I grit my teeth. Why was she insisting on embracing the worst possible slant for everything? Fuck, she'd been outplayed by the Black Knight only twice – when had she become so fragile?

"And what would that be?" I bit out.

"A better commander than you," the Hellhound gravelled. "Someone whose advice you should be taking."

"That's-"

I almost said ridiculous before biting down on it. Calling her a fool wasn't going to achieve anything.

"- the truth," Juniper said. "When have I ever won a victory, save when you were dragging me along?"

"You beat back Malanza at the Camps," I said.

"I played for time until you could return," she replied, "and would have lost if you had not. It's been like that since the start. Three Hills was your plan. Marchford, Five Armies and One, Dormer – all the way to the Tenth Crusade. And when I did hold the command with none above me, I almost broke the Army of Callow in Iserre."

"I handle the Named part of those plans," I said. "The military parts were yours, Juniper. In almost all those battles, I went

down in the ranks and fought. Someone needed to actually command the army and that's always been you."

"You don't need a Marshal for that," Juniper said. "You need a general, and you have plenty already."

"I don't agree with that in the slightest," I harshly said. "And you're forgetting who built this damned army in the first place, Hellhound. It sure as Hells wasn't me."

"Don't you see how senseless it is?" Juniper miserably said. "We had a single draw when we were kids and it's all come from that. Every office, every honour, every title. I am a child in marshal's stripes facing a real marshal of Praes. It can only go one way."

There was nothing I could say, I dimly realized. We could be at this all day, I could have the silvermost tongue in Creation or the finest rhetoric of the Free Cities and it wouldn't move her an inch. She'd swallowed the lie, let it settle in her guts. Words wouldn't fix this. Fuck, I wasn't sure I *could*. My eye strayed to the sycamore, the shifting lay of its shade baring what I had missed: it was dead, inside. Through cracks I could see it had gone hollow, dead at the heart and the limbs simply too slow to have caught up to the truth. When I looked at Juniper she did not meet my eye.

"I will refuse a resignation if you offer it," I curtly said.

I got back on my horse and left her to her tree.

—

The bruising night battle had changed the balance of power in the valley.

We'd shown we had teeth and the Army of Callow had managed to recover from the exhausting overnight forced march that'd won us Kala Fortress. The Black Knight wasn't as sure she could take us on a field now. So both my army and the Black Knight's avoided further fighting, in the valley at least. Zola ordered a permanent night watch on the Legions in case they made another move on Sepulchral's vanguard, but like us Marshal Nim was focusing elsewhere: the valley between the hills of Moule and Kala had become a race of fortifications. I sent Archer and Huntress out to slow them as I had yesterday, hitting them at different places in the line, but even so their advantage in sapper numbers told.

They caught up to my own sappers and then began to overtake us, though not by too large a margin. Across the valley mirrored works were emerging: two lines of trenches facing each other, with palisades behind them. East to west, the both of us hurrying

towards the half-road. We even took the same precautions, pulled from the same doctrine. To prevent a night attack overwhelming our positions, we raised walled camps behind our walls where we could keep protective garrisons.

It was in Moule Hills that the fighting continued. I needed all my sappers down in the valley working on the siege works, which meant I'd have to rely on regulars to actually head out into the hills and cut wood. Compared to the goblin skirmishers from that would be shaken loose to harass us, my legionaries would be at a distinct disadvantage. A protective screen had to be sent out, so I sent for the two I believed to be the right people for the job. Lord Razin Tanja and Lady Aquiline Osená came into my tent an hour past dawn, but it was not an elaborate plan I gave them.

"Kala Hills," I said, pointing at the map. "If it's an enemy and it's in it, I want it dead. Keep them off our woodcutters."

"The plan?" Razin politely asked.

"Pick your men, pick your pace, pick your battles," I shrugged. "Those hills are yours."

Aquiline grinned.

"You have us an honour war, Black Queen," she said, sounding delighted.

"Honour can bite my ass," I said. "Bring me scalps, Osená."

The look on her face was somewhere between scandalized and gleeful, which actually did wonders for my mood. At least the lordlings could be counted on not to fall apart, I thought as I sent them out of the tent. By afternoon I had my first reports: the Dominion force was taking to the task with fervent enthusiasm, the Malaga contingent in particular. Fighting the Champion's Blood in the Alavan hills for centuries had ensured they were well versed at fighting in this sort of terrain. It was a bloody, tribal fight just the way the goblins and the Levantines liked them. Razin himself came back near Afternoon Bell with a fresh scar and a pleased look on his face, just in time for Vivienne to ambush me as I got a cup of wine in him before sending him off to a healer.

"The commander of Sepulchral's force sent us a rider," she said, briskly entering the tent. "They want to meet."

"Finally," I grunted. "You got a name for me?"

"Isoba Mirembe," Vivienne said.

I let out a low whistle.

"Sepulchral's heir," I told a confused Razin. "Her grand-nephew."

"Does she have no closer relatives?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"It used to be her nephew, but we killed him at the Folly," I said. "They have a time for me, Vivienne?"

"Half-past Afternoon Bell," she said. "South of Moule Hills."

I grimaced. Would have to saddle up soon, then. And since the young man – he was nineteen, I vaguely recalled, or thereabouts – was technically heir to both Askum and her claim on the Tower I'd have to bring enough high-ranking people it wasn't an insult. There weren't really many I could spare, though. Then I shot a considering look at Razin, who was noble.

"Finish that cup, lordling," I said. "And get that wound looked at. We're going for a ride."

Might as well pick up the other kids, I thought. Sapan would be pissy at leaving Masego's side – or more realistically his grimoires – but it would be good for her and Arthur to get a proper look at Wasteland high nobility. Besides, even though I didn't believe the call to be a trap that hardly meant I trusted the Mirembe. Two more Named would be a useful precaution. Razin Tanja set down his empty cup on my carved table, standing up, and that was the sound of us getting a move on.

—

Isoba Mirembe looked a lot like I'd expected Sargon Sahelian to. Tall and with slender muscles, his face a perfect symmetry of high cheekbones under cold golden eyes. He was beautiful, but almost more like a statue than a man. It reminded me uncomfortably of the Exiled Prince, who might as well have been cut out of marble. This one, though, did not have a Name. How many potions and spells had it taken for his dark skin not to have the slightest of imperfections on it? The armour he wore was practical, at least, if incrustated with enough jewels to arm an entire company of legionaries. My escort of knights was a match in numbers for his retinue, but instead of the handful of nobles he'd brought I instead had two Named and a ruler of the Blood.

"Black Queen, I greet you in the name of Dread Empress Sepulchral," Isoba said, breaking the silence, "and give you her thanks for your intervention last night."

"The Black Queen greets her back," I drily said. "You know who I am. With me ride Lord Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood, the Apprentice and the Squire. And, of course, twenty of the same knights that ran down the Legion horse last night."

The last part was a break in manners, but I regretted it not the slightest when I saw the backs of my knights straighten. They'd

earned the praise, as far as I was concerned. Isoba introduced only the nobles he'd brought, each a ruling lord or lady in their own right. He'd not skimped on the rank of those he brought, at least, which was a good sign. With that out of the way, we got to business.

"A truce between our forces would be only natural," Isoba suggested. "Neither Aksum nor the true empress have any quarrel with the Grand Alliance."

"A truce is a start," I said, "but it's just delaying the trouble. We need to strike at the Black Knight together."

"My aunt would welcome the official backing of the Grand Alliance as ruler of Praes," Isoba easily replied, smiling without a speck of joy. "On such terms an alliance could be made."

"You're not getting that," I bluntly said. "And you lending a hand to the business of keeping your hides from being tanned is hardly worth that asking price. Poorly bargained."

"Why would we pay for what you offer freely?" the young man laughed. "It is in your interest to keep our force from being overwhelmed, lest you find yourself fighting the Legions alone."

"You're standing on quicksand, Mireembe," I warned. "I'm not going to keep pulling you out of the fire if you're of no use to me. Better then to let the Black Knight bloody her forces killing you all."

That got his attention.

"Bluster," he dismissed, but his eyes had sharpened.

I sighed. There was no point to this if he had no grasp on the precarity of his situation.

"This is why children shouldn't be sent to negotiate," I said. "You've wasted my time."

He looked like I'd slapped him, which to be fair I pretty much had. His gaggle of nobles were studying him for a hint of his thoughts – or of weakness – but he wasn't going to walk back his words after I'd insulted him. We'd have this talk again after Marshal Nim put some proper fear in his belly, or she killed them all. Either way, it was no trouble of mine. So long as the vanguard had a proper standing fight instead of being slaughtered half asleep, I figured they could cost the Legions at least two thousand men going down. It'd make the Black Knight's force somewhat more manageable.

"Back to camp," I told my people, pulling at Zombie's reins.

My eye found that Razin, though, was looking at the other young man with an odd look on his face.

"Since I was a child I have been told of the cunning of the Praesi high lords," the Lord of Malaga said. "And *this* is the truth of your blood? This is a bitter disappointment."

"What would a savage from the edge of the world know of anything?" Isoba mocked. "The Mirembe could wipe out your misbegotten bloodline as easy as—"

"I have been on that horse, once upon a time," Razin said, eyeing the other lord. "So I am not without sympathy for your position, for it is not pleasant. Yet even a savage from the edge of the world knew it was better to swallow pride than perish like a fool. Where is the cunning and power that your people so often boast of? All I see is an arrogant child who would kill himself and all with him out of wounded pride."

Eyes, amber and dark, studied them both coolly. The nobles were listening.

"You know *nothing*," Isoba hissed. "Either of cunning or death. If the Legions come, they will be cowed."

"If the Legions come, you will die," Razin slowly said, as if speaking to a half-wit. "I am Blood, Isoba Mirembe. I understand honour, the pride of defiance. But that pride must be rooted in something more than fantasy, else you have saddled a dead horse. When the Black Knight comes you will be slaughtered to the last, and you are breaking off talks with the sole woman who can prevent this. This is *senseless*."

Huh. Isoba was looking at him like he wanted to skin him alive and boil him. Shit, now I was almost hoping the heir to Aksum would live just so he'd have to keep remembering that little speech. The nobles had watched it all, and I saw now that looks were being traded. They had come to a decision.

"It was not known to us that Marshal Nim had become the Black Knight," one of them idly said. "The situation has changed. Names are not to be underestimated."

"Perhaps talks should be had, after all," another said, smiling pleasantly.

Neither were looking at us. All of them, amber-eyed vultures, were looking at Isoba Mirembe. I saw it sink in, the truth that if he did not bargain Sepulchral would have another heir by nightfall. And it was hard pill to swallow, but still better than dying, so he turned to us with a mild smile and talks began anew. I sent Razin a fond look. Sat in that horse before, had he? Sarcella had not been so long ago, and still it felt like a

lifetime. What did the man I was looking at now have to do with the boy I'd fought in that city?

So very little.

—

Isoba Mirembe would not concede to joining us in battle unless his position was assailed, and on that the nobles seemed to back him. Orders from Sepulchral herself, I suspected. We did strike a bargain, though: he would harass the Legions from behind, slowing their works, and in return I promised to intervene if the Black Knight tried to wipe him out again. It wasn't what I'd wanted from him, but it was still better than them staying holed up in Moule Hills twiddling their thumbs. The second day rose to much the same arrangements as the first: in the valley walls raced east, while in the hills trees fell and blood spilled.

It was all ambushes and raids in there, not a single standing fight to be found. War parties came back with trophies or never at all. The Dominion was better up close and with javelins, it became clear from casualty reports, but the Legion skirmishers were hardened veterans with full stocks of goblin munitions. We pushed them back far north by afternoon, but it led the Levantines into a series of vicious ambushes on mined grounds that forced them into full retreat. Aquiline captured a prisoner that shed light on the turnabout: the Legions had sent for volunteers from Risas, the town by the lake, so that they might have native guides in the hills. The losses earlier in the day had been bait for the trap.

In the valley the Legions were still ahead of us, but Isoba had been true to his word: he sent out his horse to harass the enemy. Quick hit-and-run attacks on companies between Marshal Nim's camp and the walls, burning a few carts and killing a few isolated tents. He retreated immediately when the Legions sent out their own cavalry, returning to the safety of the camp. The Black Knight hadn't made it a priority to bottle up the Askum troops before, but that changed with them making it clear they were willing to go on the attack. Sappers were pulled from the valley to begin raising a ring of forts near the foot of the hills where Isoba was encamped.

Good, it'd slow the Legions where it mattered.

On the third day, the situation in the valley and hills stabilized. In Kala Hills, the chastened Levantines established a cautious stalemate slightly to the north of the lines of fortifications. It left the greater part of the Kala Hills and its wooden bounty in Legion hands, but the Aquiline had sent her slayers to secure a few hidden glades to the east that kept us sufficiently provisioned in wood. Considering the disparity in numbers, I was more than satisfied with the performance of the

Dominion forces and made that plain to both lordlings. It was in the valley that we pulled slightly ahead, our wall and trench passing the Black Knight's. The Legions had carts full of what I believed to be siege engines brought to the front, though, and I ordered the same of my men.

No battle ensued, though. When trouble came it came from elsewhere. Scribe found me near Afternoon Bell and led me to a tent where two men were bound and gagged under guard.

"Who am I looking at?" I asked.

"Trusted servants of Lord Sokoro Abara," Eudokia said. "I've been keeping an eye on him. They were sent to take the long way around Moule Hills and get in touch with Marshal Nim. Some information would be passed as a gesture of goodwill, ties established."

Well, he hadn't struck me as a particularly trustworthy man. Hadn't expected him to try to play both sides so quick, though.

"What kind of information?" I asked.

"Minor," Scribe said. "Troop numbers, camp gossip."

Mhm. So nothing too drastic. He'd wanted to establish credentials, not outright jump ship. Not yet.

"He's still got his half-brother in a cell?" I asked.

Scribe nodded.

"Take him out," I decided. "Stash him somewhere in our camp."

"And these two?"

I eyed them.

"Put their heads on his bed," I said. "With a written note: *no second chances.*"

That should remind him in whose hands his leash was. It better, I had plans for tomorrow and wanted no distraction from them.

—

On the fourth day, I decided it was time to try to kill Marshal Nim.

Not here and now, unfortunately. I was unlikely to succeed with a nascent pattern of three nudging coincidence in her favour. But I could, at least, solidify that pattern. The veil over that knife was to be the Army of Callow going on the offensive: we were only two days away from our trench reaching the road, half the valley's length already fortified, so the time had come to test

the enemy's defences. The Legions had mounted their siege engines, as had the Army of Callow, but neither side had begun firing. We'd not wanted to begin that slugging match too early. Until now.

My ballistae began hammering at the enemy palisade at the turn of Morning Bell. Within eighty heartbeats, the enemy returned fire.

They had us beat in numbers for traditional Legion siege weapons like ballistae and scorpions, but by doctrine a legion didn't usually carry trebuchets unless an actual siege was planned. That gave us an edge in range and power with the three we had, but as the sky filled with stones I saw the margin was much thinner than I would have liked. On both sides mages had been brought to the fore, using shields to prop up our palisades so they wouldn't break under hits, but the enemy's superior volume of fire was hammering harder at us. We had fewer mages, too. I had an answer to that, fortunately: Archer and the Silver Huntress began using their proper bows.

Javelin-sized arrows began killing the siege crews and breaking the engines, our own ballista fire forcing their mage lines to stay and protect the palisades instead of covering them. The Black Knight had other mages to call on, though, and they intervened before my Named could do too much damage. A whirling wind formed over the enemy position and I grimaced. That looked simple and easy to maintain, which was bad, but worse was that neither my archer Named could land an arrow through that. Magic like shields they had arrows that could go through, but not wind. And it was exactly that, just magically induced.

Time to gamble, then. This might turn around on us if we didn't. I gave the order and the signals went up. In the Kala Hills to the east, through a path the Levantines had found, a strike force of a thousand emerged past the enemy defence line. There was a fort in the way, the Legions had known of the path's existence, but suddenly the wind in the sky stopped whirling and instead formed into a great spear. It hammered down into the fort, killing an entire company in a moment as Hierophant reminded everyone on the field why people avoided fighting mage Named of his calibre.

The legionaries rushed past the wreckage, heading straight for the enemy engines with two silhouettes at their head: Squire and Apprentice. *Come on, Black Knight, I thought. You need to keep those engines, otherwise digging out the vanguard in the hills will get a lot more complicated. It's only a thousand, and you can handle a mere Squire can't you? Take your swing. Come on.* A surge of power in the distance reminded me why I wasn't with the assault, a ball of poisonous green clouds beginning to form above my own siege engines.

"Hello, Akua," I coldly smiled, and unleashed the Night I'd spent an hour gathering.

My work was here. I'd asked Masego to keep the kids alive if this went south, it would have to do. And it was looking pretty good. The force with the Squire got to the engines and set two on fire in quick succession while I maintained a stalemate with the mage nobility and arrow fire began picking off Legion mages. Only the Black Knight wasn't showing. Not even in a possessed body. Shit, she wasn't taking the bait. Worse, even as my attack force began running into entrenched opposition and was forced back I found out where the Black Knight actually was: there was smoke coming from the Aksum camp. Had she hit them with an ogre line like she'd done our camp near Wolof?

Sepulchral's men didn't make fortified camps like the Legions and the Army did, a raid like that would go... badly for them.

Cursing, I have the order for a retreat. We'd broken at least half of the enemy siege engines, those deployed here at least, but it'd been costly. Even with Hierophant covering the retreat, we lost a little over half the thousand we'd sent. And Marshal Nim had not shown. I'd not finessed fate into killing her before the campaign was over. How had she known not to show? My fingers clenched, then unclenched. Akua, had to be. But why would she tell the Black Knight? If she was going to make a play for the Legions, and she must if she was to attempt to overthrow Malicia, she could not keep Marshal Nim alive. The Black Knight was a loyalist, the marshal that'd stayed true.

So what was her game?

It was beginning to slip out of my hands, I realized. I'd thought I had a handle on the path Akua would take, and I still believed that I did, but I had to wonder... I pushed aside the worries, attending to the here and now. With our retreat, siege fire petered out on both sides and ended entirely by Afternoon Bell. Sappers on both sides began repairing the chunks of palisade that'd been blown away, and that strange air of truce fell over the valley again. There was no more killing over the fourth day, not even in the hills.

All knew better than to believe it would last.

—

On the fifth day, Scribe brought news.

"Sepulchral's army is getting close," she told the war council. "If she keeps up the current pace, by evening in six days she will reach Moule Hills."

Opinions were divided on how we should react to that.

"We should delay until the greater army arrives," General Zola pragmatically advised. "Sepulchral will likely attempt to use us to destroy the Legions at the least cost to herself possible, but she will still broadly be on our side."

"Or she could sit it out entirely, waiting for someone's supplies to run out and desperate decisions start getting made," Aisha pointed out. "We should not assume cooperation of Abreha Mirembé, she is well aware that we do not wish her to climb the Tower."

"Even if we do want to finish off the Legions before Sepulchral arrive, *can* we?" Vivienne asked.

"If her vanguard helps, I believe it's possible to win a field battle," I said, then hesitated. "I'm not sure how decisive a victory it would be, however."

"That would strengthen the position of the pretender empress when she arrives," Lady Aquiline said. "Give her power in bargaining with us."

She wasn't wrong, I admitted. If Army of Callow and the Loyalist Legions bloodied each other just before Sepulchral arrived with her fresh force, it swung the balance in her favour. On the other hand, should we really wait six days just for this to still be true only with her camped in the hills over the battle? Aisha wasn't wrong either, when she'd said that Sepulchral might just try to live up to the vulture on her banner. No decision was made, in the end, though I knew one would have to be soon. If we were going to attack, it would have to be somewhere over the next three days. Otherwise the margin to rest and regroup before the empress-claimant arrived would be risky.

The trenches and palisades in the valley kept steadily stretching east, and by tomorrow Pickler was certain we'd reach the half-road. Fortifications were not, unfortunately, a goddamned plan. That was our trouble here: we didn't have a plan to beat the Black Knight, even if we could force her into a pitched battle. Which was looking less and less likely by the day.

Both sides extended their defences to the road on the sixth day, the skirmishes beginning again in earnest in Kala Hills. Weather blew in from the north-east that forced everyone to retreat by early afternoon, though with the warm morning sun being covered by clouds as the air cooled. What began as a hard rain that sent everyone running to fill water barrels turned into something altogether less pleasant before the hour was out: rain turned to snow, and then the kind of hard hail I would never have expected of the Wasteland. Everyone was stuck in tents for the rest of the day, until the storm passed halfway through the night.

When the seventh morning rose it was to still-wet ground, the hail having melted overnight, but also to General Zola bringing

me a worrying report. Two lines of scouts sent to the south of Moule Hills were hours late in reporting. We hadn't seen movement from the enemy, but the Black Knight might have moved troops under cover of the hail.

"Battle formations," I ordered Zola. "And prepare a force to handle our eastern flank in case they went around Moule Hills unseen."

Yet I learned, not even an hour later, that I'd been wrong. It was not the Legions that had caught our scouts. Well, in a sense I supposed it actually had been. In the middle stretch of Moule Hills, well to the south of Sepulchral's camp and about the height of the mirroring fortified lines, banners had been raised. Legion banners: the Second, Third and Ninth.

The Rebel Legions had arrived before Sepulchral could, and the balance hadn't swung against us so much as swung down on our heads.

Droughtbringer

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Droughtbringer

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

[*knockoffnikolai*](#)

Aquiline grinned.

"You have us an honour war, Black Queen," she said, sounding delighted.

"Honour can bite my ass," I said. "Bring me votes, Osenä."

[*Liliet*](#)

Seriously? You're not even the person making the actual reminder and you're doing this?

Pethrai D'arkos

I mean it's practically tradition now. It is our duty to compensate for those who forget.

[*Liliet*](#)

I don't think Droughtbringer forgot. I think they're doing exactly what they mean to do.

Insanenoodlyguy

Litliet, I know this is a peeve of yours, but you really got to let it go. Some of us have fun with this. That's fine! Some of us don't, like you. Also fine! But there is no reason for you to show up and be this annoyed about it. I mean, if Droughtbringer comes back and says "please don't reply to my posts with these" then okay, sure. As it is known you don't like these doing it as a response to your posts would be pretty dickish. But unless Droughbringer is your alt... you... don't need to care on their behalf?

Miles

Just pick less iconic lines. Even someone like litliet can be made to enjoy them if they aren't precisely chosen to ruin the important story beats.

therealgridlock

Ah yes,

"I was stuck taking a 17 hour long shit.

Vivienne arrived, asked if I needed anything.

'Need some more toilet paper,' I said. 'Aside from that, could always use more votes.'

She wandered away with a sigh to fetch me a roll of both."

nim

Nah this should stop

Anonymous

Honestly, I'm annoyed by it too. Many of us are. Please understand that when a few people vocalize their complaints, there are usually quite a lot more who are quietly displeased. This shameless vote-fishing with bait-and-switch blurbs is the single biggest reason I often don't feel like looking at the comment section, because it instantly brings down my mood, and I imagine I'm not the only one.

Furthermore, this smarmy post of yours where you act upbeat in order to upbraid someone and essentially tell them to stfu because you don't like to read those posts

without so much as a hint of irony at how the post you are faulting as improper is itself a request for people to tone down a posting habit they do not appreciate smacks of hypocrisy and selfishness masquerading as friendliness/empathy. I find that insincerity and self-centered approach to what constitutes pleasant behavior galling, which is why I find myself responding.

So perhaps you should consider letting it go instead.

medailyfun

the groove into Creation

Shveiran

God forbid someone makes a joke you don't find funny...

[Liliet](#)

I know, right? Awful.

Irritant

Seriously? You're not even the person voting and you're doing this?

ninegardens

On the one hand, I understnd Lilliets horror. On the other, this is actually a pretty good riff.

Pethrai D'arkos

I mean it's practically tradition now. It is our duty to compensate for those who forget.

Pethrai D'arkos

Replied to the wrong post and the stupid thing won't let me delete it.

[Liliet](#)

You're not wrong about this specific time, but the principle of the thing... It's not like people who do this always make them okay.

[TeK](#)

I mean it's practically a tradition now... to not make it ok. We have to compensate for those who blunder.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

I know this is a strongly-felt position for you, but I don't agree that riffing on the text ruins the text.

[Liliet](#)

me staring at a pile of ashes I don't agree that throwing a match on these flammable materials burns them down

[knockoffnikolai](#)

I wrote that comment and then was like "wait she's on discord I can just talk to her there." Based on that conversation I was misunderstanding your issue with the voties. (I'm Trollmore btw)

[Liliet](#)

o hi lol

Witness Alex

Hyperbolic nonsense. By definition these comments don't ruin the text. At most they, "ruin," the comments section.

Except they don't, skip down by one (or the first chain) and voila! Not ruined.

The argument that it undermines the tone of the chapter is often correct, especially in chapters with strong emotional impact. But by this stage you know that the jokes will be there, so just delay reading down until a harmless joke won't sour your mood.

SomeGuyWhoReadsThings

I'm subscribed to lord of the rings memes on Reddit and it's still a text I hold in the highest regard, like a Bible to a christian. What a hill you guys have chosen to die on....

Insanenoodlyguy

That is an act of destruction. This is an act of alteration. Completely different school of magic!

Tiredofcancelculturestickingitsbeakineverywhere

When you posted this on December 7, 2018 it ruined the immersion for me because i scrolled down to the comments section but thought I was still reading the story.

"Akua: Catherine this is the third time I'm saving your life tonight and I know you made a point out of how it was not by making good decisions that I made it into a cloak accessory but right now I think in sheer stupidity your attempts at heroism-
Catherine: You're not wrong. Consider, however: what if I did ANOTHER stupid heroic thing, most definitely dooming us both to die slowly and painfully, and you let me
Akua: ...
Akua: Okay."

I think it would be better if you didn't write stuff like this as you're not the author. I know I'm the only one complaining but that proves theres lots more that don't like it too.

I think all comments should only be a bland text equivalent of a golf clap to keep this beautiful work of fiction unsullied.

Rynjin

And that is exactly the reason I choose to participate in comments here sometimes, and not on RoyalRoad stories.

A chapter can have 100 comments and at least 80 of them will be "thsnks for the chapter", "TFTC", or "thanks for the snack".

You could assign an AI to write comments on modt stories there and nobody would be able to tell the difference between it and other posters.

I'd rather see a thousand bad jokes and crack theories thsn another bland, inane "thanks".

isioisi

Man you guys who rail on those that make the vote posts are more annoying than the actual vote posts. Can't you just scroll past it and get on with your lives? Yikes.

[Liliet](#)

You do realize that every criticism of my criticism is making this part of the comment section even longer, right? 🤪

Maarten S

I could say the same to you.

Kennedy

Alright so my guess for the next chapter names is something along the lines release/loose then maybe follow through since that is a fairly important part of archery

Lictor Magnus

That's what I had though earlier after nock but anchor and aim were not two titles in the line of thought I saw coming.

ruduen

Yes, they refer to the steps of archery. There are different depending on the source you're using. For example current NASP (National Archery in the Schools Program) steps, which are one of the first to come up in my Googling, are:

1. Stance
2. Nock
3. Draw Hand Set
4. Bow Hand Set
5. Pre-Draw
6. Draw
7. Anchor
8. Aim
9. Shot Set-up
10. Release
11. Follow-Through

Note that I imagine we're using a different set of steps here, likely based on a historical set. The uses of steps in Chapter Names started in Chapter 12 (String), and I expect the set used here is something based on historical records, rather than the modern interpretation. I'd expect 2-3 more chapters on the pace, but I'd put money on Release and Follow-Through showing up.

Kennedy

I do target archery and I learned it as feet, draw, anchor, level, aim, release, follow through. So far there's been footing or feet, pull or draw, anchor, no level since there's no scopes, and aim. Nock and string aren't part of my mnemonic device but you're right that it makes sense for more historical archery.

[*irritantseraphim*](#)

Gotta string that bow before you nock the arrow. And you gotta nock that arrow before you draw.

caoimhinh

So next chapter should be something like "Hold"?

I doubt it's gonna be shoot/release/loose.
That's likely to be for next Friday, in the time-honored tradition of leaving us with a cliffhanger for the weekend.

shikkarasu

Pretty sure that 'hold' is only used in cinema for dramatic tension. Drawing the bow and holding it for any length of time is a great way to wear out your arms, given that you are holding 40-50 Kilos while you are waiting to loose.

RoflCat

My vote is on Taut i.e. pulled position just before Loose.

dadycool

I wonder how crucial Archer and Silver Hunter will be in the climax of this arc, then. Presumably, they'll be the deciding factor.

armarm

I'm certain that this series of bow titles refer to juniper always referring to her plans as an arrow in her quiver being drawn out and not to our 2 archer names. this is junipers redemption/recovery arc to set in stone the need for non named players to run the show after cat abdicates.

[Liliet](#)

Juniper is still falling towards rock bottom and you think her recovery arc started X chapters ago?

miles

No rock bottom, and thus the start of her recovery, is where she'll be when she pulls the game winning plan out of her head.

[Liliet](#)

So yeah you were right yooooooooooooo ♥

whatabutthead

You really complain about the joke vote posts but come back to post spoilers on old chapters? Or is this post a joke?

[Liliet](#)

...Good point. I wish wordpress had a delete function.

dadycoool

The bits with the Levantines were nice. "Here's a sandbox for you two to play in. Have fun." The character growth of Razin is beautiful.

ninegardens

So.... whose side were the rebel legions on? I don't think it was ever cleanly decided.

Also, I can't help but think this all ends with Marshel Nim stepping back and Throwing her hands in the air. The Rebel legions are... friendly towards her? But also have opinions about what she should do. Akua has poisoned her trust in the Empress... and gotten her out of a Rule of 3... but hasn't turned her around or aside.

Cat would really LIKE to preserve these armies, so being able to off "Hey guys, we could just not kill each other" is a fine offer.... if she can get past Nim's concerns.

ruduen

She's not out of the Rule of 3 yet. It's delayed for the moment, but until there's a clear break in the pattern (likely through conclusive non-draw between the Squire and the Black Knight), the story will continue nudging things into place for the draw.

mamm0nn

Actually I wonder about that. Cat acts as if it already affects Creation, but is one loss really enough for the pattern? I mean, it's a pattern, not a ritual cast or a prophecy made.

Yes, I can see Providence nudge a draw if those two Named face off again. But just the Hero losing to the Villain seems like too thin and loose an event for the interactions with other Named and armies to be affected? That seems more something to happen after both the loss and the draw have happened.

Even in Book 1 Cat didn't really have a providence-mandated fate intertwined with William until it was just William's Win ensuring he wouldn't die (too easily) before she did.

agumentic

Any two Hero and Villain, no. But Squire against Black Knight is an old and well-worn story, even a single event

has fate inclining its way. And Cat's fate was so intertwined with William's after their first battle that Amadeus straight up said that it was useless to try and pursue him, he'd get away no matter what.

Andrew Smith

It pretty much depends on how fitting a rivalry between those names are like agumentic said William only needed one fight to start benefiting from the pattern of three(just having the second draw basically locks the story in)

Linnus42

The issue is more in my mind two things. One the rules might not be the same because in this case the Squire is the Aggressor as Arthur is part of the side invading Praes ergo making the storyline less favorable. The other issue in my mind is Nim and Arthur aren't really on the same level. Arthur is a bit player in this storyline whereas Nim is more a rival to Juniper or even Cat in this storyline than Arthur. Nim is one of the highest ranking people in her faction. Name or Not Arthur might not even be Top 20 in this section of the Grand Alliance in Praes much less the entire Grand Alliance. Arthur even if he is Squire is really just some random Named the Black Knight fought and beat up during a Raid. So given there different levels and lack of mirroring and storyline linking them I am not sure there would be a Pattern of Three. William and Cat at least fought over the Soul of Callow. Nim and Arthur don't really have any real link.

agumentic

Well, this isn't an exact science, so we can't say for sure where the strength of the story is surpassed by outside factors. But, in the end, he is a Callowan Squire facing the Black Knight of Praes. This story has a backing a thousand years old, there probably were dozens of Squires and Black Knights facing off sort of like this. It's not the most solid of foundations to build a pattern from, but one of the biggest experts in stories and Namelore on the continent believes it's there, so I am inclined to believe her.

shikkarasu

What convinced me was Arthur gaining an Aspect in the wake of the first fight designed to prepare him for the rematch. That's a lot of Narrative weight on this rivalry already. That said, Nim is a strategist; she should be able to find a way out of this.

RoflCat

Nim would need Akua or someone else with better grasp on Story-fu to avoid the pattern.

Even Akua herself seem to be accidentally breaking the expected pattern, like with the 'why not?' towards that guy or this helping of Nim.

Insanenoodlyguy

That's not an accident. That's years watching the Story-Fu master .

Mental Mouse

Cat figured out a way to kill off a Rule Of Three (throwing the middle fight, with a backstop), and Akua was there. And Nim has her own backstop with her possessed bodies.

Liliet

Unfortunately it's really easy for something to be read as a draw.

Cat didn't just throw the middle fight with a backstop, she genuinely made it into a victory for the Pilgrim. She helped him. He achieved his faction's goals in that fight.

(Remember how during their first pattern-of-three encounter Cat had a talk with Rozala and Rozala basically went "look just throw a fight I need one (1) victory over you for show" and Cat was like "I really cannot afford that sorry"? Then Cat went and did exactly what Rozala had asked for, and that was the victory the Pilgrim got)

For Nim to use that tactic and throw the middle fight, she has to *genuinely* concede something to Cat's faction in the process. A backstop that prevents her from meaningfully losing anything / Cat's faction from meaningfully winning anything, will just make it into a draw and further the pattern.

Mental Mouse

My point re the possession-as-backstop is that she can lose a fight, and even lose a fair bit of military position, without being in danger of actually getting killed.

Liliet

I mean yes she can avoid getting killed by conceding major military objectives. If they're not major enough,

considering killing her IS a major objective for Cat's side, it's a draw.

Mental Mouse

Well, that's the trick on her side – but killing her certainly isn't the only objective, and it's not even a primary objective for Cat. Indeed, Cat would be just as happy to *turn* her into an ally.

She certainly has room to take a loss against the Squire, and she can definitely avoid getting killed by him in the process.

The question is whether she has the savvy (and confidence) to find the line and take the loss when it counts.

Liliet

Yea.

Mental Mouse

Also, Nim's Ro3 isn't with Cat, it's with Squire... and he's not competing for the Black Knight role.

Liliet

No, he's not. Why bring that up?

Mental Mouse

Because he doesn't have to kill her to advance to his own Knight role...

Liliet

So what? That wasn't the case for... oh, ANY of the rivalries we've seen. Heiress never aimed for Black Knight, after all.

caoimhinh

As of now, the Rebel Legions are tentatively on Nim's side. They are going to make her an offer to betray Malicia and force the Empress to abdicate, then go and crush Sepulchral together as a united force.

What to do afterwards is in the air, though, as seems to be the rule for most of those fighting there, including Cat. They all have goals and hopes, but not so much on the side of plans and concrete strategies for this campaign.

Also, if Nim refuses the offer that the Rebel Legions are going to give her, then they are going to support Catherine's war effort, and even support Amadeus's claim to the Tower.

Then again, this is what they *said*, not necessarily what they will really end up doing, especially considering how Amadeus is yet to appear with all the supply of Goblinfire that the Tribes have.

agumentic

Amadeus already said that he is mostly staying out of this particular mess. Whatever his plans are, he is not going to step into the limelight before Ater.

RoflCat

He's THE Pivot right now with the influence he can wield whether be it the Legions, the Clans or just the veterans still loyal to him.

That is also why him making any move on the board is possibly the worst move for him. It would exposes him to the biggest enemy in his eyes: Bard.

EowynLuna

Amadeus isn't going to appear in this battle. He's going to appear in Ater at the same time Malicia calls all the nobles to the tower. Then everything will be gathered in one place: nobles, tower, goblinfire.

[sengachi](#)

"So.... whose side were the rebel legions on? I don't think it was ever cleanly decided."

That's a great question, and I'm sure everyone present would really like an answer to that.

Cicero

Aren't the Rebel Legions suspected of favoring Amadeus' claim to the Tower?

Is this really a bad result?

[Liliet](#)

As of the last talk with Cat, the Rebel Legions intend to make a deal with Nim.

edrey

nice chapter. for some reason i am linking this whole book to hakram game, "climbing the tower", several rounds of it. a game of negotiation and position, and more if you think in the next game, like the winner and how you win determine the next round. the three armies lost too much time, now callow is going to take them all next its malicia, amadeus and akua, in ater. then the bard, Dk (behind malicia) and Fk. and all of them are cheating.

shikkarasu

Can I just say, getting a few friends to take on the persona of High Ladies/Lords and less playing so much as roleplaying Raising Towers is more fun than it has any right to be. It basically has to be DnD players who like political intrigue, but the result is a game that is genuinely fun to lose.

[Liliet](#)

Well, here's where Cat never really could follow Akua's thought patterns. Turning Nim was Akua's FIRST idea. Then again, that's the Wasteland thought pattern that Nim then showed she wasn't following – Cat probably could predict that *if* Akua went for that it wouldn't work, and that she'd figure that out quickly. The thing that *really* wrecked Cat's calculations here was Akua seriously getting into helping Nim through this.

Of course, Akua is actually swaying Nim's opinions on the Tower, here... and Akua knows *why* Cat is doing what she's doing.

shikkarasu

Cat was right about every ingredient in the pot, but still got the recipe wrong. Akua is making a play for the tower, but she's doing it her way -the *good-guy's* way- and laying her cards on the table. Cat assumed that Akua would get closer to the Tower before abandoning Evil for a 2nd time, but Akua was always going to take what works from the Power of Friendship. It was, in hindsight, her stated purpose all the way back in the Everdark.

I think this is also why she can't hear the song; Akua isn't climbing the Tower the 'right' way. She's doing what Amadeus did and having honest conversations with her ally. She's trying to find a mutually beneficial arrangement with Nim instead of trying to manipulate, use, and discard the Black Night.

I also don't think Amadeus heard the song while he was taking over Praes. Even before he decided to back Malicia, he was never fighting the 'right' kind of war. He confided in Cat that he only knew The Girl Who Climbed the Tower from Malicia. At least, that's what I got from his statement "[the song] was not for me."

[Liliet](#)

No, I'm pretty sure he wouldn't have remembered the song if it was never his. "It wasn't for me" is a statement of choice – he gave the Tower to Malicia, therefore the song wasn't for him.

My understanding is that hearing the song of the Tower is a literal manifestation of hearing the Tower's song – being allured by what the Tower can give you, wanting things that can be reached through taking the Tower.

That's why Amadeus heard it in Epilogue 6 despite wanting nothing more than for it to shut up – he might hate the Tower, but it's the most straightforward way to A LOT of things he wants, and it's a temptation like a bad popup ad – it's just not going away just because you want it to.

Akua, on the other hand... doesn't actually want anything FROM the Tower. If you pay attention to her internal monologue, she has literally no step 2. Not a single time did she mention anything that will happen AFTER she takes the Tower. Not a DE Name she's looking forward to claiming, not an ambitious plan, not a foreign or internal policy she plans on pursuing. And she doesn't even think taking the Tower is pleasant and will lead to personal satisfaction, she jumped to her feet without noticing (Akua!!! Sahelian!!!) when lecturing Nim about it.

Akua is not hearing the Tower's song – she's not seduced by it, she doesn't believe it will give her anything, she doesn't idealize it, she has no plans that incorporate it as a middle step. She's walking towards it because it's a direction she's aware of and she has no other plan – and is not really the kind of person who functions well without one.

And Cat seems to have underestimated just how deeply the whole "good is seductive" thing went for Akua. It's not just guilt. Cat kept SAYING that she would make a person out of her but she doesn't really know this person she made because she could never trust that it was not a persona Akua was deliberately adopting. Cat was worried about overshooting in her estimate of how far Akua has come, but she undershot significantly, instead.

dadycool

Self-sacrificing for the betterment of the majority, getting passionate about trying to save her friends/allies, and leaving your (not so) Good group to take over the Evil side so you can at least use their resources in a productive way. That certainly sounds like Hero behavior. lol, I love how she was completely upfront and honest when she said to the Sisters that she had the Power of Friendship on her side and she was going to use it.

Liliet

Deep sarcasm that is also completely upfront and honest actually is honestly the best.

gnaruscat

And is totally Akua

Liliet

Yes ♥

Burlyraven

Damnit, Juniper, get your head out of your ass. Your warlord need you.

Liliet

Welcome to the life everyone else leads Juniper: the one where maybe someone else could do your job better, but they have their own job, so your own is yours to do SO GET YOUR HEAD OUT OF YOUR ASS AND DO *YOUR* BEST

Juff

Typo Thread:

they raised or > they raised you or
horsemen, Talbot > horsemen; Talbot
us as risk > us at risk
skirmishers from that > skirmishers that
Askum > Aksum (occurs twice)
Tall and with > Tall with
was hard pill > was a hard pill
intervene of > intervene if
the Aquiline > the Lady Aquiline
I have the order > I gave the order
decisions start > decisions to start
Sepulchral arrive > Sepulchral arrives
If Army > If the Army
scouts send > scouts sent

ohJohN

goddamned > godsdamned

Frivolous

I'm not too concerned on behalf of Catherine and the Grand Alliance.

In a situation with so many sides of almost equal strength and strategic and tactical cunning, chance holds sway, which means providence rules.

I suppose it's Catherine's nature and training to ignore providence because she's a villain and all, but she has heroes in her army, which means the Story will tend to turn out well for her side, more often than not.

Also she's coming into a truly mega Name, one that I believe encompasses a Role as a matchless strategist and commander of armies, which means she's more likely to win than lose.

[Liliet](#)

Same.

Beside pure story logic, the Rebel Legions will most likely only make a deal with Nim if Nim agrees to go against Malicia, which means Catherine suddenly has a lot less incentive to oppose her. And Akua's a wild card that is due to give Cat a massive payoff sometime soon.

RoflCat

>And Akua's a wild card that is due to give Cat a massive payoff sometime soon

Or the biggest surprise because Cat-Akua thing is on that Callowan revenge i.e. Catherine refused Akua's redemption moment in favor of her own revenge, even if it's costing her a lot at this moment (the magic that dropped them out of the Ways, even if she soften the blow, Nim avoiding Pattern of Three for now, etc)

So the best counter Akua can make is to 'give Catherine what she want, but not the way she want it'

[Liliet](#)

Akua is already giving Cat surprises.

And I don't think Cat "refused Akua's redemption moment". Stopping Akua from sacrificing her own life is not an "evil action denying her redemption" and neither is "refusing to kiss her". Like, that's just... Cat's prerogative. Her plans for what she'll offer Akua to do eventually are monstrous sure but she has not yet implemented them in any way shape or form, so far she's played this entirely by the book.

And that nets payoff.

[TeK](#)

I have a feeling that Aqua nudging Nim from one side, and Legions nudging her from the other can actually make her swing the other way around. The problem is merely justifying her rebellion to her beliefs. Legions need to be loyal to Praes, not necessarily the ruling Tyrant should do the trick.

[308924810a](#)

I'd thought the rebel legions would take longer to arrive. I guess they took Twilight to get here?

When it was discussing the need for a plan I immediately jumped to waiting out the six days for Sephulchural to arrive and letting everyone fortify and get attached to their camp positions, then leaving Sephulchural and the Black Knight and walking off with the army of Callow, or at least threatening to do so.

With the rebel legions approaching and the Callowan army threatening to leave, Sephulchural's force might be forced to attack first, in the understanding that they need to beat the legions before reinforcements arrive.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I suspect not much fighting will happen now that the Rebels are here. Shit will go down once the rest of Sepulchral's army arrives. Malicia will trigger whatever contingencies she has but the plan will backfire and cause Nim to side with the rebels. Maybe demons? We've not seen demons in a while and Malicia wanted Sahelian artefacts back IIRC.

Overall, I think the Rebels and Nim have fairly similar ideology: both represent the "new" evil, based on strong institutions and strict meritocracy. The difference is that Nim believes Malicia is a legitimate ruler whereas the Rebels don't. Black is a couple of steps ahead in that he believes the seat of a Dread Empress is incompatible with the institutions he's created through the Reforms.

Steven Silver

I liked Razin before this. Now I love him. His character arc's been one of my more favorite, so far, and I loved every moment of him using his experience to put an uppity lordling in his place XD

Also:

"Put their heads on his bed," I said. "With a written note: vote."

—

She's probably not talking about you, reader, but I wouldn't risk it 😊

magesbe

I think what Akua is doing with Nim is interesting; sure it makes killing Nim harder, but the thing is, Nim doesn't have to be an enemy. She would make for a very powerful ally in fact if she could be turned, which may be possible if Nim fully believes Akua in that Malacia was letting her get killed.

ohJohn

That scenario has some interesting parallels to Malicia's own climb to the top of the Tower: a girl, her family killed by the current Tyrant (Alaya's father, Tasia) and forced into servitude (Nefarious, Cat), teams up with a freshly-minted Black Knight, who's focused on improving Praes through reforms and institutions (Nim explicitly following Amadeus's example here), to take down the current Tyrant.

Jason Ipswitch

We just need one more army and we'll have a grand five-way standoff. Just like back in War College.

Zach

Looks like I was right about Catherine underestimating how much Akua changed. Catherine seems to have thought that Akua would genuinely seek to climb the Tower and only truly regret things afterwards, but Akua is already taking a bunch of actions that conflict with that goal and I seriously doubt that she'll be able to successfully climb the Tower like this.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

It's beautiful.

violentink

I suspect this isn't where the story is going but HOT TAKE: Juniper is Right.

Like, universal principle of military command – if someone does not have confidence in their own ability to command, then you should remove them from the post, because they would know.

Best move for Cat is to give Juniper independent command back in the war vs the Dead King, where there's no buck to pass, and let her (a) develop as a commander and (b) build her confidence again.

In story terms though, I feel Cat is gonna screw up and Juniper is gonna pull her arse out of the fire in a Big Damn Heros moment and I am so here for that. 😊

Chapter 18: Release

"The trick isn't to win battles, it's to let your opponents lose them."

—Aretha the Raven, Nicaean general

General Sacker came to meet me with a company of a hundred heavies and three lines of mages, the lot of them glittering with at least half a dozen defensive enchantments and shield spells at the tip of their hands. Well, would you look at. The Rebel Legions had grasped the reality that I might be somewhat cross at them. It was almost like they'd taken my coin and supplies for years before turning on me at the first opportunity. I wasn't going to be forgetting that, or any other of their small slights.

"Hail, Black Queen."

A mere twenty knight stood fanned out behind me. What need did I have for a larger escort than that?

"Sacker," I said. "Fancy seeing you here."

The goblin general had only walked up to the edge of the defensive enchantments and not a step further. I would have been offended by that if I hadn't seriously considered slaughtering the entire contingent and ripping her plans out of her mind on the ride here. Only the certainty that it would push the rebels to allying with the Black Knight, however temporarily, had stayed my hand.

"You were warned of our march," General Sacker replied. "We have dealt openly with you."

"Debatable at best," I flatly replied. "But let's pretend I buy that, just for a moment. Keep up that alleged streak and tell me what you lot came here to do."

"We aim to engage in talks with Marshal Nim," Sacker said. "We have no intention of fighting you save if you force our hand."

I snorted. General Mok's plan to talk the Black Knight into deposing Malicia was still their play, then. They were fools if they thought it would get them anywhere. Nim was in deep with the Tower, she wasn't going to defect now. Malicia would string them along until she no longer had a use for them, a situation I could only assume was imminent.

"And your stance regarding Sepulchral's forces?" I asked.

"If arrangement is reached with the Black Knight, there will be either surrender or war," Sacker said. "If not, the situation remains fluid. Regardless, we will not attack unless first provoked."

Mhm. Then they weren't all in on Mok's plan yet. The vanguard in the northern Moule Hills was being used as threat on the flank of the Loyalist Legions, one they had no intention of removing before a deal was struck with the Black Knight. An alliance with the Rebel Legions wasn't on the table – wouldn't be unless Marshal Nim refused their entreaties outright, which she wouldn't because she wasn't a fucking idiot – so there was no point in aiming for that. I could, though, aim for a smaller concession.

"Then I'll ask for your promise to stand aside should I intervene to prevent Marshal Nim wiping out the vanguard," I said. "If not your help outright, which I would take as a sign of good faith doing much to restore your trustworthiness in my eyes."

She hesitated.

"They are a rebel force," General Sacker hedged. "The Black Knight's duty is clear."

I met her eyes and let all pleasantness drip down from my face.

"My tolerance has limits," I said, tone so very mild.

"We are not in your service," the goblin general snorted.

"No," I replied, "but so far you have toed the line when it came to being my *enemy*. You might want to consider the price of crossing it, before you offer me another half-hearted platitude."

"I am a general of-"

"You *were* a general," I coldly interrupted. "Now you're a vagrant that twice bit the hands feeding you. You're out of chances, Sacker. With me, with the Tower, with everybody else."

"Threats will not sway me, girl," General Sacker said.

I let Night billow in my veins, coming quicker for the anger in my blood.

"A threat?" I laughed. "Do you honestly think your little spells would stop me if I wanted you all dead? If I wanted to rip out every secret from your head and make them dance before my eyes? It's not a threat when I warn you, Sacker. *You are not strong enough for my words to be hypothetical*. If you get in my way, I will fucking step on you."

I leaned forward.

"So I'm going to ask you again," I said. "I want your promise to stand aside, should I intervene to prevent the Black Knight from wiping out Sepulchral's vanguard."

Still she hesitated, and a ring of red light formed high above me as Night kept coming to me. I ripped it out of the sky without even bothering to look.

"So long as no deal has been struck with the Black Knight, you have our promise," General Sacker finally said.

"Good," I harshly smiled.

"You are not making allies with your words, girl," the goblin said.

"And still I somehow seem to have more than you lot," I replied.

I cocked my head to the side.

"And Sacker, one last thing?" I added.

She watched me expectantly.

"Call me girl again and I'll make you eat your own tongue," I calmly told her.

Somehow, I saw, the calm gave her more pause than my anger had.

—

The Rebel Legions did two things the day they blew into our increasingly crowded battlefield. The first was send envoys to both myself and the Black Knight. The second was throw their hat in the ring, so to speak. The Loyalist Legions and my Army of Callow had dug trenches and raised palisades along two thirds of the length of the valley between the hills, all the way to the road, but the deserters sent their sappers downhill the moment they had a camp up and began digging a trench of their own. Facing mine and Nim's, vertical to our horizontal.

"They're digging a hundred feet past crossbow range, both ours and the Legions'," General Zola informed us at council. "Sapper-General Pickler believes their fortifications will end up in a thin crescent facing our lines."

"We'll need to raise our own trenches facing theirs," I sighed. "Or they'll be able to flank us at will."

It would turn our fortifications into a straight corner with one side facing the Loyalist Legions and the other the Rebel ones, while the Black Knight's trench would end up at a much wider

angle. Given their more numerous sappers, though, I didn't anticipate them losing much of a step.

"We're getting boxed in," Grandmaster Talbot said. "With all these walls and trenches the Order will be made useless."

"We can't prevent them for raising fortifications of their own without forcing a battle," Aisha said. "One at which we will be at a severe disadvantage, should the Black Knight reinforce them."

Which she probably would. The deserters were still at a full force, thirteen thousand and fresh. The Army of Callow numbered a little under thirteen thousand, now, and Nim's legions should be around twenty or twenty-one thousand. That battle would see us outnumbered more than two to one while flanked, which was a recipe for disaster. We couldn't afford to start that fight.

"We do nothing," I said, the words bitter against my tongue. "To them, at least. Our sappers need to prepare our flank for the possibility of assault now."

It was out of my hands, now. All I could hope was that my enemies did not yet band together. The day passed quickly enough, laden with bad news, but the following warning ended up just as darkened. Scribe had requested the war council gather, which was rare enough I did not think twice about granting the request. What she had to say was not long, but it still hit hard.

"It cost me most of my agents within Sepulchral's main host, but I have found out who plans her campaign for her," Scribe said.

I laid back into my seat, already sensing this was not pleasant news.

"Instructions are received by letter, which are read out loud over scrying ritual," Eudokia said. "The physical letters eventually make their way to Sepulchral herself, however, and my people were able to forge a decent copy of one before fleeing camp."

She set down a letter on the table, which aside from having calligraphy small and cramped did not particularly evoke anything in me. Juniper, though, breathed in sharply.

"This is Grem One-Eye's handwriting," Scribe said. "He has been planning Sepulchral's campaign for her from captivity in Ater."

I grimaced. Well, fuck. Just what we needed, another marshal in the mix. My fingers clenched, then unclenched. Wrong way to think about this, I decided. Grem wouldn't have had the pull to do this on his own, someone had to be helping him. Hells, someone had to have *asked* him to do this because otherwise I couldn't see him

helping Abreha Mirembe. And only two people were in position to do it, Malicia and my father. It didn't fit Malicia, though, her way of doing things. Even if she'd been helping Sepulchral stay afloat with good advice, she would have cut off the flow now. She could no longer afford game this elaborate.

So it meant I had, at last, found the first trace of what my father was up to in Kala.

That somewhat improved my mood, but it passed quickly. While I'd been lost in thought I'd not been paying attention to the table, which only claimed my attention again when there was a ripple in the assembled council. Juniper had gotten to her feet.

Without a word, she walked out of the tent and did not return.

—

Once more I found the Marshal of Callow standing beneath a sycamore.

The same as last time, a bone-dry skeleton of a tree hollowed out inside. Dead and dying, the limbs having yet to catch up to the emptiness at the heart of it. Juniper's escort had stayed far, as ordered, and as I limped past them across the dusty ground I found my eye dragged above. Sunset was painting the sky in layers, just like the stones of the hills to the west: the dark blue of night high above, with a distant moon, but then it lightened. Yellowed. Only to deepen once more, orange and red and at last a rich purple. Day died and its death throes shifted across the stone and dust, shade cutting in fluid slices as it swallowed up Creation in a never-sated maw. The Wasteland, for all its many dangers, was capable of eerie beauty at times.

Juniper was not leaning against the tree. I saw that first, even as I approached her. I had thought to find here the same hunched and self-loathing creature that'd been wearing the skin of one of my oldest friends for over a sennight, but this was... different. Her back might not be straight, but she was not sagging like withered vine. Instead she stood there with a lost and thoughtful look on her face, looking straight west. I followed her gaze, founding nothing more than the sappers of the Rebel Legions at work digging their own trench and palisade. They were skilled hands, well-drilled for all that they had deserted the Tower's service. The three generals leading them had kept them disciplined.

I hesitated to break the silence. I'd found what I'd thought I would, and I was not sure I wanted to interrupt... whatever this was. For all the intensity of the Hellhound's gaze, I had of late seen in her fragility that had me staying my hand. As I wrestled with my doubts, she came to a decision of her own. Her voice was

rasping when she spoke. Dry, and she licked her chops before doing it.

"The Scribe, she said that Sacker's in command among the deserters," Juniper said. "Is it true?"

I hummed.

"Can't be sure," I admitted. "But the Jacks heard the same thing. I think Mok has more pull when it comes to strategic decisions, since he has the biggest army, but that Sacker's the lead for tactics."

Her eyes never left the sappers digging to the west. I bit my lip, then cast aside my hesitation. It wasn't doing me any good.

"They tell me you've been here more than two hours," I said. "Have you been looking at them the whole time?"

The Hellhound laughed. It was a low, rumbling thing. Not quite amused or happy, more like a... release. Vented feeling.

"Yeah, I have," Juniper said. "Because there's this..."

She shook her head.

"She was like an aunt to me, Sacker," the orc said.

I did remember. It felt like a lifetime ago, but I remembered. I'd never seen her as embarrassed as she had been when I'd first seen her meet her mother and almost-aunt fuss over her after she became a legate. It'd been a memorable sight.

"Auntie Sacks," I idly said.

"She used to tell me stories," Juniper distantly said. "When I was small, Catherine. To make me go to sleep. That was all back in Summerholm, before I went home to be raised by my father. Goblin stories about gore and raids and little girls that got gobbled up for being too slow or too dim."

"She seemed close to your mother," I said.

I'd never grown to know either more than shallowly, but it's been obvious to be even when I'd been young.

"She was probably Mom's closest friend in the world," she replied. "She spent more years of her life with Sacker at her side than she did my own father. It showed. Goblins aren't usually... good with children. Sacker was making an effort."

"She seems to have made an impression on you," I said.

Juniper flashed pale fangs at the deepening night.

"She did," the Hellhound said. "But not just for the stories. Did you ever hear she was meant to rise to Marshal in Ranker's place when she retired?"

"There were rumours," I acknowledged. "You know, back before..."

I gesture vaguely, meaning a great many things but not in particular. She snorted in amusement.

"I looked up to her for that," Juniper said. "Even more than I did my mother, because my mother was never going to rise higher than she had. It wasn't like Istrid Knightsbane I wanted to be when I grew up, Catherine. It was like Grem and Ranker and Nim. The Marshals. And Sacker, she had the stuff. The marshals knew it, so the Carrion Lord. If things had turned out different, it could be her serving as the Tower's greatest captain instead of Nim."

"A lot of things could have gone differently," I said.

My hand half-rose to the cloth covering the eye sloppiness had cost me before I forced it down. Some mistakes stayed with you longer than others. I found Juniper's gaze had moved to me, catching sight of the aborted movement, and I flushed in embarrassment. Those kinds of regrets I preferred kept unseen from even my friends.

"It's an eye, Catherine," Juniper said. "Just an eye. You could lose both and still be who you are. And that's what eats at me. When did you know?"

"Know what?"

Her gaze was alight with something I could not quite name.

"Who you were," Juniper gravelled. "We've hung titles around your neck like necklaces at a summer fair, Warlord. Countess. Squire. Arch-heretic of the East. Black Queen, Queen of Lost and Found, of Winter, of the Hunt. First Under the Night. But before that, when did you *know*?"

Half a dozen answers, some flippant and others rote, came to the tip of my tongue. I could not get any of them out, not meeting her eyes with my last remaining one. Seeing the cast of her face in the last gaps of the day, the despair and the hunger that burned in her eyes. I did love her, Juniper. My own Hellhound. As deeply as I did the Woe. I'd loved her as the hard-eyed foe I had to overcome to prove myself worthy of my father's tutelage, when we'd both been children, and I loved her now as the woman who'd built a kingdom and an army with me. So I stayed silent, for a long moment, and told her the truth.

"In the Everdark," I quietly said. "There was..."

I swallowed. I'd never spoken of this to anyone, not even Hakram. The words did not come easy. Was there a way in any language ever made that I could truly explain what they had been, the last moments of the battle in Great Strycht?

"I lost," I finally said, tone quiet. "They carved me open, Juniper, and all the power and the death and the madness I'd gorged myself on came pouring back out."

I looked down and found my hand was shaking a bit. I had come to understand the Sisters, and they me, but that had been after. After.

"It was like blinders went off my eyes," I murmured. "And Gods, but I had done so many horrible things. More of them were all I could see ahead, and I was just so fucking *tired*. So I went down."

I closed my fingers into a fist, to kill the tremors.

"And I stayed down, waiting to choke in the snow."

I heard the sharp intake of breath.

"But I didn't," I murmured. "It took too long, you see. Snow melted enough I could breathe. And I still wanted to stay down, to sleep, but I just..."

I laughed, as mirthlessly as she had.

"It was a choice," I said. "And there was nothing weighing the balance either way. So I ask myself, why not?"

I tightened my cloak around my shoulders, shivering.

"And then?" Juniper quietly asked.

"And then I got up," I softly smiled. "And I think that's what stayed with me, Juniper. The even balance and the question and the choice I made. And it's gone to shit since, you know. Death and doom and the age falling down on our heads. And every day the same choice is there waiting to be made: lie down..."

"Or stand up," the Hellhound finished.

I nodded.

"I've stayed on my feet," I said. "I will, until I am either victorious or I die. I think that's what left of me, when you whittle away the rest."

Juniper looked away.

"I thought it'd be victory," the Hellhound admitted.

"It's never the victories that stay with you," I tiredly said.

Large fingers laid against the dead wood.

"No," the Marshal of Callow said, "I guess not."

A moment passed.

"You're looking west again."

"Ranker's dead," Juniper quietly said. "But Sacker's here. Nim is here. And Grem uses Sepulchral's army. Everyone who is or could be a Marshal of Praes."

I studied her, but her expression was hard to make out and her eyes stayed west.

"There's this thing I see, Catherine," she confessed. "The lay of it. Two hours I've watched the sappers, how quick they work. How quick the work will be done. And I know how quickly Nim's will work, and *ours* and..."

"And what?" I quietly asked.

"And there is a box," the Marshal of Callow said. "Where the battle will happen. I see it. It's where it'll all happen and we can shape it."

I could smell it the air, now. Victory. Yet Creation did not shiver, fate did not ripple like a lake in the wind, because this was not the writ of any Gods. It was just Juniper of the Red Shields, looking at a dusty field in the middle of nowhere and being the woman I'd glimpsed in her at seventeen.

"You want to fight," I said.

It was not a question.

"Sacker hasn't seen it," Juniper said, sounding disbelieving. "She can't have, not if she's raising those walls. Sacker hasn't seen it, and she could have been a Marshal."

Large fingers clawed at the thin bark of the dying sycamore. She turned to me.

"I could be wrong," she told me, tone anguished. "I could be just seeing what's not there. I've... these have not been good days, Catherine, and I did not stand up in the face of them. I need you to know that *I could be wrong*."

I would have answered, but she was not done. The words were spilling out of her like broken barrel.

"I feel like my entire life I've been drawing a bow," Juniper said. "And ever since I've been your marshal, I've just... stood there. And my hand's been trembling. But this? This place, this box, these foes?"

The hand left the tree and she pushed away, straightening her back.

"I can release the arrow," Juniper of the Red Shields said, pleaded. "I can win this. *Please.*"

And I could have taken her by the arm, brought her close and told her that she did not need to win back my trust because she'd never lost it. But I knew, sure as dawn, that it was not what she wanted. Needed. And I was my father's daughter, so I offered her the very same grace I was once offered. My wrist snapped out and metal slapped against my palm.

I handed her a knife, pommel first.

"If you mean the words," I replied, "commit. Carve them."

Incomprehension, first, but I saw her eyes clear as she matched my gaze. I did not mean the plea, or the apology that came unspoken with it. Those were between us. What I wanted from her was conviction. The Hellhound leaned close to the tree, reaching inside, and carved. The strokes shook, at first, but grew certain. Her hand did not tremble. And when she withdrew, deep in the hollow of a dead tree waited these words: *Marshal Juniper wins here.* I smiled, startled.

"Here?" I asked, amused. "Exactly?"

"This tree is where we win," the Marshal of Callow said, tone even, "and everyone else loses."

She offered me back the knife, pommel first. I took it.

"Let's go home," I said. "It's getting late."

"Yeah," Juniper said, eyes red. "Let's go home, Catherine."

We'd left alone. We came back together.

—

"First, we shape the box," the Marshal of Callow said.

It was a surprisingly simple thing, when it came down to it. We had our palisade and trench from Kala Hills to the half-road, so the only way to go was south. The assumption in my head had been that it'd turn into a right angle facing the Rebel Legion line, but Juniper had seen otherwise. Sacker and her fellows had been clever in putting themselves between two forces that did not want

to fight them, forcing them to dig in and confirm their position of kingmaker of this battlefield. The downside, though, was that the sappers of the Rebel Legions needed to dig their trench in both directions *simultaneously*. So we took advantage of that.

We began building westwards instead of south, a sloping line of defence headed towards Moule Hills. Immediately the Rebel Legions began trying to force us back by cutting through our path, keeping at the same distance neither of us had yet dared to break, but when they focused their efforts south the Loyalist Legions began pushing at them instead. Nim wasn't any more interested in giving them leverage than we were, after all.

"The slopes grow steeper further south of Moule Hills," the Hellhound said. "That leaves only a narrow passage through which they can move troops into the valley, if they attack. That will shape *where* they attack."

"Which we don't want them to," I pointed out.

"Indeed. So while we raise our works we have to delay," the Marshal of Callow said. "We must maintain the stalemate until Sepulchral's main host arrives."

She had notions as how that should be done, of course. The first was to put the Loyalist Legions on the backfoot by poisoning the source of water they'd been using since we cut them off from their supply lines: Nioqe Lake.

"We don't have anything that can poison a lake that large," I pragmatically said.

I'd pretty much kill the town of Risas as well, but I was less broken up about that when they'd been providing guides to Legion skirmishers. I'd offer them safe passage south through the territory I controlled, but I wasn't going to weep about them being driven out if we did it. Which I wasn't sure we could.

"We do," Juniper grunted, "for the same reason that we had to use that lake for water. Arcadian water can't be safely drunk."

A hundred knights, Masego and myself went for a ride. We tore through Akua's attempts to stop us and I opened a gate in the sky, making Nioqe Lake a third larger and entirely unusable for water supplies.

"Then slow the deserters," the Marshal of Callow said. "The moment their walls are up they can afford to start provoking us and strongarm the Black Knight."

She spent half a day with Pickler out in the field, studying the eastern slopes of Moule Hills, before asking me for Archer and the Huntress. Ballistas were moved, and then fired at the

hillside exactly five times with the Named as spotters. The ensuing landslide didn't kill anyone that we saw, but it did drop down a least of tone of rock right in the middle of the way of the Rebel Legions. They'd have to clear them out before they could get back to work.

"So we hit the Loyalists, after that," I guessed.

"It's necessary and they had to be last," the Hellhound said. "By now they've used all their sudes to match our wall and the deserters'. But we don't want them to be able to keep fortifying over the next few days, they would encircle Sepulchral's camp with walls entirely. Thankfully, their wood reserves were used to make the ring of forts around the Aksum camp, so they are now entirely dependent on the wood cut down in Kala Hills."

"So what do we do, drive them out?" I asked.

"That would be too costly," Juniper replied. "There is another way. It hasn't rained in days. All you have to do, Catherine, is live up to your reputation."

We set fire to the damned hills. Masego and I with large columns of blackflame, but it wasn't only us. Indrani and Alexis shot fire arrows, a raiding party with Squire and Apprentice started a swath with torches and fire spells. The blaze got out of control when the wind turned, burnt a chunk of the hills under our control as well, but for the better part of the day the wind had blown north. The Legions weren't going to get anything but ash out of those hills.

"The Black Knight will dismantle Ogarin for spare parts," the Marshal of Callow noted, "but that will take time and the townsfolk will resist. It should buy us long enough."

—

It did.

Sepulchral had been six days as well, and we kept the stalemate going just long enough. Our wall was anchored on the slopes of Moule Hills, facing that of the Rebel Legions, while to the north the Black Knight had hemmed them in as well. Envoys had gone back and forth between those camps, but no alliance against the Army of Callow had emerged. We'd kept them on the backfoot until Sepulchral arrived from the west with the rest of her twenty-thousand strong army. The Loyalist Legions had not finished their encirclement of the camp up in Moule Hills, and so they were forced to evacuate the sole fort in the way of Sepulchral linking her forces together late in the sixth day.

And so, at least, everyone was here.

"My agents in the Rebel Legion camp tell me that the talks with Marshal Nim are souring," Scribe told me the same day, in my tent.

"She's still not budging?" I asked.

"She has promised to extract of Malicia promises to make suborning officers of the Legions of Terror with mind control spells," Scribe said, "but she still refuses to turn on the Tower in any significant manner. Now there is division among their generals. Sacker is pushing for their force to declare in favour of Amadeus as Dread Emperor, but Mok is strongly opposed. He instead argues that if further concessions are extracted from Malicia, safeguarding the sanctity of the Legions, their reasons for breaking with the Tower no longer exist."

"Jaiyana Seket?" I asked.

"Hedging," Scribe grimaced. "There's not telling which way she'll end up leaning."

I breathed out. General Mok was arguing to rejoin Malicia's cause, essentially. And he'd never bothered to pretend he was anything but hostile to my presence in Praes, or indeed the Grand Alliance's concerns about the Dread Empire. I'd warned them that my tolerance had limits.

"Have assassin kill Mok," I said. "Frame Sepulchral for it if you can."

"That should be-" Scribe began, but she was interrupted when Vivienne blew into my tent.

I cocked an eyebrow at my successor, who was looking rather harried.

"Viv?"

"Trouble," she said. "I have a fresh word from the Jacks. General Mok was killed an hour ago."

I glanced at Scribe, but she shook her head. I supposed not even the Webweaver worked that fast.

"Where's the trouble?" I asked.

"General Seket got killed as well and they caught the people who supposedly killed both," Vivienne said.

I swore furiously.

"They caught Jacks, didn't they?" I asked.

She nodded.

"It's... bad, Catherine," she said. "There's been brawls in their camp, people are saying this is a coup by Sacker done with our backing. That she's planning to sell out Praes to the Grand Alliance."

I swore again.

"If I may hazard a guess," Scribe mildly said, "the figurehead of this belief will be the senior legate for either Mok or Jaiyana Seket?"

Vivienne looked startled.

"Mok," she confirmed.

I leaned back into my seat, closing my eyes and rubbing the bridge of my nose. Well, that was a particularly convenient turn for the Tower wasn't it?

"Fuck," I said. "Malicia played us."

She'd whipped the deserters into a frenzy against us just before a battle was to erupt and the seniormost officer with a clean reputation was most likely in her pocket. Maybe if there were a few days or a week for things to calm down this could be straightened out, but we wouldn't get that long. *Ten to one odds she had something nasty cooked up for Sepulchral's army too*, I thought.

"Tomorrow we have a battle on our hands," I plainly said. "We need to pull off your plan *tonight*, Vivienne. Can it be done?"

She grimaced.

"I would have liked a day or two longer, to make contact with the right people," she admitted. "But it is not impossible."

"Then go get your cloak, we move with nightfall," I said. "I'll need you to inform Juniper, Scribe, because come dawn the blades will finally come out."

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

mamm0nn

"Trouble," she said. "I have a fresh word from the Jacks. A Practical Guide to Evil was boosted to number one an hour ago."

I glanced at Scribe, but she shook her head. I supposed not even the Webweaver worked that fast.

Steven Silver

"The trick isn't to win votes, it's to let your opponents lose them."

—

Not actually, keep voting!

Aston Whiteman

Later update today? ":p

caoimhinh

Oh, I was wrong.

The title actually was something like shoot/loose.

ruduen

Yep. I have three guesses on just what the next title might be:

1. Going directly to Follow-Through. That being said, with everything only hitting the fan now, that seems unlikely.
2. Something involving the arrow in Flight.
3. An interlude interrupting for the actual battle. Possibly several interludes before we hit Follow-Through.

If I had to put money on one, I'd do it on number 3 – major battles do tend to lean towards Interludes. Still, there have been surprises before.

nick012000

Did Juniper just get a Name? The Marshall of Callow. I wonder if she's a Hero or a Villain? I expect that historically that would have been an Heroic Name, but she is the Marshall of a villainous Queen, so...

megaprr

No, I don't think so. The text explicitly says that creation didn't ripple and that it wasn't an act of the gods. A Name would be a bit too out of left field for her at this point. Especially considering she's an Orc, and how there's a lot of baggage tied to that.

caoimhinh

Nope.

It's explicitly said how that's not the case, even if it pretty much should.

I had also believed Juniper would come out of this phase of depression, her own personal trial by fire, with a Name. Specifically the Name of Marshal.

But this is cool too.

Here, on this field, Juniper of the Red Shields is *the* Marshal. The genius to beat the geniuses and accomplished veterans of the previous generation.

But she is not being Named for it, she's not having the support of Above or Below, this is *all her*. No mandate of the Gods leaning on the scales, no Aspect, no Providence. Only strategy.

Shveiran

Honestly, I give it fifty fifty odds that she becomes the Marshall after winning a battle involving three more Marshalls. Having it happen before would have been weak, as this was a pivot for the character but the character has been on the back seat for a long time: she needs a deed to claim the Name.

But it would be cool either way.

shikkarasu

She has the story, she has the role, she even has all the 'claimants' represented in the battle, but she lacks the will. She doesn't want to shape the world, just win this battle. Otherwise she'd have the ripple, the weight of a Name that might be.

I wouldn't have been upset if this was how she gained a Name -they've been built on less- but I don't think she will.

Shveiran

Meh.

"Shaping the world" is kind of a fuzzy concept. Squire!Cat wanted to fix the world or die trying, but Squire!Arthur pretty much just wants to be a good knight. Both got Named.

As we were reminded this chapter, Juniper has always wanted to be a Marshal, so she doesn't lack that will, juts the belief she's good enough. If she wins, she'd likely get that.

It's not a given, mind you; I'm just saying it is very much a possibility.

Earl of Purple

Arthur isn't a good example- he's a hero, not a villain. But I mostly agree with you; the Poisoner got a villain

Name, and she's not interested in changing the world, just baking pies and murder. She'd be as happy baking pies for the rest of her life, it's just that murder pays better.

Darkening

Yeah, poisoner and grizzled fantassin were both about wanting to the best at their thing, not any greater scope plans, and juniper is right there in wanting to be the best general possible. And given how the marshals have been built up, breaking the armies of 3 different marshals would be just the thing to earn juniper the name.

Earl of Purple

I don't think the Grizzled Fantassin is a villain. She's a mercenary, who works for whoever pays her. It's part of her Name, as much as fighting is. And I didn't think she was necessarily the best fantassin when she got the Name, just one of the most experienced on the front lines. If she was a commander type Name, she'd be better served leading a company of Fantassins on one of the fronts, not providing muscle to a Band of Five sent miles from the front line.

caoimhinh

In fact, they weren't even passionate about it, nor did they want to be the best at it. If anything, it felt more like they were just doing their thing, and Name just started to coalesce in them through a long time without them doing anything extraordinary or special. Then one day they realized they had a Name. Poisoner literally looked at the mirror one day and the realization hit her, while Grizzled Fantassin was sort of brooding while thinking about her life and about how she was now a veteran before she had noticed it.

Liliet

Yeah, it's about the story, not any kind of internal will / passion, those only matter insofar as they *factor into* the story.

The key point is, the story of a grizzled fantassin or a poisoner resonates with people, they would retell it and find it fun should they hear it. The story of a marshal? Calernia collectively goes

“meh” to that, or Grem One-Eye would have been Named.

shikkarasu

Only two points:

- Black calls being Named “imposing your will on Creation,” (can’t find the source, probably paraphrasing) although he may be wrong about this since Namelore is hard to be objective about. Cat says of Vivienne “You’ve got your Role and the will, but you need weight. A story that people will talk about.” Although she picked this up from Black and so if he’s wrong so is she.

- Grem was a claimant. It was mentioned when Hakram was 70% of the way to Adjutant. “The last orc to have the potential for a Name was Grem One-Eye, boy. You walk in hallowed company.” (2-11: Report) The implication is that Grem turned down being The Marshal because it would have sparked another civil war. Much in the same way that Akua’s father turned down becoming the Warlock.

Otherwise, yes, the Poisoner and Fantassin shoot all of my assumptions about namelore to pieces. I guess my main reason for insisting that Juniper won’t be Named -ever- is the amount of focus her lack of Clamancy has had. Throughout the story, but especially in this last scene. As always I look forward to being wrong, but I feel this is one of my less crackpot theories.

[Liliet](#)

- * Plenty of stories involve will as a component, i.e. to fit the Role properly you need the will. That doesn’t mean every story is like that. Catherine is talking about Vivienne’s story, which very much involves will.

- * Amadeus tells Catherine that the difference between people who have Roles and people who don’t is will in Chapter 1. Amadeus also tells Tariq that there is no such thing as teachings of Below in Peers and tells Catherine that it’s okay to want things for herself *even though* she’s a villain (that condition famously hostile to wanting things for yourself). Amadeus is not so much wrong as, as, he’s *an orator*. He doesn’t pick things to say based on whether they are true or make internal sense, but only on whether they further his point / fit his agenda.

* "Grem was a claimant. It was mentioned when Hakram was 70% of the way to Adjutant. "The last orc to have the potential for a Name was Grem One-Eye, boy. You walk in hallowed company." (2-11: Report) The implication is that Grem turned down being The Marshal because it would have sparked another civil war." What makes you think Marshal is the Name Grem was a claimant for? Also you can't turn down Names. Cordelia's was a 1 in 1000 case that Augur worked her ass off to arrange and Cat's still telling her she's going to get the Name anyway since she claimed the Role with her actions, just in another way. "People can refuse Names at will" is a common myth in the fandom, it's not actually how it works in-universe. You can only get out of getting a Name by getting out of the groove that's leading you to getting one. Grem, y'know, kept being Marshal. And I read that reference as Grem having been a claimant to Warlord and going off the rails by going to Black's side to be Marshal instead. (Akua's father chose to not do Warlock things, that's why/how he did not pursue the claim he potentially had. Grem did Marshal things)

Anyway yeah Juniper isn't going to be Named because her role isn't interesting enough to a layperson to be a Role. She doesn't do Named things, she does things that are awesome when you're a specialist that can appreciate them.

Earl of Purple

This is mostly to Shikkarasu: The Name that Grem turned down wasn't Marshal- it was Warlord. He turned it down by agreeing to be a marshal of Praes under Amadeus as the Black Knight, rather than leading the orcs on an ultimately futile war against Praes. Because if they attacked Praes, and lost, then the orcs would be back where they started; if he became a marshal of the Legions of Terror, and won, orcs get a step closer to equality in Praes.

[Liliet](#)

That's what I think too, though both of you are committing the presentation error of stating speculation as facts, I'm pretty sure we never got elaboration on Grem's claim one way or another.

shikkarasu

Earl of Purple: I stand corrected.

jamesc9

Unles Callow wants to start telling meritocratic military stories, and they start with "the Marshal of Callow is an Orc and she beat three human Praesi Marshals at once, because she's just that good".

Earl of Purple

None of them are human. The Black Knight is Marshal Nim, an ogre. General Sacker is the last commander standing in the Rebel Legions, and a goblin- and not a marshal; she didn't get that promotion. And Marshal Grem One-Eye is also an orc.

caoimhinh

At this point, it's been proven that there's no one absolute formula for a Name to form. Nor a unique ever-present thing for a new Name to emerge or an old Name to be claimed.

Many factors can be involved, and both inside and outside the books various have been identified: strong will, weight (which can mean lots of things, from how well-known a story is to how relevant an event is), burning conviction, fame (like Heiress turning into Diabolist because that was the fame she earned or Catherine being about to get the Name of Black Queen because that's how people called her), and more.

Heck, Names can be rejected by the claimant (Akua's dad and Cordelia), and another person can stop you from getting a Name, (Amadeus preventing Cat from becoming Black Queen), or you can lose a Name because of depression (Viviene) being "killed" (Akua losing Diabolist after becoming a shade, and Cat losing Squire due to being Fae), it can be usurped through ritual (Chider stealing Squire from Cat), or the Gods can take it from you (Amadeus losing Black Knight).

You can even have a Name forced into you, like Anaxares's case.

Sabah said "I was born into mine" but that's a bit vague and open to interpretation, her whole family bloodline is cursed with lycanthropy, so she

wasn't and couldn't be the only cursed, yet she was the Cursed up until she became Captain.

So there are many, many factors at play, both personal and cultural, and thus the presence of some factors do not assure the emergence of a Name, and the absence of a particular one doesn't mean a Name won't be obtained.

On a meta-level, and ultimately, characters get Names because the author says so XD

Liliet

Story is the universal factor in all of these.

You can reject a Name or fail to claim it by not doing the thing a person with the Name's Role would have done. (As with Akua's dad, Cordelia and Catherine)

You can lose a Name by no longer performing the Role authentically (which happened to both Amadeus and Vivienne)

Fame can be a part of the story. Will can be a part of the story. Literally any in-universe factor can be a part of the story, which is why Names are so diverse. Story is the unifying factor it all comes down to.

Culture, narrative, how people frame the world for themselves. It's what shapes Names and empowers them. A Name cannot exist if there's no cultural impetus for it (WoE).

It's really not that complicated.

Darkening

Eh, grizzled fantassin at least had a, "If I'm going to be a grizzled fantassin I'm going to be *The* grizzled fantassin" line which I took to be a desire to be the best and most accomplished one.

Ulixes

I think if she pulls this battle off as planned that might be the start of a name, she really needs to get her groove back before she has the conviction to claim a name. These things tend to take a while and there's been no hints whatsoever of her getting name powers so I don't see it just popping into existence all of the sudden.

Liliet

Conviction isn't a necessary requirement for a Name (newborn baby Sabah!)

A story is. And Juniper doesn't have one, not one that resonates in-universe. "I was the daughter of a renowned berserker general and wanted to be less like her and more like the people who stayed on the backline and planned, but I wasn't sure I was good enough – but then I saw what other marshals didn't and I got my conviction back" gets a resounding "meh" from people who aren't also high level officers who appreciate what goes into a battle plan.

caoimhinh

You are really nitpicking there.
That's not Juniper's story.

Juniper built up an army nearly from the ground up, a multi-cultural and multi-species army, taking Callowans into Praesi doctrine of war, integrating the now Knight Order into their ranks, and since its foundation, Juniper has led them alongside Catherine through campaigns that would have broken more veteran armies.

Battles against hordes of devils, multiple Demons, the armies of the continent, and Arcadia. Juniper is doubting herself because the responsibility on her shoulders is massive, and she has been faced with hard situations and dark days for the past three years, making strategic errors and facing defeat, not to mention what Malicia's orders did to Juniper. Her depression and doubts make a lot of sense.

Because she was facing multiple enemies on all fronts and threats all around from veterans of war and geniuses from all over Calernia, she was on the backfoot against *Kairos Theodosian*, a man who - however temporarily- could even outplay the Wandering Bard and the Dead King while playing around with the rest of the armies in the field.

She rightfully sees that the board is wide and complex and she has faced, is facing, and will continue to face opponents that by any normal logic should be able to crush her. She was having doubts because she is aware of the precarious situation and the magnitude of the opposition.

Only now she is finally getting rid of her hesitation and finding her spark again. Noticing that despite the might and wit of the enemies she does not lack

that herself. Now she is facing the legends of her home, the men and women she grew up admiring and looking up to, the people that inspired her to be who she is now.

And she is going to beat them all.

That is the story of Juniper of the Red Shields. the Marshal of Callow.

Calling it what you did is a gross oversimplification.

[Liliet](#)

Increasing complexity doesn't make for better public reception. Which is what my point is.

[Liliet](#)

The problem is that Juniper's Role does not match the culture she's in. A supermajority people on Calernia still only cares about commanders when they lead charges, which Juniper doesn't. Her story isn't told and won't be told even if it's known, people just won't care that she saw a box, they won't understand what it means.

[Liliet](#)

It's not about the will. It's about the story weight. Like five people total appreciate the gravity of Juniper's waffling here, literally everyone else would go cross-eyed bored listening to the story of a backline Marshal.

[Adrian_V](#)

I think the only reason Marshal isn't a name yet is that there are too many with the title right now plus is more like the role/pattern is forming, Marshal is definitely become a name in the next generation if you ask me, same way as Captain or the 1 that basically was a commander of the Watch (the one Black killed back as the squire via crossbow barrage).

There probably will be subtypes like Marshal of Callow and another for Praes, or even ranks like High Marshal.

Another thing why I think it isn't 1 right now and will probably emerge in the next generation is that the title of Marshal is gaining weight abroad, every nation on Calernia will respect the title and that will add weight but it is still a process in progress so is basically accumulating

[Liliet](#)

Most people on Calernia will remember these wars as shaped by the politicians and the commanders who actually took point. Amadeus of the Green Stretch, Catherine Foundling, Cordelia Hasenbach, the Blood, Klaus Papenheim. Juniper of the Red Shields isn't exciting – she's the one who goes to nap while the battle rages, because her part in it is done.

There's no story in a Marshal's role.

Henry

I don't quite agree with you I mean just look at military sci-fi like legends of the Galactic heroes. It managed to keep me invested for 110 episodes and it was pretty much just a story about a bunch of people making battle plans definitely a genre. Even looking at it from a historical point of you people still remember Moltke the elder or Marianne. And both of their contributions to history were mostly around building battle doctrine rather than leading forces as commanders. There's definitely a story to Marshalls Maybe not in the old system of names given that was more epic fantasy but in the New World that's being created I could very much see it

[Liliet](#)

Sure, in a hundred years or so I can picture commander Names emerging. Right now the culture of Calernia is clearly focused otherwise – if only because there's no shortage of people who are BOTH awesome commanders AND do heroic charges, overshadowing those who are just the first thing.

Also, I have no idea who either Moltke the elder or Marianne are. I managed to live 27 years a nerd without learning a single fucking thing about them, which brings us back to my point about how most people don't really retell these stories.

(Military sci-fi is not a currently existing genre on Calernia. It needs to be *in-universe* stories, remember? Like when EE shot down the Grey Knight Catherine theories by saying there's no cultural impetus for the Name Grey Knight anywhere on Calernia)

Henry

Yeah I definitely see your point. And I might just be a massive military history nerd with a bunch of friends who are also massive military history nerds so what I consider general knowledge might actually not be that. However for the no cultural story part wasn't Theodosius the unconquered pretty much just a military

commander name. How is thought that he was just fantasy Napoleon or Alexander the Great. I do agree that we're unlikely to see Juniper get one mostly because if someone was going to get one I think it would've been the iron Prince.(good old Clouse was one of my favorite Side characters) But as all of the armies become more professional the role of really good general staff member is going to become a lot more relevant. Which is why one could argue that Juniper could climb at whereas these other commanders current as she is more on the administration side.

(I mean like I said I'm just playing devils advocate. I would preferred juniper not get a name we need more non-named characters doing awesome shit. As I feel like there are just way too many names running around right now most of which are really cool but don't get flushed out)

Liliet

Theodosius the Unconquered was a ruler, which Juniper is not. Battle winning is a black box for most people – they can appreciate that it was awesome how it happened, but there's little patience/understanding for the details of who did what in the planning stage. So you know the credit for the whole thing tends to go to the seniormost person, who is the one that gets a Name from it if anyone.

jamesc9

Henry, sorry, you're loosing me a bit.

Do you mean Marianne the official semi-naked person of the French Revolution, or someone else?

Henry

Marian (I spelled his name wrong forgive my dyslexia)

He was the guy behind the Marian reforms which essentially turned the Roman army into the legions that we think of today whereas before that they used Astarte and had a completely different organizational structure. Essentially he's the black of the real world and that he turned the legions into a professional well disciplined fighting force. He's also famous for being one of the first generals to march on Rome at the head of an army and his rise to power is generally considered the start of the decline of the Roman Republic.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marian_reforms

Nah

Nope. That being said, with every single marshal in the theatre of combat fighting the same battle, it's possible they're all claimants for the Name of Marshal.

[*Liliet*](#)

If there were cultural impetus for such a Name, it would have been claimed by now (by Grem)

KiltedBastich

Arguable. Names take a while to form, and they need a 'groove' in Creation. There needs to be a Story and a Role. However, that Story doesn't need to be one that is widely known, else you'd never be able to have secretive Villains with new names. It just needs to resonate with a Role that has fully formed. Given that we know that Grem One-Eye could have been a Named Warlord, it's likely that potential went instead into carving a new groove – one which only someone else can fill.

So I agree with your logic about Juniper to some extent, I differ on the topic of how well known the Story has to be. The public at large doesn't have to know anything at all about the Story. Like many other things, that can help, but it's not a requirement. The groove in Creation, and the Role, are the only hard and fast requirements.

[*Liliet*](#)

The Story doesn't need to be widely known, it needs to widely *resonate*. If-people-knew is the criterion. We're working with a hypothetical omniscient narrator, here.

It doesn't have to be known to anyone at all that an Assassin exists and scattered mysterious deaths have a common cause. It just needs to be a fact that IF people knew, they would talk about it. That they would *make up* a story like this even if it wasn't true at all. There needs to be resonance, an idea people care about.

Actual knowledge is not a part of the equation.

Juniper's situation is the opposite: even if you told her story to everyone in Callow, most everyone's eyes would just glaze over and they'd forget most of it instantly.

SpeckofStardust

Watch next chapter be "land" as in land the shot.
Also what happened in the Rebel Legion camp plays into Akua's story. aka Malicia has zero problems with killing even those loyal for short term benefits.

Darkening

Could also be 'fly' or 'flight', as in the arrow's in the air flying for the target with things still in motion maybe.

caoimhinh

Follow through, maybe?

dadycoool

"See? You see? She had the only one among the rebel leadership killed, all so she could make Cat look bad. That's what his life was worth to her when he wasn't useful enough to her!"

Damien /

"And this is really crassly done too. No one could possibly believe that the person obviously guilty is the actual culprit !"

WuseMajor

I wouldn't exactly call them short term benefits. Right now, Malicia has a very delicate game to play. She needs to wall up the Black Queen and her entire army somewhere, long enough that she can force Cat to the negotiation table, where Malicia actually has a chance of coming out of this with her head attached to her shoulders.

Any other objectives are secondary to "ensure Malicia's survival," and if Cat manages to get out of this trap and spank her army in the process, then Malicia has zero leverage and Cat will just continue rampaging across Praes until everyone in the nation turns against Malicia.

And we've seen what happens to Praesi "lords" when their families decide they've had enough.

On the other hand, if Malicia took all the gloves off, rummaged through the Tower's basement for all the ancient death rays and doomsday devices, and simply destroyed Cat and her army...well then Procer and Callow either collapse entirely and the Dead King eats the continent ...or Cordy uses *her* doomsday device which...basically no-one has any idea what it will do.

This will also cause Malicia to die, just longer term.

So. Malicia has to be very careful here or she'll lose the only thing she has that she actually cares about: her own life.

[sengachi](#)

The thing is, in spite of Juniper's brilliance, Cat's power, and the amazing institution of the Callowan army, I'd actually bet good odds on Malicia successfully walking that line. Not great odds, but good odds.

At least I would if it wasn't for the fact that Amadeus is waiting in the wings with a mountain's worth of goblinfire and one Ranger.

jamesc9

"a mountain's worth of goblinfire and one Ranger", which probably have about equal destructive potential.

KiltedBastich

Eh, say what you will about Ranger against people, from ordinary soldiers to Named, she's never shown the propensity for mass property damage that a mountain of goblinfire represents. Catherine's the one everyone expects to leave a trail of widespread devastation everywhere she goes. Ranger just murder the crap out of everyone unlucky or foolish enough to cross her in any way.

[Tohron](#)

Malicia's ploy might get the Rebel Legions aligned against Catherine for now, but at the expense of undermining their leadership (unless Sacker manages to maintain tactical control while making concessions to other elements in the army). So that may shift the numbers against Catherine, but it also makes the force easier to outplay in the field.

[Burlyraven](#)

Yay, Juniper got her head out of her ass!

This is going to be a very confusing fight, no matter how it breaks down. Four elite forces, each unsure of the loyalty or enmity of the other three. Definitely the kind to be decided with knives the night before, as is being shown.

Jason Ipswitch

A lake dropped on a lake and burning a forest; Cat is in top form here.

I really like Juniper carving into the tree. I hope she survives this to write the definitive text on the art of war.

[Liliet](#)

Considering her epigraphs have mentioned historians arguing about the finer details of Catherine's rise, I think it's good as confirmed that she will.

Steven Silver

Yo dawg, I heard you like lakes XD

[origamiflame](#)

So we put lake in yo lake, so you can lake while you lake

Insanenoodlyguy

Right now it's safe to say Juniper and Aisha will survive past this wars end, long enough to have their memoirs published. I honestly think they have, at this moment, better odds than Cat herself.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

[Liliet](#)

HELL YEAH HELL YEAH HELL YEAH

So Juniper feels better now that she realizes she'd been outplayed by not one Marshal but two, huh?

[Liliet](#)

Also: something something the importance of restraint.

The difference between Cat's actual plan and what Malicia framed her for is the number of the bodies on the floor. Killing just Mok vs killing him AND the neutral one.

[Darkening](#)

Eh, more like she saw it was possible for marshal's to make mistakes since she was seeing something they didn't seem to, combined with Cat's anecdote about her own lowest moment of failure.

[Liliet](#)

Cat's anecdote came after Juniper felt better. But that too good point

Steven Silver

I like to think of that anecdote as tinder to Juniper's spark. It was too touching a moment for me to want anything less ♥

[Liliet](#)

Yeah it definitely helped as FUCK. Juniper had managed to get on top of the fence but she needed a kick to get over it to the right side, and Cat basically tackled her.

[boballab](#)

I think it was realizing that Sacker missed it and was the one the Marshals had predestined to the rank that turned it around. If it was just losing to Grem or Nim that can all come down to her complaint of coming up too fast and not having the experience, but that excuse doesn't work anymore when she sees Sacker doesn't see what is going on and Sacker does have the experience. The General she modeled herself on, the one she looked up to and they don't see it. Also this is almost in a way a reprise of the final at the academy: A four way fight, winner take all.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

[Adrian_V](#)

Is not just that, she was defeated wether by 1 2 or 3 is irrelevant, not even by who, she just realized the important part is what she does with that defeat. Cat literally spelled it out for her but i think she had already come up with the idea when seeing the "box"

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Juniper figured out the philosophical implications. She did manage to get over herself enough to actually pay attention to the battlefield and NOTICE the box though, so GOOD JOB

mamm0nn

"Trouble," she said. "I have a fresh word from the Jacks. General Mok was killed an hour ago."

I glanced at Scribe, and she nodded. Wow, the Webweaver worked fast.

Meanwhile in the rebel camp: Alright people, so I think it's safe to say that if we caught the Jacks, that means it's

definitely not Callowans behind this, right? I mean, this is Praes, we know better.

Everyone else: *Nods all around.* Yeah, we're not stupid, dude. She has Named who could've done this more effectively, and there's two Dread Empresses who'd try something exactly like this.

Darkening

It *is* pretty funny that they seem to be lapping up the obvious conclusion here given that we've seen sayings about how having only a couple layers of deception is a sign of a rank amateur among the highborn lol.

ohJohN

Keep in mind though that most of the Legions isn't highborn, it's primarily greenskins, farmers, criminals, etc. with some lesser nobles (like Aisha and Ratface) sprinkled in.

I'd expect some general cultural competency re: deception in a land that considers Traitorous a national treasure, but the rank and file aren't generally the ones playing 5D chess – if your family could afford to teach you, you probably had better options than enlisting – so seeded rumors backed by a trusted senior officer will still go a long way.

Damien /

The Rebel Legions' soldiers might not see it, but Akua and Sepulchral will understand.

sengachi

Also to be fair, while they might expect more nuance of Praesi nobility, selling the idea that Callowans and their novel spy network are this bad at assassination is a pretty plausible idea to peddle, however false.

rouquincool

Keep in mind only highborn do the whole Tzeentch-level plots thing. Normal Praesi citizen like those who serve in the Legions aren't all that versed in intrigue iirc.

Xinci

Well beyond casual devil debts and such. They do appear to have intrigue for that

Liliet

That'll be officers, and Cat herself says that if she'd had a week to sort this out it would be possible to do so. But the

battle is tomorrow and the rank and file will NOT understand the intricacies of "how easily they got caught".

Also, nobody knows Cat has Assassin, yet.

edrey

Just imagine the look of their faces when they read that tree and find that all was planned. nice.

as side note: is the Barrow sword dead? or just irrelevant? he just doesnt appear.

Shveiran

He is a champion.

This is a time for strategy, long-range duels, arcane rituals, fortifications and skirmishes.

His time will come.

[sengachi](#)

The Barrow Sword is a politician, a would be noble, an amazing fighter, and an excellent warband leader. But of the many things he is, he is not a strategist or a tactician. His intellectual military contributions probably cap out at well-planned raids by a few dozen people, and his political leanings are more towards ingratiating himself with the right people and reading the winds than in decoding military motives and capacity.

He's just not useful at this stage of the game. It wouldn't surprise me if we see him make an appearance in the battle itself though, and/or in the aftermath.

[Liliet](#)

(And unlike the Squire, he doesn't have the story momentum for Cat to billow out beyond his regular capacity for one person's contribution, here)

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Damn, I loved Juniper's development through this arc. Masterfully crafted.

Can't wait till the battle. I'm expecting Sepulchral's army will be a bit of a non factor given it's probably deeply compromised to Malicia and mostly formed out of levies.

If it really takes place at dawn, what are the chances Vivienne's plan, plus the rising sun bears fruit to her Name? Especially if the Callowan deserters desert back – that should have a lot of weight to it. I think another possibility would be Malicia

releasing a demon or two to fuck up everyone and Vivi charging against it.

dadycoool

And so we arrive at the point in the arc where the young pup, distraught at how unskilled her lack of relative experience makes her look, realizes that her young eyes can see better than the old dogs, and that she can more easily pick up new tricks that don't occur to them. And upon this realization, the gifted child turned brilliant adult makes full use of her faculties and carries the day, appearing as a last hope in the darkest of the night.

For all she managed to accomplish on her own, in terms of the realizations of her own worth and such, we of course can't discount her Warlord, who managed to be exactly what she needed at the time, giving her that last bit of steadiness as she Releases the arrow. "How did you do it?" "By doing exactly what you're planning on doing right now." As an aside, Cat and the Bard both seemed to have an onscreen "You're not going to let me die? Okay, I'll make it everyone else's problem then" moment before getting up and rocking the world.

[Liliet](#)

> You're not going to let me die? Okay, I'll make it everyone else's problem then

Bless this phrasing.

dadycoool

I based it off of a post I once saw where instead of saving someone's life made them indebted to you, it was more like "God wanted me dead, now I'll spend the rest of my life showing you why" kind of thing. Here, I figured I'd make it more a "You should have let me sleep" kind of thing, considering they both laid down and tried to die, but weren't allowed.

[Liliet](#)

Cat was allowed to, she just got bored halfway there and wandered off. ADHD queen.

dadycoool

"OK, I'll just lie down and die...um,...OK, this is taking too long. Where'd my Winter go?"

[Liliet](#)

Bless.

Benjamin Huang

What a goddamn chapter holy shit EE you madlad.
The Black Queen will see the Empire broken neath her knee.

RoflCat

I feel like this will ends up biting Malicia in the back.

That honest warning Akua gave to Black Knight about how Malicia only see the Legions as her tools? Yeah, this is a pretty grim reminder of that.

She sacrificed two generals, one in favor of her rule and one neutral, all because she see this move as something that tip the board in her favor, and not even to win the game at that.

Shveiran

Yeah. Honestly, that Nim and Mok didn't see it coming (I don't mean now but EVENTUALLY) kind of boggles the mind.

"Yeah, she mind-controlled everyone to ensure loyalty, but considering nothing has changed and that every new Named she gathers will be even less loyal long-term than the old ones, I'm sure she won't do it again, right? I mean, that'd be silly."

I mean, hindsight 20/20 and all that, but Jesus, Mok...

[sengachi](#)

I think the thing is that for Nim and Mok, failing to reestablish the Legions in their Amadeus-established institutional role is the failure state. They're not here with the goal of winning battles or conquering territory or elevating rulers. They're here to reinstate the old system of the Legions that Malicia shattered. Their ability to wage war is simply the mechanism by which they intend to exert leverage, not a goal unto itself. They don't want war, they want to use their ability to wage war to force Malicia to recognize their importance and make concessions.

Choosing to betray Malicia, however deservedly, however sensibly, is a failure state. It ends the war, sure, but in a way counter to their stated victory conditions. Which means they were stuck in a godawful situation where the only path with a *chance* of victory involves hoping Malicia doesn't do exactly this.

beleester

Yeah, Nim was fairly upfront about this – if the Legions crown an Empress, then they lose their reputation as an

apolitical tool of the Tower and instead become another faction the Tower has to keep happy.

(For an empire ruled by backstabbing tyrants, Praes has some surprisingly modern ideas about civilian control of the military.)

Cicero

More like the Legions as a institution are very new (previously they were mook canon-fodder). So there is no precedent for how the modern Legions interact in with the succession of Dread Empress.

Amadeus seemed to set a slight precedent that the Legions were loyal to the Empress, and where not involved in the factional fighting. But I think the main issue is that the leadership of the modern Legions know how they used to be treated as cannon fodder and never ever want to go back to that. If they become a faction in the succession wars, then if they ever lose one of those succession wars the resulting Dread Emperor might decide to eliminate the modern Legions and reduce them to cannon fodder again.

But if they become an institution loyal to whoever is the Emperor, well, then their increased competence compared to the old Legions means the Reforms will stick and become unchallenged.

Shveiran

Yes, but the argument only holds water in a vacuum. If Malicia wins the succession war, she won't let the Legions alone because just because they stood loyal this time it's no guarantee they'll stay loyal the next time. What if the Black Knight becomes a claimant rather than a High Noble, next time? Who will the Legions follow? She can't take the risk, she will NEVER take the risk, so EITHER the mind hooks will come again or she'll dismantle the Legions so they can't affect the power balance too much. Probably the first one, because Malicia doesn't ruin something she can suborn instead. There is simply no way that the Legions staying put or returning to the fold will result in them becoming an impartial institution under this Empress.

jamesc9

And this Empress is, or has been, the relatively good case, compared to cackling madmen who need more bodies to bleed.

Earl of Purple

Yes, Juniper is back. And dumping Arcadian water into a lake already inhabited by giant squid... what impact on the ecosystem will that have?

[*sengachi*](#)

I'm guessing the usual Praesi thing that happens when you dump an unholy amount of toxic magic into the ecosystem. More terrifying abominations to make coming generations rue the people who came before them, especially whichever asshole is responsible for the glamour-using near-invisible krakens in the lake.

[*sengachi*](#)

Being able to convincingly write a character pulling one over on world-class military experts is no mean feat. Bravo.

superkeaton

Eyyy, there we go. This won't fix everything, but at least some healing can begin.

zucced

Really liked that conversation with Juniper and Cat. It's been a long time since they've been so open and raw with one another

[*Liliet*](#)

And Cat has been long overdue for talking about some things out loud.

Juff

Typo Thread:

look at. The > look at that. The
afford game > afford a game
like withered > like a withered
founding > finding
it's been obvious to be > it'd been obvious to me
gesture vaguely > gestured vaguely
so the Carrion > so did the Carrion
blindens went off > blinders came off
it the air > it in the air
I'd pretty > It'd pretty
least of tone > least a tonne
so, at least, (should probably be "at last")
to make suborning (should this be stop)
not telling > no telling
"Have assassin > "Have Assassin

[*onedollargum*](#)

["Call me girl again and I'll make you eat your own tongue," I calmly told her.]

I remember when Duchess of Moonless Nights made that fey eat their own fingers, and when Catherine was really horrified at the depths to which she'd descended. Feels like we're getting back around to the auto-cannibalism train.

Shveiran

Meh, to a goblin is just self-recycling.

beleester

So, Malicia framed them for doing the thing they were going to do anyway?

SpeckofStardust

No different then Malicia making a deal with the dead king when cat was going to do the same thing.

Miles

Malicia framed them for doing the thing they were going to frame Sepurchal for.

Cat really needs to get quicker at this though she really is her mother's daughter in that sense. Or learn to assume any clever plan she can come up with is already in motion against her.

Cicero

Who is Cat's mother in this analogy?

[Liliet](#)

Both Malicia and Ranger can be argued to be Cat's step-mother easily: Amadeus's platonic life partner and Amadeus's girlfriend. So basically Cat has two.

I assume they meant Malicia, here.

[Liliet](#)

They weren't going to kill Seket, and the difference is pretty big: a surgical strike on just the specific guy who is a diehard for opposing them vs *leaving* only the person who advocated joining them.

Xinci

Glad we confirmed that Arcadian water is indeed incompatible with at least some Creational creatures physiology, even though Arcadia mimics Creation. Though that may be due to how close Arcadia is to Creation rather than anything else(grooves just go through and imprint on Arcadia perhaps). Their matter at its base differs in inbuilt rules compared to those of Creation and presumably even if Arcadia is similar its kind of like a being levo-amino acid based vs dextro amino acid based. It also seems that, similar to munitions or alchemy, Arcadian water can subsume or at least partially change other matter its exposed to? Quite curious about what kind of rituals or perhaps mastery if one has the mantle of a Court, could be used to make its constituents similar enough to be survivable. Being claimed/swearing fealty to a court also seems a potential route for achieving this. Given how similar this seems to devils and presumably demons being inedible, I wonder if there are similar acts one could do to become compatible with them.

Juniper appeared to have a kind of hopeful, "broken pedestal" moment. She saw that those she looked up to werent invincible, kind of a "glass half-full" moment since now there are possibilities beyond defeat to her internal review of their capabilities.

Darkening

I mean, I think it's less that the Arcadian water changes the normal matter so much as the water gets mixed together so that even if your glass is 3/4 normal water there's enough Arcadian Atoms to make you sick. It's likely Akua could come up with a spell to banish the arcadian water out of barrels of water to leave it normal, but doing it enough to supply an entire army would probably burn out every mage they have.

Xinci

The thing is the trick would be easy, if time intensive, if its just something like contamination. Assuming the density differs(given it is from presumably the area around where Winter was) you would just need to wait for the water to level out into different areas of density, probably helped by using those magical panes to help push water down, or just excite it by heating it up

Shveiran

Why would the density differ?

I mean, it's possible, but I wouldn't say that's very likely.

Miles

The way it works is quite simple. Water is just water. But lake water isn't *just* water. Lake water also contains oils and organisms and minerals and things. In the teal world, those oils and organisms and some of the things are all left-handed in their very make up, all the way down to the smallest bits that can be described that way. But in Arcadia, these same oils and organisms and things are right-handed.

This is fine as long as both realms are separate. Right-handed things interact with other right handed things in the same ways that left-handed things interact with other left handed things. But put a right handed amino acid in a left handed organism and it makes its way where it would normally go if the handedness matched, until it reaches another left handed thing. Then, the right handed amino acid and left handed thing interact completely differently from how they should. Maybe they don't at all, or maybe they interact when they'd normally just pass by each other.

Now, add enough right handed things to a left handed body, and all kinds of biological processes start to go wrong within the body. Pretty much as if the body had been poisoned.

Despite what this sounds like this isn't even nonsense. It's Chirality.

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chirality_\(chemistry\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chirality_(chemistry))

Miles

Except the teal world bit that was supposed to say real world.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm likewise glad to see it confirmed that Arcadian water is unsafe, but I think the chirality argument is on a hiding to nothing... remember, this is a much more magical universe, with its chemistry explicitly off-limits due to the gnomes.

Miles' point about "organisms" is closer, especially since it's been made clear that in Arcadia, there's much less distinction between the "things" and the "people". Arcadian water isn't just H₂O that happens to come from someplace else, it's the material of a realm that predates the mortal entirely, charged with powers and essences that really don't belong in the mortal world. Never mind bacteria, worry about *undines*, especially given there were monsters present already!

So yeah, the Wasteland has now gotten even more weird and hostile... Maybe the lake will eventually come up with its own corrupted-fae Ladies to hand out baleful daggers.

[Liliet](#)

I think chirality was just an example for *how* things can go wrong in mixing water without one type "subsuming" the other.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I do note that in the process of getting here, Cat *has* dropped Arcadian lakes on a couple or three parts of Callow. The former Liesse area was probably going to be screwed-up anyway, but even so Viv may have further occasion to regret some of those fights.

jesdynf

I just can't get past the idea of Drunk Akua watching Catherine pull that same goddamn trick /again/.

"— I beg your pardon?"

"Lakeomancy. That's what she calls it."

"That's... that's not what you'd call that."

"Feel free to tell her that."

"How can we stop it?"

"I dunno, steal the /rest/ of the lakes in Arcadia first? But we haven't cut a deal with the elves like she did, so we'll get swarmed by Spring or October or whatever fresh catastrophe she's unleashed in the twenty minutes since nobody's been looking over Hierophant's shoulder."

[Liliet](#)

Honestly that could be sober Akua. Sober but very, very, very done.

[Liliet](#)

Also, a deal with the fae, not the elves. Cat has no deal with the elves and they're not relevant to the question in the first place.

[308924810a](#)

Everyone who is or could be a Marshal of Praes."

For a second this made me wonder whether this while battle will decide who gets the Name of Marshal. But the mention of Creation not reacting makes me doubt that.

[Liliet](#)

I think Marshal doesn't get to be a Name (as Grem demonstrated by not getting it). It would be because most people on Calernia really just don't care about that role enough for it to be a Role. Oh some guys in a tent at the back of the camp argued and

one of them had a personal crisis? How very fascinating. Can you tell me about the wolf cavalry charging against the knights though?

Linnus42

I mean Juniper could win this and become the one true Marshall but even if she has a great plan. How much of the win will be because of that great plan and not the fact that her side has what half a dozen Named and few people on the cusp of getting Names. Nim has herself and Akua working on it...the rest have zero. Granted I am happy Juniper will get a chance to shine and not be such a sad sack. Just that while painting the Grand Alliance here as a major underdog, EE seems seriously downplaying their obvious advantage in Named, as to be honest the troop differences aren't that major. Assuming no one teams up.

Miles

I'm still waiting for the Black Knight Errant to show up with his theme song.

<https://duckduckgo.com/?t=fpas&pn=1&iax=videos&ia=videos&iai=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwat>

Miles

I'm just waiting for the Black Knight Errant to show up to this party. Gis is the last major force not around.

Also Hakram with the other orc faction.

Earl of Purple

Named don't win battles, not on their own. And Juniper, Nim, and everyone else will be working with that knowledge- both the Army of Callow and the Loyalists know what the Named with Cat can do, so that's something that they will take into account when planning the battle.

Besides which, Cat has an advantage in Named numbers, but she's at a numerical disadvantage, and the other forces all have strengths and weaknesses of their own. Planning a battle takes all of those into account.

Mental Mouse

Remember that the Legions in general have anti-Named doctrine (from decades of fighting Callow), and Akua has been feeding Nim info. Cat's Named are still an advantage, but they can be taken out if she's careless.

DC

Me three chapters ago: jUsT dUmP a LaKe AnD dRiNk ThAt

Me today: ._.

[Liliet](#)

Us to you three chapters ago: good point, must be a reason why they're not doing that, maybe it's not drinkable?

Us today: yooo

DC

grumbly grumbly :V

Widjetty0ne

I started reading PGTE about a month ago. Today is the day I caught up. I expect I shall have a lot more free time in the coming days.

Chapter 19: Vivienne's Plan (Redux)

"A superior strategic plan can fail on tactical grounds should decision-making in battle be disconnected from strategic concerns. This is why training officers to understand these concerns is a priority for a modern army, and the foundation of our manner of warfare."

– Extract from "The Modern Legion", a treatise by Marshal Ranker

The Thirteenth Legion was something older Callowans avoided talking about.

My generation didn't care about it as much, since we'd been raised to Legion garrisons and imperial governors, but I'd served drinks to enough soldiers that'd served during the Conquest – on either side – to hear the whole gauntlet of opinions on Legio XIII, *Auxilia*. Most of my people knew the basics, that it was a legion raised almost entirely out of native Callowans that'd sided with the Dread Empire either during or after the Conquest. Bandits and rebels, people called them, and a lot of things nowhere as nice. Led by General Jeremiah Holt, who'd once been Sir Jeremiah Holt, they'd not actually done much to help the fall of Callow when Praes invaded and only become a formal legion afterwards. Their main assignment over the following decades had

been garrisoning Thalassina, but they'd done a few stints elsewhere in Praes. Never, however, back in Callow.

The thing was, some of the older soldiers who'd fought under the Fairfaxes actually had complicated feelings about Jeremiah Holt. The man was nearly seventy now and he'd been called a traitor for forty years but in his youth a lot of people had seen him as somewhat of a romantic figure. He'd been a rebel against the crown, sure, but before the Conquest the situation in Callow had been a lot more complicated than my people cared to remember. For all that Callowans like to pretend that the years before the Praesi rolled in had been a flawless golden age where our wise and benevolent Fairfaxes rulers had been beloved overlords, that was ignoring the realities of it. They'd been a popular dynasty, the Fairfaxes, but they'd also been two reigns removed from a brutal internal civil war and that sort of thing left *marks*.

The War of Cousins had shaken up the balance of power in Old Callow, with two branches of House Fairfax twining the line with respectively the Caens of Liesse and the Sarsfields of Summerholm before taking swings at each other for control of the throne. There was a lot of to say about that civil war, but ironically what mattered most was the people *not* mentioned in the writings about it: the northern baronies of Hedge and Harrow. They'd stayed aloof throughout the entire war, same as they'd been during the Conquest, because by the time that branch of House Fairfax my father destroyed came to the throne the north had effectively become a realm within a realm. With the power increasingly gathering in Laure, Summerholm and Liesse northerners had started resenting the authority of a distant crown that little aside from collecting taxes.

Enter Good King Robert, last true Fairfax king of Callow, and Sir Jeremiah Holt of the Order of the Antlers. The estrangement between the north and throne had sunk deep enough that Holt, a bold young knight of northern extraction, had rebelled against King Robert to seek the independence of the northern baronies and parts of the territory now under Southpool. He'd been fighting for the restoration of the 'Kingdom of Dunloch', the ancient northern realm that the Albans had conquered before turning to the last holdout of the Kingdom of Liesse in the south. The historical grounds for that rebellion were pretty thin, considering that before the Albans annexed the north it'd been more of an alliance under a prominent warchief than a proper kingdom and said warchief *had* surrendered in exchange for being named Duchess of Dunloch. Resentment of Laure had been strong enough up north, though, that Holt found more than a few knights and soldiers flocking to his banner when he raised it.

Their rebellion had been rather tame, very knightly. It'd been more a play of fox-and-hound with the Fairfaxes than the kind of violent resistance that'd followed the Conquest. Unfortunately,

after a few humiliations too many King Robert had gotten serious about putting them down and bodies had started piling up. Holt lost most of his rebel troops and had to go increasingly bandit to stay in the fight, which tarred his reputation. Enter the Conquest and bandits popping up everywhere as troops marched east, leaving everyone's holdings unprotected. A much grimmer Jeremiah Holt saw his opportunity. He'd been halfway to gathering a sizeable army of malcontents and robbers when Amadeus of the Green Stretch had reached out with an offer to him.

Self-rule for the northern baronies so long as Holt entered imperial service, as well as a formal military office for him and his men. Jeremiah Holt took the offer, famously, and slew a few hundred soldiers under the Count of Ankou before capturing the man himself and keeping the city out of the war by threatening to hang him his noble prisoner should anyone pass the city gates.

He'd never quite been forgiven for that by the older generation. Having one of their romantic heroes shake hands with the Black Knight and rise to the rank of general in the Legions of Terror in the aftermath had been one of the many hits the pride of Callow had taken after the Conquest. It'd been striking enough that I'd been surprised to learn after joining the Legions that there were songs about Holt – two of them, a sad one called 'O Knight of Dunloch' and a merry one called 'The Ride at Luthien's Crossing' – because I'd never heard either of them sung. I tended to believe that if he'd ever been allowed to serve as a garrison in Callow his star would have risen, especially if he checked the abuse of an imperial governor, but then that was likely why my father had assigned the Thirteenth duties on the other side of the empire.

Today's Thirteenth Legion wasn't the same that'd formed during the Conquest, of course. Most those soldiers were either dead or retired, with the holdouts being high-ranking officers whose position wouldn't require much fighting. But unlike other legions, the Thirteenth had become something a family trade while out east. Children and grandchildren of the original soldiers and officers made up most of the ranks, and while many of my people wouldn't consider them countrymen the soldiers themselves believed differently. Praesi tended to call them Duni, but for all that the soldiers of the Thirteenth were now often mixed blood – not only Taghreb and Soninke but also from Ashur and the Free Cities – they largely considered themselves Callowans. An estranged tribe gone into exile, perhaps, but still Callowans.

And on that hinged Vivienne's plan, because there was nothing more exiles wanted than to come home.

It hadn't been easy to get into the camp. We'd approached under the cover of Night as well as night, but regular patrols and a solid ward layout had still slowed us down to a crawl. It'd been

a game of patience, which had irked me considering the looming battle and how impatient to get this done it was making me. We'd eventually slipped in, though, if much later than I would have preferred: past Early Bell. Most the camp was still asleep but one of Vivienne's spies had made contact with the legion's junior legate, Alice Burnley, and it paid off exactly the way it was supposed to. Within half an hour of our arrival, the Thirteenth's senior officers were shaken awake and summoned to an impromptu war council in the usual tent.

Where Vivienne and I waited seated in a dark corner, cloaked, as officers filed in one after another and the sturdy, grim-faced Legate Burnley fielded questions about the summons by deferring until the general was there. Jeremiah Holt was the last to come and I took a moment to study him from under my hood. Still built like a bull even at his late age, he was blue-eyed with a crooked nose and white hair that'd fallen atop his head. He moved gingerly but with assurance, for all that he seemed rather tired from being woken up at this hour.

"What's this about, Alice?" General Holt asked. "Your messengers were tight-lipped about everything but the urgent need."

His eyes moved to us, our shrouded silhouettes in the corner.

"Eyes of the Empire?" he asked.

I smiled in the dark and struck a match, revealing up my one-eyed face just long enough to light up my pipe. I pulled at the wakeleaf, breathing in deep and blowing it out in a long stream, as the half of the room that'd caught sight of the telltale details froze. Jeremiah Holt was one of them, but his surprise did not last long. He straightened, hand casually coming to rest on the dagger at his side.

"Good evening, Your Majesty," the general of the Thirteenth evenly said.

"General Jeremiah," I nonchalantly replied.

Half a dozen swords were out in the heartbeat that followed but their leader snorted at them.

"Put that away, you fools," he said. "If they'd come for blood it would already be on the floor. If Alice let them in it'll be for talks."

His eyes went to Vivienne's silhouette.

"Would that be the Webweaver or Princess Vivienne with you?" he asked.

Vivienne rose to her feet, pulling back her hood.

"You are quick to adjust," my successor praised.

"I'd been wondering if one of you would come," General Jeremiah said. "Nim believed not, but she's always been better at reading the east than the west."

"They're here to make an offer, Jeremiah," Legate Alice said. "I got oaths through the Jacks that blood won't be spilled even if we refuse it."

Blue eyes went to me, following the plume of smoke leaving my lips.

"And will those oaths hold, Black Queen?" he boldly asked.

"I keep to my word," I simply said. "Good or ill. Have any of you heard otherwise?"

None refused me that. For all that I'd turned my back on the Empire, I was known to keep my promises. It was a reputation that'd cost me much to maintain but moment like this were why it had been a worthwhile investment. There were a dozen people in here, most above fifty but a few closer to thirty, and the tension went out of them all when I backed up Legate Alice's words. The white-haired general snorted again, going to pour himself a cup of spiced wine before dropping into the seat at the head of the table.

"Let's hear it, then," General Jeremiah said, tone deceptively light. "What is it that you're offering for us to tun on the Tower?"

There were murmurs, in the wake of his words, but no one bared the swords already returned to their sheaths. I laughed.

"Are you saying you no longer consider yourselves loyal subjects of the crown of Callow?" I mused. "A most surprising turn."

There were a few chuckles but many more wolfish smiles. They had no love for my crown, these men and women. The few that'd once lived under the rule of Laure had been outlaws to it. But neither were they the Tower's folk, because they'd never been allowed to be. The reason one legion had been left to garrison a wealthy city like Thalassina for so long without fear of corruption was that the Thirteenth was as estranged from Praes as it was from Callow. Even after a generation of living east of the Wasaliti they were still strangers in these lands, distant from its factional struggles. I glanced at Vivienne and she inclined her head. She was to take the lead: it was her plan and so hers to execute.

"You know who I am," Vivienne Dartwick said. "I am now a princess, heiress to the throne in Laure, but I was once the Thief and a rebel of the Lone Swordsman's band."

"A hero who fought to restore the same throne many of us fought against," General Jeremiah bluntly said.

"There are no Fairfaxes left, Holt," Vivienne replied just as bluntly. "The Kingdom of Callow that will stand when this war ends will not be the same as it was in old days. Your war ended when Amadeus the Black opened the throat of the last of that line in a cradle. You have *won* it."

A dark-haired man in his early fifties who by his uniform should be the senior legate of the legion, Eldon Hawley, broke in.

"Why's it you doing the talking?" Legate Hawley challenged. "Princess you are, but it's the queen who rules. What are your words worth, Dartwick?"

Some approving mutters followed, as well as glances at me. In the dark they could see little more than the red burn of my lit pipe and the smoke wreathing me, but it was enough. Vivienne stood in the light, upright and bearing a silver circlet, but the hard truth was that it wasn't her reputation that had these people willing to hear us out. There was nothing I could do about that, though, without making it worse. It was a hurdle she had to overcome herself.

"I'm the one talking because I'll be the one dealing with you in twenty years, legate," Vivienne replied, unflinching. "You're trying to make it a slight, but it is the very opposite."

She did not elaborate. The general let out an approving grunt, eyes considering.

"It's not a bribe and a pat on the back you're offering us, then," he said. "You're in it for the long haul, and the long haul for Callow is you on the throne."

Understanding spread through those that hadn't followed along, interest coming with it. This lot had been offered many a bribe, in Thalassina. The Kebdana and their great vassals had been some of the wealthiest people in Praes. They'd not taken them then and they would not now. Gold wasn't what any of these people were after.

"You have grievances with the throne in Laure and I'll not speak to the justice or injustice of them," Vivienne said. "It was before my time. But I tell you now that throne is dead and buried. What's left behind is Callow, and it is that same land that beckons you home."

"We've been out east for long, princess," a fair-haired woman said. "Some of us were born here. We have families, husbands and wives and children."

The blonde was Kachera Tribune for the Thirteenth, Sally Thoms, whose name might be right out of a Laure street but was deeply tanned from a Taghreb father who'd raised her in Thalassina. The city might be dead, but the ties were not. There were many in the Thirteenth so bound to Praes.

"And they will be welcome in Callow as well," Vivienne said.

It wasn't quite the right angle, I thought, and she saw it too from the hardening of a few faces.

"We've made homes here, princess," the Staff Tribune said. "You're asking us to abandon them and pretending it's a favour."

"Have you really?" I mildly asked.

Eyes went back to me. The Staff Tribune straightened, his close-cut grey hair lending him a certain presence under torchlight.

"We might not be Praesi-" he began.

"Duni," I softly interrupted. "That's what they call you, isn't it?"

He looked angry at being interrupted, but none denied what I said. They'd all heard the word before.

"That's all you'll ever be, out here," I said. "Useful servants. Serve for a dozen generations and it will mean nothing. You all know that already, you've seen it with mfuasa and they think more of those than you. Bad blood cannot be made into good blood, that's the way of the Wasteland. You have reached the summit of what you can aspire to in Praes. So the question left to ask is simple enough."

I shrugged.

"Are you satisfied?"

The silence was telling. Rebels and bandits were ever hungry men. I let the silence stand, passing the torch back to Vivienne.

"You sacrifice in going home, like all exiles," the princess of Callow said, tone honest. "I will not pretend otherwise. So let me speak to what you will gain instead."

That had a few leaning forward, those who'd struck closer to the bandit strains of the Thirteenth than the rebel ones. The ones with mercenary leanings.

"Amnesty for any crimes once committed in Callow-" Vivienne began, and already a few scoffed.

We'd known they would, but this step was necessary for the rest. General Jeremiah was studying her with a frown, as if wondering why she had so blundered.

"I take no alms from the throne in Laure," the Supply Tribune bit out. "It was no crime to buck the tyranny of Fairfax laws then and it needs no fucking forgiveness now."

"It does," Vivienne replied evenly, "as by ancient custom it is forbidden for an outlaw to hold or be granted a noble title."

That little sentence went off like a sharper in the tent. Even General Jeremiah, who'd not been known as *Sir* Jeremiah since the Order of the Antlers had stripped him of his rank, looked surprise. Legate Alice, who'd left our side to go stand with her fellow officers, was the one to voice her skepticism.

"Even out here we've heard that you two have been stamping out the old nobles," she said. "And now you're offering to make us of the same breed you want to smother? That seems like an ill fate awaiting us."

I bit my tongue, for though I wanted to reply it was not me who should speak. It was Vivienne that needed to draw the distinction between what had been the policies of my reign and what would be the policies of hers.

"Nobles got in our way, after we broke with the Tower," Vivienne said. "They were treated accordingly. Yet I'll not pursue that enmity into my reign. The territories that were cut out as imperial governorships under Amadeus the Black will remain administrative provinces with appointed governors, but under that authority I will raise nobles again."

I didn't like it, I honestly didn't, but it wasn't the same for her as it was for me. Vivienne was a Dartwick, minor nobility but still very much a noblewoman by birth, and she wouldn't come to the throne with the kind of baggage I brought. Orphan, apprentice to the Carrion Lord, villain. Nobles would actually be willing to work under her in a way they simply hadn't been for me. She wasn't going to undo the brutal work of centralization that my father and then myself had done, she knew better than that. That was the whole point of keeping governors: there would never again be dukes in Callow, that kind of power would only ever be held by the grace of the throne. Yet she was very much in favour of cultivating the presence of lesser nobles once more.

She had valid reasons to, I'd been forced to admit. Lesser nobility was how Callow had been able to maintain so many knights without bankrupting itself, pushing off the costs of that to

noble families instead of making the state coffers bear it, and it was also a solution to our still chronic lack of qualified officials. Vivienne intended to turn my father's orphanages into schools under the aegis of the crown, but that would take years and it'd never work outside the largest cities in Callow. Until then, she'd be relying on spare sons and daughters of the nobility to serve – and even after, she'd keep using them as a balance to keep the power of her own Laure bureaucracy in line. She had learned from Malicia's reforms in Ater in a way I'd never thought to.

"Noble titles," General Jeremiah calmly said, but I saw the hunger in his eyes. "Would you care to elaborate, Princess Vivienne?"

"For you, the barony of Longcourt," the dark-haired princess replied. "Which you might not be familiar with."

"A week's travel north of Liesse," Jeremiah Holt calmly interrupted. "Known for its apple orchards, as I recall. The last baroness of Longcourt was a girl of fourteen that died at the Siege of Summerholm."

"She was," Vivienne said, hiding her surprise with some skill.

"The land was placed under the imperial governor in Liesse, but there are cadet branches to the family," the general said. "That title would come with enemies."

Vivienne smiled and so did I, pulling at my pipe. And there was where her cleverness had shined through. Because the dozen in this tent had already been high-ranking strangers in a foreign land before, made to step on toes just by being who they were. Half the reason they were even hearing us out was that they were sick of being in that role. They weren't eager to start being the same thing only after uprooting themselves across two rivers to a land most of them hadn't seen in decades if ever at all. Any of them picking up titles would make enemies of the relatives of the people who'd once held to those titles. This had been meant to be great hurdle, but Vivienne had instead managed to turn it into an asset.

"It does not," Vivienne said, "but it does come with a wedding. I believe your eldest grandson is yet unmarried?"

The old man blinked.

"He is," the general warily admitted.

"So is Holly Leyland, the eldest daughter of the man with the best claim to the title," Vivienne said. "Both have already agreed to unite the lines, should you and your grandson agree."

General Jeremiah seemed genuinely taken aback. My successor's gaze swept across the rest of the officers.

"I offer twenty lordships to be divvied up among you as you wish, but in truth that is the lesser part of my offer," she said.

She reached into her cloak, taking out a folded parchment and setting it down on their table.

"This is a list of sons and daughters from noble families in good standing that have agreed to marriage with officers of the Thirteenth or their descendance," the princess of Callow said. "Age and rank in succession are included."

The tent was as silent as a grave.

"This is not a trap," Vivienne Dartwick gently said. "When I speak of bringing you home, I mean every word. I am not the Tower, to strand you among enemies and then use the fear to weaken all beneath me. Come back to Callow, and you will truly be *back*. All the land offered is in what was once the Duchy of Liesse and now lies empty, but this will not be solely a noble's game. Freeholds will be provided to retiring soldiers and formal knighthood to any cavalrymen who are willing to join the knightly order I will found – the Order of the Stolen Crown."

Kachera Tribune Thoms licked her lips then broke the silence.

"And what do you want in exchange?" she asked.

"Fight with us here," Vivienne said. "On this field. When we march east to bury death for good, fight with us still. And when the war ends, *come home*. Be part of the peace we'll all have fought for."

She'd hit all the right notes, I thought as I watched them teeter at the brink, and still had things been even just a little different this would not have enough. But the droplet that'd tip the cup was that Thalassina was gone. It was where the Thirteenth had been for the longest, and when that city had died to the Warlock's wrath many of the ties that bound the legion to the Wasteland had died with it. The same kin that they might have been afraid Malicia would kill as retribution to changing sides were already dead and buried. They had a lot less to lose now than they would have had five years ago and Vivienne had offered them more than they had ever hoped they might receive.

"We'll need to talk it over," Legate Hawley roughly said. "Bring more officers into it-"

I blew out a long stream of smoke.

"No," I said. "Tonight. You have until the hour's done to make your decision."

Some looked angry, but General Jeremiah was not one of them. If anything he looked approving. Smart man.

"Any longer than that and the Eyes will be onto us," he said. "You want us to march right now, don't you? Smash through the palisades while we have the element of surprise and link up with the Army of Callow."

I nodded. The moment the Thirteenth went over to our side or refused to, the Battle of Kala had effectively begun. When they moved all sides would begin to muster for combat, because to do anything else would be ceding the initiative to the opposition – and none of the four armies on the field were willing to do that, when all knew annihilation was just one mistake away.

"Come dawn there will be a battle," I said. "Now's the time to decide on which side of it you'll stand. You've heard what Princess Vivienne Dartwick offers you. You know what the Tower will give you and the worth of Malicia's promises. *Choose.*"

It was not a simple choice and they did not simply make it. They gathered among each other, talking in low voices as they argued faults and merits. Vivienne retreated, coming to stand by my side, but neither of us spoke as we watched it unfold. It wasn't the kind of plan I would have made, and my fingers itched to see it play out. It'd give power and wealth to people that I honestly considered to be pretty shitty and untrustworthy, but beyond that there was too much... give to this. Making nobles diluted the authority of the crown. Making several nobles, all with close ties to each other and in the same region, was making a potentially dangerous power bloc. I would have preferred cornering them, burning their ties to Malicia and taking them in on my own terms.

A third Gallowborne, to match the one I'd lost and the one I'd spent.

Vivienne wasn't me. It wasn't that she didn't see the same dangers I did, just that we didn't have the same... instincts about how to deal with them. She wasn't afraid of a Baron Jeremiah Holt because even if he grew powerful she was confident she would make him into an ally. Bring him into the fold, use that power to her advantage without needing to have something to hold over his head. And in someone who hadn't been with me for so long I would have been tempted to call it naivete, but Vivienne wasn't naïve. It was the same part of her that'd made her refrain from killing when she'd been the Thief, that'd seen her join the Woe when the odds were Callow would burn if she didn't. She was willing to embrace foes in ways that I just wasn't.

There was little of our old madness in Vivienne Dartwick, of the slights and long prices, and I could not help but feel that our people would be better off for it.

The officers of the Thirteenth chose, and they chose hope. They chose home and peace after the war. I saw it spread from one to another, the decision, until even the holdouts bent their heads and the same man who my people had once written songs about turned his blue eyes back to us.

"It has been," Jeremiah Holt softly said, "so very long since I saw home."

He breathed out shakily.

"An oath broken and an oath taken is a cheap price for that," he said.

"Then kneel," I said.

They did, but I did not rise. My hand touched Vivienne's side and she met my eye, looking almost startled. I almost snorted. As if I would reap the harvest she had sown. No, those oaths were hers. She had won them, she would keep them. And the officers of the Thirteenth, on their knees, spoke their oaths to the princess of Callow. And with every oath the world shivered, until the same rebel who'd once fought a throne now swore to another. Jeremiah Holt spoke his oath, and when he swore to the princess of Callow the whole of Creation bore witness. Vivienne shivered too, the weight of the pivot pressing down on all our shoulders. Ah, I thought. Indrani had tried to tell me, hadn't she? I'd gone too deep, too... narrow trying to figure out who Vivienne was. I should have known that the simplicity had been at the heart of her the whole time.

Vivienne Dartwick had entered the tent as a princess, and now stood a Princess. It was as simple as that.

I almost laughed, seeing the hope and awe in those eyes, because didn't the Gods just love their little jests? Vivienne had once been a fine enough thief she'd earned a Name out of taking from Praes, and yet the greatest of her thefts only came now that she had left behind. As a girl, all she'd ever taken from the Dread Empire was coin and good. Now, though?

The Princess of Callow had stolen back an entire legion.

Interesting, I expected that Cat would come into her new Name first, that as a subordinate that Viv would continue to be molded until Cat's came into being.

[Liliet](#)

Nope. Vivienne is long past the stage of getting molded 😊

[Liliet](#)

Also, GO VOTE! I mean boost! Do the thing!

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

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Nope. Vivienne is long past the stage of getting boosted. 😊

(As an alternative to the whole "vandalize a quote" boost thing, which I've come to agree is annoying.)

Anomandris

Princess of Callow? Is it just me or does it not sound..... Namey enough? Also, extremely geographical...

Dredcor

Her Name is likely just The Princess. Perhaps a transitional name, like The Squire.

A Queen Name perhaps coming once she ascends to the throne.

Reader in the Night

Not even Princess of Callow. Just... Princess. Extremely generic, though I suppose less so than Heiress.

I loved this chapter and it was amazing, but I do question that Name decision. Callow has a long and historied tradition of Shining Princes, breaking it now for what feels like no apparent reason (unless the name Shining is specifically associated with the Fairfaxes) comes off as against the nature of Names, because as far as grooves in reality go, Shining Princess is a fairly entrenched one.

Dredcor

I don't think Vivienne necessarily fills the Shining Princess' Role is all.

Juliet

I think Princess has a fine groove, the entire world (even Malicia's meddling) made a point that Catherine was originally only the Queen IN Callow.

Most of the other cultures that participated in that have Princes or Princesses, but their ruling class (First Prince, Taric's people, Dread Empress or Emperor in Praes) don't legitimize Princess > Queen as ruler.

This feels like Anove smiling; as the Black Queen moves on from ruling Callow, there is yet a Princess, where once their enemies spurred the world to deny both.

Who rules Callow might just be Catherine's oldest question, it was one of the first things she thought about Black's reaction to her desires in book one.

[Liliet](#)

I guess the problem is, Shining Princess is entrenched deep enough to be kinda narrow – in a way Vivienne misses. She might lead knightly charges from time to time but she's not a combatant by primary role. It's her Squire who's the rival to the Black Knight, not her.

dadycool

Callow also has a long history of not being a conquered vassal state of Praes and the Age of Wonders has a long history of not being ended, but Black and Tyrant broke those streaks. Cat is ushering in a new age that not even she knows what it'll be like, and it includes carving your own footsteps. Abigail of Many Titles actually followed the path of one of Cat's aspects: a Callowan general leading a military based off of the Carrion Lord's teachings with an Orc assistant. Most of what Cat's doing has Never Been Done Before, and her successor being equally as trailblazing surprises no one.

Reader in the Night

Those streaks were broken for a strong reason, and in the Tyrant's case, at immense cost. Vivi didn't really do anything to buck the name "Shining", and even played a bit into it with her charge.

Though I suppose simply the fact that she willingly follows a Villainess might disqualify her from the Name of Shining. If Shining Prince was the Callowan ideal of the perfect prince, then compromising with Evil might be enough to prevent the Name from forming.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's more Vivienne's tendency towards backroom deals and diplomacy over flashier villain duels and the like. She's led knightly charges but it's not really her *thing*, she just does that as one of the large variant toolbox she has.

The story is slightly off to the side of Shining Princess specifically.

[sengachi](#)

Generic yes, but there is some serious power in the more generic Names.

aurikdomi

Heiress, Squire, Concocter, Poisoner, many others all have a pretty decent power yeah. nothing wrong with generic

Flameburst

Unless I miss my guess, shining prince was a martially inclined name, someone who leads and inspires soldiers from the front. While Viv can and has done that, it is pretty far from her core personality, making it a poor fit.

On the other hand, most generic names we've seen have been transitional names, and her story right now is all about growing into the role of Queen everyone knows she'll have to fill soon. A transitional name works better for her than a full one right now.

Halinn

> On the other hand, most generic names we've seen have been transitional names

I'm not so sure. Archer and Ranger are both quite generic, and those sure aren't transitional. Neither was Vivienne's old name of Thief.

Tenthyr

The point is that the expectation of princess is that she becomes a queen, much like how a squire becomes a knight. An archer is an archer, ranger is a ranger.

[Sethur](#)

As I understood it, the old callowan names (at least the royal ones) are gone for good after Amadeus stamped them all out during his decades of rule as a de-facto vice roy of Callow. Like the Orcs can't have a Warlord anymore, just warlords. What Cat and Vivienne are establishing are new grooves. They are distinctly different from old Callow and

their Names reflect that. Vivienne is not one of the Shining Princes of old and will likely never transition to a Good Queen. Also, Callow itself is not the same anymore, so it makes sense that callowan Names change to reflect the change in society, power structure and population (and geography, as Liesse is no more).

[Liliet](#)

I think orcs can get Warlords again... IF they gather up into a raiding horde again.

Names go away when Roles go away. And I don't think it's been made impossible for there to be a Shining Prince(ss) again in a generation or two. It's just... not Vivienne.

Lux In Somnia

I took it as her taking the name of Princess. It just so happens to be that it is of Callow

Kyle Wong

It's the exact same naming convention as the Tyrant of Helike.

[nostoneuntuned11](#)

It seems plenty namey given that Callow isn't just a kingdom, it is The Kingdom. None of the other major powers are true kingdoms like Callow. So of course they would hold the generic royal titles. Just like the Empire has the Warlock or the Chancellor.

It definitely is transitional name by the nature of the title. The Princess will one day be the Queen.

Karma

Awesome

Raved Thrad

Wow. Just... wow.

7imelock

I think the Name is just Princess -it's sort of similar to Tyrant in a sense.

Dredcor

Yeah, pretty sure it is. Though there's also the chance it is a transitional name, since it wouldn't make sense when she ascends to the throne.

Konstantin von Karstein

It's definitely transitional.

LarsBlitzer

As well as transitional, much like Squire or Apprentice. I'm getting the feeling that Vivienne's change from Princess to Queen could serve as a catalyst for those two under her (the aforementioned Squire and Apprentice) to assume their own Names, whether they'll be complementary or not isn't determined, but having a bona fide Queen getting her Name would be a pretty heavy thumb on the narrative scales. Of course, that won't happen until Cat abdicates.

[onedollargum](#)

Cat was always worried about the Squire becoming her successor, but she's just helped create the Princess to her Black Queen.

Dredcor

Correction: She was worried about becoming a MENTOR to the Squire, because being a Named's mentor vastly increases your chances of dying.

Having a successor, though it comes with its own patterns and stories, does not carry the same weight.

dadycool

Yeah, mentors tend to get killed at critical times to bring the up and coming Hero out of their funk and she's like "Yeaaaaah, no." Most of the time she uses stories like the Bard does, but that one is a lit Sharper and she goes full Carrion Lord on it.

Charles

Yes, but Queens can abdicate, and Cat is planning to. So many of the Heroic stories end with a dead mentor to spur on the new Knight.

[Liliet](#)

Half of the problem with Squire being potentially her successor is that he's not Vivienne, whom Cat has already picked for this.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

The other half is Contrition being sore losers 😊

[Liliet](#)

*and wanting to kill her

[boballab](#)

I just realized that Cat is starting to resemble a female version of the god Odin: 2 Raven's, one eye but with a staff instead of a spear. Odin besides being associated with War and Battle is also associated with the Gallows and it was the mention of the Gallowborne that tripped this realization.

dadycool

Don't forget that her Name has felt like a wolf since Squire 2.

caoimhinh

Since Squire 1, actually. the beast is shown back when she was forcing the activation of her third Aspect and facing off the Demon that corrupted it.

[Liliet](#)

I think people have been talking about Odin!Cat ever since she got two crows on her shoulders (aka start of book 5).

NICE re: gallows association!

[Liliet](#)

THE PRINCESS!!!!

This is... okay this is not as fun as Shining Princess would have been but this DOES fit Vivienne better, on a very deep and thorough level ♥ ♥ ♥

Oshi

I keep thinking there is more to it than that. But maybe this is it? I wanted a The in front or something.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, she's... The Princess.

:3

Sykomantis

So is she The Princess of Callow~~3M~~ or just The Princess?

dadycool

It sounds like her Name is Princess, though her title is Princess of Callow. It's similar to how Cat and Cordy have the

titles Black Queen and Warden of the West, even though they never actually had the Names.

Downzor

Black Queen and WotW were both potential names at one point - your point still stands, but I think the better example is Dread Empress and Tyrant of Praes. IIRC the first is a Name and the second is just a title

Earl of Purple

Tyrant was the Name of the Dread Emperors, until possibly Triumphant. It happened before Theodosius the Unconquered, as he was first Tyrant of Helike I think.

ohJohn

My guess would be, if not Shining Princess, then Princess of Callow, based on related precedent: Named Callowan monarchs are usually either "Good King/Queen" or "King/Queen of Callow", so "Shining Princess" would mirror the first and "Princess of Callow" the second.

(I still think Shining Princess is plausible, given her historic association with Summer's sun and the phrasing in this chapter - if one were talking about William's Naming, saying "he had entered the tent a swordsman, and now stood a Swordsman" doesn't negate the "Lone" bit - but I can see how it's not a perfect fit for Vivi's Role, given what we know of past Shining Princes/ses.)

dadycool

This was beautiful. All hail the Princess! She honestly deserves this, considering she put her heart and soul into Callow, in a way that Cat never really did. Where Cat was the heir to the Carrion Lord through and through, looking to all the world as if she wanted to reach out and Take the whole of it, eventually coming to rule Named like no one ever had before, Vivienne was always looking to Callow, either to avenge it in some way or to make it better. Where Cat was always looking at the bigger picture, even stepping back and peeking at the frame, Vivienne was always rather hyper-focused on her own home.

Shveiran

Well, not really? Cat has been very focused on Callow until Book 4, when she stopped pretty much just because she realized how much larger than Callow were the roots of Callow's problems.

She didn't stop caring about Callow, she just realized there was no fixing the mess without addressing everything else too.

Meanwhile, Vivienne has grown into caring for it. When she was younger, she was after a lot of things there were not quite Callow – revenge, restoring the Kingdom, independence from the outside world – and only since she came back from Keter has she actually started to plan and find her own ways (and not Cat's) to help Callow.

Xinci

Hm another reminder of the difference in methods Evil and Good cultivate I suppose. Vivi tends to associate more with the cooperative aspects, that compound the longer cooperation is held. Cat goes with the more unsurpassive aspects that tend to stick around even after the initial event that precipitated em has dispersed. Given Praes and Callow may becoming more harmonious over time depending on how Cardinal is set up and how Amadues's plan for the Tower works out, her being less into deterrence behaviors may be very helpful for their long term development.

Cosmic jest are quite nice, though, it is notable that the pattern keeps to the groove. She stole and found it not enough as the Thief, so she instead tried to steal back the ideal of Callow as Princess.

I am quite curious how Vivien will affect the Thirteenth, just like I am curious about how their integration into the Army of Callow will change its tactics. What methods do they have that may differ or harken back to the times of old Callow? Given their leader seems to be a clever type perhaps it will give Callow even more long term military advantages or at least methods of war. Taking from Malicia's reformation of the bureaucracy in Ater is part of it for sure, but I am curious how they will do with the common perception of them. Perhaps they will be perceived as redeemed due to turning on the Tower, fighting a war against the DK then returning home? Kind of the whole deal where fighting a mutual enemy often leads to groups integrating together if the conflict last long enough.

As a final sidenote, definitely seems like oaths do indeed give weight, presumably due to them acting like bindings observing a rule? Thus the Watch gaining access to powers due to their oaths. Enough souls say something is true and a rule can be inscribed due to the oath taken.

Konstantin von Karstein

Concerning the Watch, those « oaths » are more like rituals to bond them to the Gestalt.

Liliet

Oaths give weight because they matter and are awesome in people's eyes. It's simpler than that Xinci.

Xinci

I would say they only matter because observation matters. That is to say, the observation of rules and those rules binding entities seems to be the delineation between various entities and just Creation itself. Very much a in observing you shape and are shaped, kinda deal. Underlying mechanics seem pretty universal for this kinda thing since it harkens back to at least the Fae(you could say Demons too given they are almost undifferentiated from their Hell until they subsume something and even then it goes the opposite route in that thing just becoming a vector)

[Liliet](#)

I think you're grossly overcomplicating a very simple thing.

[Yamageddon](#)

I mean, given that this is fiction set in a world that undoubtedly has inconceivably complicated rules of reality that we don't see because it wouldn't be expedient for the purposes of the narrative EE wants to tell, there's really no strong reason to draw a line beyond which theory crafting about the nature of Creation is over-complicating it. Take Higher Arcana for example, an aspect of spellcasting so complicated that each of the highest caliber practitioners must form their own alphabets and syntaxes to understand the universal mystical laws. We get some windows into how it all works through interludes with mage characters, and some from Cat recounting her meagre learnings on the subject, but mostly that intensely complex subject is left as abstract, because this is a story about Cat, not the intricacies of the magic systems of Calernia. That doesn't mean the simple, abstract surface understanding of higher arcana is the reality in universe.

[Liliet](#)

Higher Arcana is v different in nature from narrativium. One is based on math, the other is literally based on human ability to process events.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

The Princess of Summer could tell Cat cut a deal with Larat just by looking at her, so I'd say oaths, pacts and bargains all leave a tangible mark.

Shveiran

Bargains struck WITH THE FEY, sure.

Xinci

I mean she noted that she could only see two, not that there weren't more binding agreements she could have already had. Given people seem to be able to sense things like someone coming into a Name, how its bound to something else, if it cant be bound, and if someone can be a claimant at all it isnt particularly strange for these things to leave noticeable marks. Doubt Tariq would have almost wept at the sight of Cats soul it id didn't indeed leave rather permanent observable changes.

BargleNawdleZouss

Oh wow, I kept expecting Nim & Akua to crash the party!

Oshi

This a story fu battle. The Black Knight has no place in this story so no Nim or Akua. It's why Cat and Vivienne are the only ones there.

Cat knew this had to succeed to she made sure Vivienne and her hero name (and above's press on the scales) got her the legion she needed for the battle.

Juff

Typo Thread:

about is as > about it as
Fairfaxes rulers > Fairfax rulers
that little aside > that did little aside
hang him his > hang his
something a family > something of a family
revealing up my > revealing my
to tun > to turn
looked surprise. > looked surprised.
huger > hunger
descendance > descendants
had effectively begun > would effectively begin
holdouts bents > holdouts bent

Silverking

I do like how Vivienne and Cat's relationship has allowed them to view their very different methodologies to be viewed not as a rebuttal or a rejection of the other, but a transition. Callow NEEDS a Warlord right now, just as it will NEED a Princess to thrive in the future. Some of the other nobles may think that Vivienne's nobility and hope should be viewed as a triumph over Cat's irreverence and pragmatism, but Vivienne's still the woman who burned the Varlet alive while wearing a dress.

...I wonder if one of the Princess's Aspect will be Claim. Just for old time's sake.

[laguz24](#)

I think she got her pocket dimension back, remember the shining sun?

medailyfun

no, the sun during that battle was Masego's

[Sugar Roll](#)

After reading this chapter I thought Vivienne would become The Matchmaker.

WuseMajor

I think that if she has any more complexity to her name, it will be Princess of the Dawn.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Just how compromised the Thirteenth legion ends up being? If there's one thing Malicia can be dependent upon, it's souring a good thing.

I think the battle won't be a traditional, decisive victory for Cat. My bet is on Malicia meddling (still waiting for the demons) in such a way Nim realizes she needs to be deposed.

nick012000

Yeah, unless swearing oaths to the Princess cancelled out the commands that Malicia implanted in them, they're all still compromised with implanted commands the same way that all the other Praesi officers were. I guess that being under the authority of Cat and Vivienne might be able to stop Malicia from activating the implanted commands, though, the same way it prevented the activation of the commands she implanted in the leadership of the Army of Callow.

Earl of Purple

Malicia's mind control is a mix of Speaking and the aspect Rule. Swearing an oath to the Named Princess of Callow, traditional enemy of Praes, is almost certainly enough to loosen her control. And if not, the fact Cat is there, whose Name does not accept Malicia's Rule already, almost certainly will break the ties needed for that control to work.

Earl of Purple

I seem to have missed the button when trying to reply to this, so see my comment lower down.

Shveiran

Also, Malicia's orders come from an Aspect that is still recovering, according to her own POV chapter; if she can call on those orders, she won't be able to use them at full force.

Also also, that time she had the story in her sails (Empress calling her rebellious subjects to heel) and was revealing a new trick.

This time, a new Name was born out of the loyalty stolen from her rule; the ball is on the other foot now.

Also also also, now Cat and co know Generals and upper echelons are compromised; if they don't think all the above are enough, they'll have countermeasures at the ready.

[portionofthecure](#)

All the other stories I read are just to fill time waiting for this one. The time span and history of the characters culminates in such epic happenings.

Maybe I'm just emotional tonight but my breath caught in my throat when they kneeled for Princess

Joel Chambers

"It has been," Jeremiah Holt softly said, "so very long since I saw home."

He breathed out shakily.

"An oath broken and a vote given is a cheap price for that," he said.

Vote: <http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Burlyraven](#)

I wonder if Vivienne might not pick up Merciful as part of her Name at some point. She's more forgiving than most Callowans on a notable level, but the word does have some harsher meanings still fitting to a heroic princess/queen.

Earl of Purple

I think if one of her descendants gets a Name by behaving in a similar way, they might get Merciful Princess, but Viv's Name isn't going to change until it transitions into Queen. Right now, she's carving the groove that others will follow in, and they may get adjectives that more accurately describe the shape

of it. As Princess, there's nothing Vivienne can do that isn't Princess-y, no matter how merciful nor how cruel.

caoimhinh

Queen Vivienne Dartwick of Callow, the Merciful.

jamesc9

I really hope that the vast majority of those marriages work. Noble divorce among the just-returned-from-exile definitely seems like a path to blood on the floor.

Shveiran

I think it's still unclear whether or not divorce exist in Callow, for nobles or no. I don't think it was ever mentioned?

Regardless, these marriages have no less chances to work then the normal arranged ones that Callowan nobility still does, so we are not off to a very bad start; especially if they come back as heroes from Praes and Keter.

[Liliet](#)

I think failed noble marriages as in the spouses don't actually like each other don't result in divorces, they just result in both spouses cheating happily and only seeing each other at dinner as co-heads of household.

Kennedy

Darn the archery theme to the chapter names is over, I was really hoping for a follow through. Although I suppose follow through could actually be a good name for this chapter.

Linnus42

I mean I guess Princess works cause Callow is really the only real Monarchy around on the continent. Shining is more Martial Inclined and Viv is very much not even if she can inspire the troops sometimes. I did think Sun or Star would be in her Name though even if not Shining so Dawn Princess or something.

As for this Legion I don't know its a good moment for Viv but I think the foreshadowing on this is a bit weak. When did we first hear about this Legion? Also I am not sure I trust this Legion much in the circumstances if I was the Praesi side against Cat, Viv and Callow lol.

Sinead

The legion was mentioned back in Book 1, and we knew Auxilla was here when they first engaged with Nim.

Linnus42

Have they come up since Book 1 before being mentioned in the latest Book?

[Cold Cyberia](#)

They've been mentioned a dozen of times but much like the other legions based in Praes, it was with offhand details since they weren't really a part of the story.

Earl of Purple

A couple of the Free Cities are monarchies, Helike and the one that had the Basileus working with Malicia (Nicaea, maybe? Basileus is Greek for 'King'). But Kairos worked hard at killing the Theodosians, and Cat killed the one he couldn't reach by having him shot whilst he was talking and General Basilia chased off the last of the other city's royals and put the military governor on the throne- but not with a royal title. Other than those, Callow really is the only traditional monarchy on Calernia.

superkeaton

Has the Thirteenth been mentioned before? If not, this all feels a little... convenient, but it's entirely likely they have and it's just been lost in the web of words EE keeps on spinning. And if it hasn't, then it fits with the finger on the scales the Gods keep placing.

Alex Straughan

They were mentioned a few times in the first and maybe second ark. They have always been a part of Guidverse Lore but never had an actual presence in the story. They were just mentioned in tactics discussions and history lessons. Stuff like Black threatening to send the thirteenth to deal with people and how their history as bandits and rebels made the surviving Callowen nobles wary of them.

superkeaton

Cool, good to know it's just my scattershot memory.

[sengachi](#)

This is the kind of thing where, if this were a work of shelf-published fiction, there would be a whole months-long editing process where an editor (or even a team of editors) would go over the story with the author. And during that process stuff like this would be highlighted and they'd work together to find ways to slip more foreshadowing of it earlier into the work. Little comments about them, maybe some plot point involving the

Legions could be found where the Thirteenth could replace that Legion just to get some more screentime. This explanation would be chopped up and shuffled earlier into the plot, with something more like a reminder than an intro happening here.

But this is a web serial, and if that process ever turns out to be financially worth it for EE, it hasn't happened yet. It's just a simple fact of web serials that, while individual chapters will have been edited and workshopped, the overall story structure is always a first draft. So you won't always get the kind of in-depth and integrated foreshadowing good shelf-published fiction has by the time it reaches your bookshelf. It is what it is.

[Liliet](#)

EE intends to fully rewrite the story into a second draft before pitching to publishers. This is literally an intended first draft, EE slipping in late things he wants to have in the story is not even really an oversight, just a changed opinion.

hakureireimu

Yes; multiple times; many times. Just not at this level of detail.

Abnaxis

Every time cavalry—or the relative lack thereof— in the Legions has been brought up the Thirteenth has come up in pretty much every arc, since they're the only Legion of Terror with a dependable cavalry contingent.

Also, way back when Cat was raising the Fifteenth Legion it was mentioned how conspicuously she didn't get any manpower transferred to her from the Thirteenth, which was mentioned as being made up of Callowan bandits and exiles.

zucced

Now that, is hype. Princess is kinda plain for a Name, but like others have mentioned it's probably transitional.

Can't wait to see what Vivienne's aspects are though. Something to do with negotiation perhaps? Oratory? Inspiring the troops?

kinghaart

I think *Negotiate* fits her personality.

jack

The Princess is probably a transitional name that leads into something The Good King/Queen (the traditional name for named Kings or queens of Callow)

jdburger

I think you are right about the Transitional nature of the Princess name, but I do not think she will be earning the Good Queen name. The Queenly name I think she will most likely earn does not flow well with Princess... since I expect she will a title along the lines of Queen of Thieves.

She has almost achieved a set of 3 in stealing important items from powerful beings (Fey and Named). (1) She stole the Sun from the Queen of Summer and their court. (2) She has now stolen the loyalty of the 13th from the Empress of Praes (likely superseding any name granted control). I believe Viv has one more grand heist still to go before she becomes Queen, unless we are counting the theft of the Throne of Callow (Catherine's Abdication) which I am kind of leery on.

[Casey Glick](#)

She stole an entire fleet, although that was rather lower in narrative priority.

She has also stolen poor Cat's heart.

She will not steal the throne from Cat, because that would be a terrible story precedent. Cat absolutely will resign because "peaceful handoff of power between very different rulers" is the Story she wants.

Abnaxis

Hmm...

Vivienne was worried about having a Name from Above, but strictly speaking there's nothing Good or Evil about Princess. I mean, strictly speaking the same is true about Thief and Archer, but it's interesting that her name isn't Heavens mandated to be Good—it will only be as Good as Vivienne makes it

[Liliet](#)

There's also nothing strictly speaking Good or Evil about Lone Swordsman either, yet both we've seen have been heroes. Squire can literally be either, but baby Catherine was specifically a villain because she was Amadeus's Squire specifically. A Role can be instantiated as definitely Good or Evil even if it's not explicitly there in the Name.

Abnaxis

Ehhhhh, I haven't really seen many examples of evil Lone Swordsman tropes. Their whole archetype is brooding and "being the hero we need, not the hero we want"

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Squire is maybe the more relevant example. The Name itself in abstract is neutral/flexible, but a particular instance of a Name often (usually?) super isn't, between Arthur's Light and Cat's necromancy.

Frivolous

Catherine founded the Order of the Broken Bell – Broken aka Break, her former aspect, because Catherine is a destroyer.

Vivienne will found the Order of the Stolen Crown – Stolen aka Steal, her former aspect, because Vivienne is a thief.

Malicia will have a cow once she finds out that she lost the Thirteenth. It will magnify all her insecurities and make her seem weaker to all her subjects, especially Nim and Akua and the nobles.

hoser2

I think this battle, which will be over before many people hear about the stolen legion, will be much more consequential for Malicia's reputation and fate. If Nim wins, then it was something she overcame. If Nim loses, it will have been a contributing factor. Either way, the outcome of the battle (which I expect the legion to affect) will be determinative.

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

Uhh, folks, are we SURE Vivienne isn't still Thief? She just yoinked an entire legion.

caoimhinh

And she just founded the Order of the Yoinked Crown.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It occurs to me that Cat is training Viv in the infamous art of "picking up the box and hitting the other person with it".

Eris

Oh my gosh, today I just learned that Praesi has the same letters as Persia.

I was reading Persian history and kept on thinking it said Praesi

Aaradur

No, the whole point of Viv being Cats heir is that she is not going to be another black queen

Bainos

Imagine that you're a regular soldier in the thirteen, young, so maybe 25 or 30 years old. You know that Praesi don't really treat you as an equal, but you've still lived your whole life there and, well, it could be better but isn't so bad either. You met a kind Taghreb girl, fell in love, and you were married, have a child that will probably join the legion as well once she's older.

The destruction of Thalassina was a hard blow, as many of your relatives died, but you were one of the lucky ones – your wife was traveling when the siege started, so she and your child escaped the destruction. You don't speak about it too loudly near those who lost people they cherished, but just like a few of your fellow legionaries who had relatives in other parts of the country, you still have a home and family to return to.

Then your officer walks up to you, and tells you that you must fight against the Legions. After that, you will need to follow them to Callow. You will never see your family again, although if you're lucky they at least won't be executed by Malicia. In exchange, you will become a citizen of Callow, a country you only vaguely remember but that you know treated you like a criminal.

When you start to wonder why such an order would be given, you learn that the officers of your army accepted this in exchange for noble titles, lands and advantageous marriages. They feel like Callow is their home, and wanted to go back, so they sold your legion, your own home and family in exchange for it.

And if you don't fight so that those officers get their shiny new titles, so that you might go back to your family, you will be promptly executed as a deserter.

I feel bad for everyone who wasn't in that tent and just got told to betray Praes in exchange for nothing, or die. Cat and Amadeus were right, nobles are scum. They should have been stripped of their titles to the last one. Including Vivienne, because I had forgotten it, but she very much is one and thinks like one.

Kai

I'll admit, I'd been hoping Vivienne's new Name would be the Princess of High Noon.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I'm sorry, but I'm now imagining Vivienne as a cowboy. Cowgirl, I suppose.

Chapter 20: Malicia's Plan

"Do I not defeat my enemies, when I mind control them into being my friends?"

– Dread Emperor Imperious

The Battle of Kala began with three streaks of red light crisscrossing a dark sky.

Its prelude had taken place while most the Thirteenth still slept, hard men with sharp swords going into tents to end the lives of the soldiers the general staff believed would fight against rebellion. The purge was quick and bloody, followed by men being hastily roused, and the Thirteenth Legion began to move moments after a mage line sent up the lights that would inform the Army of Callow of our success. The legion left behind a significant chunk of its supplies and all of its siege engines: I'd heartily agreed with General Holt when he'd stated that the Thirteenth tried to leave with everything it would just get caught by the rest of the Loyalist Legions and rout. Treachery rarely made for strong morale, much less treachery interrupted halfway through.

The legion was not in a good position to turn on the others, no doubt a precaution of the Black Knight's. The valley between Moule and Kala Hills had sprouted fortifications in three sets. First the Rebel Legions', in an angled half-circle whose curve faced the east with its back anchored to Moule Hills. Then the mirroring sets of the Loyalist Legions and the Army of Callow, first running parallel from Kala Hills to the east until they reached the curve of the rebel trenches and then, still in a rough mirror, curving around the half-circle. The Thirteenth Legion, while assigned to the front, had not been posted facing us. Instead it was to hold the curve of the loyalist trenches, facing the fortifications of the Rebel Legions. That made leaving a more complicated task than we would have liked.

It might be possible to cross the trench the Thirteenth guarded and then march down the no-man's-land down to my army's positions to the south, but that would be... risky. The Rebel Legions might think they were being attacked and start shooting. Considering two thirds of the triumvirate of generals that'd run that army had just gotten killed and the surviving third was discredited, I was inclined to think they were nervous enough to start shooting without thinking if they caught sight of movement. That left only

the option of getting out the hard way: through the camp of the Eighth Legion, which held the western half of trenches facing my army's own. The three streaks of red light were meant to help with that chancy business and help they did.

Within moments, torches lit up the night as the Army of Callow began an assault on the Eighth Legion's position from the front.

General Jeremiah had offered both Vivienne and I horses, but while she rode with the old man and his general staff I held back. There would be retaliation when someone on the other side realized what was happening and I needed to be ready for it. I kept to the side of the army, its soldiers giving me a wide berth, and rode slowly as I kept an eye on the distant camp in Kala Hills. The camp of the Fourteenth, holding the eastern half of the central trenches, lit up with torches first at the sound of the fighting. The camp in the distance was not far behind, though, and maybe a quarter-hour later the rebel positions were alight as well. I shaped an eye out of Night and tossed it up above, keeping an eye on the battlefield as armies began to move.

Surprise was working to our advantage. The loyalist sappers had built their walls cleverly, keeping much of the half-road behind them, but that'd been turned to our advantage. The Thirteenth moved briskly down the road and smashed into the side of the Eighth's camp by surprise even as the legion was mustering to face an assault from the wrong direction. The rebels were staying out of it for now, probably wary of dipping a toe in this without having a better read on the situation, and I chewed on my lip as I loosely kept pace with the Thirteenth. I'd started trailing behind, wary of the hammer blow I'd expected but wasn't coming. My little eye in the sky was beginning to glimpse the shape of a rout, meanwhile.

The Eighth had been taken by surprise, out of position and attacked from two sides. Goblin munitions deployed to hold the trenches had stopped cold the advance of the Army of Callow but General Wheeler couldn't afford to pull away those men else General Zola would resume the charges. When the Thirteenth ran into the first few companies thrown hastily in its way it had slowed, but it had now smashed its way through them and the Eighth's positions were collapsing. Too many of its legionaries were only half-dressed, and some enterprising souls from the Thirteenth had set fire to parts of the camp. Gods, at this rate we might actually destroy the Eighth as a fighting force. That'd be quite the coup, if one we'd not dared to hope for.

With one legion gone and one switching sides, the Black Knight would be –

"Ah," I grimly smiled as power bloomed in the heights to the north, "*there you are.*"

Night swirled around me in thick currents, terrifying my borrowed horse into trying to buck me off until I stole away a sliver to force calm into his simple mind. I wasn't seeing magic accreting anywhere yet, but it was only a matter of time until the enemy mages- my thought was interrupted by a subtle wave of power shivering across the Thirteenth. Instant. It'd been quick enough I'd not been able to do a fucking thing. And now legionaries were dropping to the ground, one after another. Like puppets with cut strings, just... falling to the ground. *Weeping Heavens*, I thought. What was this? The sorcery seemed to strike as if by random: it dropped ten soldiers in one company, thirty-three in another and then none in a third. Heart in my throat, I rode to a fallen soldier and unhorsed.

The rest of his tenth spread to make room for me, faces full of fear, and I swallowed a wince as I knelt in the dust by the dead man. Except, I realized a heartbeat after I undid the straps of the legionary's help, this was neither a man nor a corpse. The dark-skinned woman under the steel was still breathing, if faintly, though she looked sick and she was shivering with fever. I laid fingers on the side of her neck and found the skin slightly shrivelled but the pulse steady. I heard the soldiers around me began to salute and turned to cast a look at the approaching mounted silhouette of the fair-haired Kachera Tribune of the Thirteenth, Sally Thoms. She saluted me, after a beat of hesitation.

"Your Majesty," she said, stumbling over the unfamiliar address. "The general sends me to ask if you have any insight on this curse. It is crippling our offensive."

I looked away, my lone eye turning to the shallowly breathing woman I was still laying a hand on. Something about this was niggling away at me. The suddenness of the effect, unlike any war magic I'd ever seen, and the shrivelled skin. There was something familiar about this, somehow, but where would I have... Suddenly I breathed in.

"Tribune," I said. "The rations your legionaries have been eating, where have they been coming from?"

She looked surprise.

"You think us poisoned?" she asked.

My look grew impatient and she swallowed.

"Part is from our own stocks, ma'am, but half has been coming from the supply depot in the main camp," the Kachera Tribune said.

And there it was, good as confirmation. General Jeremiah had said that the Black Knight had not believed we'd approached him, but

evidently she'd taken precautions anyways. And not just her, because I *had* seen this magic before. Just never used like this, and I moved my gaze back to the downed legionary so that the officer would not see triumph in my eye and misunderstand. I let it linger though, the taste of victory. Allowed myself to enjoy it. Because the last time Akua Sahelian had used that ritual, she'd left a few thousand Spears of Stygia dead and shrivelled husks before using the power to open a Lesser Breach. Now, instead, she had chosen to spare lives. To incapacitate instead of kill, even when the incentives were *many* to do otherwise.

All these corpses could be undead, right now, with the power she would have gotten back. Or she could be hammering away at the Thirteenth with a spell powerful enough that even I would struggle to protect the legion from it. Instead she has stayed her hand. Proved she was not the same woman she had been at First Liesse, even in the face of greater gains than those for the taking back then.

"I've seen this magic before," I said. "It won't kill them or continue to drain them. Light or healing sorcery should be able to fix most of the damage."

I followed her back to the general staff, after, though I sent up another Night eye to gauge the situation. Our overwhelming advantage had turned to ash in our hands in a matter of moments. At a guess I'd say that maybe a quarter of the Thirteenth had dropped under the ritual, punching holes everywhere in its formations and causing widespread chaos. The Eighth was using the time to consolidate its position and I could already see the Fourteenth moving towards the melee to reinforce. Considering the Army of Callow's attempts to breach the trench were still a bloody stalemate – Zola had gotten men to the palisades, but Wheeler had gotten his mage lines in position and was torching everything in sight – this now had the potential to go very badly for us.

I still had Night at my fingertips but I was hesitant to use it. It'd leave us exposed to a counterstroke from enemy mage cadres and I could solve one of our two problems at most. Either I'd slow the Fourteenth or blast our path south open, but I couldn't do *both*. Now quickly enough, anyway. I was still weighing the risks when I got to General Jeremiah and found that the choice had been made for me.

"Princess Vivienne is leading my cavalry in a delaying action against the Fourteenth," the old man said. "I if I might-"

I raised a hand to interrupt him, looking through my eye in the sky again. There she was, leading six hundred heavy cavalry against the Fourteenth's vanguard. The enemy looked to have been sloppy with composition, they'd gone heavy on crossbowmen and too light on regulars, but she was still outnumbered more than three

to one. I held back my wince. I'd have to trust her, then, and do my own part. The Night eye turned to the positions in our way south. The trench and palisade were facing the wrong way to stop us, but General Wheeler was the veteran commander of a sapper-heavy legion: already there were stakes and mantlets put up in our way. Mage lines were waiting behind lines of regulars, the enemy general's intent plain enough to read. Now that the battle was turning in his favour, Wheeler wanted to keep us contained here until reinforcements arrived and we could be surrounded. Time for a reminder of who he was dealing with, perhaps.

"I have come a long way, through winding paths," I spoke in Crepuscular, voice rising in prayer. "Yet behold this barren realm, this crown of ruin!"

The Night roiled around, like a wind made of darkness, and I felt talons biting into my shoulders. I felt Komena smile against the side of my neck, pleased at the destruction to come.

"Let me match horror with horror, might with might, and know no master in this."

My limbs were trembling and the general staff had all backed away, looking at me in a mix of terror and fascination.

"So let the sun weep and the Crows have their due," I smiled, "for in the end all will be Night."

I'd only used this working once before, in Hainaut, and as the sky lit up with black fire I was reminded as to why. My vision swam, but I forced myself to finish it: I raised my hand, snapping my fingers, and the Hells were unleashed. A young black sun exploded, streaks of flame tearing through ground and men and shielding spells as screams filled the air. Black flame began to fall in a heavy rain, leaving only a horror of the dead and dying where once the Eighth had stood in our way.

"Your Majesty," General Jeremiah carefully said, "are you-"

I spat to the side, wiping my mouth. It tasted like vomit, though I'd not thrown up, and this wasn't even done. I raised my staff, the old general instantly going silent, and after pointing it at the horror swept it through. As it passed the black flames guttered out, leaving behind only great trails of smoke. I spat to the side again, leaning back tiredly in my saddle. Gods, my bad leg burned.

"Get your legion moving, Jeremiah Holt," I rasped out. "I don't have another one of those in me, not for a few hours."

It was another hour before we made it to safety, a full quarter of the Thirteenth Legion left behind either as corpses or prisoners, but we made it. I waited at the edge until our

Princess made it back victorious, a makeshift banner for her knightly order flying high as thousands of throats cheered themselves hoarse.

Now the real battle could start.

—

By midmorning the lines in the sand were drawn.

The wounded had been seen to, the dead burned. I did not bother to send envoys to the Rebel Legions after I saw four crucified bodies hoisted atop their palisade: the same four Jacks who'd supposedly assassinated General Mok and Jaiyana Seket. I didn't know who was in command, Sacker or one of Malicia's plants, but whoever it was they were hostile. Yet the rebels had not returned to the loyalist fold, if the way both armies kept the trenches facing each other manned was any indication. It'd be a battle with four sides to it, not three. Our attempts to reach out to Sepulchral came to nothing: the Rebel Legions were running patrols and west of Moule Hills and shooting at our people on sight. I sent a pair of riders to take the long way around, but it'd be hours before they were anywhere near the Aksum camp and hours more before they could return to us with anything useful. No, when it came to Sepulchral's intentions we were still running blind. That had me somewhat uneasy.

"We've gamed out the engagements with all possible stances on her part," Juniper told me, unmoved. "Whether she stays holed up or goes on the offensive, she'll tie down largely the same number of loyalist troops anyway."

That sounded almost absurd, considering that with the defection of the Thirteenth in fact Dread Empress Sepulchral now commanded the largest of the four armies in Kala – around twenty thousand, even with the losses of her vanguard – but Juniper wasn't blowing hot air. The camp in the hills she'd taken for her own had easy slopes down mostly facing the north and east, approaches where Marshal Nim had built forts in a since-broken attempt to encircle the camp. We expected a single legion to be assigned to defending those forts, the Eleventh, with the reserve being kept close just in case. Sepulchral led a traditional Praesi noble army, which meant they were pretty shit at taking fortifications if magic couldn't level the walls.

Good luck with that when Akua Sahelian was running the mages for the other side.

The Loyalist Legions certainly weren't going to *win* that fight, but the Black Knight honestly shouldn't be wrong in believing a single legion should be able to keep Sepulchral contained long enough for the fighting in the south to be settled. If no one else intervened, anyway. I sighed.

"Malicia will have something afoot in that camp," I said.

"Let the Tower have its tricks," the Hellhound said, "so long as we have the field."

There was little more left to do save hope it would end up as she'd said. We'd already tossed the dice, it was too late to have qualms. The legions and our army spent the time preparing for the fight all could smell in the air, but there was an odd sense of restraint. Like no one wanted to be the first to swing a sword and get the butcher's ball rolling. In the end, it was us who fired the first shot: Archer shot a legate from the Fourteenth who'd made the mistake of wandering too close to her range and with the woman's death rattle hostilities began. I wasn't actually fighting, to my mounting frustration. Masego and I were on the rampart of a fort, overlooking the battlefield and awaiting enemy magic. We were meant to be defensive assets for now, not go on the offensive, and though I knew the sense in it the sight below had my nails biting into wood.

It was a bloody slaughter.

First came the siege engines. The scorpions and ballistae of the enemy began pounding at our palisade, knocking down chunks where my mages did not reinforce quickly enough, and our own engines replied in kind. A heartbeat later the rebels entered the fray, and to my relief they'd picked a side: their own. They were firing at both the Army of Callow and the Loyalist Legions. Already I could see what Juniper had told me about, the 'box'. It was a corner, the square-shaped area where our fortifications were facing the loyalists to the north and the rebel to the west. The weak point of our defensive setup. Bombardment from both sides was already taking its toll, the sheer number of engines that facing two different sets of legions signified having an immediate impact.

Marshal Nim theoretically had the same weakness in her setup facing our own weak spot, but in practice she was better off: the Army of Callow had fewer siege machines spread out over a set of fortifications just as long.

"Are we simply going to fire at each other with machines all day?" Masego asked me, sounding pleased. "That sounds rather civilized."

"No," I sighed. "Now comes the bloody part, Zeze."

Rising from their cover in the trenches, legionaries climbed over the solid grounds and began charging at the enemy fortifications. They came for us and we for them. Across the great line splitting the valley, across the half-circle and its mirrors, men and women in legionary armour raised their shields and charged. From atop palisades mage lines began firing volleys of fireballs, crossbow

companies filled the air with bolts. Down in the no-man's-land, screams and death bloomed. It was the kind of messy, ugly butchery that only came from well-trained forces hammering at each other. Legionaries tried to form testudo formations to take the edge off sorcery and arrows, but on all sides the same model of scorpions were turned on those attempts.

Those deadly bolts punched through shield and mail alike.

"They are not winning," Masego said.

I turned and found him frowning. Puzzled, and perhaps a little appalled.

"No one is winning," he continued, frown deepening.

That's war, I almost said.

"First we bleed," I said, "and then Juniper's plans begin."

The priests were giving us an edge, I saw as the hours passed. The body count kept mounting and the men grew tired, but the fighting continued. Twice rituals were attempted against us, but both times we shut them down. Light healing did not need time and carefulness the way mage healing did, which meant it could actually be done on the frontlines: this was a meat grinder for everyone, but unlike our enemies we could keep some of our men in the fight. We didn't have the numbers to fight a war of attrition against two sets of legions, though, which was why Juniper had made plans otherwise. So far everything had come down along fairly predictable lines, which meant now generalship would begin to matter.

Which turned out to be a problem, because against our predictions the Black Knight was moving the Seventh south to reinforce her battle line. Juniper and I had been sure the Black Knight's own legion would be kept in reserve for hours yet, held back as a precaution in case Sepulchral ended up giving the Eleventh trouble. Four thousand fresh troops would be enough to breathe vigour into an attack on our defences, I thought, and already the melee between the trenches rested on a knife's edge.

"Fuck," I muttered, looking at the Seventh's dust trail rising high. "What do you know we don't, Black Knight?"

Leaving my post, I headed out to speak to Juniper and found she had an answer for me. Not out of any prodigious insight, but because the two envoys we'd sent this morning had turned back early and brought back news.

"There's fighting in Sepulchral's camp," Juniper growled.

"I'm guessing you don't mean the Eleventh is attacking it," I said.

She glared at me. Fair enough. Whatever Malicia's scheme had been in there, evidently it had crippled them as an army. It made sense that the Black Knight felt comfortable sending her reserve into battle if Sepulchral's twenty thousand were basically out of the fight. That was something of a problem.

"We need to get that army moving," I grimaced.

"Good of you to volunteer," the Hellhound replied.

"Not even queenship gets me out of the shit jobs," I sighed.
"Should have aimed for empress."

Juniper snorted and gave me the Order of Broken Bells to lead. My knights weren't going to be charging trenches anytime soon, and the enemy's remaining horse was also still at large. I wasted no time, saddling up and riding at speed full south. Going all the way around Moule Hills to get to Sepulchral's camp would take hours, even riding horses, but there was no alternative. We passed by the silhouettes of the Rebel Legion camp in the hills, deep behind their valley fortifications, and I noted it did not look heavily defended. Sacker or whoever had usurped her command were putting their back into the valley battle. I could see the sense in it, even if it was Sacker that'd given the order.

The rebels didn't want to win the battle, they wanted everyone weakened to their bargaining position improved. Either Marshal Nim or myself winning would be an actual problem for them, they were sure to kneecap whoever pulled ahead.

We kept riding hard to the north, eventually finding the same path that Sepulchral's main host had taken to link up with its vanguard in the heights. There were wagons at the bottom of the slope and tents too, the camp having proved too small for the whole army of the rebelling High Lady of Aksum. We got closer and immediately I winced: not only was there no picket to see us coming but what looked like supply wagons were actually being left unguarded. There were some soldiers at the bottom of the slope, maybe a few hundred, but they were disorganized and didn't actually notice us coming until we were in charging distance. Levies, I thought. Rubies to piglets those poor bastards were levies wanting to be left out of the mess in the heights.

Our arrival unsettled them but the shield wall they tried to make to discourage a change was visibly shaky. I hadn't come here for a fight, though, so instead I whistled for an escort of knights to follow me and pulled ahead. It took a bit for them to realize I wanted to talk and then choose someone who would, but eventually a pair of middle-aged Soninke shuffled forward warily.

"I'm not here to kill you," I bluntly said. "I'm here to speak with Empress-Claimant Sepulchral."

A harsh laugh from one of the two.

"A little late for that," he said. "The old witch's finally dead."

It was easy to get them talking after some prodding. Apparently Abreha Mirembe had died overnight. Some had claimed it was old age that'd done her in, but both her designated heir Isoba Mirembe and his cousin Sanaa Mirembe claimed it to be assassination. They promptly accused each other of the deed, which had seen violence ensue. Sanaa Mirembe, sister of the same Fasili Mirembe who'd served Akua and died at the Doom, had proved to have many supporters among the Aksum men. Isoba, however, was engaged to the daughter of the High Lord of Nok: those troops had largely sided with him. Fighting had been breaking out all day with short breaks to negotiate, but the breaks were getting shorter and the fighting bloodier.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Malicia had fucked up that army pretty good. If I were a betting woman, I'd bet that Sanaa was the Tower's ringer in that fight but I couldn't be sure. Besides, in Malicia's shoes I wouldn't actually want Sanaa to win by too much if I wanted her to win at all. The costlier her victory, the less of a threat she would be after being called to heel. No, I decided, just having a ringer was too simple to be a plot of Malicia's. Better odds she had someone under Isoba as well, fanning the flames so that the factions would keep bleeding each other instead of coming to an arrangement. Worse, I couldn't see an easy way out of this. I wasn't sure I had the men to force Isoba's claim, I thought, and even if I did it'd take too long.

I needed that army to get marching an hour ago.

"Are they fighting right now?" I finally asked.

"No, they're still in talks," one of them said. "The moment they leave the tent and the corpse, though, they'll be back at-"

My eye sharpened.

"The corpse is still in there?" I pressed.

They nodded.

"It's why the truce is observed while in the tent."

I left them to that, riding away and back to the Order. Talbot came up to me but I ignored him, closing my eye to think. Would it work? *Could* it work?

"Your Majesty?" Brandon Talbot asked.

I opened my eye. It was my best shot.

"Form up," I said. "We're going into the camp."

I felt the weight of his gaze on me, but he did not question the wisdom of the decision. He was a reliable sort, Talbot. The way uphill was difficult, but the loyalist sappers had pretty obviously gentled the slope. It was usable, just not the kind of thing you ever want to lead a cavalry charge up through. Or any charge, honestly. We ran into actual defences the moment we reached the heights, at last. The division in the camp was pretty blatant, tents and furniture having been used to make makeshift barricades facing each other while bristling armed soldiers faced each other. I saw – and smelled, Gods take pity on my nose – that horses had been butchered by the hundreds while tied and their carcasses left to rot in the sun, but along with that horrid mess two parts of the camp were being avoided.

The first was a pavilion the size of a small castle and enchanted to look like one, which I assumed to have been Sepulchral's personal quarters. It was now neutral grounds for negotiation, however long *that* would last. The second was a maze of large cages of black iron, which only people in scarlet livery every came close to. I could see misshapen silhouettes within, some of them snapping at the servants in scarlet and others trying to claw their way out of the cage. Right, Aksum. The Cauldron of Monsters, once famous for its use of monsters in battle. At least the squabbling soldiers had been smart enough to stay clear of that. Neither side moved to block us as we formed up on the heights, but the repositioned to be prepared for a fight if it came down to it.

Gods, it better not. We didn't have the room for a charge and they'd bury us with corpses if they had to. No, I was going to put on the fancy hat and bargain my way into that tent. The Order was just here to... help temptations stay at bay. It took half an hour for all my knights to make it up in the camp but I waited it out, only then riding forward with a small escort. Someone must have warned the squabbling Mirembes, because both of them came out of the tent with escorts of their own. I led Zombie towards them, pleased I wouldn't need to posture to get that talk after all, and sped up. Trumpets sounded, and I almost laughed at the pageantry – did I really require that kind of announcing? – before I realized they were coming from too far north.

The trumpets continued to sound the alarm.

"ATTACK," shouts came in Mthethwa. "THE LEGIONS ARE HERE!"

Huh, that might actually end up to my- I caught sight of movement from the corner of my eye, feeling a ripple of magic. A small thing, repeated many a time. A few hundred cages had opened at once, and as my stomach dropped I saw a scaled beast the size of

a battering ram slink out and taste the air with a forked tongue. Well, I thought, fuck. Magic rippled again but I almost laughed. What were they going to do, open the fucking cages twice? A heartbeat later a hold opened in the middle of the camp, the sides of it inscribed with runes.

"I really ought to know better by now," I admitted.

At least I knew what Akua was going to do with that stolen power from earlier, I mused as a Lesser Breach screamed open and devils began pouring out. I sighed, cracking my neck and loosening my shoulder. Time to get to work, then.

After all, if it were easy what the Hells would they need *me* for?

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Steven Silver

"Do I not defeat my enemies, when I mind control them into being my voters?"

– Dread Emperor Suffrage

evan LEE

If it was easy...huh. I guess cat has a point here.

[Mental Mouse](#)

So, having not yet won her own army's, she's about to take over *another* army and win the fight with that one? Is this going to be a pattern?

Anomandris

Honestly, the best thing for Malicia to do would be to drop a nuke on the whole area and decimate all 4.... Even she has got to realise now that there can be no deal with Cat. She can however deal with Procer (maybe not WK, but at least Cordy) if Cat is out of the picture.

Also, as a budding villian myself (I work for a bank), I actually want to tear my hair a bit at Akua. If you've turned, commit! You don't see a hope of redemption from the Callowan side, that's why you switched. Being velvet glove with your curses and attacks does you no favours. Commitment is the necessity for true Evil!

Liliet

Alas, Akua didn't turn so much as run away. The side she ran away to happened to be opposed to the side she was on previously, but the spirit of the affair is very different.

Anomandris

Ah, the childish tantrum. That, actually I can understand and sympathize with.

Emrod

It's not even that, Cat had already said her intentions; she reformed Akua and made her family, only to rebuff her at the final step and send her careening didn't the other side. Akua will get everything she every wanted before her reformation, but now she's REFORMED and wants nothing of her old vices. Catherine's final mercy will be to give her purpose as the master warden over the prison of infinite shifting labyrinths carved from the corpse of Akua's downfall. A prison of two, where one holds down the other as it flagellates them both, endlessly.

Killing Tresmegistus has as more issues than it's solves, long forgotten plots and monsters left for a rainy day that only he can leash, it whom are freed job his death. A new champion of below risen to take his throne. And it adds a name as his guardian, so a story designed to prevent the story of an unleashed monster on the world risen again. Many layered and strong this plan.

Liliet

I don't think Cat's plan will play out the way it's been explicitly and in detail laid out to the audience 😊

RoflCat

Well, that's the irony of her current position: Catherine CAN'T die if Malicia want to survive the current events.

Catherine is essential in keeping the Grand Alliance together and thus the only option to actually push Dead King back into his jar without catastrophic result.

If Cat die, GA falls apart. Even if Cordelia activate her angelic nuke unless it can take out DK permanently then he'll be back later, and this time there won't be GA to stand in the way of him rolling over Praes.

And no, nobody in GA will make any deal with Malicia, not even Cordelia. She has burned far too many bridges in her political chess game thinking that if she can leverage her way out when she win (not if)

Miles

That's not his style though. He only ever goes out to kill armies. Once he's got a nice hoard of fresh Named zombies he'll go back into his territory and turtle up again.

Shveiran

Not this time. He needs to conquer Calernia before the advances of magic and technology overcome his own advantages and the slippery slope starts; otherwise, a Crusade will eventually defeat him.

...Although now that I think about it, I suppose that the AngelBang would pretty much collapse civilization on Calernia or thereabout, so I'm guessing his timetable for the Conquest could be moved forward a bit.

samshadar

On the other hand, you can be sure that the continent would be colonized again by the empires across the seas. As far as we've been told, Calernia is actually a backwater of sorts, and the powers on other continents are far stronger and probably more advanced. That means unless the DK's victory is complete and he fills the vacuum left behind by the destruction of the GA, there will be others to reclaim the continent.

mamm0nn

He's been invited, there's nothing stopping him this time and for once he even has the upper hand of angels coming before demons. DK isn't raiding, this time he's going for the continent, it seems. Taking the whole west while the east is off-limits by agreement.

Quite likely creating a new map of evil dead vs living of both good and evil mixed, even if the Free Cities that have thus far stayed out of this war for the most part end up on that living side. With what we have now, that may actually be a doable end game for him. Not the whole thing, but definitely enough to see the other half consumed in the next war.

shikkarasu

Even worse than being invited by Malicia, he has the blessing of the Wandering Bard. I have to wonder if that was the real thing that kept him from leaving his box; knowledge that she would just put him back in.

[Liliet](#)

I'm loving the Masego developments here.

Loving the Akua developments, too :3

Juff

Typo Thread:

that the Thirteenth > that if the Thirteenth
down the no-man's-land down > down the no-man's-land
half of trenches > half of the trenches
I if I > If I
patrols and west > patrols west
the rebel to > the rebels to
fireballs, crossbow > fireballs, and crossbow
know we don't > know that we don't
weakened to their > weakened so their
every came > ever came
the repositioned > they repositioned

Xinci

I am rather curious if the eyes of Night Cat uses kinda replace her vision since she has one eye. Also curious about how well Cats Night eyes help her with depth perception. She can have multiple up too, so maybe she can achieve some very interesting perspectives.

Hopefully we learn about these monsters later, havent actually seen any beings other than soldiers really interact with extra-Creational creatures like Devils before.

May get a lot of casualties here overall from the look of things

[*Liliet*](#)

I think they very much don't work as a substitute for mundane depth perception: they aren't *in Cat's face*. They're an entirely separate capability that does not restore lost functionality.

[*marillius*](#)

Having multiple eyes further apart would definitely increase depth perception.

mamm0nn

Not if you don't have a brain fine-tuned for it, like with our eyes.

shikkarasu

Brains are startlingly adaptable. People have lost upwards of 50% of their brain and have made full recoveries, with the remaining part just learning to pull double duty. Admittedly these are rare cases, but the precedent is amazing.

There has also been amazing success in controlling robotic 3rd arms that wire directly into the brain, cameras (extremely low res, black and white only) wired into the visual cortex, and even translating one sense to another ('hearing' through specialised speakers that vibrate areas of a person's back).

Are our brains optimised for our current bodies? Sure, but most of that comes from your first 6-8 years of being in that body. Brains are, at their core, learning machines. You can learn to incorporate anything into 'just another limb' given a year or three of constant practise.

Sinead

To top it off, while Cat isn't full on Fae senses/ biology is a vague suggestion anymore, her brain is probably more adaptable for odd sensory information.

Shveiran

And if they did, Cat wouldn't rely on them because that's just asking for someone to strip her of them later on and cripple her accuracy when it matters.

thecount

I'm more curious why the red ring didn't appear. Did Aqua just said the legions "Welp, she broke it, but she won't leave her cam anymore anyway." And the agreed or what?

kinghaart

She's also faked her presence before with that stone so it might just be deemed unreliable now.

Kennedy

I love Cat's prayers for big workings of night

Kage Lupus

Agreed. I really liked the idea of her being surrounded by this foreign legion that had never seen her working with Night before, chanting in some crazy language, and ending the whole thing with "Cho Sve Noc".

mamm0nn

Ask me tomorrow.

Mike E.

And after she is done rambling in some weird language, the entire legion in front of you is engulfed in fire and death, then tells you she can do that again with just a few hours rest.

SpeckofStardust

So Callow knights Vs devils summoned by a traitor. Akua really is aiming for least kills here. (practically it cause the dead king is a problem for her, emotionally she cant control herself)

[Liliet](#)

Notably in Akua's own perspective we haven't seen a single thought towards the practicality of it. She's not thinking about the Dead King, the only thoughts she spares towards long-term interaction with Catherine are that (1) she won't forgive her and (2) they won't ever fuck (these are notably two separate thoughts that come up in different contexts). That Akua's actions are actually reasonably practical from the point of view that remembers DK exists is a coincidence, because Akua herself audibly doesn't.

Miles

Kinda starting to wonder if Akua's power is actually diminished in all this, by some safeguards Malicia put in place. Nim should know what she's capable of so if Akua were actually going easy she'd be caught basically instantly.

Zach

Akua herself admitted that she went easy on the Army during her PoV chapter (the one where she talks with Nim). She's actually honest in her attempt to lower Callow casualties.

[Liliet](#)

> With the mages in line, she proved her value to the Black Knight. A ritual to bring the Army of Callow forcefully into Creation, to deny retreat through the Twilight Ways. It was an inspired piece of spellcraft, she thought. And she found her hand, moving again and again. Adjusting numbers. It was pointless, Akua thought. Even if the blow was softened she would never be forgiven for it. And still. The hand moved. Some had hated her, in the Army of Callow. Many. Others had been... kind. In their own way. How many of them would she kill with her ritual?

>

> A few less, she thought. If she could.

I don't think anyone short of Hierophant tier understands what Akua is capable of.

nick012000

Empress-Claimant Sephulcral is dead? I guess whatever's left of her army's about to join Cat's, then. I half-expect that either Cat's going to bring her back as an undead minion, or she's going to slap some sense into Sephulcral's heirs since it was obvious Malicia who did it.

KiltedBastich

Why not both? Cat's going to bring Sepulchral back as an undead minion with her mind intact in order that Sepulchral can a) make clear her choice of succession, b) tell her minions who betrayed and murdered her so that person can get their comeuppance, and c) order them all to avenge her. She'll probably then ask Cat to let her rest, and Cat will gracefully assent to let her go.

Darkening

Can we get a moment of appreciation for Vivienne gaining a heroic name and immediately leading a cavalry charge to buy time for her allies to escape? That was about as guaranteed a success as I can imagine lol. Not sure what cat is planning with the body, making her undead would presumably run into the issues the wasteland has with undead not being allowed to rule. Hm.

Earl of Purple

Not just any cavalry, either. They're knights now, at least sort of. It was a charge of her new knightly order, so the riders must be knights.

As for the body, she just needs it to answer some questions, I think.

GluestickGenius

Stuff the body full of explosives and send it towards the enemy lines, I assume.

Shveiran

It would be a hilarious call-back, not gonna lie.

Also...

...Uh, weren't we told several times that Name power made munitions' deflagrations more powerful?
I wouldn't discard the possibility that the body of a DREAD

EMPRESS CLAIMANT being used to fan the flames may result in a rather big blast.

Zach

I got the impression Catherine's goal is to prevent Malicia from doing something with the body, rather than doing something with it herself.

Regarding Vivienne, I'm pretty sure Exiled Prince got shot in the throat during his first Named battle, so doing something immediately after you get your Named doesn't completely guarantee success.

Earl of Purple

The Exiled Prince had been around a while before he went to Callow and joined the rebellion. He was ran from Helike after Kairos took the Name of Tyrant, which was at some point between twelve and thirteen, and he was sixteen when he first showed up. So he'd been kicking around for a few years, dodging fights with the Tyrant's assassins probably, dealing with bandits, trying to gather support to reclaim his throne, etc.

Darkening

It's more about the heroic charge and character hanging back to fight a delaying battle so his friends can keep going tropes, the comment on it being fresh is just that she's already diving right in and abusing it lol

[Umbral](#)

I think Akua is turning into a hero. She's not hearing the Tower's Call and only feels the shiver of possibility at Warlock.

She

[gnaruscat](#)

I just realised something about Cat's Name ability. (This isn't directly related to this chapter, but it did occur to me because of it. As usual, sorry for the rambling nature of the post) Everyone is assuming that she Speak-ed (yes, spoke would be more correct, but Speak is the aspect) Malicia. But that doesn't make sense with Cat's personality. I think she did the exact opposite. She Denied, or Opposed, or something similar. That's why she seemed to overpower Malicia... She didn't overpower her, she Name-judo'd her

Kage Lupus

Gonna have to disagree. Speaking isn't an Aspect like Rend or Take, it is an ability any Named can theoretically use. I always had the impression that it is based on authority over the people you are commanding, whether that is formal or just implied by the narrative. Black was able to Speak at Cat way back in book 1 because A) Her Name was weaker than his and B) She was his Squire and a Black Knight should be able to command those.

The reason that Cat being able to affect Malicia is such a big deal is because neither of those two points should have been true. Cat isn't even Named yet, and even if she were Malicia has sunk deep into her role as the Dread Empress over decades. Plus, Empress in general is normally at the pinnacle of command structures so her Name should be naturally resistant to being commanded by others.

The same thing was basically true of the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim as well. Both of them were affected by Cat speaking before, although not directly at them. That gives the impression that whatever her new Name is, it is related to having authority over Named in particular. Not based on their Above/Below affiliation, or any political/cultural/ethnic considerations. If you are Named then Cat thinks that she should be able to exert her will on you if necessary, and those three examples I listed are proof that on some level Creation agrees with her.

[gnaruscat](#)

Good point, on all points. Thank you!

inglessiejek

Can't remember where but almost the same points as made by Kage are actually made in one of the chapters

Zach

Yes, I think that this is basically a correct read on whatever is going on with Catherine, and it also fits Catherine's philosophy (that she wants to prevent Named from being in positions of authority to begin with, even if she realizes that this probably won't be practical – her philosophy is basically centered around controlling the role Named have in their continent). It also fits her history – she's directly been in command of other Named during the war against the Dead King, and even though she's only technically in charge of Below, in practice she also exerted authority over Heroic Named, due to White Knight avoiding using his authority.

zucced

It's a shame Sepulchral bit the dust, I enjoyed how much of a disruption she was to Cat and Malicia.

She had such a badass title too

Shveiran

So, does anyone else have a feeling Malicia got her hands on an Assassin Named?

I know she has the best spies on the local block, but she just murdered three very high-profile targets in one night, one of which a claimant to a very powerful Name. Not everyone needs to be Named, of course, but this does reek a bit.

Also, it would be just like Malicia to use her own Named assassin to do something only a Named assassin could manage, and then leak that Scribe was behind Assassin all along (if she knows, which is uncertain).

DC

...She's planning to Weekend at Bernie's this, isn't she.

Lurch

Demons. A Lesser Breach, pouring forth demons. Right as a force of Callowan knights are in position.

This is the enemy they are pretty much made to combat.

This should be good.

Lurch

Correction. Devils. Still, looking forward to this.

Santiago A Duarte

Okay...what? For the longest time we heard about how horses were just about the only thing that the Dread Empire had found it impossible to get from Callow, how nobles butchered their own herds or rebelled when it was attempted. Then in this book there are horses all over the place in Praes. I was suspending disbelief in Wolof because it stood to reason that some of the richest nobles would have gotten their hands on a few horses as status symbols and such, but now in this camp there are hundreds?? And clearly they're not worth ridiculous sums of money, if soldiers are slaughtering them like pigs. What is going on?

[what color lingerie looks best on very pale women](#)

Can someone recommend Peekaboo Bras and Open Cup Bras? Thanks x

Interlude: Juniper's Plan (Redux)

"Armies, like water, take the path of least resistance."

– Dread Emperor Terribilis II

They were wildly outnumbered, surrounded on all sides and faced with horrors most. It was, Grandmaster Brandon Talbot thought, just another day in the Black Queen's service.

He was already looking forward to the mad caper that would get – most of – them out of this alive. He turned to look at the Black Queen, who was grinning a hard grin that swept the doubts right off the frame of any knight close enough to see it. Confidence rippled out through the Order, passed from knight to knight like a whisper. And why wouldn't it? How many times had it seen them laugh in the face of death and leave victorious, that grin? *Once more*, Brandon Talbot fervently prayed. Brandon's queen cracked her neck then sighed.

"Well," the Queen of Callow drawled, "isn't this a right mess, Talbot?"

He swallowed a shit-eating grin. It was going to be one of *those*, then.

"Positively uncivilized, Your Majesty," he agreed.

"Ain't it just?" she said, the Laure drawl rearing up its head. "Now, looking at this situation before us, I can't help but feel that it's missing something."

"So much as a speck of godliness?" Brandon tried.

She snorted, then erupted into a small chuckle like he'd said a joke.

"Oh, Talbot," she mused, "the things you say sometimes."

A heartbeat's pause.

"What's missing, of course, is *more* monsters that want to kill everyone," the Queen of Callow nonchalantly told him. "So let's remedy that lack."

Brandon remembered a night when he'd been a boy and he'd snuck out of the manor in Marchford with his sister. It'd been summer

and they'd gone out into the hills, bravely defeating sheep-shaped with wooden swords before collapsing exhausted in the grass and looking up at a sea of stars. He remembered the breeze, how warm it had been against his skin. That was what Night felt like to him, when the Black Queen used it – that warm breeze against his skin. There were goddesses behind that power and should they frown upon him he thought it might be a terrible thing to behold.

But they were passing fond, instead, and so he felt a warm summer night's breeze against his skin as the Queen of Callow ripped open a wide gate into Arcadia.

Just in time, for madness was seizing the enemy camp. Monsters were tearing into men, howling devils flying through in riotous flocks and for some godforsaken reason the Praesi were *still* fighting each other. On the others side of the gate Brandon glimpsed a screaming blizzard, but when the queen rode into the white he shouted orders to follow. The Order formed into a column and went through in good order, the edges of their formation hacking away at the monsters and devils that were already nipping away their ranks, but it was not long before all had passed through. The grandmaster had run regular drills with mages to be able to charge in and out of gates at the drop of a hat, considering how often it was being used a tactic these days.

The whipping winds almost deafened him as he cross, but not so much that when he approached his queen he could not hear her shouting. Squinting he tried to make out what she was looking at, finding with surprised it appeared to be fae. Maybe a half-dozen of them, riding on pale horses and looking utterly unconcerned by the cold. Was Queen Catherine making a bargain, an alliance? He spurred his mount closer to join her side.

"-and that smirk makes you look like an asshole," the Queen of Callow shouted. "I could kill you and all you friends with a hand tied behind my back, even if I had *no* fucking eyes."

Ah, Brandon thought. The fae were not only pale, they were *utterly livid*.

"How quick you are to give insult, when still protected by oath," one of the fae shouted, "yet if-"

There was a flash of boiling-hot Night and half the fae's face melted off.

"Boring," the Black Queen said. "Hope you have more friends, otherwise I won't even be able to work out an appetite for supper."

The fae screamed, which Brandon thought might be something worth worrying about before screams answered in the distance and he

decided it was definitely something worth worrying about. Queen Catherine glanced at him, having finally noticed his presence.

"Ah, Talbot," she said. "Good, get the Order in formation. We're going to have get out of here in a hurry, I can feel at least a hundred of them coming."

She frowned, then cocked her head to a side.

"Damn, that's a Duke for sure and he feels *pissed*," the Black Queen gleefully said.

"I'll see to it, Your Majesty," Brandon said. "Are we to be fighting an enemy in particular?"

"We're going to take the big tent that looks like a castle," Queen Catherine said.

Ah, the one stinking of magic and heavily defended. He really should have been expecting that. The grandmaster of the Order of the Broken Bells saluted, and rode away to muster his knights.

The storm was getting worse and the fae angrier, leaving soon sounded just fine to him.

—

It was a graceless thing, this battle.

"All this shady shit they've pulled and still it comes down to the melee," Staff Tribune Ligaia muttered in disdain. "So much for the scheming witches."

Marshal Nim Mardottir grunted back, noncommittal. Her old friend — as much of a friend as a human could be — wasn't the first one today to grumble about the plots of the Empress and the Warlock and how they were staining the honour of what should have been a clean battle. She was, though, the first one to complain the scheming hadn't been effective *enough*. In both cases, the Black Knight tended to disagree. Malicia's surgical assassinations and hidden assets had paralyzed both the deserting legions and the Sepulchral rebels, though according to the Eyes even after being framed for an attempted coup Sacker had wiggled back her way to command by swearing to be hard on the Army of Callow. As for the Warlock's ritual against the Thirteenth, it had done more to improve Nim's opinion of the woman than weeks of smile and pretty talk.

It had been both effective and restrained, showing regard for the well-being of soldiers that'd served the Dread Empire loyally for decades before being led astray. More regard than the Tower had thus far shown for the legions that served it, one might argue. If one wanted to be hung a traitor.

"If we can rout Sepulchral's brats quick enough we can win this battle before nightfall," the Black Knight rumbled. "It'll cost us bloody, but I can see the writ."

A casual look at the melee raging across the valley showed only men dying pointlessly on a field. The deserters to the west, aggressively trying to bleed everyone else, while across the valley to the east the Legions of Terror and the Army of Callow lost hundreds every hour struggling over the same two hundred feet of solid ground. Casualties had been mounting all day, the Black Knight had already lost near two thousand. It was worse for the Callowans, though. Sacker was going after them hard with her siege engines and the Thirteenth's treachery had left them underequipped and tired from the night fighting. The Army of Callow would be the first to break. The Black Knight's gauntlet closed with grinding sound of metal on metal before she pushed down the swell of anger. She'd thought better of Jeremiah.

What had the Black Queen offered to turn him?

Sometimes it felt like she was the only person in Praes who gave a shit about the Dread Empire. Malicia was scheming herself into the grave, the Carrion Lord was setting fires left and right and all the while nobles were at each other's throats like the middle of a fucking invasion was the time to settle their grudges. Even the Legions, which should have been a pillar of stability, were falling apart. Thousands had deserted over the mind control hook. It wasn't that Nim didn't understand the disgust, the sense of betrayal, but could Malicia really be blamed when half the damned Legions had gone the way of the Carrion Lord a year before? It was not madness, if it'd turned out necessary. Mok had argued it smacked of slavery, though, and not been wrong.

His offered bargain – returning to the fold in exchange for turning on Malicia – had been a damned silly thing anyway, and one Nim could not accept lest the Legions of Terror fall apart entirely. Malicia had given the order to keep stringing him along until Sepulchral was in place and Nim had done it, with a heavy heart but done it anyway. Mok had been a friend, once, but duty was duty. And when all the pieces had been in place the Empress had paralyzed one enemy army and turned another irremediably against Callow, over a day's span turning the Black Queen's position from superior to imperiled. No, the Empress had proved over and over that she was an able woman. But she was also one who still had implanted commands in the minds of hundreds of her own officers. They would only be removed at the end of the war. Nim should not begrudge that, given the stained record of loyalty of the Legions over the last few years. Should not.

Her gauntlets ground again.

"Ah, our beloved sorcerous overseer returns," Staff Tribune Ligaia muttered. "What glamour, what grace, what a stupid fucking thing to wear on a battlefield."

Snorting in an amusement, Nim turned to follow her subordinate's gaze. Lady Akua Sahelian, who some already called the Warlock even if the Powers had not yet granted her that in truth, was wearing an ornate red dress on a field where almost all the Named present were after her head. The Black Knight could not think of a goof reason for it, save possibly because Soninke highborn were all fucking mad and this one madder than most. Nim had yet to parse out Sahelian's game, what stood behind the warning about the pattern of three and that convincingly raw tirade about the Tower. She'd had confirmed the bit about the pattern, asked old friends who'd learned a few pieces of namelore.

Nim would have preferred relying on the learned folk of Husseil-Ossa, what humans called the Hall of Skulls, but none of the seventeen kings and the thirteen queens had far-lore to share on Names. Unsurprising. She had risen high enough among her people to know more had been lost over the centuries than the old crowns cared to admit. Human learning had been made to serve, instead, and human learning had said Akua Sahelian likely saved her life. This was not a pleasant position to be in, but these were not times for pleasantness. The Black Knight need only look to the three armies in Legion armour hacking at each other like animals on a dusty field to be reminded of that.

"Lady Black," the Warlock greeted her, offering a bow. "Staff Tribune Ligaia."

"The imperial's courts further south, in case you got lost," Ligaia scornfully said.

"As usual, Lady Ligaia, your helpfulness is as a balm upon my soul," the Warlock smiled back with seeming delight before her expression sobered. "I happen to bring more urgent news, Marshal."

The golden-eyed witch – Powers, that colour was eerie even on humans – turned to meet Nim's stare.

"The Lesser Breach has been closed," Sahelian said. "That should mean either Queen Catherine or the Hierophant are in the camp. I cannot think of any other here with the power to so quickly achieve this."

The ogre shook her head.

"The Hierophant's still out there," the Black Knight said.

She could feel him, through **Survey**. The aspect born out of decades of battles had become like an unearthly sense, an ability

to take a single look at a battlefield and know what all the pieces in play were. The Black Knight had taken more than a week to learn to recognize the particular pulls at her instinct as being specific Named, but now that she had it took only a moment to find them. So long as they were 'visible', anyway, a nebulous distinction she still sometimes struggled with. The aspect had more esoteric applications besides, she'd learned, pairing with another to turn a simple trick of power into something entirely more deadly, yet such things must be used only with care. There were rules to fighting between Named that she was still only faintly aware of, no matter how many dreams of Amadeus' life the Powers saw fit to send her.

"Then it must be her," the Warlock said.

Nim wondered if the girl knew of the faint undertone of yearning that always crept in her voice when the Black Queen was brought up. It was the worse kept secret in Praes that the Queen of Callow and the Warlock had been sleeping together during their years abroad, but while most assumed it had been a coup on Sahelian's part to prepare her later betrayal the Black Knight believed otherwise. That break hadn't been a clean one, for all that the Warlock had bound her fate to the Tower's.

"Take the mage cadres and go support the Eleventh," the Marshal of Praes ordered her. "The Mirembé remnants pulling together would be trouble. You have my authority to take any measures necessary to ensure they do not, Warlock."

"How exciting," the golden-eyed witch drawled. "By your will then, o Black Knight."

Nim waved her away irritably. Sahelian was a viper, but she was a competent viper. If the Black Knight had to be saddled with a caster of that calibre – which were always trouble, the old Warlock had been too – it might as well be one who knew her business. Her attention returned to the battle in the valley, the bloody melee in three parts. The Army of Callow had edge ahead in the morning, the Black Knight thought, but now that Noon Bell had come and gone it was increasingly on the backfoot. An hour ago Nim had allowed free use of munitions on the front against the Callowans and the difference in stocks was beginning to tell.

Juniper of the Red Shields had clearly stacked the western corner of her defensive line, knowing it was the weak point, but the Black Knight was beginning to think the other woman had made a blunder. Her eastern flank was wavering. Already the Callowans had nearly been pushed back into their own trench and the pressure was only increasing. Had the young Marshal of Callow thinned her eastern flank at the expense of her western one, knowing the latter would bear the brunt of the casualties? The Black Knight could not deny what her own eyes were seeing, what

her aspect kept drawing her attention to: there was an opening to take. Nim turned an eye to Ligaia.

"Pass the word," she said. "The Fourteenth is to mount an all-out assault on the eastern flank. Commit the reserves, mages are to turn to fully offensive fire and the siege to concentrate for a breach."

It would not matter if Sepulchral's brat had some sense beaten into them, the Black Knight thought. Not if the battle to the south was already won, and this campaign with it.

—

Juniper ripped into the dried mutton jerky, swallowing a mouthful of meat after barley chewing it. Gods but she'd been ravenous all day. She bit off another piece then paused halfway through chewing, turning to look at the woman to her side.

"Doesn't taste salted," she said.

Aisha wrinkled her nose.

"Swallow, Juniper," she said.

The Hellhound rolled her eyes but indulged her Staff Tribune. She then turned back an expectant gaze. Aisha smiled, pushing back a strand of that soft dark hair before answering.

"I had it washed and dried again," Aisha said.

Juniper, like most orcs, preferred meat without seasoning. It was a small thing, but it was those that spoke loudest. Juniper felt a sharp swell of fondness, one of those moments that always brought her dangerously close to thinking about biting that smooth neck and a hundred more things after that. Years of control kept her body from moving, though she noticed that Aisha had caught the glance to the neck and her lips quirked. Nothing was said of it, but the shared knowledge hung between them in the air. Dragging her eyes away, Juniper of the Red Shields turned her attention back to the battle in the distance. A look into her Baalite eye confirmed the trend she'd seen forming over the last half hour: the Fourteenth had committed to an all-out attack and the eastern flank was buckling.

As it should. She'd ordered General Zola to thin it.

"It's time," Juniper said, licking her chops. "Have the fallback order sent."

Aisha briskly nodded, rising from her seat to pass the order as Juniper stayed in her own and watched the eastern flank through the Baalite eye. Concentrated ballista fire had torn through chunks of the palisade and the Fourteenth, though green, was

well-trained. Their backline was already bringing wooden planks to the fore that'd serve as makeshift bridges to cross the trench and allow legionaries pour through the breaches. Flags and sorcery had Zola informed now was the time to pull out and the general did what she could. Her legionaries had been getting pushed back into their own trench by the Fourteenth and that didn't leave a lot of room to maneuver. She got out those she could and began pulling away from the palisade.

The Fourteenth, howling and victorious, followed the retreating Army of Callow. Against most armies Juniper's counterstroke would have resulted into a rout, but this was the Legions of Terror. The young legionaries were not baited into a hasty pursuit, instead getting shouted back into line by sergeants and lieutenants, so when sixty feet behind the palisade they found the Army of Callow reformed into a shield wall the did not get scattered. Instead the Fourteenth formed its own shield wall in time and the lines collided. Juniper sucked at her teeth. It would hold, she decided. The Fourteenth needed to cross a trench and blown-up chunks of palisade to reinforce its own shield wall, effectively slowing its advance to a crawl.

The Fourteenth would be tied down there for hours with little to show for it, should nothing change. Good.

The Baalite eye moved to the northwest, where the Seventh Legion was marching down the road to reinforce. Nim would be sending her legion to back up the Fourteenth, the Hellhound knew, unless she found a better opening. Juniper just have to give her that opening, to heat up that old veteran's lizard blood and bait her into going after a victory. Juniper rose to her feet to give the order herself, the one that'd most matter in this entire battle. It would be a rider that carried it, not flag or sorcery. Otherwise the Black Knight might smell the trap. And away the rider went as Juniper returned to her pavilion and her seat in the shade, Baalite eye tight in grasp and Aisha returned to her side.

"This is it," Juniper gravelled. "The knife's edge."

The moment that would make or break the Battle of Kala. Even as the situation on the eastern flank stabilized, the breaches stopped cold, the western corner began to waver. It'd been hammered at all morning from two sides by engines and legionaries, assaulted relentlessly. Thrice rituals had been aimed at smashing the palisades, only the Hierophant's intervention keeping the magic from breaking the stalemate. Bravely the legionaries of the Army of Callow had held, but now they were wavering. Their eastern flank had just been punched through by the Fourteenth and enemy soldiers were spilling around the shield wall, the Black Queen was nowhere in sight and the

pressure was only increasing. They broke, first in singles and then in clumps.

That was, at least, what Juniper was trying to sell.

And that was the danger, the knife's edge, because a feigned retreat could so easily turn into a real one. Once soldiers got running, no matter the reason, it was hard to get them to stop. Juniper had built her box, even though its walls could not yet be seen, but it might yet be blown apart by the same men she meant to hold it. Pickler's sappers did what they were meant to, carpeting the grounds with smokers that obscured everyone's line of sight as legionaries ran and legionaries pursued. Not only the loyalist but after a few moments the rebels as well, a chunk of wall in front of them just as undefended. Sacker, Auntie Sacks, would order it. She couldn't afford to let Nim take those fortifications, else her plan of bleeding both sides would go up in flames.

The last thing the Rebel Legions wanted was to be penned in by the Loyalists Legions, meaning they had to take that palisade so the Eighth could not.

Smoke rose into the sky in great swaths and Juniper clutched the Baalite eye so tightly her knuckles paled. What would win out, the Marshal of Callow wondered. The fear, the instinct to run and keep running, or the trust? The Army of Callow had grown to trust its commanders, fighting on foreign fields, but the fear had grown too. Hadn't Juniper felt it herself, that poison that spread through the veins and blackened everything? More than just felt, she had wallowed in it. She'd glimpsed, though, a light on the horizon. A way to settle it all at last. The Hellhound leaned forward, jaw shut tight as she looked at her soldiers move.

Haven't you ever wondered? Where we stand, compared to the best. We've fought Procerans and rebels and corpses, but this? This is the standard. The reigning champion. The mother we must murder to surpass.

"Come on," the Marshal of Callow murmured in Kharsum. "It can be done. We can beat them. Trust me and we can *beat them all*."

Soldiers ran, past the lines and the officers waiting with their whistles and shouts. Juniper's heart leapt up in throat, but it wasn't done. The same hard iron that'd seen the Army of Callow through the Camps and the Graveyard, through the Boot and Hainaut and dozen more battles, it told. Some kept running, but some fell into line. And that was all that was needed: a few people standing. Men gathered to them like a standard, lines firming, and Juniper began to laugh. In the distance, sappers began to raise mantlets. A box, formed out of the eastern corner of trenches and palisades and the second cornered the sappers were now making of wood. A box filled with smoke, and soon to be filled

with only Named and her enemies. Juniper rose to her feet, passing the Baalite eye to Aisha.

"Juniper?" she asked.

"Look into it," the Hellhound said. "Northwest."

Aisha did.

"The Seventh Legion," Juniper stated, "is no longer moving to reinforce the Fourteenth. It's moving to reinforce the Eighth."

The dark-haired woman put down the Baalite eye after a moment, smiling.

"It is."

The Hellhound flashed her fangs at the horizon, triumphant.

"Where's that wagon with the roof again?" she asked. "I need a nap."

Aisha started in surprise.

"Catherine is not back from Sepulchral's camp, we don't know--"

"She chose me," Juniper said. "I choose her. She'll get it done, and that means the last decision that matters in this battle has already been made."

Juniper of the Red Shields, Marshal of Callow, walked out the pavilion with steps lighter than they had been in years.

—

"What the fuck is happening in there?"

Ligaia wasn't asking anything that the rest of the general staff wasn't silently wondering. The Black Knight surveyed the movement of her own troops, but she found nothing but the obvious. The Eighth Legion had entered the smoke and was engaged in a brutal melee against the Army of Callow and the deserters, Sacker pouring her soldiers into the grinder to make sure she wouldn't get enveloped by any single force. The Seventh was reinforcing, but the truth harder to swallow was that those reinforcements were *needed*. Between the casualties of the Thirteenth's treachery and the brutal blind fighting in the smoke the Eighth was getting mauled. Nim watched the movements of the troops, towering above her officers, and her fists began to grind.

"Ma'am," Senior Sapper Licker said, catching her attention.

"We're at risk now. The deserters are still hitting our trench but we can't spare the men to hold it unless we send

reinforcements from the Seventh. The flank's getting stretched too thin."

"Your recommendation?" Nim asked.

"Deploying goblinfire," Licker evenly said. "They'll answer in kind, but it'll lock down that entire front. We can focus our efforts on the breach in the smoke."

The Black Knight hesitated. Already she could make out currents in the battle. The Fourteenth was deadlocked, while her legions were pouring their strength into the smoky breach. So was Sacker, and with the main front of contention between the loyal legions and the deserters the tendency would only increase. *We have the advantage*, Nim reminded herself. The Seventh were fresh and the Army of Callow stretched thin, while Sacker's rebels were tightly packed – it would be difficult for them to mount a harder push because there simply wasn't enough room at the bottom of the hills for them to muster. Senior Sapper's Licker was going to make the breach into the fulcrum of this battle, but it was a fulcrum the Legions were best placed to triumph in.

It would get bloody, but it would get done.

"See it done," she ordered.

And with all of it resting on one breach, there was only one thing left. Nim would have to head into the smoke herself, lead the Seventh personally. Tempted as she was to **Delegate** one of her personal guard and guide them through **Survey**, her instincts ran against it. Half-hearted commitment here would be punished, she dimly felt.

"Ready the Warhammers," the Black Knight ordered. "I'll lead the push into the breach personally."

—

The Duke of Boreal Lights had been helpful enough to die taking out the Hellgate, but Brandon found the man's retinue decidedly less obliging.

"Why—"

He hacked into the flesh but the blue-skinned fae turned into ice, shattering and reforming.

"-won't—"

Even cutting the bastard thing's head off didn't help. It turned to mist and reformed, and then it had the gall to stab at him. Brandon slapped away the spear with his shield and stabbed it in the eye because, really, where was it getting the bloody nerve? It should have been dead six times over by now.

"-you-"

Oh and now the devils wanted a piece of him as well. The grandmaster slice through the wing of the howling monkey-creature and deftly led his charge to kick it after it fell, turning to parry a spear blow and smashing the fae's face with his shield with a grunt.

"-bloody-"

Oh, the broken nose didn't even come back even after it turned to mist. Brandon snarled, smashing its head repeatedly with his shield as the fae rocked back in pain and dismay.

"-DIE!"

The bottom of his shield went into the creature's skull with a wet squelch and finally it dropped to the ground. Panting but vindicated, Brandon turned to have a look around. The rebel Praesi had finally stopped fighting each other, after *only* half an hour of still hacking at their kin while the world went to the Hells, but the Eleventh Legion had reached the camp and even with the truce the defence was too disunited to drive it back. Outnumbered almost four to one, the legionaries were still making meat of the rebels – though it helped that the devils flying around everywhere avoided them like the plague and it'd started raining acid on their foes. That wasn't Brandon Talbot's problem, though. Now, where was the queen?

Ah, there she was. Near the castle-tent, fighting what looked like a pitch-black land octopus with suckers that spat out an acidic goo. A tower of black flame took care of that as Brandon rode to her side, pulling back his knights with him as he did – there was danger in stretching themselves too thin even of the rebel Praesi seemed to be avoiding fighting them – but by the time he arrived she was tossing a dead fae in the path of a devil belching vivid red flames while trying to fend off what looked like... a hippogriff? No, not quite. He might never have seen one of those outside heraldry, but while the creature had horse's legs and tail it instead of a hawk-like appearance it had great crow's wings and head.

It also bit off the head of the queen's horse, before she stabbed it in the neck.

Brandon rode at a gallop, smashing into a devil that tried to fall upon the queen as she leapt with a loud grunt of pain from her dying horse to the monster and Night bloomed like a sickly wind. With a satisfying crunch he smashed the bloody thing's skull with the pommel of his sword even as another clawed at his armour with screams of pain and the hymns burned bright. By the time he was done, the queen was sitting astride the dead crow monster with a smugly satisfied look on her face. No, not dead

Brandon saw. Undead, for it blinked and let out a happy screech that had him wincing in pain.

"This is mine now," the Black Queen happily announced, and a heartbeat later she was aflight.

Godsdamnit, Brandon thought, that was going to be just as bad as the damned fae flying horse. It'd been impossible to catch up to her when she rode that one, and at least that bloody thing hadn't had *claws*. He looked up, saw she was still headed for the great pavilion and rode after her with a sigh. Some Praesi household troops were in the way but it was nothing lances and a gallop couldn't disperse. He saw the queen disappear into the pavilion, which was a relief until he heard the fighting in there. He charged in with a wedge of a hundred behind him, smashing into what looked like a three-way brawl over a corpse. Sepulchral's squabbling heirs and a company of Legion heavies, led by-

Oh, the most beautiful woman Brandon had ever seen in his life. Would ever see in his life. He ought to dismount and kneel, to pledge service and love and-

"General Lucretia, if you don't stop glamouring my knights I'm going to feed you to my horse."

The warmth went out of the world. Brandon came back to himself, sweat drenching his back, and realized with shame that he'd been halfway out of the saddle. Many of his men had been no better. His fingers clenched around his sword. Another abomination best put to the sword, this smiling woman among the legionaries.

"Black Queen," the general spoke in a honeyed voice, "there is no need for-"

"I warned you," Catherine Foundling said, voice echoing of distant caws. **"Bite off your tongue."**

Power rippled out, and while the dark-skinned general shrieked and fled in a flap of dark wings as she spurted blood many of her legionaries ended up struggling with the same order. Brandon looked around and smirked. Some of the Praesi seemed to be struggling as well, but not a single knight of the Order had been affected.

"Forward," he shouted. "Forward and drive the Legions out!"

A shout forty years too late, but better than never. Even the Praesi rebels gathered themselves long enough to attain usefulness and they helped push out the legionaries, which retreated out of the pavilion after heavy losses. That did not, unsurprisingly, end hostilities. Brandon's queen had led her... mount near a corpse on a table made of solid gold and pearls, which seemed to rile up the Praesi. Two nobles – they had the

look, the attitude and most of all the golden eyes – led the charge, loudly arguing though they refrained from violence.

“The succession of Aksum is no matter for outsiders, it is-”

“It is already decided,” the boy lord shouted. “It was made official years ago, Sanaa, that I am heir. Your grasping attempts to pretend otherwise-”

“You are the creature of Nok, not a true Mirembé,” Lady Sanaa scoffed, “and-”

“Gods Below, this might be the most terribly tedious shouting match I’ve ever heard,” the Black Queen said, Night billowing around her. “Here’s a solution: neither of you are in charge.”

The staff of yew she always carried was lightly tapped on the corpse, which Brandon now saw was that of an old woman. The pressure of the Night went out and the body shuddered. This did not, unsurprisingly, seem to please the two squabbling nobles.

“It is against law for undead to hold any noble title,” the young lord scoffed. “Do you think putting strings on a corpse will make it otherwise?”

“This is absurd,” Lady Sanaa hissed. “For once, Isobe speaks truth. By what right do you meddle in our affairs?”

The Black Queen smiled, pleasant and mild, which had Brandon tensing. That was usually the smile that preceded corpses beginning to drop. Beneath her the crow-winged chimera stirred, looking up with cruel eyes, and in the magelights of the pavilion the dark fringes of the Mantle of Woe seemed to meld into the creature’s feathers.

“By what right,” the Queen of Callow softly said. “You lot keep asking me that, don’t you? Nobles and officers and even Malicia herself. By what right do I meddle in the affairs of Praes, which is not mine to rule and a sovereign state beyond my reach?”

Her sole eye burned with feverish light.

“By what right?” the Black Queen hissed. “You dare ask me that, you pack of jackals who bleed Calernia as it struggles for its very right to exist, who writhe and bite and have a thousand times turned the east into a madhouse?”

The Praesi flinched away, but Brandon leaned forward with an eager smile. His knights too. They knew it well, that weight in the air. Had learned to love it, for though it was the herald of terrible things that terror was ever turned away from them. She was a queen in black, adorned in wrath and dread, but she was *their* queen to the bone.

Let all the world fear her, save the sons and daughters of Callow.

"You made yourself my mess to handle," Catherine Foundling snarled. "That is my right. The east is your prison and I am your fucking warden, rattling the cage until you fall in line."

Brandon felt it then, the... pressure. It was suffocating and every soul in the pavilion seemed to be choking on it. The queen looked through them all with her gaze, and wherever she looked knees buckled.

"So what will it be, Mirembe?" the Queen of Callow said. "How many of you do I need to butcher before the lesson sinks in?"

Silence was her answer.

"I thought so," Catherine Foundling quietly said. "Get up, Abreha."

The corpse did, looking around blearily. As if she'd just woken up from a long nap.

"Your Majesty?"

"Yes," the young woman smiled, "I am that. Now let's get this army moving, yes? We have work to do."

"I await your orders," the corpse said, bowing her head.

"First we're going to slap away the Eleventh," the Queen of Callow said, "but after that? Well, we're going to march."

"Where to?" the corpse of Abreha Mirembe asked.

"We're going to visit my old friend General Sacker," Catherine Foundling coldly smiled. "And remind her what happens when people cross me."

—

The hammer went down, pulverizing the sergeant and the legionary next to him. The Black Knight withdrew the weapon, shaking away the pulp as her Warhammers fanned out around her. The melee was turning to their advantage, as much as Nim could tell in this maze of smoke, but her instinct was pulling at her. Something was wrong. An arrow streaked through the smoke, which she tried to swat down but missed by an inch. One of her retainers screamed as it went through his eye, dropping to the ground and twitching.

"Archer," the Black Knight snarled.

She and the Silver Huntress had been scything through her soldiers and her personal guard alike, taking lives and then

melting away before they could be caught. The sole time Nim had thought she'd caught the Huntress she'd run into the Barrow Sword instead, who had somehow managed to scar enchanted armour straight out of the Tower's vaults with a bronze sword. The Black Knight stomped through the smoke, sweeping away another handful of legionaries with a blow but finding no trace of the Archer. In the distance someone died in a flash of silver Light, the Huntress' signature.

Nim wouldn't fall for that again. Going hunting for them only ended up in her swinging at smoke while she took one arrow after another. None had penetrated the armour so far, but the Light would shatter the enchantment fully in time.

"Forward," the Black Knight shouted.

Her soldiers shouted back. There were more enemies ahead, full companies now, and the sound of sharpeners in the distance. The fighting grew harsh but they broke through, Nim leading the charge, until she made out distant shapes ahead. A wall? A few more steps forward, slapping away an arrow from the Archer come for her neck, and she realized it wasn't a wall. Not exactly. Mantlets had been placed as some kind of rough palisade, and before them she saw a sea of blood and flesh. Munitions and crossbow bolts shredded anyone that came close. What was this? She took another step forward, but she felt sharp pressure from her left. Nim backed away and a spell of blue light passed through where she'd just stood.

The Hierophant?

No, she thought as pressure came from the right this time and she caught a blade with her gauntleted hand. The Squire looked up at her through his helmet, blue eyes burning, and the Black Knight felt her stomach drop. The boy had come for her, as Sahelian had warned. She tried to crush the sword but he ripped it free, dancing away from her hammer blow with speed he'd not had last time. Another arrow needed swatting away, and then as she tried to smash the Squire darting close a swirling spell of darkness seized her foot. She was pulled off her feet, and while she backhanded the Squire away he landed on his feet with his sword up. This wasn't a good fight, she thought, they had her swinging at ghosts and-

The Black Knight breathed in sharply. When had been the last time she'd slain a legionary with the marking of the Army of Callow? Often it was hard to tell in the smoke, but she couldn't recall. There'd been a few at first, isolated, but she'd been fighting for hours in the smoke now and it had been *long*. But no, that made no sense, why would Sacker commit so thoroughly to this breach if she was losing so many men? The Squire came for her from behind but she smashed her hammer into the ground, bumping him up and backhanding him away. An arrow wreathed in Light

streaked for her side but the Black Knight screamed, smashing through it, and when a spell that was a blue drill of light struck at her armour it dispersed against the enchantments.

In the distance power bloomed, once and then twice, and though one disappeared the second struck close. Nim was half braced for a betrayal by the Warlock, but the magic that descended was not treacherous: a massive gale of wind blew, cutting through the smoke. Suddenly half the obscured battlefield was revealed, and what Nim **surveyed** with a single glance had her freezing. The Rebel Legions were being routed. Not only were their corpses carpeting the ground where the Seventh had broken their push, but in the distance smoke rose from where they camp was in Moule Hills. Had someone hit them from behind?

Oh, Nim thought. That was why Sacker had been committing to the push her. With her back aflame and only one way out – the goblinfire had closed the other – if she did not break through here her legions were at risk of being surrounded and slaughtered to the last. An arrow flew but this time the Black Knight saw it come from far and simply stepped out of the way, then punched through a wavy spell and swung at the Squire. The boy ducked out of the way and then slid under her, scoring a blow against her leg and cutting into her greaves, but she kicked him away and he went tumbling. She pursued, trying to end this even if lore said she might not, but he ducked behind a blood tree of all things.

Nim's hammer went right through, wood flying as the rotten thing half-collapsed. It was hollow, and though she was already aiming another blow at the Squire her aspect tugged at the corner of her eye. Inside the dead tree, words had been carved in Lower Miezán.

Marshal Juniper wins here.

Nim breathed in sharply, the Squire retreating as she slowed her steps. Looking around, the Black Knight could not see a single company of the Army of Callow on the field. Only manning the mantlets to the south and west, and in front of them piles of bodies were piled so high they were almost a second wall. It suddenly fell into place and marshal felt like she was going to be sick. The Marshal of Callow, Nim realized, had baited both her and Sacker into pushing their main offensive here, through this... box. And then she'd withdrawn her own soldiers to the edges, and let her enemies slaughter each other under the cover of smoke. They'd been fighting each other all afternoon, ruining their armies against each other as the Army of Callow mopped up the edges and waited. The Legions had lost, Nim thought. Rebel and loyal alike, they had lost – and they would continue losing as long as they fought.

There was only one word left to speak, she knew, before this day could end.

"Retreat," the Black Knight shouted, and it tasted like ashes in her mouth. "Retreat!"

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

"Where's that wagon with the roof again?" she asked. "I need a nap."

Aisha started in surprise.

"Catherine is not back from Sepulchral's camp, we don't know-"

"She bostee me," Juniper said. "I boost her. She'll get it done, and that means the last decision that matters in this webforum has already been made."

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

ruduen

"It was the worse kept secret in Praes that the Queen of Callow and the Warlock had been sleeping together during their years abroad..."

Apparently even Praes is getting in on the shipping.

"'This is mine now,' the Black Queen happily announced, and a heartbeat later she was aflight."

So, apparently, she has, in fact, managed to find another flying fae creature to raise from the dead. Is this going to be a thing for her? Fae are involved and this is the second, so we'll have to see if it is going to be a thing for her.

Quite a lot to process, and it's interesting to note that the fae are in play again after so much portalling was done through Twilight rather than Arcadia. I wonder if this particular set has anything to speak of when it comes to all of the lakes that have gone missing by now.

My very own name

Isn't this a Praesi beast, not Fae? I understood Sepulchral's army to have brought a bunch of crazy beasts.

KiltedBastich

Yeah, this looks like part of the Mireembe menagerie, a crow-hippogryph. How very appropriate.

RoflCat

Well, to complete her Odin-ness she'd need an eight-legged horse.

Which is to say this Zombie the...7th? might not last long.

Unless it's the 8th and survives by being 'the 8th, legged-'horse" she rides...

nick012000

Someone ought to make an article on the wiki for Zombie. 😊

[davax](#)

Meh, flesh crafting together a zombie horse with 8 legs would require the remains of at least three or four horses I think. the rear haunch legs aren't really good for this sort of thing so you'd need at least three sets of front legs... and the rest is sorta trial and error work. the forth horse carcass... or bits of one, is just for spare parts really but... Yeah I wouldn't really bother with the whole thing beyond just to see how it could be done. I'd rather just put together a couple "normal" zombie horses from the same amount of parts and go from there.

Miles

I'd use something other than horses. Maybe spiders? Or the legs of her enemies

Earl of Purple

It's confirmed, she's going to put the Dread Emperor that turned himself into a giant spider and fled to Ater's sewers back on the throne in exchange for a mighty steed. Dread Empress Arachne, here we go.

Earl of Purple

If you count the wings, this one's got six 'legs', so she's most of the way there. Technically though she also needs to adopt Roland and get him pregnant with a magic stallion, so he can give birth to her eight-legged horse.

I only suggest Roland for this because I can't think of anyone who fits the 'trickster' role quite so well as he, and both Roland and Loki can work with fire.

Ciel Morgenstern

Zombie the 8th and horse-legged. Not quite the same... The horse is out of the way with the crow-head already. – But you

gotta allow for some adjustments. At least claws and a beak as a plus are not mean, either. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Praes isn't even shipping it, they're just resigned to it being obvious fact.

Yeah as My very own name said, I think that beast is from Aksum, not Arcadia.

[Liliet](#)

THERE'S THAT DRAW

aksjdfhaskjfhjdf bless Juniper bless this

also holy fucking shit

akjsdfhkajsdhfkalsjdhfklaskjdhfklasklafsfdlhjsdfhlsjdfhk

did I call it right? did I call it right all the way in Book 5?
is that happening?

hakureireimu

What did you call all the way in Book 5?

[Liliet](#)

the Name :3

[Liliet](#)

I had the theory that Cat would be Named Warden of the East

Kage Lupus

Man, I was really pulling for something like Adjudicator or Arbiter, but Warden of the East sure is looking likely right now. I am really feeling the play between meanings as well. Warden of the West is a protector, Warden of the East is a jailer.

Sinead

It also mirrors the Ministers of the Left and Right of the Yan Tei.

[Liliet](#)

Cat will be both! She's just... the police 😊

mavant

I suppose she is a bit of a bastard.

Voice of the riders

The Black Knight drew with the Squire, their duel was never finished. Marshal Nim lost to Marshal Juniper.

Sir Nil

"Marshal Juniper wins here."

Gotta love these moments, where all the pieces fall into place.

Lictor Magnus

Whelp looks like Cat is going to be Warden of the East for sure but it's going to be the prison kind rather than the protector kind the Hanno is turning into. She'll be in charge of keeping the more troublesome villains in check.

Also it looks like Nim just locked herself into her pattern of three. Too bad she was never the squire. She could have learned how Cat cheated two of them.

Tenthyr

Nah. Warden of the East is way too narrow compared to what she's growing into. The bard literally tried to tangle her into forming a name in opposition to hers simply in fear of what Catherine COULD become.

caoimhinh

It was always about the East with Cat's new Name. It started to form when she said she would put the East in order, back in Salia when she was speaking with Hanno and Tariq. It still fits in Cat's vision of Calernia. Catherine has always referred to Calernia as a bucket of crabs fighting each other. She can be the Warden that puts them in order so that they can stop stepping on each other and finally progress.

By the way, while Cat refers to it as warden of a prison here, there's another use for the term, which is the one that's used for Cordelia's title.

The Warden of a Realm or Region was the governor or the highest military chief and jurisdictional officer in said region. Their powers extended to both civil and criminal jurisdiction, as well as possessing authority in both the military and the political government.

Miles

Wait so she's going to have to climb the tower to get the name?

But we won't see what it does is she only gets it after the plot is done. 😞😞😞

Abnaxis

I think the reason why the key to Cat's name is in the East, is because that's where all the continental powers not already bound to her are going to be subjugated to her authority.

She already has Procer and Levant following her lead and she put the current would-be Empress of the free cities into power. She has a close-ish relationship with the dwarves and she's First Among the Night for the drow.

Mark my words, somehow the Elves' conflict with Hye are going to be tied to their infertility curse and Cat is going to somehow resolve that situation for them in a way that binds them to her. That just leaves Praes to settle, which I think will end with the orcs becoming the highest regional power after Amadeus destroys the Tower along with the entire current ruling class of Praes.

Cat's name isn't going to be limited to one who is an Authority over Evil, nor is he name going to be deeply tied to the East—when she has Spoken, she has been able to compel the Pilgrim and the White Knight—heroic named with absolutely no ties to the East who would only feel any effect from Speaking if Cat's name somehow had authority over theirs.

Rather, I think we're going to see a Warden for each Cardinal direction—Hanno to the South, Cordelia to the West, Hakram to the East, and Akua to the North. And Cat will be the Archqueen who manages the Warders.

There are a lot more reasons for why I think all this, but the post is getting long enough...

jamesc9

Where are the Orcs? That's where I'd expect Hakram to be Warden.

Itarion

She might have a chance to learn how Amadeus cheated one. The Delegate/Survey combo is likely sufficient for the same trick he pulled on Hanno at the Red Flower Vales.

caoimhinh

Also, it might have been from there (or another similar situation in Amadeus's life) from where Nim got the

inspiration to use her two Aspects together to “possess” a body.

caoimhinh

Although, now that I recall, Amadeus and Hanno never had a Pattern of Three, despite clashing multiple times. So I’m not sure if that trick is applicable to save Nim. She did mention in this chapter that her very Name was telling her that using that would have dire consequences, so the odds are she can’t use that to fight Squire.

Onos

Yes, they did. That was why Amadeus pulled his trick to skip out on fighting Hanno a third time.

And I suspect that was some misdirection from Creation to persuade Nim to actually fight – a deputy probably outright wouldn’t survive, so there’d be no third encounter.

Andrew Smith

There was no pattern of three with Hanno that was part of what further convinced Black that he didn’t have long to live,

The story beat between them was the sword of Judgement was coming for him because he has been Judged

[Liliet](#)

They specifically did not have a pattern of three, that was why Amadeus thought he would die soon.

The story lock he was escaping was Hanno’s coin.

[Liliet](#)

They did not have a pattern of three but I think it would work. It worked for getting her into this mess after all.

I think the Name was less warning her about something about this situation and more... well, if this WERE a real opening, her taking it or not taking it personally would have made the difference. Her Name instincts were running off compromised intel, and she forgot to account for the Squire entirely.

Relai

I think her name will be something along the lines of “The Warden of Evil”, or if the author is feeling particularly cheesy, “The Practical Guide to Evil”. There has been a trend

with Cathrine since the beginning of the story, a person aligned on the side of evil, but one who is checking all of the worst of her kind's impulses. She was there to stop Liesse with Diabolist, stopping the Sisters of Night from continuing down the path of mindless slaughter, the Dead King, and keeping the villains fighting the Dead King in line, and now in the East with Malicia. She has quite literally been everywhere making sure that her kind isn't trying to get everyone murdered.

Hellspirit

I'd go for something with Sheppard in it.

Xinci

Warden of the East may make sense given her own notes of it being more like a prison warden and Kairo's talking about all the horror the groove she is making with the "hard person making hard choices" schick.

Tenthyr

Damn, juniper even knew to use the squire to get a draw in just to really lock in the final reveal of her plan. Exquisite.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I suspect that was Story getting its oar in.

kinghaart

Which really begs the question of where Bard is.

Somehow this story is going to turn on Cat at some point and this would be a natural time...

Itarion

A strange game, this. It seems the only way to win is to not play.

[Mental Mouse](#)

You can't win. You can't break even. You can't leave the game.

jamesc9

On a long summer's evening, on a train bound for nowhere,

nimelennar

"It was the worse kept secret in Praes that the Queen of Callow and the Warlock had been sleeping together during their years abroad"

Ooof. They think it's something as simple as /resolved/ sexual tension, do they?

"The east is your prison and I am your fucking warden"

Huh. Props to whoever guessed it.

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

Nah. She said warden. Not Warden.

dadycoool

True, but that "pressure" is mighty sus.

Insanenoodlyguy

Bard was trying to make a Warden of the West to manipulate them. Then she tried to make Catherine into something DIRECTLY OPPOSING her because she thought that was a better alternative then where she was really going. Warden of the East... Whatever she's becoming, it feels larger then that.

Thanatoss

How is Warden greater than opposition to Bard? Bard is on the same level as Dead King and Warden of The East is on the level of... Well... Named Cordelia?.... Not all that impressive, but certainly op plot and story wise vs Dead Kong

Shveiran

Greater might be the wrong name for it. Different is more likely.

But Warden of the West is not "named Cordelia": it is something new, unprecedented.

The Wardens sound like Roles that both regulate and protect from outside force their chunk of Calernia, and the first instances of both will be (whether one is Hanno or Cordelia) people capable to speak with one another.

These won't be mirror Names like White and Black Knights, natural opposites.

And that means that these Names are heralds of change for Calernia.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That might just be her domination power (future aspect?).

Hmm. **Command, Claim, Oversee**. Those aspects would hearken back to the Black Queen, but at a higher level...

shikkarasu

She will **Dictate** terms, I'm guessing. I think **Rein** as a play on Reign. **Claim** sounds pretty on point.

shikkarasu

While looking through my reread notes I found this:

6:Interlude – Lost and Found

It was the royal seal below but there were fresher words, the ink a little smudged. *No matter where you end up*, Catherine Foundling had written in that ugly scrawl of hers, *you will be one of mine. Sooner or later, I will come to collect*. Screams, fighting. The devils were close.

-Wait, how many "I will come to collect"s are there?

-If there's only two, the third time will be an aspect, mark my words.

-A quick Google confirms, she's only said this twice so far.

I am going to amend my guess to **Dictate, Rein, and Collect**.

hakureireimu

Premature

Crackle

Can we please not have a Warden of the East, it would be such an ugly copy-cat Name.

Thanatoss

I still am not convinced about Warden of the East.

In my opinion this might be her ROLE or part of it but not actual Name.

Zach

I argued against it when someone else predicted it some chapters back, but it seems like they might be right. Seems weird to me, though; how would "Warden of the East" be a name that results in Catherine being able to Speak to Pilgrim?

shikkarasu

I would assume it is in the way that the Captain's physician may overrule them even without sufficient rank. Cat knows best, and when she plays the "I'm the one who kept Praes in check while you hid in the Whitecaps" card even Heroic Named feel compelled to sit down and follow her lead. (to a degree, obv.)

Even a few years back as Winter!Cat she was negotiating with the Pilgrim on rules of engagement. Night!Cat has significantly more political power among the Good nations and represents the evil side of the civilised world. When she claims jurisdiction, higher ranking Named concede.

Sinead

AHHHAHAHAHAHHAAA!

God I LOVE this series highs!

And hey! "I am your Warden..." Perhaps a red herring, perhaps it's an actual mirroring...

A long wait until Tuesday now.

hakureireimu

If you're going quote, at least quote it accurate; warden is not capitalized.

Sinead

My apologies. These chapters come up at 10pm for me and I mistyped.

Unfortunately, I cannot edit.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

That tree payoff was on point.

Akua and Cat both falling on their respective old tricks is a nice touch. It almost feels rote now. "Oh, devils? Guess it's time for my otherworldly monsters".

I wonder what Akua did at Sepulchral's camp? She was ordered to support the eleventh but we haven't seen her from Cat's POV and instead she blew off the smoke. Was their interaction skipped or did she actually not go there?

RoflCat

My guess is she got the vantage view of the smoke then upon realizing what's going on opted to save Nim as priority.

[Liliet](#)

Acid rain falling on Sepulchral's forces was mentioned.

Kennedy

Fuck yeah Marshal Juniper is back baby! I really wanna know what Amadeus is up to in all this.

[Liliet](#)

Sparring with Ranger half the country away ♥

Kage Lupus

The old horizontal sparring, maybe 😊

[Liliet](#)

They were doing the vertical version last time we looked in on them but that too~

Raved Thrad

I can see Razin and Aquiline, after having met Amadeus and Hye, cuddling up to each other and going, "That could be us right there."

[Mental Mouse](#)

That would be... overly ambitious.

Aldurathel

The Warden of the East.
It's coming.

kinghaart

Be fun if there was just a single Warden name for Calernia and all three were vying for it.

dadycool

I am cackling at Cat's new mount. The moment I heard that it was a crow in front, I thought she would try and wrangle it, forgetting her M.O. of killing her mounts before taking them. I absolutely adore the imagery of her cloak practically melding with the feathers of the hippogriff. Talbot's POV was definitely my favorite this chapter, start to finish, though they were all splendid.

Poor Nim. Even if she has an academic understanding of Namelore, she doesn't live and wield it like Cat does. Between playing directly into Juniper's hands and lacking the expertise of Cat

and Amadeus, she really didn't have any chance here, especially being partway through a Pattern of Three with the Squire. She's doomed the moment they find themselves in the same battlefield again. She's passed beyond Akua's ability to help.

Noldo

I wonder if Nim's self preservation becomes the driver that makes her turn on Malicia and join forces with Cat. Knowing that she is locked in a pattern of three with Squire, best way to prolong her life is to ensure that they do not end on opposite sides of a conflict. Taking the loss by losing the mantle while keeping her life?

[Liliet](#)

Doubt it. Doesn't feel like that's the kind of person she is.

Kage Lupus

My thought is that this is all leading to a much bigger culmination of Named. Squire takes out the Black Knight, earning himself a promotion to White Knight. But that requires the current White Knight to lose or change his name. Since we already know Hanno is entering a transitory state I would guess that he becomes the Warden of the West and frees up the White Knight name for Arthur.

Hanno and Cat maintain their equal-yet-opposite dynamic that they had going on during the war against DK, Cordelia rejects the Warden of the West role a second time because she is still fundamentally against the idea of taking up a Name, and Arthur gets to be the first White Knight to exist in a world where East and West are not in constant conflict. He can focus on fighting specific monsters and villains instead of the entire concept of Praes.

And all if it is predicated on Nim being stuck in this pattern and getting killed by the Squire. It is a sad way to go and maybe she doesn't fully deserve it, but narrative weight is a hard boulder to shift.

burlindw

There are more Knight names than White Knight and Black Knight, especially in Callow. Cat has mentioned the Rebel Knight specifically as an option that she wouldn't be able to allow him to take. My guess is that he'll end up simply as The Knight, like how Viv is just The Princess.

Christian Oaks

We don't know viv is just "the princess" cat felt that was the shape but we didn't get the confirm from viv

Vic

For what we know from the Lone swordman's arc you can loose in the pattern of 3 and still been alive if you know how to play your cards

kinghaart

Plus Squire's loss to Nim was kinda weak too, feels like Nim could survive a third encounter by "losing" in some other manner.

Yunamed

Nim can still escape the pattern with help. Remember when Cat escaped hers with GP? It's still possible.

hakureireimu

Nah, Cat escaped hers with the Pilgrim while on the draw stage. Nim already had her draw, so defeat inevitably follows. Now the only thing she can do is to be defeated without being killed.

Agent J

Not true! There's always the option of intentionally letting her rival kill her and then bullying a Choir for resurrection. There's always a way forward if you're willing to bleed enough.

Relai

I think the pattern of three will not fully complete or at least result in Nim's death. But I do not think Nim is going to be the one to actually twist the pattern in any significant way. It has been repeatedly stated that Nim is a noob when it comes to naming stories. She didn't even know she was in it and barely knew anything about it once she did. And in this fight she tried to just brute force her way to a victory. When Cathrine dodges or shapes stories, she has to do some Olympic-level gymnastics to do so. So there is a disparaging difference between the two of them.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Nim's problem is that she *doesn't* know Namelore. *Nobody* has an academic understanding of Namelore, the good stuff gets passed down from teacher to pupil, and she's never had a proper teacher.

Liliet

Eh, Akua can still help her survive. Not win, no, but that was always... If Akua had been thinking with her head and not her sense of guilt + romantic rejection she'd have seen the writing on the wall and absolutely NOT gone to reinforce the losing side.

But, well. If.

jamesc9

Unless she has margins for being both embedded and disembedded, and would like to end up as a free agent with all of the powers of a Warlock.

Liliet

We have seen her thought process. It mostly boils down to telling herself she's aiming for the Tower and being surprised she doesn't hear its song.

SpaceDorf

Talbots POV had me laughing out loud on the train.
The proud Knight basking in glorious chaos.
Storm Troopers fistbumping and high fiving while Dark Helmet delivers a hellish smackdown on the enemies.

.. Zombie the sixth .. look what the Cat dragged in.

Juff

Typo Thread:

horrors most. (missing word)
nipping away their > nipping away at their
as he cross > as he crossed
Squinting he > Squinting, he
with surprised > with surprise
you friends > your friends
smile and pretty talk > smiles and pretty talk
with grinding > with the grinding
goof reason > good reason
Nim would have preferred (extra space)
imperial's courts further > imperial court's further
worse kept secret > worst kept secret
had edge ahead > had edged ahead
barley > barely
legionaries pour > legionaries to pour
into a rout > in a rout
the did not > they did not
just have to > just had to

only the loyalist > only the loyalists
corned > corner
Sapper's Licker > Sapper Licker
grandmaster slice > grandmaster sliced
even of the > even if the
tail it instead > tail, instead
had great crow's > had a great crow's
pain and the hymns > pain, and the hymns
dark fringes Mantle > dark fringes of the Mantle
ever soul > every soul
queen through them > queen saw through them
last the fought > when they'd last fought
where they camp > where their camp
to the push her. > to the push here.
and marshal > and the marshal

chris S

I think we're all so hyped up on the word "warden", we're missing the forest for the trees.

Queen of Callow

They knew it well, that weight in the air. Had learned to love it, for though it was the herald of terrible things that terror was ever turned away from them. She was a queen in black, adorned in wrath and dread, but she was *their* queen to the bone.

The emphasis on the 'their queen', and the post paragraph sting sentence, doubling down on the Callow link.

Also, Brandon's POV alternates between Black Queen and Queen of Callow and occasionally Catherine Founding to refer to her. The last time Black Queen is used is straight after the above quote, right before the Name appears. Brandon even feels the weight of a manifestation beginning in the quote.

Cat's driving force is that she's sick and tired of Callow being a punching bag that Procer and the Empire see as 'the thing you trample over to get to the fight on the other side'. Everything she's done has arguably been to make things better for Callow.

Look at Catherine's monologue.

Surely a Warden of the East wouldn't have any of the East be beyond her reach?

This isn't just Malicia or the nobles, Cat means every invasion of Callow, every army of sentient tigers or flying fortress, every spell that destroys the Wasteland even more than it already is.

Cat's just used 'the east' to mean the Empire.

Finally, consider what this is getting shown against –
Juniper's plan:

Juniper is the marshal of Callow, and she's just boxed up her Praesi enemies and let them tear each other apart while the Army of Callow guard the walls, making sure they stay there. How very prison like and symbolic.

chris S

damnit I replied to the wrong thread because of mobile shenanigans

Miles

I think we're all so hyped up on the word "warden", we're missing the forest for the trees.

Warden is typically the job title of the person in charge of the prison so it still fits.

miles

Effing quote tags didn't work!? Now it looks like I'm contradicting myself instead of quoting and replying

AbraKadabra

How about Dread Queen?

NotTraitorous

Someone give Talbot a medal for how much of Catherine he has to put up with. XD

[irritantseraphim](#)

I want a picture of Chibi Cat on top of her new mount "dis mine now!"

I couldn't help but smile at the image of the Black Queen grinning maliciously as she declares she has taken another monster as mount

Shaerick 68

I'm a tad bit confused, when did Cat get her necromancy shenanigans back? I thought that was a named thing?

Yunamed

She's always had it. She animated Red axe's body and she still didn't have a name.

Jason Ipswitch

I've just presumed that she hasn't used it much lately, because trying necromancy tricks against the Dead King is likely a Very Bad Idea. Idk if there was explicit textual confirmation of that.

kinghaart

I think it might have been assumed, and therefore just never tried.

"Instead of a Dead King you would have a Dead Queen!" vibes.

jamesc9

I think that this is the Night-as-theft version of necromancy.

caoimhinh

She has never lost that ability.

She had it as Squire using Name power, then as Duchess of Moonless Nights and as Sovereign of Moonless Nights using Winter Fae power, and she still keeps it as First Under the Night through the use of Sve Noc's Night.

mamm0nn

Probably also a Night thing.

Wonder

Night is the facilitator of Necromancy here.

Sinead

Night also likely started as a tool for Necromancy under the Twilight Sages as well. It's probably more suitable for this than Winter was.

Probably gets messed up with holy water though.

Miles

She can do it with whatever power source is available. Name, Winter, Night, doesn't matter.

SpeckofStardust

Well that is one way to end a pattern of 3, Nim just lost here and I dont think anyone would dispute that. Also cat has a new flying fae mount.

Siva Chandra

Except that it's not ended, only set in stone. It ended with a draw between Diet BK and Squire, with both retreating.

SpeckofStardust

Really? Cause the Squire holds the field, he (and his team) kept the Black knight focused on the fight rather than the battle and she lost both. If the black knight didn't take to the field she would have noticed what was going on sooner and retreated before her army was beaten. (and this fight would have been a draw then but a draw needs both sides to lose the same 'amount')

This is too 1 sided of a outcome to be a draw.

mamm0nn

Yeah, with these things it's usually best to assume that 'Whatever is most convenient to the Heroes by any stretch of the truth' is the case. Neither died and Nim didn't win, so it's a draw.

SpeckofStardust

Nims primary role is as the military commander of her forces, so I'm sticking with Cats statement a chapter or 2 ago, the pattern wont take hold. The black Knight is already "doomed" because the next major fight will be at the Tower. And after this fight I dont think anyone is holding any delusion that the Dread Empire is going to win that.

Halinn

But she wasn't engaging the Squire in that capacity.

nick012000

"the next major fight will be at the Tower." Somehow, I doubt that. Amadeus is planning on blowing it up with lots of Goblinfire, remember? I think it's entirely possible that the next fight between Nim and Arthur will end with her surrendering and agreeing to the Truces and Terms, along with signing on to joining the war on the Dead King.

Steven Silver

I like this prediction. I want it to happen. Because, even though she's not on the right team, I've come to like Nim. Here's hoping a pattern of 3 only need to end in defeat, not death ♥

KiltedBastich

The thing of it is, Nim believes in honor. She believes in keeping her word, in doing right by those who have served her and served with her. She believes in the Legions.

None of that will last with Malicia in charge.
All of it is a perfect fit for whatever Cat or Amadeus build after Malicia's fall. So, all Nim needs to do is fail, lose honorably and survive the defeat, then volunteer to be part of the rebuilding.

It's a fine irony. The best way for Nim to get everything she wants is to fail utterly at all of her current goals, yet she is absolutely unable by her very nature to let that happen without a fight.

hakureireimu

The Squire didn't hold the field; he retreated ("the Squire retreating as she slowed her steps"). So will Nim since she sounded the retreat.

The outcome of the battle is irrelevant to who wins or loses, since the Squire is not a military commander, only a combatant. Therefore Nim's loss at the army level is not a win for Squire at the personal level. Since they dueled each other and both retreated, its a draw.

Voiceoftheriders

The Black Knight drew with the Squire, their duel was never finished. Marshal Nim lost to Marshal Juniper.

Onos

Well since Arthur isn't the commander of Callow or anything, the outcome of the battle between armies is irrelevant to he and Nim's PoT. Looks like he scored a solid draw, since neither he nor Nim got any significant hits in and both have opted for a tactical withdrawal to end their fight.

Agent J

You're confusing the battle with the fight. Nim lost the battle against Juniper. The fight against Squire was more or less "called off" on account of having lost the battle. To be more clear, Nim retreated from Juniper. Squire was just, like, there. Buzzing around like bee she wasn't able to swat down. So,
Battle: Lost
Fight: Draw

Relai

I am pretty sure it ended in a draw. The fight between the squire and the Nim did not result in either of them winning or losing. Neither of them are dead or lost/ won anything of significance in that duel. But I don't think the duel between the two needs to consider to the overall shape of the war. I think name stories would get too weird then. Like what if in a hypothetical scenario, a Black Knight cut off all the limbs of a squire and walked away beating him, but then the Black Knight lost the battle and the war; would that be considered a win, a loss, or a draw in that situation?

Reader in the Night

I'm still not sure I have a solid understanding of all troop movements for this battle. If I'm reading this right it was actually a fairly straightforward affair:

The Army of Callow and the Loyal Legion were trenchfighting in the middle of the plain, while the Rebel Legion was taking pot shots at both.

Then the Army of Callow "buckled" and fell back behind their palisades, causing the Loyal Legions to pursue. Since the Rebel Legions (RL) didn't want the Loyal Legions (LL) to push back the AoC too hard, the RL attacked the LL's flank with the intent to bleed them.

And that's when Juniper's plan came in: She predicted the LL would shut down their shared corner with the RL through goblinfire, rendering the upper "right" corner of the "square" impassable.

From there, she set fire behind the ranks of the RL to force them to commit to the push (somehow, Cat was supposed to do it but she spent most of the update in the complete opposite side of the battlefield). She used smoke to hide the fact that the RL were committing to the fight against the LL, making Nim think ahe was fighting mostly against the AoC. From there, the tactical situation shifted to the two Legions dogfighting each other while the AoC took potshots at them both, so while all sides lost troops to the killbox the AoC lost the least by far.

All in all, not actually some brilliant feat of deceit and fairly obvious in hindsight, but all that was needed was for the trickery to hold up for some time in the heat of battle, which it did. Like Cat said a couple of updates ago, there was no extravagant Named bullshit, this battle was won through basic tactics and competent generalship.

There's still a few questions left unanswered, like how the hell Cat teleported from Sepulchral's camp to behind the lines of the Rebels' camp, but the fire could also have been accomplished by someone else detached to take the mountain paths to go around the

Rebel Legions' camp (particularly, the Levantines were nowhere to be seen this fight).

But if so, why did Catherine say she and Mireembe's armies were going after Ranker?

hoser2

The rebels were right next to Sepulchral's camp since their arrival. Cat went around the back of Sacker's rebel forces to get to Sepulchral's camp. No teleportation required. Cat just had to attack the back of the rebel formation which was not heavily defended.

kinghaart

That, plus in the original plan I bet the RL would have been forced to go on the attack to get away from Sepulchral's forces, who would have taken the opportunity to pounce on two distracted foes.

Konstantin von Karstein

Why did Cat open à Gaye to Arcadia?

Noldo

To get the fey duke to close the hellgate and serve as distraction. Opening your own portal and goading fey to strike the hellgate was probably easier than trying to close the gate directly.

mamm0nn

Opens a fey gate right in front of the Hellgate, making the devils pour into the feywild and the fey pour into the hells.

Now, let's get me a new awesome mount, shall we Talbot?

Steven Silver

Thank you for writing this, I didn't really understand how the Fae helped until I read this 😊

mamm0nn

Not actually how they did it. We were vaguely told that Cat lured a Duke out into the world and that the Duke decided to close the Hellgate to stop the constant flux of more devils. Cat kinda just left that area after adding another faction, trusting the fey to keep the others occupied somewhat, instead of the better means of stopping the gate by putting a gate in front of it.

Silverking

I'm fairly sure that Juniper never really intended that anyone would actually find her declaration in the hollow tree, but to have Nim reveal just as she realizes that she's been placed in a no-win scenario...*chef's kiss* just beautiful.

jamesc9

This world runs on story-book logic and Cat knows it.

As soon as she pushed Juniper into leaving evidence of committing, it was odds-on that Nim would find it.

And yes, it's also beautiful, as long as we're not on Nim's side.

nick012000

I think it's funny that Juniper saw the battlefield situation better than a Named who literally has Survey as an Aspect. Maybe she will become the Marshall, after all.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Nim hasn't grasped the limitations of her Survey aspect – in particular, it's clearly present-tense only, and doesn't help with knowing what's coming.

medailyfun

still, it's odd the aspect did not see the forces layout through the smoke

Onos

There was that entire section where Nim considers that things have to be "visible" in some way which she doesn't quite grasp yet for the aspect to pick it up.

"Smothered in smoke to the extent no one noticed an entire army withdrew from the area" definitely works within the restrictions of "not visible".

Zach

My interpretation of it is that Survey basically let's Nim instantly acquire a comprehensive understanding of what she's be able to accomplishing without the Aspect. So she can instantly acquire the same perspective she would have gotten from a careful inspection of the battlefield.

It's similar to Adjutant's Find, which only helps him find things he'd also be able to find through conventional means.

Miles

She's too fresh to her Name. Give it some time and she'll be using it as a stronger xray vision.

If she lives that long.

Mental Mouse

Again, possibly because she hasn't had enough experience with it.

samshadar

That's just it. It becomes clearer if you think of an Aspect as a fancy new weapon.

It's not the weapon that makes the difference (yes, sometimes it can), but understanding of its application in the greater scheme of things and mastery of its use.

If you don't have those, the weapon might be just as dangerous to you as to your opponent – sometimes even more so.

Earl of Purple

This was a great chapter. I love Talbot's section, and it was interesting to see Ishaq's sword isn't just a soul drinker, but leaves a mark on Tower enchanted steel. I thought enchantments weaken with age, especially if they aren't refreshed. I guess the soul drinking gives the bronze sword an alternate power source to people refreshing the enchantment.

aurikdomi

I wonder if that's what happened his sword "drinking" power from the enchantments? he definitely got through them better than the Silver huntress with arrows empowered by Light

Miles

It probably drinks the enchantments. Leave it to Praesi to use horrors where mundane things would work just as well.

Wonder

Juniper and Aisha need to make sweet passionate love SOON!!

Dear gods ,the tension between them is just so heady .

Sinead

Pretty sure relations between an orc and human results in death by snu snu for the human

Abrakadabra

To me it was jarring. Like it was probably the first time that their attraction ever came up?

Darkening

It very much is not. It's been subtext in basically every juniper perspective where she interacted with Aisha. This is probably the most blatant it's ever been though.

Abrakadabra

Subtext means it was invented later. The author changed it up that is all.

Darkening

Juniper been taking longing looks at Aishas neck in several interludes before thos, whether it was planned before that or not.

Darkening

Juniper been taking longing looks at Aishas neck in several interludes before this, whether it was planned before that or not.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Since when did Juniper get that Baalite eye? I don't think it was ever mentioned before this chapter.

Onos

The whole Army of Callow (officers anyway) has been using them at least since scrapping with Neshamah. A war which has now lasted for like three years. Which Juniper sat out till now.

Xinci

It was, she had em by the time they got Procer

Earl of Purple

It's a telescope, Baal has the best glassblowers. As is said elsewhere, Callow has enough for its officer corps, though they're probably expensive.

Sparsebeard

It has to be.

Christian Oaks

I always thought it had some sort of scrying magic but I like the telescope idea as well

Daniel

So the next chapter is Amadeus's plan right?

Raved Thrad

Snapshots from a battlefield:

Juniper: "I'm back!"

Aisha: "You never left."

Juniper: "You say the sweetest things. Bare that pretty neck for me."

Catherine: "Sweet Crow-Sisters, a winged abomination! AND IT'S MINE NOW!"

Komena: "Oooh, pretty! Can you imagine the Firstborn with mounts like that?"

Andronike: "On it!"

Sapan: "Ast tasarak simuralan krynawi!"

Masego: "What are you...?"

Sapan: "Er... nothing! You saw nothing! You heard nothing!"

Masego: "Also, you're here to kill people, not put them to sleep."

Sapan: "..."

Masego: "Right. The Black Knight is open again."

Sapan: "Yes, Master! Ast tasarak..."

Masego: "I need to hide my fiction books better."

Arthur: "You're wonderful!"

Nim: "Thank you, I've worked hard to become so."

Arthur: "I admit that you are better than I am."

Nim: "Then why are you smiling?"

Arthur: "Because I know something you don't."

Nim: "And what is that?"

Arthur: "Marshal Juniper wins here."

inglessiejek

Ah Talbot, I did not realise you were a hilarious MF we need more scenes from your point of view (hint hint 🤪)

samshadar

The years under Cat have changed him too. While he may have had doubts before, he doesn't anymore. There have been too many crucibles. And if anything, she's proven viciously loyal to her troops and to Callow.

And she's been a terrifying foe to her enemies.

Zach

It's helped that, starting with the war against Dead King, Talbot and his Order have basically been fighting the sort of capital-E Evil enemies they were trained to fight – mostly the Dead King, and now Praesi. Earlier the conflicts, while necessary, weren't really the sort of fights that appealed to him and the other knights (stuff like the Fae or the Crusade).

One part I found interesting is how Talbot (and presumably the other knights) apparently perceive Night as some sort of gentle thing from their perspective as non-enemies.

jamesc9

So, in Max Weber's terms, Cat has traditional authority, which can be used to point the Order only at some targets, rather than rational lawful authority, which could be used to point them at anybody, provided the paperwork was correctly filled out.

Xinci

Well, Hail to the victor, and to the victor goes the spoils. Mm one can see the way that Tyrants became as loved as they did in Helike with how the Callowans treat Cat. Though given the ingrained deterrence behaviors of their culture, one would think it would be even more bone deep. May lighten to some degree if they have less enemies though, I suppose, without constant pressure they will get softer.

Its kind of nice to get a picture of the army of Callow getting to that precipitation point with their originator when it comes to victory, even if it was only this once. The usual bit where she goes off to sleep, a good sound off for the event. Also nice to see how Junipers relationship with Aisha stands.

I am rather curious about how that Night construct will grow, Winter Zombie was a "blank slate" to a degree and got both bindings placed on her in being claimed by Cat and by being exposed to and intaking so much creational stimuli. The Night is of Creation though so the process may differ a bit? Anyway, too bad Cat isnt going to get crow griffin cavalry.

As a sidenote still not sure if Cat broke her oath or at least the spirit of it by attacking those Fae.

Darkening

Pretty sure her killing that Fey broke the treaty and let them attack her back, hence the war and of screaming fairies coming for her head into that mess. Which, might make future events interesting if she ever needs to visit Arcadia for some reason.

RubberBandMan

No, the boon she had was only that she and her people could travel through arcadia without being attacked or slowed. It says nothing about what happens in creation. So Cat goes in, knowing they can't touch her in arcadia, pisses them off and kills a few, then goes into creation, where they can follow and attack her. Which now they want to because Cat was a real jackass.

Fae of all people know that the oath can be abused, if Cat gave a shit about anything going on in arcadia. But Likewise Cat knows if she pisses off the queen and king, they are perfectly capable of making her regret it in creation, one way or another.

Darkening

Oh, and Cat made a point of mentioning that night necromancy lacks the spark that made her winter zombies grow into actual individuals, so no clever hippogriff mount sadly.

dadycoool

Yeah, that was the most tragic part of Night eating Winter, for me.

Earl of Purple

I have hope her Name will help there, giving her undead personality as they age and adapt. Especially for those linked so tightly to her as her mounts.

[Adrian V](#)

Or maybe it will have some sort of resonance, i mean how many times was the fact it has crow features remarked?

dadycoool

What if this very crow-like creature is the Sisters' new form?

Xinci

If it's a monster from the Praesi menagerie it likely has a soul. Night can contain souls perfectly well so it may indeed grow in different ways from Zombie the Third

Clmineith

Concerning the Names, Warden of the East seems too limited to me. Warden of Evil... maybe, but it's still limited.

Has someone considered Warden of Calernia?

Of course, it could be not Warden at all.

Sinead

Keep in mind that the Yan Tei system of government has the Ministers of the Left and Right.

She may be the one to say the table needed too be built for everyone to sit at, but she isn't the only one who counts. Something like the Warden of the East still fits in that sense.

aurikdomi

best case for Warden of the East in this comment thread ^^

[Adrian_V](#)

HAHAHAHAHAHA, before anything else, how old is Brandon? Or rather how much older than Cat is he? Because i get a lot of exasperated fond uncle vibes from him lol

Love the new Zombie, how many are now? Are we at the 13th? xD

And wow i would love to see a diagram/map, whatever is called of this battle, or someone recreating it on AoE or Total War (any one really), that would be so awesome.

Darkening

He's somewhere in his 30s as I recall. I remember a comment about him being fairly young compared to the surviving pre conquest knights, but he got credit for approaching Cat. But he's definitely got at least a decade on her.

jworks17

One of the best chapters, loved the Talbot bits.

ninegardens

Huh...

I think Nim is going to survive all this, and end up being the Praesi general vs the black King.

Not how she SEES Akua holding back and not killing soldiers (which I imagine Akua thinks is all sneaky and on the down low), and her responses is "Oh yeah, that seems good and reasonable".

Nim is... actually kind of a good person. At least... as good of a person as we could hope to find in a general working for a dread empress.

MoreDakka

The big problem with Nim being a good person is she is the only one caring about what's best for the country. Her boss only cares about herself, her mentor (The last BK) wants to tear it to the ground due to its flaws and failures, the nobles want power to the point they are willing to destroy everything, and her enemy's want everyone above to stop causing problems during the apocalypse

The only way she wins requires the death of all her major allies and the cooperation of her opponents all without accidentally ruining the defence against the dead king

ninegardens

Oh yeah- never said she would WIN. Nim has no possible win condition. Just said that I rate her as having a decent chance of survival.

I guess I just mean, at that start of this book, I rated her as being the enemy Dragon, guaranteed to die vs Catherine's plot armour (no offence meant, just... this is a story of Cat winning). Then we had the pattern of three vs squire (another major death flag), so I'm like "Yup, she's a goner".

Now I'm not so sure. I expect her to lose, but I rate her survival chances greater than 50:50, and instead of expecting her to die at Arthur/Cat's hands, It seems more likely to be Malicia.

kinghaart

Sad thing is that Nim's patriotism isn't all that different to Cat's, she just doesn't get realize that too defend Praes, she must change Praes – and that Malicia is the biggest threat to Praes right now.

superkeaton

Beautiful.

Frivolous

I don't have much to say for this chapter, except this:

I believe this is the first time it's been mentioned how the Roles of Warden of the East and Warden of the West are complete opposites. Same title but opposite meaning.

Warden of the West is Protector of the West.

Warden of the East is Gaoler of the East. As in prison warden.

That's all.

Cap'n Smurfy

A Crow Horse? In a menagerie of Praesi Monsters with a Queen known for her Undead equestrians? That has to be a trap.

HighJumper

"She was a queen in black, adorned in wrath and dread, but she was their queen to the bone."

I'm having trouble seeing Cat abdicate, being something other than a Queen of some sort over Callow. Dread Queen is my favorite, blending the Praesi and Callow ruling names, but her rejection of climbing the tower and recognition of separation from true Praesi culture throughout this book seem to be headed elsewhere. Amadeus is the one settling the Tower, hearing the song and intending to silence it.

Even if not her Name, Warden of the East could be a subtitle as that under First Prince, but that seems like Procer baggage not really applicable in the eastern cultures.

KiltedBastich

Queen Emeritus of some kind is a distinct possibility, as a title if not a Role or Name, especially if she is picking up some other form of authority from a different Role. She wants to abdicate in favor of Vivienne, no one is forcing it upon her. Also, it stands to reason that even in a peaceful future where she leaves the day-to-day running of Callow to Vivienne, if she had some sort of particular request they would likely fulfill it if at all possible.

Sykomantis

After reading all the arguments so far, my guess is the new name will be The Sovereignty (not to be confused with sovereign). My reasoning is that while the sovereign actively rules, the sovereignty is what EMPOWERS a sovereign to rule, which I feel fits better with Cat's ultimate goal: abdicating to run a school for Named, granting them power (in the form of knowledge, among other things) and having the ability to strip away that power if and when needed, but not actively ruling anything herself.

That or Headmaster, by being the Master of Heads (of state).

(I know that was bad fight me)

stevenneiman

I have a question about the afterlife: Do Evil people really go to the Hells when they die? I ask because there's a lot of lines that indicate as much, but there's also a whole branch of magic dedicated to dredging up much less cooperative beings from the

Hells and it seems suspicious that it would be impossible to get one dead human back from them.

Earl of Purple

Nobody actually knows. The House of Light say that they do, and Good people go to the Heavens and live amongst angels, and that belief seems to be held in Praes as well, though why is unclear. Possibly a relic of the Crusader Kingdoms. Those resurrected by Light don't recall much of the time spent dead, and I assume the same is true of undead with souls like Lady Abreha Mirembe here. Akua isn't a help because her soul never left Creation; it was grabbed and sewn into a cloak before it could get anywhere.

kinghaart

IIRC there are many levels of the Hells and not all are (mortally at least) accessible.

One wonders if the Serenity might actually relate to this...

morroian

This, this is the shit. One of the best chapters of the entire Guide so far. I've still got issues with Akua's arc but that's swept aside with chapters like this.

Chapter 21: Amadeus' Plan

"Is there not a stark absurdity to what a battle truly is? Thousands of strangers on two sides of a field, prepared to slaughter each other because half a dozen men on either side told them to."

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

Seen from the above, it was easy to understand why General Sacker had agreed to the cease-fire.

The Rebel Legions were like a bottled rat, now that the Black Knight had called for a retreat of her own army. Juniper had wasted no time surrounding their position in the valley, turning all engines on the tightly-packed ranks, and Sepulchral's own army had hit them in the back even more brutally at my order. Sacker's troops defending her camp had collapsed under the combine pressure of mage cadres and Nok wavemen, archers who

lived up to their sharp reputation. It'd been a bloody business, feeding levies into Legion fortifications, but we'd caught the rebels unaware and the disparity in numbers had them collapsing in short order.

The camp was ours now, the parts we hadn't torched anyway. That'd left the Rebel Legions surrounded between steep hills, stripped of supplies and room to maneuver as the noose tightened around them. To annihilate Sacker's army, nothing would be required of the Army of Callow save that it hold its own palisades while at a generous advantage. All Juniper needed to do was wait while Sepulchral hammered at the Rebel Legions from behind with her great numbers and fresh troops. The rat would be pressed against the bottom of the bottle, squeeze so tightly nothing was left but ground flesh and blood. So when the offer had come from Juniper, it'd only been natural that General Sacker accepted a cease-fire and talks.

Zombie the Seventh took nothing more than the pressure of my knees to be guided into a gentle downwards glide. The creature – she wasn't a hippogriff, not exactly, but given the similarities I was currently leaning towards 'hippocrow' – had proved to be eager and obedient after I'd raised her, perhaps because the Sisters had taken a personal interest in the process. Komena in particular had felt intrigued, enough to lend a hand to the process. Regardless, my latest Zombie had proved to be a very good girl indeed on top of being even quicker in flight than I'd thought she would be. Turns could get a little tricky, mind you, but Zombie clearly relied more on Creational laws than magical ones when it came to her flight.

Compared to my last flying mount, anyway.

The no-man's-land between our position and that of the rebels had been cleared for the duration of the talks, legionaries returning to hide behind their walls, and the empty space made it all the easier to pick out the delegations. Juniper didn't seem to have brought any officers with her, but she'd been wise enough to bring Indrani and Alexis as bodyguards. There wasn't a lot that'd be able to get past those two. Sacker, on the other hand, had with her two men with the painted insignias of senior legates on their armour. There were half a dozen regulars with them, but they might as well be decorations for what it mattered.

I landed half a hundred feet away, Zombie's arc smoothly turning into a run and slowing down as we approached. The Mantle of Woe trailing behind me, sword at my hip and yew staff lowered, I brought my mount to a halt before the delegations.

"Marshal Juniper," I smiled. "Congratulations are in order."

The Hellhound scoffed, but I could see the pleasure she was badly hiding.

"Could have gone better," Juniper said. "But we can save that talk for the camp, Warlord. There are more pressing matters to settle."

"So there are," I agreed, eye turning to the three top officers of the Rebel Legions.

"Black Queen," General Sacker blandly said. "Greetings."

Someone had remembered my warning, I noted. Good. I'd been completely serious.

"Sacker," I said.

"The legates with me are-"

"Irrelevant," I bluntly interrupted.

The human of the pair, a middle-aged Taghreb, looked furious at that. She didn't speak out, though. The orc seemed to take it in stride, which raised my esteem by a notch.

"Either you can speak for your entire set of legions or this conversation is pointless," I said. "I did not come here to indulge in petty games."

"I can speak for our men," General Sacker flatly said.

A look to the legates – the light caught in her fake eye, reminding me I was not the only woman here to have lost one – served as both a quell and confirmation. Neither gainsaid her.

"Good," I smiled.

"We're willing to surrender," the old goblin said, "under certain terms. Guarantees need to be made that no soldiers will be harmed. Regular food and water. We're willing to sit out the rest of this war if-"

She was serious, I realized. How many soldiers did she have left of the thirteen thousand she'd begun the day with? Couldn't be more than eight, after the beating they'd taken. And she still thought she was in a position to strongarm me. I'd been too soft on these people, I suddenly realize. The Rebel Legions had taken my coin and grain before selling me down the river without a second thought, and the way I'd just taken it had made them think I was easy pickings. I'd held back, out of a desire to maintain the armies of Praes for the greater war and out of respect for my father.

It was long past time I stopped.

"Archer," I said, "nock an arrow."

I heard a chuckle and did not need to turn to know she obeyed. I met Sacker's eyes evenly.

"You seem to have some grave misunderstandings about the nature of your situation," I said. "So let me be clear: if I tell Archer to fire that arrow eastwards, Sepulchral's army will resume its attack."

The goblin scoffed.

"You'd lose-"

"I don't give a shit how many of them we lose," I coldly said. "I'll spend her entire army if that's what it takes to break you."

I harshly laughed.

"Terms?" I mocked. "You'll sit out the war *if*? I didn't come here to negotiate with you, Sacker. I did that once before and you fine fellows me in the back. We're past making deals."

I struck my staff against the ground and the sound rippled out, dust flying up.

"You can surrender unconditionally," I said. "Or Archer will shoot that arrow and I'll fucking kill you all."

Sacker's face tightened, her ever half-closed eyes opening fully. She studied my face and whatever she found there had her hesitating. She turned to Juniper.

"And you have nothing to say to this, Marshal of Callow?" she pressed. "Your men will be the ones spent for this madness."

Juniper's face hardened and she bared pale fangs.

"Every sack of grain your soldiers ate, every crate of steel you used, could have kept some of my legionaries out west alive," the Hellhound growled. "And what did we get for it? Be careful now of calling on *sentiment*. You might not like what you let out of the cage."

Sacker flinched. Juniper had been as a niece to her, once. Maybe she still was in some ways. But personal ties cut both ways. She turned her eyes back to me, knowing better than to ask for anything out of the likes of Archer and the Huntress. Hells, of the two Alexis would probably be the hardliner. She had that traditional heroic disregard for the lives of anyone that might be considered to stand under Evil's banner.

"Many officers will balk," General Sacker told me. "If you do not offer guarantees-"

"So let them balk," I shrugged. "We can have this conversation again in half a bell, when I've put another few thousand in the ground."

The genuine indifference in my voice, I thought, was what got it through to her I wasn't bluffing. I absolutely wasn't. I'd just make sure that the household troops from Askum and Nok were the vanguard for the assault instead of the levies, to keep the casualties of the attack where they deserved to be. The goblin sagged.

"An hour," Sacker said. "Give me an hour to talk the officers into it without bloodshed."

I glanced at Juniper, who looked like she was biting down on the answer she wanted to give but did not have the authority to. No objections there, then. I might as well give the rebels a little more rope, lest the noose turning into an outright hanging.

"An hour," I agreed. "If I don't have your formal and unconditional surrender by the end of it..."

I did not finish the sentence, or particularly need to. Sacker and the legates left, tails between their legs, and returned to their lines.

I got my surrender before the time had passed.

—

"We are now victims of our own success," General Zola sadly said.

No one in the war council — our usual, save now with the addition of General Jeremiah Holt — argued with that, because it was the honest truth. We'd forced the Rebel Legions to surrender and the Loyalist Legions to retreat to their camp in northern Kala Hills, but we now had fresh problems on our hands. Namely, seven thousand eight hundred and seventy-nine prisoners of war that we needed to keep an eye on. And keep under a roof, fed and with enough water to live. We were effectively being forced to supply a second army of prisoners and our supplies would be stretched to a breaking point if we did. Much of the Rebel Legions' own foodstuff had been either burned or looted when Sepulchral's forces took their camp.

Some of that I could get back from them, but I didn't want to take too much. The Praesi law that undead could not hold noble title meant that Abreha Mirembe's hold on her own army was painfully fragile, holding mostly because the soldiers from Nok were going to stick around as long as it looked like Isobe was still going to inherit Aksum. Otherwise those forces would be marching away by now, leaving behind them a vicious Aksum civil war. No, I had to leave Sepulchral some of the goods. Asking back

for half was reasonable, I decided, and I'd set Vivienne to arranging it.

"I prefer the troubles of a great victory to those of a great defeat," the Princess in question snorted. "We have supplies enough to push back the issue for a few days without it denting our reserves too much. We can keep our attention on more pressing matters."

Juniper cleared her throat.

"Speaking of," the Hellhound said. "Pickler, what is your timeline on the work?"

After the surrender came and the rebels laid down their weapons, there were only a few hours left before sundown. Since it was clear there'd be no more fighting for the day, Pickler had taken to bettering our position in anticipation of tomorrow. Companies of unarmed prisoners had, under the wary eye of our own legionaries, been set to taking down the enemy's fortifications: tearing down their palisades and filling their trenches.

"Our palisade will be the only one standing come dark," Sapper-General Pickler said, "but the trenches are harder work. Maybe half of it done in time, if we're lucky. I gave orders to focus on the road, it'll be easier for us to move troops across if we need to go on the offensive."

"Can goblin prisoners not be put to work in the dark?" Brandon Talbot asked.

I grimaced at that and wasn't the only one.

"They'll run," I said. "And do just that if we're lucky. They've a lot more goblins than we do, too, so even if we put our own goblin legionaries as overseers it'd be a major risk. Better to just left the work unfinished."

"Agreed," Juniper said. "It is only a precaution, regardless. I don't believe that Marshal Nim will be going on the offensive. Her losses appear to have been extensive."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"We got casualties estimates for her too, now?"

The tall orc nodded. With the casualties taken in the early skirmishes around the region, the desertion of the Thirteenth and the mauling the Eighth had taken during the night our guess had been that the Black Knight had been fielding an army about sixteen to seventeen thousand strong. How many were left now, though?

"At least five thousand and a half dead," the Hellhound said. "Tentatively we're pegging her current strength at eleven thousand."

I let out a low whistle. With the Thirteenth as last moment reinforcements, this morning we'd fielded around fifteen thousand men. Our butcher's bill had us at twelve thousand eight hundred and twelve soldiers now. Almost thirteen thousand strong. Gods, even Sepulchral had lost more men than we had: her twenty thousand had, between civil war and battle and desertions, tumbled down to maybe fifteen thousand now. Gods. Our total losses had been less than half of those of every other army on the field *individually*, not even put together.

Juniper had, over the span of an afternoon, not upended the balance of power so much as murdered it and buried it in a shallow grave. Weeping Heavens. I found my glass of water, emptied it on the ground and leaned back my seat to grab a bottle of aragh. I poured myself a finger, then found a few grins and cups headed my way. When everyone had their own in hand, I solemnly raised my cup.

"To the Hellhound," I said, "and the Battle of Kala."

It was with rowdy cheer my toast was taken up, drinks going down and being poured anew. I met Juniper's eyes and grinned, enjoying the dark flush to her cheeks. Aisha even talked her into a cup of her own. I laid back into my seat, enjoying the warmth of the tent, and breathed out weeks of worry. They could be put to rest, for a few hours. We'd earned it.

After all, for all the troubles of victory I'd rather be in this tent tonight than any of the other three.

—

With morning came the time to make the difficult decisions.

The Black Knight still had a sizeable army holed up in Kala Hills, but so long as Sepulchral remained on our side the threat was mitigated. None of my general staff had an appetite for trying to force that camp immediately, especially not when leaving the Legions in it would make them wither on the vine. We'd poisoned Nioqe Lake and Nim herself had poisoned the main wells in the region, so in at most a week their water situation was going to start getting dangerous. Only the scale of the losses they'd taken in battle would prevent it from being an issue even earlier. Taking into consideration our numerical advantage — we had the Loyalist Legions outnumbered almost three to one — and our fortifications in the valley, it would be suicide for the Black Knight to attack us. That meant we had enough breathing room to handle our own internal troubles. The

most urgent of them was, unsurprisingly, what to do with the several thousand prisoners we'd taken.

"We can't handle feeding them for the rest of the campaign," Aisha said. "And even if we could, we need to begin marching on Ater soon. There is no practical way to bring that many prisoners with us on the march."

"We should keep the officers of tribune rank and give the Fourth's Justice to the rest," Brandon Talbot advised.

Gods, that stupid name. It was what some of my men had taken to calling the punishment I'd given the Helikean cataphracts after capturing them back in Iserre: broken fingers and being stripped of equipment.

"This is a wild land," Aquiline said. "It would be kinder to simply kill those warriors than to maim and release them. The sword will hurt less than claws."

"It would be a death sentence to release them like that," Vivienne agreed. "Ideally we would ransom them instead, but they've managed to burn every bridge they have. There's no one left who'd pay for them."

"Amadeus might," I objected.

"He can't afford the price," she frankly replied.

"We should seek to recruit soldiers instead," General Jeremiah said. "It would make up for our losses, and the Army of Callow has expertise in assimilating legions."

I rather admired the entirely unashamed way he said.

"That was my thought was well," I admitted, "and Juniper's too. How did that go?"

The Hellhound sighed.

"Malicia poisoned the well," she said. "Most of the rank and file are convinced we assassinated two of their three generals just before making common cause with Sepulchral after a coup failed. Maybe three hundred volunteers, and I wouldn't trust them right off."

Fucking Malicia. I might have given the order to kill Mok, sure, but I wouldn't have been sloppy enough not get blamed for it afterwards.

"They might not be willing to fight for us," Vivienne said, "but they might be willing to fight *against* the Black Knight."

She paused, choosing her words.

"We could offer some of the soldiers freedom in exchange for serving as the first wave of an attack against the camp in the hills."

I chewed on that for a moment. Juniper looked on the fence, but the idea appealed to me. Sure it'd be putting troops we didn't trust all that much in our order of battle, but it'd also soak up casualties that would otherwise thin my own ranks. And, even better, I wouldn't be expected to keep feeding those soldiers after they went their own way.

"We'd have to limit the numbers," I said. "Else we're just releasing an army into the wilds."

"Organization will be tricky," Juniper said. "I'll want to position them so if they turn against us it won't lead to disaster."

That wasn't a no, and after a round of debate the idea was adopted. Aisha left the tent to begin organizing it. That didn't entirely solve our prisoner problem, though, since two thousand at most was what I was comfortable arming again. The arguments went in a circle. No one thought we should feed the prisoners or keep them with us, but most of the measures that'd make them no longer a problem for the rest of this campaign also effectively consigned to death by Wasteland. Everyone agreed, at least, that we should keep the high-ranking officers as prisoners. Execution was floated as an option – by Talbot – but even those that didn't balk at killing prisoners thought it might lead to mass unrest among the imprisoned soldiers.

"Even arming half of them would be a mistake," General Zola argued. "With that many soldiers, which we agreed would be needed to survive the Wasteland, they have enough men to begin seizing the private armories of nobles and towns. They would rearm and pursue us."

"We don't know for certain that they would," Juniper grunted. "But I take your point. I don't want to leave that force at our back either."

And that was the crux of the issue, really. We all wanted to march on Ater, where the war on Praes would be brought to an end, but we needed to clean up house first. That would mean dealing with the Sepulchral situation, later today, but also tying up all our other loose ends. Marshal Nim's army needed to be decisively broken or made to surrender, and after that was done I didn't want Sacker's army nipping at our heels when we moved south. Hells, to be frank I didn't want them involved in that siege at all. They'd not proved to be trustworthy enough to be allowed to, and they'd failed to be victorious enough to force the issue their way. I could just see them stumbling into us at the last moment and fuc- wait, no.

"We're looking at this wrong," I said. "Juniper, how long do you expect operations in Ater to last?"

"Two months at most," she said.

Longer than that and we'd be forced to make a deal anyway. Procer was already buckling, if we wanted there to still be a west by the time we returned we couldn't tarry.

"So we strand them," I said. "We keep the officers and arm enough they should be able to survive the Wasteland, but we take all their mages. If they don't have any access to the Ways..."

"Even at their fastest possible pace, they'll arrive along after the dust is settled in Ater," Juniper finished, tone considering.

"Best we end things with the Black Knight before that," General Jeremiah pragmatically advised. "Still, seems a sound enough plan."

Not the most elegant way to deal with prisoners, but we didn't have time for elegance. A round of agreements, some more enthusiastic than others, saw the matter settled.

"We'll be receiving Sepulchral this afternoon," I said, "to confirm the terms of our cooperation. Once she agrees to lend her aid to an assault on the Loyalist Legions, I believe we should begin preparing for an attack."

"Agreed," Juniper growled. "We have the numbers to properly squeeze her now. I want to swing part of our force out east around Kala Hills and encircle her. The same paths they used to ambush us there can be turned against them now."

The discussion grew animated after that, commanders pitching in for a plan to either force a surrender out of Nim or crush her army irreparably, but I excused myself eventually and Vivienne did the same. We needed to get moving if we were to be ready to receive Sepulchral.

—

Abreha Mirembe wasn't exactly my creature.

You could barely tell even she was dead, since it was poison that'd done her in and she'd been pretty ghoulish even before biting it. I'd raised the would-be empress as undead through use of the Night, but that didn't exactly give me control over her. I could move her limbs, sure, and inflict pain on her soul. But I couldn't control her mind, save through coercion. She'd showed me deference since her raising, but that wasn't the effect of the Night so much as the knowledge that I could send her back to the grave with a snap of my fingers. I was uncomfortably aware that

the ties binding me to her were not meaningfully all that different from those binding Malicia to Sargon Sahelian.

I'd soulboxed a High Seat too, it just happened that said box was their own corpse.

We kept the audience private, as small as it could be. That meant two people on our side, Vivienne and myself, and three on hers. High Lady Abreha herself, her designated heir Isobe and the niece that'd tried to usurp his place, Sanaa. Considering the only reason Sanaa was still alive was that she had enough supporters among Aksum's army and vassals that her death would have caused armed reprisals, I expected relations between her and her aunt to be frosty. To my surprise, Sepulchral now seemed to be favouring her over Isobe and taking no pains to hide it. *Praesi*. Abreha must have decided that a closely-fought coup was a sign of talent and begun to reconsider succession. Isobe was displeased by that undercurrent, by these talks and most of all by me.

"Rumour in the camp is that he blames you for this," Vivienne murmured into my ear.

I blinked at her.

"Why?"

"He lost a lot of face in front of vassal lords and household troops when you and Lord Tanja humiliated him," the Princess said. "He's been saying that if not for that more would have stuck with him instead of turning to Sanaa's camp."

That might be partially true, I thought, though ironically enough Razin had probably done more damage than I did. It was a little much to blame me for his own failure to gather a solid core of supporters, though, especially when he'd been the one starting with a – oh Gods, I'd been spending too much time with *Praesi* if the decisions of someone like Abreha Mirembé were beginning to make sense to me. Best get this over with. After half-hearted courtesies we got to the meat of the talks, which was defining what Sepulchral's position would be going forward.

"I want you to formally renounce your claim on the Tower," I said.

"That cause is lost," Abreha conceded. "Yet renouncing it will have costs for my supporters. I'll not lay down arms only to have a puppet ruler installed in Aksum."

"We can understand that concern," Vivienne diplomatically said. "I assure you, neither Callow nor the Grand Alliance intends to intervene in your matters of succession."

The old woman laughed.

"A nothing promise," she said. "You will have to do better than that. You want my army for your siege of Ater, and I want sturdier assurances in return."

"We could always offer our services to Malicia instead, should you-"

Sepulchral's hand slapped Sanaa across the face. I hadn't even made her do that, so I cocked an eyebrow.

"Count this a favour, girl," Abreha said. "There are some people you don't threaten unless you've made the decision to go through with it. They'll just kill you if you do."

Sanaa liked furious and humiliated, but to her honour she appeared to be listening. Huh. Maybe I *wouldn't* be having a little conversation with Scribe about her, after all. I had no intention of leaving the High Seat closest to the border of Callow in hostile hands, but if she could learn that made drastic steps unnecessary. Vivienne cleared her throat.

"Assurances of what nature?" she asked.

"I want it confirmed by whoever climbs the Tower that I'll legally keep my title until the end of the war against Keter," High Lady Abreha said, "with all attached rights, including that to designate my own successor."

I traded a look with Vivienne, who nodded.

"That could be arranged," I said. "I take it it's a formal Grand Alliance demand you're looking for."

The old woman grinned.

"I want it written in the treaty that settles this dance," she confirmed.

She really was an old fox, I thought. That way no matter how ended up ruling the Dread Empire they couldn't actually try to oust her afterwards without bringing down the Grand Alliance on their head. She was using a continent-spanning coalition as the guarantor of her succession. If nothing else, I had to be impressed by the sheer gall.

"I can't formally agree to that without speaking with Cordelia Hasenbach, though I expect agreement on her part," I said. "That said, I have half the Majilis of Levant in my camp at the moment and they'll back those terms so I'm comfortable giving you a provisional approval."

They were amenable to helping us against Marshal Nim with just that, so it was brisk business afterwards. They departed some

hours after and I caught Abreha as she left, away from the others so we could have a quiet conversation.

"So what is it you're actually after?" I asked.

She looked surprised, like she had no idea what I might possibly be implying. It was just a little too smooth to be believable. I cocked an eyebrow and she smiled.

"Who knows how long your war will last?" she said. "It might be a different empire, by the time the dust settles."

"All about staying in the game, huh," I said.

Abreha Mirembé cackled.

"It's the very thing, Black Queen," Sepulchral said. "Perhaps even the *only* thing."

—

We spent three days recovering and planning our offensive against the Black Knight, whose army had further fortified its position in Kala Hills but not since moved. There was some trouble with the prisoners, people trying to flee in the night, but we'd disarmed them and the Wasteland was not kind. Those that got out did not get far, and bringing back the mangled corpses to display them soured the appetite for that kind of adventure. Our count of recruits rose to around four hundred but came to a hard stop after that, with further efforts yielding nothing. Aisha's efforts to make 'volunteer companies' that would fight against Nim were more successful, though, reaching close to the two thousand that I'd been willing to allow.

The rebels might despise us but they were scarcely fonder of the Black Knight, who had spurned their offer of joining forces in favour of remaining loyal to the Tower, and many found freedom in arms in the wake of fighting 'Malicia's dogs' a rough but fair deal. Juniper and the general staff were putting the finishing touches on our plan to break the Legions with as few losses as possible to us, aiming to push the deaths on Sepulchral and the volunteers as much as we could without being too obvious about it, but I flitted in and out of those meetings. Most of my time was spent with Scribe and Vivienne, scrambling to get a read on the situation in the rest of Praes.

We still couldn't scry properly, but that was a regional effect. Sending mages further out and then arranging messages being carried by horse worked, well enough that Cordelia was able to send her assent to High Lady Abreha's terms and secure her alliance to us. I enjoyed the relative light demands made by this on my time, but the relative sense of safety was ripped out of my grasp without warning on the morning of the fourth day after the

Battle of Kala. Even if Masego hadn't immediately come for me I would have known something was up: the amount of power I could feel coming out of the Black Knight's camp was like a lit beacon to my senses.

"War ritual?" I bluntly asked.

"No," Hierophant immediately ritual. "And it is two rituals. One of them, the smaller, is making a gate into the Ways."

I blinked.

"You told me the Ways wouldn't be usable for a few days still," I slowly said. "That they were still too fragile for large troop movements."

"They are," Masego said. "Which is why I believe the other ritual is meant to stabilize them in some way, or at least accelerate the process of that recovery."

"That can be done?"

"I cannot," Hierophant reluctantly admitted. "At least, I have not yet grasped how it might be done. It is possible that either Akua or other talented mages have found such a solution, however."

"So they're trying to slip away into the Ways," I pressed.

"That seems likely," he agreed.

Fuck. And that would mean facing this same army again, only holed up behind the walls of Ater. I could think of few things I wanted less. Juniper was of the same opinion and we hastily mobilized. Hierophant probed with spells and figured out the stabilizing ritual would need to finish before they could begin moving out, so we had a few hours to spare at least. Enough that we arranged for the volunteer companies to be armed and put in front while Sepulchral's army deployed on the plains below the enemy camp. It all took long enough that Masego confirmed the stabilizing ritual was done by the time we began to march in battle formations, which meant I was now fighting the Battle of Maillac's Boot again only from the other side.

We couldn't even muster our whole army for the attack, since at least three thousand had needed to stay behind to keep an eye on the prisoners, so this was going to get *messy*. Taking a fortified uphill Legion camp with only hasty preparations? We sent the rebels and the volunteer companies as the first wave. To my distaste, I saw that Abreha had sent in her levies first. I could understand the sense in that, professional soldiers didn't grow on trees, but it would be a slaughter. Still, horns and trumpets sounded. There would be blood. Soldiers marched up the hill, and

atop it a thin crest of legionaries formed a shield wall of their own. Steel glittered under the sun, a sea of it.

It was an accident when it happened. They began singing, on one side and the other, with just a few beats of difference.

"Boot goes up and boot goes down –

There goes their callow crown."

The Legionary's Song, most people knew it as. Some called it *Swallow the World* instead, but they were fewer. The legionaries which had been named rebels began to sing it, moments before the legionaries that had been deemed loyal did the same. There was a beat of hesitation, steps slowing, and the songs melded.

"And no matter how high the walls

We're all gonna make them fall."

The couplet ended to the sight of the legionaries that'd been climbing the hill stopping. No arrows followed, no devastating barrage of spells or munitions.

"They can send us their pretty Knight,

Their killer all decked in white,

Only now we've got one too –

And he always gets his due

.

They got a wizard in the West

But no matter how he's blessed

We got a Warlock in the Tower

Who'll use his bones for flour

.

Let them keep their priestly king

Cause no matter how sweet he sings

We've got an Empress black as sin

Who'll take his throne with a grin."

It was a happy song, or at least meant to be. And yet somehow the tune that the wind carried all the way to me was mournful. A lament.

"We're the Legion and the Terror

They're in the right but we're meaner

So pray hard boy, and pay your toll –

We're gonna swallow the world whole."

Atop the hill, legionaries looked at legionaries down it. And someone, some faceless man or woman, threw their shield on the ground. Their sword. And something hung in the air, a weight, as armies that had been savaging each other for weeks looked at each other. Someone in the volunteer companies threw down their own shield, and then it was like floodgates had opened. Shields and swords and helmets fell to the ground. And then, in the most damning of silences, the soldiers left. Nim's, the rebels, even some of mine – the Thirteenth most of all, but had I not devoured legions before? The Army of Callow spat back out some of those sons and daughters.

Even some of the levies bolted, melting into the river of deserters.

"-Majesty, Your Majesty," Brandon Talbot called.

I glanced at him.

"What should we do?"

I looked atop the hill. How many of her men had Nim lost? I couldn't tell, but it was not few. Same for us, and somehow I knew that when I returned to camp prisoners would have joined the flood as well. We'd all brought armies here, waved banners and played games. Won and lost. And after two weeks of brutality, an army was walking away. Could I really blame them? What were any of the people here fighting *for*? Even those of us with causes had dragged them through so much dust they could hardly be recognized.

"Nothing," I finally said. "Nothing. Let them go."

Even the Black Knight what few had left to flee with. We would meet again in Ater, to end it all.

A song and then silence: so ended the Battle of Kala.

[Droughtbringer](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Ulixes(Josh)

"-Majesty, Your Majesty," Brandon Talbot called.

I glanced at him.

"What should we do?"

"Nothing," I finally said. "Nothing. Let them vote."

Sir Nil

Cool.

Sinead

How do you kill a story? You make sure that no one wants to tell the story ever again.

This is why Amadeus is deliberately absent. He cannot be the figurehead of a movement, because that would just put a fresh head under an old crown.

dadycool

The only way to fight an idea is with another idea. If a story isn't told anymore, it's lost. And if a story is lost to living memory, it dies forever.

ArkhonIX

Yep. This wasn't a pivot to transfer a crown from one Emperor to another. This is the death knell of an ideal. Specifically, the Praesi ideal that power is worth any cost. These soldiers have finally realized that there is a cost too high to pay. They will not kill each other for the power of their masters. They have refused to kill their brothers and sisters, and that decision has much larger ramifications for the country as a whole. The people are fed up, and that tends to be what finally kills dynasties. It might take a while, but this was the first nail in the coffin of Praes as a country

[sengachi](#)

I love this ending as the conclusion of the Legions fighting to be an institution which mattered. They eventually mattered the most not by choosing whose wars to fight, but by choosing to not fight at all.

Zach

I kind of wonder if, based upon the chapter title, Amadeus somehow purposefully helped arrange the large conflict between a bunch of Legion (or Legion-like) soldiers, with the intent of

making the soldiers reject continuation of the conflict (which might also have something to do with why Catherine might object).

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Yet he won

Lictor Magnus

Interesting. I wonder how many of them went back to camp vs leaving the war completely.

[Liliet](#)

Couldn't go back to camp, I don't think.

Reader in the Night

What the hell happened here? Can someone help me understand? Specifically, about the positions of the Armies in the beginning of the battle:

I though the Four Armies basically formed the four sides of a square, with Sepulchral's army holding the half-road, then the Army of Callow and Nim's Army who each had a corner with the half-road facing each other, and Sapper's Army opposite Abreha's closing the square.

So how did the army of Nok hit the back of Sacker's Camp? Does the half-road curve around the entire valley?

[Liliet](#)

Not a square. There's a map on discord, but the simple way of describing it is this:

```
SS | NN
SS | NN
   NN
RR\__
RR/  CC
   /CCC
```

(S = Sepulchral, N = Nim, R = Rebels, C = Callow)

(Only the fortification lines are obviously double except those around Sepulchral who didnt make her own and just got fortified against by Rebels and Nim)

You can see the corner between R, N and C which was the "box" from the last chapter.

S and R are situated IN hills – Moule hills, to the west.

Kala hills are to the east, and are partially shared by N and C, though they also hold part of the valley between Moule and Kala hills. The half road goes through the west of the valley,

next to Moule hills, approximately where the fortification lines are – I don't remember how exactly it intersects, but the Rebels' fortifications definitely fuck with it.

[Liliet](#)

To be more clear, the box was like this:

```
SS | NN
SS | NN
   NN
RR\____
RR/____|C
___/CCC
```

Callow abandoned their fortifications but then quickly formed new ones, leaving a "box" where both Rebels and Nim went and savaged each other.

shikkarasu

Bless you. I was having a hard time following. Might reread with that map in mind.

dadycool

So, did the Legions basically look across the field at each other and collectively go "We're the Legions of Terror. What in the hells are we doing?" Based on the title, I'm guessing songs like this, anthems, are in a way a failsafe to avoid division among the ranks of Legionaries or something. The moment any of them start singing it, they look at the armor on the other side, look at the armor on their neighbors, and come to their senses. A victory for one Legion is a victory for all Legions, a defeat for one is a defeat for all, and when victory for comes at the expense of another, all are disgraced. This goes deeper than a Command or Rule, this is a belief, branded into the very soul of everyone who ever marched beneath an Empire Banner.

[Liliet](#)

...and that was Amadeus's plan, bless him.

ninegardens

I love that this is Amadeus's plan and he isn't even present.

Also... kind of hate how ruthless and cynical Cat was being with the rebel legions. This chapter is a victory, but in many ways, the villain of this chapter is her.

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

She is a villain, in the end. Though this day probably shapes her into a better one.

Sinead

I wonder, especially with how ruthless she is being in this last chapter if she will have a pivot where she either falls completely (too much the woman of hard choices) or becomes something with more flex in her.

She created this ideal of a means to keep everyone at the table. However, her being too uncompromising (or compromising in the wrong fashion) may spell out her own doom in terms of being bound to a bleak ending.

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

It's quite likely her father just saved her from that this day.

agumentic

She is not called "Black Queen" for her great appreciation of the colour. Whatever her goals are, Cat never had much kindness and optimism in her.

[Liliet](#)

Well, Cat *did* offer them to surrender only to be stuck with them as prisoners and her problem, instead of just going through with wiping them from the map.

dadycoool

I was legit thinking that the 2,000 rebels would essentially be another Gallowborn.

[skyguy998](#)

The title for this chapter makes total sense. What is Amadeus about, when it really comes down to it? He is about saving Praes from destroying itself, the endless cycles of war and violence that is slowly killing the Empire.

We know that Praes is no stranger to civil wars, but what Amadeus instituted with reforms was a new Dread Legion, one that comes together with modern military discipline and tactics. What holds a professional army together is not so much force and fear but instead love, that of holding together for the sake of one's country yes, but deeper down for that of the man and women next to you.

These armies are all offspring of that institution. They have all served with that distinction for decades, sometimes together in battle but more generally as that of legionnaires.

They threw down their arms because the song reminded them of who they are, of the fact that they are brothers and sisters in arms fighting each other for no reason that is comprehensible to the rank and file, for goals and dreams that speak of something virtually indistinguishable from each other.

So Amadeus plan of the reforms comes to fruition in the most obvious of ways, Praes cannot eat itself if the people doing the fighting refuse to fight, recognize each other as brothers and sisters in arms, and work together to say "no" be it to Marshals, Queens, Names or Gods.

Amadeus's plan comes to fruition not from the last few chapters or books, but from decades of hard work and reforms, changing the spirit of an entire nation, and the stories they tell

edrey

Sad, but i feel curious, how amadeus achieve that?. he knows his soldiers, true but that is something else.

ninegardens

He didn't enact this plan last week or last month, or last year. He put it into place 50 years ago, its only now that we see the damn thing.

He wanted Praesi to be more than a snake, cursed to forever devour its own tail. This... this is part of that. This isn't Amedaus's plan, this is his *PLAN*. His goal, his ideal, his hope.

The fact that Cat, nor anyone else in her camp even considered peace talks with the loyalists says... a lot.

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

And it explains why he speculated this might put them at odds. He's removing quite a bit of her power and leverage here. A lot of things are uncertain now, including if even he will have any control of this group (though odds are good), and, if they are making their own decisions, how much of them can be put towards the war that follows this. But he's been prepared for the possibility Cat will kill him for a long time, and at worst he's taught her one final lesson this day.

[Liliet](#)

I expect Cat's army is left much bigger than Nim's as a result. She'll have kept all the Callowans at the very least, as well as Levantines.

The real issue is Sepulchral – or rather, those UNDER Sepulchral. Sepulchral herself is far too interested in what Cat and the GA have to offer her. Still, the issue is manageable.

The Loyalist Legions... have been reduced by FAR.

agumentic

Sepulchral's army is not really an issue. I would bet on the remaining Loyalist Legions over her host even now. The armies of Old Praes are just not very relevant on the modern battlefield.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on the exact numbers. If Sepulchral has ten thousand and Nim has two?

agumentic

Depending on the composition of said forces, I'd be wary of favouring Sepulchral even then, but I figure Nim has something like seven or eight thousand left to Sepulchral's maybe fourteen. 2 to 1 is more than enough for the Legions to wipe them out.

[Liliet](#)

There are three ways Cat and Co could have initiated talks with the loyalists:

1) Initiate talks with Malicia through Nim as an intermediary. The reason Cat is unwilling to do that has been spelled out and illustrated in the Wolof arc. Malicia cannot be trusted and Catherine is aiming to remove her completely. There are no talks to be had there, no compromise to be found. Malicia wants control, Cat wants to strip control from her. Any delay on that goal puts Procer further into the pit.

2) Initiate talks with Nim and try to convince her to make a separate agreement from Malicia. The writing was on the wall that this wouldn't happen, as whatever reason there was for Nim not turning with the Rebel Legions, would still be there and likely strengthened as Malicia was given time to shore up her defenses there. This is playing her game. We saw how it went with the Rebel Legions.

3) Find another leader or leaders and have talks with them, separate from both Nim and Malicia. This is exactly what they

did and how they got Thirteenth to defect. There are no other pickings for them there, no-one else will be willing to defect from Nim AND Malicia and have separate talks.

ninegardens

Nim rebuffed the Rebels while she had strong military power. Now she is in a weaker military position, and hence might be persuaded to talk.

And more to the point:

It doesn't matter if your chances of success are low. Yes, given what we've seen, I'd put Cat's odds of GETTING anywhere with talks at 10%.

But that's 10% odds of thousands and thousands of people not dying. And they didn't consider the possibility of diplomacy and then discount it... they just didn't even talk about diplomacy. None of them did.

[TeK](#)

Well, mostly because diplomacy had failed them already. Malicia will never abdicate, Cat will never tolerate non-abdicated Malicia. There was no place for diplomacy on the battlefield. It would be just an empty gesture.

ninegardens

Malicia isn't here. Nim is here.

And no- screw that. Diplomacy isn't something you try once, or twice and then go "Oh well, guess that didn't work".

If you are in a position of diplomacy being costly then yes, I agree, think twice. But Cat has an enemy, who she hasn't spoken to yet, pretty much entirely at her mercy.

This is a great time for diplomacy! It's cheap! You have all the leverage! The person who was previously being the main issue (Malicia) isn't here, and Nim is here, so talking to her will provide you with 8 megatonnes of information, even if she doesn't surrender. And you aren't even giving up that much information yourself, since Akua ALREADY spilled all your personal intel.

Besides which, when it comes to diplomacy "It might not work" isn't a good enough reason to abandon it. "It probably won't work" isn't even a good enough reason either.

Shveiran

That really, really depends on the specifics.

I agree in principle, but let's get real: Catherine is trying to save the continent from an undead invasions. She cannot, should not afford risks beyond a certain level of stakes, because a mayor setbacks may collapse the war effort. Ultimately, what stops Nim from going back on her word?

How can a deal be guaranteed?

What stops the Marshal from simply backstabbing her once they are in sight of the walls of Ater?

It's not that she dislikes diplomacy. It is that uncertainty is just not an option. That's why even beating the Legions meant a problem. Can you afford to leave them, just because they promise not to fight you again?

She didn't want to kill them all, but if they can't be trusted there wasn't a long list of alternatives that were acceptable in this situation.

[Liliet](#)

> talking to her will provide you with 8 megatonnes of information

Only if she's willing to humor you?

[TeK](#)

You can't negotiate with someone who does not have the authority to negotiate with you, or with someone who does not have legal authority to uphold the terms you ask for. If she truly negotiated with Nim for surrender, that would be no longer diplomacy, that would be subterfuge. And she knew better than to attempt it. By this point both Cat and Nim know each other well enough to disperse with superficial hypocrisy of "attempting to negotiate". If other side truly had a change of mind, they would've send envoy themselves.

Besides, diplomacy never was a particularly strong suit in Catherine's arsenal.

[Liliet](#)

10%? More like 0.00001%, and much higher odds of her LOSING something as a result of the negotiations. 100% chance of losing time, which is a very precious resource to her right now.

They didn't talk about diplomacy because all the interests have essentially been laid out and seen as incompatible.

Like, what do you imagine for those 10%? What do you think they would have agreed upon?

ninegardens

0.00001% you say? so you might call it...a one in a million chance?

A one in a million chance is a sure bet, everyone knows that!

...

More seriously though: Cat hasn't TALKED to Nim yet. She has no way of knowing how loyal/disloyal Nim is, and she has Nim outnumbered, with the chance to dehydrate her out. Nim is in a VERY weak military position.

We the audience have seen things from Nim's point of view, but Cat hasn't. So yeah, when talking about a general I have never spoken to in person, who is at a huge strategic and tactical disadvantage, in a country that is already at civil war, I *would* put the negotiating odds higher than 10% that they can be negotiated with.

And they only had the sharp time constrain once the portal opened. A portal that ZEZE of all people described as "Huh, I didn't know you could do that". Before hand they were all like "Well, we could starve them out, but that would be a pain in the ass".

Hell, she could have even just flown up on a horse with a megaphone, yelled at the opposing army and said "If you want to fuck off home we won't fight you."... which is pretty much what happened, despite Cat's best efforts to the contrary.

You talk as if Cat had no choice but bloodshed, but thing is, the text *directly shows* that there was a peaceful solution available... by showing peace happen on the page.

agumentic

Well, Cat is not you, and have correctly figured out from her myriad of sources on Nim's character that she is not going to make a deal to dethrone Malicia, which is a basic prerequisite of any possible diplomatic resolution.

Asking soldiers is not the same as the negotiation with the loyalists and probably wouldn't work besides – that was a decision the soldiers needed to come to on their own, without influence from any of the leadership.

Liliet

I am not talking about HOW Cat could have talked to Nim. I'm asking WHAT KIND OF AGREEMENT do you think they would have come to?

Do note that Nim could have initiated talks at any point, too, and Cat is well known for being willing to talk with whoever is willing to talk to her. Except Malicia personally. The line was pretty clear. Nim chose not to step over it.

sengachi

All it takes is two loyalists asked to get a song going on the same cue, and decades of preparation and building of esprit de corps to make it work.

Liliet

It doesn't even take that first part, just the second. Of course they'd sing, it's what people DO in circumstances like these. Of course they'd sing the same song, they're of the same culture.

Rey d`Tutto

And that's why it's Maddy's win.

nimelennar

"It was an accident when it happened."

Yeah, right. Pull the other one; it's got bells on. Cat just doesn't want to admit that she got outplayed by someone who actually cares about keep the Praesi Legionnaires alive.

I wonder how many plants Amadeus had in each army. One for each would be enough for this result, but some redundancy would both make the song more likely to start up successfully, as well as provide some insurance should they die in battle.

agumentic

He didn't need plants. Seeds of distaste for civil war and narrative causality is more than enough to cause this on their own. It's not like this is the only way it could happen, after all.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not a single damn one. He wasn't counting on something like that. He was actually doing something his daughter taught him. Riding fate instead of avoiding it. Brother fights brother, a

moment of recognition of this fact and two forces realizing the best move in this game was to stop playing any game that set them on each other. You don't need redundancy for the inevitable.

[Liliet](#)

I do not think there were plants.

Amadeus's "plant" is the entire Legion culture. He trusted in what it was and what it would do in his absence, because he's someone who could rally them to anything, but he needed them to make their own collective decision. Any ruling system is secretly a democracy (c) TGAB.

Amadeus didn't NEED plants. He just believed that this would happen. The SPECIFIC way it happened, that those specific legionaries started singing first, was technically an accident, but it's an accident the same way a thunderstorm lighting a forest on fire after a prolonged dry spell is an accident. You cannot predict when and where it will happen, but you can predict that it WILL.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

TGAB?

Rynjin

The Gods Are Bastards, a very good but currently defunct serial.

Worth reading, though it's worth knowing up front that its first book is pretty much irredeemably hot garbage; one of the worst starts to a web serial I've ever read. It rapidly improves from there.

Revenant

The Gods Are Bastards. (<https://tiraas.net/>)

If I remember correctly, both works have referenced each other by now; if incorrectly, then it's only one way.

[Burlyraven](#)

Praes is in the middle of a revolution, and it's the quietest one the nation's ever seen, despite it taking so much blood to make it happen. I highly doubt they'll be a good nation at the end, but the people are starting to realize just how many of the old ways are worthless. It's going to take a messiah to really cement the story, though, and I still think that's Akua.

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

It's interesting. First, when we realized the song has always been about her, it seemed a foregone conclusion. Then it seemed to be strongly conveyed that she didn't hear the song anymore, that she didn't want this nearly enough to ever be appropriate for the name. But I'm convinced again. She doesn't want to be Empress of this Dread Empire, and so she can't be. But maybe what's going to emerge from it's ashes of the fallen tower will be what she's always been meant to be part of.

Sinead

This may mean that Cat herself will be the one to take up Liesse's Crown and stand against the Dead King if Akua takes this Role in Praes.

Reader in the Night

Damn, a leaderless Legion, banded together through bonds of brotherhood that overcome mere hierarchy across every side of a battlefield, and then fleeing into the desert? That is one powerful Chekov's gun to unexpectedly pay off at the story's last moment. I wonder who Amadeus is going to aim that Silver Bullet at?

But yeah, a lot of people commenting on how Amadeus' story has been of how the common folk of Praes are sick and tired of tyrants and their games, and now there's a masterless army of Praesi patriots released into the wilds. Ol' Amadeus might genuinely be aiming at actually bringing down the Tower for good.

Anomandris

I mean, reforming the deserters as an army seems to defeat the purpose in my book. This seems kinda a statement that people are sick of being used as army fodder – regardless of by who. My read was that he is trying to change the whole system – adding an army doesn't do that...

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

They are sick of fighting for anybody else. That doesn't mean they aren't willing to fight for themselves. He's not proposing to take the Empire, he's proposing an END to the empire. That whatever comes next will not be this with a different name after "Dread Emperor/Empress", but something new. The system has to go down, and everybody in the system just happens to be over here guys, so... how bout it? (it will be a choice. It will have to be a choice or as you noted, the story will be damaged and they will fail). It will also be a choice if they do anything after that anywhere else. And that's where Cat's going to have a problem with all of this. Cause Amadeus does not end this with them marching to fight the Dead King on his say-so. There will not be a well oiled

magic machine that can be lent out to Cat for helpful magic assistance. I mean maybe those things will be attainable, but she'll have to ask, as he did. And at this point, I also suspect at the end the leader of this new system will be a woman who's become something that's incidentally completely useless for Cat's current Dead King plan. The Hopeful Empress Akua or somesuch.

Sykomantis

Dread Empress Benevolent, as it were

Insanenoodlyguy

No. It won't be Dread Empress for sure. She doesn't hear the song and Amadeus is determined to kill it. Empress perhaps, but not Dread.

Anomandris

So he's broken the whole 'Armies at Beck and call", at least in Praes.

Am I crazy in thinking he is gonna try breaking the rule of three next (for the Black Knight, that is?) What happens in case he kills Arthur and Nim both during their third fight?

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

Why would he do that? It seems like an odd thing to care about as it'd be on the whole irrelevant to his plans. I can't really see why he'd have any inclination to kill the New Squire at all, and by contrast has several reasons to kill Nim, so unless he wants to save both instead it seems like staying out of this is the best thing to do. Besides, the way fate works, he'd likely meet his own destruction at their hands by trying to directly interfere in such a fated fight.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I don't think he has any reason to do that.

Juff

Typo Thread:

combine pressure > combined pressure
squeeze so tightly > squeezeed so tightly
suddenly realize > suddenly realized
letme > let me
fellows me > fellows stabbed me
Askum > Aksum
to just left > to just leave
maybefifteen > maybe fifteen

arrive along > arrive long
barely tell even > barely even tell
takin no > taking no
Sanaa liked > Sanaa looked
how ended > who ended
you war > your war
immediately ritual. > immediately replied.
"I cannot," > "It cannot,"
Knight what few > Knight, with what few she

RoflCat

The crabs have escaped the bucket, together.

Abrakadabra

I get that. But I find the timing fishy. They fought each oöher for weeks after all, but now They suddenly Just realized fuck this?

RoflCat

It's because the balance is broken that this happen.

All the leaders on Legions side have either surrendered (Sacker) or are retreating (Nim)

The fight that was about to happen wasn't one for a cause, it's basically two groups of sacrificial soldiers about to clash.

The loyalist put these soldiers to delay while the 'more important' assets escape.

Catherine put these soldiers there to reduce damage to her 'more important' army.

And for the soldiers themselves, fighting each other doesn't further the cause they believed in.

The loyalist killing any rebels wouldn't hurt Catherine.

The rebels killing the shield walls won't hurt Malicia or even Nim because clearly they don't expect these guys to survive.

Once they realized this, that there's neither a cause or reward to the fight, they just stopped.

And hey, at this point even if they get executed for desertion, at least they won't go out a crab in a bucket.

Abrakadabra

Now, you are making a good point, thanks!

[Liliet](#)

Imagine a reservoir slowly filling. Then, at one sudden moment, it spills over.

agumentic

Admittedly, the whole thing was a bit overly dramatic for my taste, but this is a reality where stories are the laws of physics. Overly dramatic things are a matter of course.

[Liliet](#)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce

Unrealistic is one thing this chapter's key development is not.

A war is inherently dramatic.

agumentic

Notably, Christmas (and other) truces didn't happen in the middle of one army charging another with them breaking into song and then dropping their arms and walking off.

[Liliet](#)

Notably, the armies in Christmas and other truces also were from actual different countries and not prisoners made to charge their former comrades they'd spent the war hoping would be their comrades again.

agumentic

Plenty of civil wars in our world, not a lot breaking into songs mid-charge.

[Liliet](#)

Most civil wars, At Least That I Know Of, have a clear division between the troops as well: either ideological, or more often, ethnic/geographical. Tribe A fighting against Tribe B might be a civil war by measure of borders drawn on the map, but it's a fight against outsiders from the point of view of those fighting.

This is how Proceran and Praesi civil wars normally work: geographical divisions making "us" be people from one principality / lordship and "them" be people from elsewhere.

But the Legions are not organized on a geographical basis. They are not divided in this way, they are a

big mixer. Orcs, ogres, Taghreb, Soninke, goblins, Duni find themselves on all sides of the conflict.

The Legions absorbed into the Army of Callow at least have personal bonds with outsiders who are not Legion, giving them SOMETHING of a distinct identity to unite around, though as we can see in the text, it's a fairly weak tie and plenty of them desert as well.

The Rebel Legions and the Loyalist Legions? The line on who deserted and who didn't was drawn by the *commanders'* choices. Hell, Sacker's people didn't eve desert per se, they were with her since she got left on the inside at the Red Flower Vales! And all of these people did not come prepared to fight each other – the loyalists came to fight Callow and Sepulchral, the rebels came to join loyalists and fight the same, hopefully. The political decisions about not doing so absolutely did not echo in the popular sentiment, and Cat's move to pit them against each other finished the job.

Civil wars generally are based on a division between people fighting them. The only division here is "happened to be assigned to the other Legion".

agumentic

> The only division here is "happened to be assigned to the other Legion".

As was the case for every civil war in a state with a professional military.

But anyway, you are trying to convince me of something that I already accept – I am not arguing that the Legions refusing to fight each doesn't make sense. What I am saying is the way it happened, with the musical number suddenly breaking out, soldiers dropping their weapons and walking off into the metaphorical sunset was a bit too dramatic for my taste. And arguing about taste obviously not going to lead anywhere.

[Liliet](#)

Musical numbers are NORMAL for the army is my point. Soldier singing is what HAPPENS.

agumentic

Soldiers singing happens quite a lot. Soldiers singing the same song that turns into a lament that stops the battle, not really.

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean... the battle stopped because... oh, I already said all of this.

My point is, war is dramatic, inherently. Saying that something that happened in a war is dramatic is saying water is wet. Literally all of it is life and death, life and death of a lot of people, too. There isn't really a hypothetical non-dramatic version of this moment out there, even if they hadn't stopped and kept charging without a song it would ALSO have been dramatic and cinematic, if in an entirely different tone.

agumentic

I am of the opinion that war is actually a rather mundane affair, but that's neither here nor there. My point is, it's possible for even understandably dramatic thing to be overly so to one's taste, and that was the case for me with this scene. Nothing more.

[*Liliet*](#)

Fair, I guess.

Earl of Purple

@agumentic: When was the last time a civil war broke out in a country with a professional military which wasn't some kind of coup by the military against a civilian government (thereby pitting soldiers against civilians, rather than soldiers against soldiers) or otherwise aggravated by ethnic, geographic or religious factors? The fact the Sudanese civil war resulted in South Sudan being established as a separate country, Boko Haram in Nigeria is made up of Islamic extremists, and the Yemeni civil war's main factions are being funded by different foreign backers means I can't actually think of any.

[*Liliet*](#)

And I'm pretty sure "breaking into songs mid-charge" is what armies NORMALLY do.

Liliet

(they're just usually different songs, not the same one, see: divisions)

Abrakadabra

People don't work that way. Rolfcat explanation is better. The guys in the front lines realized they are the expendables on both sides.

Zggt

This is fascinating in many ways; Malicia and Black's ideological divide is manifested in a new way here. Malicia has a rather Praesi-centric view of the world. Even her book, which in essence decried the Age of Wonders, was not criticized for lack of pragmatism by Akua – meaning that Malicia did use Praesi ruthlessness as a guiding light behind her philosophy (else Akua would note it). Her position as a ruler in Praes probably greatly reinforced that.

But like all very elegant ideologies, even when seemingly pragmatic, the real world has a way of becoming a place where people still act like people always do. There are of course exceptions to this within the story, but in all cases the people and the leader share a symbiotic representation. The Tyrant and his madness were a representation of Helike just as much as the other way around. Likewise, The Girl Who Climbed the Tower ends with the rise subsuming who the person was in the first place – Malicia became another Dread Empress by trying to be a different kind of Empress, but she was shaped by Praes too much for shaping it into anything too different.

This has always been the point of contention between Amadeus and Malicia. Amadeus would have killed all the high lords and then let Praes consume itself for a generation for something new to rise up instead. The Tower would suffer, there would be less influence of the Empire on recovery, and in all likelihood, the person leading this would not be the person there to something different. Instead, he adapted his plan, and found an acceptable successor to his vision in Cat.

It wasn't quite the same, but he understood that Praes, as a villainous nation, always eventually pays for its successes, and instead looked to control that price from the get go. Civil war for a generation followed by integration with Callow and turning into something different might have worked. It may have been a theoretical big enough sacrifice to appease Below into making it happen. Malicia instead tried to grasp first and then use the price as a weapon... but that's just making her a pale imitation of the Dead King.

And now we finally see the seeds of all that manifest. As the escalation around these crazy and powerful few continues, as Named and High Lords and whatnot want to tear each other to shreds, the Legions now see this as an internal affair between all of those crazy people. Nim had it **almost** right, the Legions are indeed not tools for political squabbles.

Earl of Purple

This is a great chapter. And Sepulchral is vicious, cunning and I really quite enjoyed her speaking with Cat. I wonder if she'll try sticking around, placing herself as her heir's advisor or something, if she can't lead herself after the end of the War. Or if she'll get assassinated again.

letouriste

Now, this is a FASCINATING title. I've much to think about now...

axusgrad

Sepulchral really "lived" up to her name!

Josh M

I just caught up after a year of this story basically consuming my every waking thought, and I have to say EE – this entire saga is absolutely phenomenal, and probably the best thing I've ever read.

Some authors are great at world-building, some are great at coming up with a concept (the whole idea of Named is so cool, unique, and well-executed), some are great at developing well-rounded characters and getting their readers invested in and deeply caring about many of them, some are great at constructing believable dialog, some are great at fight scenes and choreographing battle and action scenes, some are great at politics and scheming, some are great at making you see both sides of many issues, and some are great at making you think about profound philosophical and moral issues. Hell, some might be great at a few of these.

You, however...you somehow manage to be absolutely extraordinary at ALL OF THEM. I've subscribed to your Patreon, and though I know that you say this is the last book in the series, I really hope this isn't the last we see of Calernia and its Named.

It makes me genuinely sad that I'll never get to read this for the first time again.

Just an appreciation post from a now-loyal reader. Keep up the great work, EE. You deserve whatever eventually winds up coming out of this.

nipi

You know when this is all over Calernia is going to have to worry about the horde of undead ratkin the drow will raise with night

[Skidemon](#)

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Zach

PracGuide is the uncontested best "page-turner fantasy web serial" IMO.

I think one of the most noteworthy things about it is that I was able to enjoy re-reading it (as someone who almost never enjoys reading or watching something a second time).

Interlude: South

"Coincidence is just fate bereft of faith."

– Dread Emperor Malevolent I, the Unhallowed

Kallia liked to think of Mercantis as what would happen if a city ate other cities until it grew fat.

It helped her fix the story of this place in her mind and that was the most important thing for someone who wanted to prowl its nights. Which she often did. Though the Painted Knife was the leader of the band of five that had been sent to the City of Bought and Sold, she preferred to leave handling the merchant lords to Rhodon. The Royal Conjurer had been a powerful man in the court of Helike for many years, before fleeing the Tyrant's ascension, and he knew how to deal with the fat schemers that infested this city like maggots would a corpse. And where he struggled, well, there were few in Mercantis whose buried skeletons could not be found out when Alain and Angelique both took to looking for them.

The Relentless Magistrate had toppled three merchant lords, two of which had been members of the Forty-Sole Court, since arriving in the city. He'd done this by proving materially and in excruciating detail how they were breaking the laws in the Consortium, causing a feeding frenzy among rivals. Angelique's own work never saw the light of day, the very lucrative – and technically legal – trade of poisons and favours she'd begun at the highest levels of influence granting her access to halls of power where no foreigners would ever be allowed to stand otherwise. Rhodon had not been shy in using them to get obstacles out of the way when it came to the task the Grand Alliance had assigned their band: burning Praesi influence out of the city.

And yet, for all the work of those three, in the end it was Teresa and Kallia who found the first hint of the plot. They'd gone drinking outside the city on one of the outlying shores, the Grizzled Fantassin calling an old acquaintance who'd 'put on the yoke' and become one of the mercenaries permanently contracted to protect Mercantis instead of a proper army. Teresa drank and brawled with the man through the evening, but when their glances took on another tone Kallia made herself scarce. She'd gone out to look for another place to drink – and perhaps a man of her own to throw backs with – but instead what the Painted Knife found was an assassination.

Two corpses later a grateful mercenary captain told her everything he knew, which in truth wasn't much. Many officers had recently been offered large sums of money to accept retirement. The captain had refused, preferring the soldier's life, and now wondered if some of the other mercenaries he'd thought

uninterested in retiring were corpses instead of truly gone to Dormer. Come morning, Kallia brought the oddity up to Teresa and watched the old woman's face harden.

"Someone's tightening their reins on the mercenary companies," the Grizzled Fantassin said. "Placing their own officers in key positions."

The Painted Knife grinned.

"A plot," she enthused. "We must defeat it."

Finally, something she could do instead of exploring the city and struggling with the impulse to cut everyone in this place who owned 'indentured servants'. Even Wastelanders despised slavery, for all their many other sins. They brought their findings to Rhodon, who punctured their ardour.

"It is Merchant Prince Mauricius consolidating his position," the Royal Conjurer said. "This is not likely to be a large enough scandal to topple him should it come out, and even if it were such an outcome is not desirable. His most likely replacement is more inclined to the Empire than the Grand Alliance."

The Consortium usually kept its Praesi clients at a distance, Rhodon explained, but the sheer amount of coin the Dread Empire poured into the city meant it tended to have friends in high places. The perceived high-handedness of the Grand Alliance and plans of a great city at the heart of the continent had only encouraged that trend.

"Seems odd he'd bother," Angelique told them over dinner, after being informed. "The Merchant Prince already controls funding for mercenaries unless contradicted by two thirds of the Forty-Stole Court. What are these men going to listen to, if not the money?"

"Yet he is not a man with a reputation for pointless action," Kallia frowned.

"No," Rhodon murmured. "So what is it that has the man afraid of being contradicted by two thirds of the Forty-Stole Court?"

And so once more they went on the hunt, for anything that would turn so many of the most powerful men and women in the city against Mauricius was bound to be important. Teresa returned to the outer shores to try to get a grasp on how many of the mercenary companies were being subverted and meanwhile Kallia set her finest bloodhound on the hunt.

"The Merchant Prince's affairs are all protected by law," Alain Monduc said. "Even his most mundane papers are considered as being 'of state'. There is no way for foreigners to access them, which will limit us to witnesses."

Kallia did not know the average lifespan of a witness in Mercantis that a wealthy man wanted dead, but at a guess she'd venture days. Meaning that if Alain's investigations were caught on to, their sole evidence was going to be swiftly disappeared.

"Ah but that's where you have it wrong, darling," the Poisoner girlishly smiled. "There is simply no *lawful* way for foreigners to access such papers."

The Magistrate looked like he was choking on sheer outrage, to the Poisoner's open delight, but when copies of such papers appeared on his table just before noon he mastered his anger.

"Copies are not strictly illegal," Alain stiffly said. "And there is some leeway in the process of gathering evidence for a trial."

Angelique looked rather robbed by the lack of explosion, which was probably half the reason the Magistrate had forced himself to be cordial. Weeks of following paper trails and Kallia being sent out to follow men and eavesdrop on their conversations at night ultimately led the Relentless Magistrate to an odd conclusion.

"Mauricius is not preparing a coup," Alain announced, "but preparing *against* one. Every single measure we've unearthed was defensive in nature."

Which made little sense, for the First Prince had strictly warned against trying to remove Mauricius from his position and the Black Queen had shrugged her assent. Even if Kallia did get her hands on something that could topple the Merchant Prince, she was to pass that information to the Grand Alliance instead so that it might be used as leverage in negotiations. So who was the Merchant Prince afraid would remove him?

"It could be the Tower," Angelique said. "Rumour has it that he had murdered the man Malicia wanted as Merchant Prince instead."

"The Empress has a reputation as a practical woman," Rhodon replied. "It would be unlike her to force an enemy where she could court an ally instead. Besides, meddling too deeply in the affairs of Mercantis would see it react harshly. It would look for protection against her, not fall in line."

"Let us pray the Empress fumbled the pig, then," Teresa said. "It would be a gift of the Gods for Mercantis to go the way of the Grand Alliance. We could use the gold."

Kallia looked questioningly at Alain, but the other Proceran seemed just as baffled by the expression. *Arlesite*, the man mouthed with a shrug.

"But whatever it is he's afraid of, he's nearly covered," Teresa continued. "He's got a little over half the mercenary companies in his pocket now. The key officers at least."

"If it were a Praesi plot, he would not have spent a fortune of his coin warding against it," Alain opined. "He would have passed the matter to us. He's certainly not been shy about using us as bears in his pit so far."

True enough. The verbal duels of the Royal Conjuror and the Praesi ambassador had turned into a form of local entertainment and they'd all been tacitly allowed to go after Praesi spies in the city so long as there was little collateral damage.

"There's not many people left who could pull off a coup," the Poisoner noted. "The Black Queen is in Praes, the Free Cities in another civil war and even the merchants would balk at taking the Dead King's coin."

"If there is no outside backing, it has to be an internal enemy," Rhodon mused.

"Which makes no sense," Angelique said. "Only the Forty-Stole Court could depose him and it's more divided than it was before he was elected. He's been playing the faction that wants a rapprochement with the Grand Alliance against the Praesi stooges to carve out a faction in the middle. No one has the votes to depose him, so what is it that he's afraid of?"

Kallia sighed. She'd never enjoyed plots and schemes. It had almost gotten her killed in Levante when she'd failed to figure out whose body the Spirit of Vengeance wore during the day, if the- suddenly she paused.

"What if the vote were rigged?" the Painted Knife asked. "You said that the Empress might want to be rid of him, Angelique, and Rhodon you once told us that his most likely replacement is in the Empire's pocket."

The Royal Conjuror hummed.

"Mind control?" he said.

"I was thinking of possession," Kallia admitted. "I have known spirits that could ride men unseen and nudge their thoughts."

"It would explain why he might expect to be able to use the mercenaries against the Forty Stoles and not be murdered for it afterwards," the Poisoner mused. "If he freed them and then made a show of returning control, it might instead strengthen his position."

"The entire city would sing his praises," Alain agreed. "A man can do much, with the love of the people behind him and debts of gratitude among the great."

"The best contracts are those you snipe another company to," the Grizzled Fantassin grinned. "Let's see if we can't get all that gratitude headed our way instead, yes?"

The plan was weeks in the making. Angelique had to burn through most of her favours and it still wasn't enough: they had to knock out guards so they could enter the Court unseen. Alain guided them through the halls, as the only one of them who'd ever been in here before – when he had presented evidence in trials – and Teresa paid off the mercenaries that'd agreed to help them smuggle in the barrels over the last few days. It still almost when to the Hells when an early guard patrol ran into them, but the Painted Knife got in close and dropped them before they could raise alarm. They rolled the four great wooden barrels with them into the great hall after Alain kicked the door open, to the great anger of the merchant lords in assembly.

The Royal Conjurer obeyed Kallia's shouted order and gathered his magic, striking down with great goutts of flame and blowing up the barrels. Mist swept over the hall, still holy and in heavy enough a cloud that it would disrupt either spells or possession.

And then, to Kallia's horror, nothing at all happened.

The shouts from the furious merchant lords got louder and the Painted Knife wondered if she had just ruined the relations between the Grand Alliance and Mercantis when one bloodcurdling scream pierced through the din. Merchant Prince Mauricius dropped out of his seat, screaming in a way that no throat could, and when he rose flakes of his face began to crumple. Underneath was a pitch-black skin, but there was nothing human about it.

"Devil," someone shouted.

Kallia cocked her head to the side. Huh. They'd been wrong but it had worked anyhow, so... win?

Win, she decided, and grinned.

—

Penthes' tall walls had kept the city in the war long past the time where a man less desperate than Exarch Prodocius would have surrendered.

Penthes has lost all its territories save a few holdout river fortresses, stood without allies and the city was beginning to starve. The supplies and mage support the Tower had sent were not enough for a city-state of that size to stay fed when encircled.

Now that Basilia's army was equipped with proper dwarven siege engines, the walls were no longer a surmountable hindrance either. In truth, if not for the presence of the Bellerophon army beneath the walls Basilia would have already ordered the city to be stormed. She'd had a swath of the southern walls reduced to rubble by trebuchet bombardment, but she was wary of committing her army to investing the city if there was a chance the Republic would strike at her while she did.

Helike still had the finest army in the Free Cities, but its numbers had thinned. Basilia had long been aware that one severe defeat was all that stood between her and the Helikean army ending as a fighting force for a few years. It was why she'd been so aggressive in her campaigning: so long as she was on the offence, she could force the battles on terms favourable to her. Now that streak of victories had been dragged to a halt, first by the presence of Bellerophon at the siege and then by what had followed Basilia's army entrenching for a few months: *diplomacy*. The Secretariat had been the first to send envoys, but Mercantis had not been far behind and eventually even Atalante – at the urging of First Prince Cordelia, her agents said – had sent representatives.

Nicae and Stygia already had envoys, arguably, as Magister Zoe Ixioni and Princess Zenobia Vasilakis were personally leading the troops their vassal states were contributing to the war. Not that the vassalage was official, or for that matter Zoe Ixioni's rule. Officially speaking she was still only a magister, though one who'd been voted emergency powers by the Magisterium without an end to those powers every being specified. Basilia tended to think better of Zenobia, who at least had no pretend she was anything but an absolute ruler when she'd crowned herself princess of Nicae. Regardless of the petty details, the fact was that six cities of the League all had envoys or armies here beneath the walls of seventh and last.

General Basilia found it highly amusing that while the city of Penthes and its ruling exarch had been made political nonentities, the siege of Penthes itself had turned into a diplomatic hotbed for the entire League of Free Cities. It was the sort of irony Kairos Theodosian would have delighted in, she suspected, and might even have gone out of his way to arrange. She had not, but Basilia was no Tyrant. That was not her calling, nor did she feel as if it should be. *Ye of Helike, do as you will*. The testament of the last Theodosian had not invited his people to follow in his wake: they were to do as they wished and nothing else, that was the very point.

Basilia had found her own wishes leading her to the walls of Penthes, to the threshold of what might very well be the defining hour of the League of Free Cities.

It was not delusion on her part to believe that. Zenobia and Ixioni agreed: there was an urgency in the air, a desperation. At first the Atalante priest-philosophers that'd been sent as delegates had only visited to sneer and snipe at the proceedings, but now they came by every other day and were negotiation in earnest. They couldn't afford not to, when Delos had sent one of the highest-ranking members of the Secretariat – Nestor Ikaroi – as its representative and begun to seriously back a reform of the League of Free Cities. The preachers were terrified of being left out in the cold, surrounded on all sides by states bound in alliance. Still, for all that the talks were moving it would have been a lie to say they were *succeeding*.

"Ikaroi isn't moving an inch even when we give ground elsewhere," Magister Zoe noted as the day's talks ended. "He's usually a reasonable man, so I expect he's under orders by the broader Secretariat."

Basilias made a noise that conveyed both agreement and disgruntlement.

"His current concessions are not insignificant," Princess Zenobia said. "Formal recognition of the imperial realm of Aenia and you as its empress is not something I thought we'd get out of the Secretariat without putting a sword to their throat. The scribes hate change the way a cat hates water."

"They would have been forced to bend on that sooner or later," Basilias said. "I hold the land, even if they might wish it otherwise. Getting me named protector of the League is where the power lies."

In practice it was not Basilias herself who was named but the imperial office of Aenia, which she happened to hold. It had been her notion to name the empire that would unite Nicae, Stygia and Helike together after the great Aenos Basileon, the sole claim to unifying authority in the region that predated the foundation of the League. It was the general's intention to follow in footsteps of Basileon and unite the Free Cities once more, but she knew she must be careful lest she follow in the footsteps of Dread Empress Triumphant instead. Even if she could take all of the League by force, she could not hope to hold them. No, better to first unite the western cities – Helike for soldiery, Nicae for trade and Stygia for fields and mines – and let her successors finish the work.

For that, though she needed an edge that would prevent the four other cities from turning on her empire in a decade after the dangers had passed. Something that would set Helike apart from the rest. To secure that she'd proposed to the other cities of the League the creation of an office under its auspices: protector of the League of Free Cities. She'd been careful not to outright step on the powers of the Hierarch, instead suggesting

the protector would lead the armies of the League in time of war and see to the defence of its borders against all foreign powers. Tying that authority to rule of Aenia had been the scheme, as it would ensure that Basilia's line would have hereditary power over the League of Free Cities.

Delos was balking at that, Ikaroi's suggested compromise of Basilia herself holding such power for her lifetime and then it being subject to election like the office of Hierarch being the most they were willing to offer. Atalante wasn't as entrenched in its opposition but was demanding instead that anyone holding such an office must follow the House of Light, which was... controversial. Trying to throw slices of Penthesian territory at the Secretariat had yielded no further concessions, even when Basilia had gotten serious and offered strategically important border fortresses. Mercantis seemed to be playing all sides, Merchant Prince Mauricius' envoys propping up Delos and Atalante publicly while making her assurances of support in private. So long as the privileged position of the City of Bought and Sold was maintained they would not go against her, they swore.

Considering Mercantis had served as middlemen when she'd needed siege engines from the dwarves, Basilia could not simply toss the snakes out of her tent the way she wanted to. She might need the Consortium again before it was all over.

"Delos has a particular distaste for hereditary power," Magister Zoe said. "I am not surprised they're proving to be the most troublesome holdout. Atalante was ruled by queens, once, but the Secretariat had held the power for millennia."

In some form, anyway, as the scribes insisted their current government was descended from the provincial one Aenos Basileon had placed to rule over the city, thus making them the sole true descendent of that founding empire. Every city save Helike and Bellerophon claimed some kind of relation to the old empire, actually. The Trakas of Nicae claimed descent of the man himself, Stygia that the Magisterium was a regency council until restoration of the empire, Penthes that their first exarch was Basileon's chosen successor and Atalante that the man himself had been buried under their city – and so they were the custodians of his empire, until the Gods Above raised him from the dead.

Not that the old stories had ever mattered much, save when Bellerophon tried to get the empire formally dissolved by the League every few years and those same cities balked.

"At least the Glorious Republic is staying out of our way," Princess Zenobia drily said. "I suppose that is the best to be expected out of them, lack of direct harm."

Everyone's positions were calcifying, Basilia felt. She knew the feeling, knew how it could be the death of progress. She'd seen

it at work in Helike, in the years before the Tyrant had restored the city: factions biting at each other around an indolent throne, no one winning or losing anything of worth. No one was going to move much from their current negotiating positions and that might be the death of this entire enterprise. Bellerophon's absence was an integral part of the stalemate, Basilia finally decided. The Republic was made up of mobs and madmen, but they were part of the League – and without them coming out on either side, Delos and Atalante felt they still had some breathing room.

If nothing else, some form of accord with the Republic would allow her to at finish off Penthes for good and turn up the pressure.

"We're done for the day," the general said, rising to her feet.

"Indeed?" Magister Zoe said, cocking an eyebrow.

"I must talk to some people," Basilia said, meaning People.

Getting to the Bellerophon camp wasn't difficult, or even being noticed when she approached: as usual they had at least twice the number of sentries they needed. Getting one of those soldiers to acknowledge that presence was more difficult, even with a company of kataphraktoi at her back. She pounded at the gate until they were forced to admit she was there, and then a harried-looking general was rustled up to speak with her. Two blank-faced kanenas stood behind him, which no doubt did little for the man's confidence about getting through this conversation alive.

"I seek to address the People," General Basilia bluntly said.

"As a foreign despot-"

"I am a general in service to no crown," Basilia corrected.

The man looked taken aback, looking back to the kanenas. Their faces were still as a pond and just as unreadable.

"There are no diplomats with the army," the general said. "You must head to Bellerophon and make your request there."

"That would be inconvenient," Basilia said. "Might I not simply, under observation by the kanenas, make my address and let Bellerophans convey it to the people by scrying ritual?"

"Bellerophon does not use scrying rituals," the man replied without missing a beat, "which are trick of wicked foreign tyrants and have never worked, may a wind of locusts blow in their faces for a hundred years."

Basilia blinked. Bellerophon absolutely did use such rituals.

"Do you perhaps have an alternative with superficial resemblances?" she hazarded.

"Communication rituals are a recent innovation of the Republic," the general shamelessly said. "They can serve similar purposes on occasion. It is not, however, in power to accede to your request."

The kanenas frowned and the man winced.

"As I have no power," he hastily added, "for it rests entirely in the hands of the People, may they rule peerlessly and without mistake for another thousand years."

Basilia waited to see if the general was going to start bleeding from his eyes. Ten heartbeats passed and he didn't, which was a promising sign.

"How may such a request be accepted or denied?" she pressed.

They had no answer to give her, so negotiations ended for half an hour while they went away to figure it out. Another woman entirely returned to answer, with two different kanenas at her back. Basilia decided not to ask what had happened to the general. From what she remembered of Anaxares' mournful ramblings, that would be a good way to get the man killed.

"Your request can be accepted or denied by a provisional vote of the entire camp," the woman said.

"May I ask for such a vote?"

An hour later she was informed that she could. It took another two hours after she *did* ask, and then they conceded that a provisional vote would be held. It was dark by then but while Basilia sent for food and took a pause to piss, she did not wander far. If she did, she was sure to lose these people. It took until Morning Bell until the votes were counted, but the kanenas found an irregularity with some of the ballots – some had been written in ink that came from Delos – so another vote had to be held. Three hours later, Basilia was woken up from her nap on her horse to be informed that the vote had gone in her favour. Though bone-tired and aching from the restless night, she took the only shot she was likely to have.

No doubt by next week the People would have cooked up a new law that made even her unlikely station unfit to ask questions of the Glorious Republic.

She left after passing along her message – offer, really – and crawled back into bed until noon. Delos and Atalante came later the same day to try to dig out of her what she'd been up to, but she put them off. It wouldn't last forever, but thankfully the

Republic had been quick in arranging for a general vote on her proposition. As soon as they'd held a vote about whether to hold a vote, anyway, which pushed the answer back another day. With typical subtlety, the envoys from Bellerophon walked into her tent as she was seated with those from Delos and Atalante.

"The Republic welcomes your recognition that Hierarch Anaxares is still among the living," the man said.

There was surprise from the others, but why wouldn't she? If there was to be a seat above her own in the League, best to leave it in the hands of a man either dead or uninterested in filling it. Permanently, if she could.

"Furthermore, your question over the status of the Dead King has been put to debate and the People have reached conclusion," the man continued. "By popular vote, Trismegistus of Keter is declared an Egregious Millennial Despot and an Enemy of the People. The so-called Kingdom of the Dead is declared unlawful."

She bit down on a grin. Ah, and there was the trick. Basilia couldn't declare war on anyone, because when a Hierarch ruled foreign affairs of the League were strictly under their purview. As Anaxares himself had once said during the invasion of Procer, however, there could be no state of war against a state that was not legitimate. If, say, Basilia led troops of the League to 'oversee the dissolution of Keter' then by the Bellerophon definition of the term it would not be a war. By the look of the frown on Ikaroi's face, he'd already put together as much.

"And the proposition over the office of Protector of the League?"

"Under the current terms of election, the People support the creation of such an office," the man said.

Such terms being every city having a vote, same as the election of a Hierarch, but instead of unanimity only majority would be required here. Helike would vote for itself and its vassal cities, whose votes would be maintained as independent ones, would vote accordingly. To secure a permanent majority, all that Basilia now needed to do was take Penthes and dictate in their terms of surrender a permanent vote for the reigning monarch of Aenia for this office. And she'd be able to take Penthes now, because as of tomorrow she was going to request the help of the People in overseeing the dissolution of Keter. The same army currently in her way would serve as the vanguard of this worthy enterprise.

"I gratefully receive the People's wisdom," General Basilia smiled.

Already she could see Nestor Ikaroi and the Atalante priests reconsidering their position. But it would not, she suddenly

realized, be enough. The shock of this turnabout hadn't quite pushed them over the top. The mire would continue. When messengers entered the tent she was grateful, as the pause would allow her to gather her thoughts and think of a way through, but the way the faces of the foreign envoys paled caught her attention. Magister Zoe leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

"My people say that Merchant Prince Mauricius had been revealed to have been replaced by a devil," she said. "The city is blaming Praes for it."

Basilias let out a low whistle.

"Why are they so unsettled?" she asked, discreetly gesturing at the envoys.

Zoe Ixion grinned sharply.

"Because the Forty-Stole Court has voted unanimously to ask for an alliance with the Empress of Aenia," she said. "They want protection."

And so the calculations in the eyes of the envoys changed again. The mire in their negotiations now looked like the Tower's work, to keep the south from solidifying in a single block. Worse than that, they knew that if Basilias began getting funding from Mercantis she might lose patience with them playing for time and decided that this could be settled with armies instead. And with that much coin behind her she'd be able to win that damned war, too.

"Perhaps reconsidering our position on the office of Protector is needed, considering the developments in the League and abroad," Secretary Nestor Ikaroi calmly said.

There were some noises of assent from the Atalante crowd and General Basilias Katopodis smiled. She knew better than to think this her triumph entirely, but it was sweet nonetheless. Sweeter still was the knowledge that the Gods were blowing wind in her sail, for what else but Fate could this assembly of coincidence be? The Old World was ending, she could feel it in her bones. The age was crumbling to dust, its relics falling one after another, and now something else was beginning to emerge from the ruins. And under that new sun, Basilias thought, there would be room for a new way of doing things. The deaths throes of the Age of Wonders would change the League of Free Cities, she swore it.

The word shivered in approval and somehow she knew that, somewhere down Below, Kairos Theodosian was laughing.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Steven Silver

Thankfully the Republic had been quick in arranging for a general vote on The Practical Guide to Evil.

jamesc9

This one is not bad. I'm still hoping that someone knows how to mask spoilers in wordpress.

ruduen

Ah, it's been a while since we're reminded about just how strong Providence can be for an actual band of five. Be in the right place at the right time with the wrong information in just the right way for it to make all of the difference.

dadycool

"Yeesh, this is just like that one time when,...wait...hey, uh, guys?"

Shveiran

And don't you just feel a surge of sympathy for poor, villainous Malicia and Allegedly Not Mauricius?

A perfectly good plot they worked so hard on, undone by mistake during a reckless act that could have soured international relationship if unfounded – and was unfounded to boot!

Itarion

It wasn't unfounded, exactly. It wasn't possession or spell compulsion, but the office of the Merchant Prince was absolutely being magically controlled by Praes. They were inaccurate, but not wrong as such.

jhack

The point is that they didn't think Maurice was being compelled. They thought that he was preparing armies to defend against the rest of the court of forty stoles, who were being magically compelled.

They thought Maurice was on 'their' side, (for a given value of 'their side').

He wasn't the target of the holy-water, he was collateral damage.

[Liliet](#)

They thought Mauricius was an ally and everyone else was controlled, while it was the other way around.

shikkarasu

So pointedly incorrect it looped back around to being right anyway.

[Liliet](#)

Yup!

Shveiran

If the culprit is the screenplay writer, accusing the casting crew is undoubtedly unfounded.

They kicked down the door to throw magic toxin at foreign rulers, for fuck's sake. It's the kind of thing where "close enough" shouldn't cut it!

Cheetah724

Technically, they kicked down the door to throw holy water at foreign rulers, for fuck's sake.

jamesc9

So it's only a magical toxin for devils and the possessed parts of people, who (presumably) are banned from being there, under the laws of Mercantis. So they were (sort-of) doing vigilante justice.

kinghaart

I mean... Heroes.

That's the M.O. if the majority of the ones we've met!

Cpt. Obvious

Right now the rulers of Mercantis are a bit shaken that they were made to do the Towers dirty work without receiving monetary compensation. So for the moment this band of five are left mostly to their own devices. But any moment someone will realize that the indiscriminate use of holy water resulted in the destruction of incredibly expensive, probably irreplaceable enchantments and curses that were placed on different personal effects and belongings of the distinguished persons who were unlawfully assaulted by these foreigners.

Now as they are not only foreigners unaware of the severity of their crimes, but also by sheer luck happened to uncover a most unsettling attempt to manipulate the free market in Mercantis it has been decided that some leniency is warranted. As such all charges will be dropped if each of them just repay the full value of the destroyed enchantments and curses. Should they be unable to pay the full amount owed a payment plan is available at the low interest rate rate of 5% a week or they may have their debt bought out in exchange for signing a standard contract of indenture. And don't worry about not being able to pay it off. If tragedy would strike and a indentured servant would die before paying off the contract it is by law inherited by closest kin.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, the reason they were wrong is that Malicia's puppet's actions were remarkably and thoroughly idiotic (cementing power even further where it was ALREADY theirs) so they couldn't really find the truth from "who profits".

jtebb2

It's not necessarily idiotic. You have to remember that Malicia is thoroughly under the impression that evil is perpetually screwed by fate. Thus the only way to win is to work around fate rather than fight it. Dramatically significant dark secrets will be revealed, so one possible way to get around that is to make sure that, after the reveal, her puppet can keep control of the city through direct control of the armed forces.

Another possible interpretation, and more likely explanation, is that this is Malicia's fatal flaw tripping her up again. Her need for absolute control is what has cost her everything so far. She can't leave anything to chance, everything must be under her control directly or covered by her contingencies. That's why she can't tolerate any equals or accept any outcome that takes power out of her hands. It's cost her the best friend she ever had, it's given her the worst enemy she'll ever have, it's steadily tearing apart all of the progress she's made in reforming Praes.

Bellaco

Not gonna lie, after what happened, one could argue that Evil is indeed screwed by fate.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, the fatal flaw of a need of absolute control is what I'm seeing. I'm not saying Malicia is stupid, just – yeah.

[nostoneuntuned11](#)

Except that their plot was unraveled by Malicia's own orders to consolidate power. The simple fact is that these complicated plots don't even need providence to fall apart. There was no reason to be as overt as they were in taking over the companies given they already had power. The fact that the companies were being bought up implies a coup from either the current holder for more power, or for a change in hands. Either way only Praes could really benefit from it. Once that happens it really isn't that big of a stretch for an attempt to expose it. And honestly it was just sloppy to use a devil given how they can be exposed. She got too clever for her own good, like most of her schemes. For example, if Malicia hadn't done the Night of Knives, she actually could negotiate with Catherine. But she burned that bridge. Sure she couldn't predict her rise in influence and the Drow, but there are always unknowns. You need to leave room for those unknowns. She is focused too much on a balance when a single unknown can throw the whole thing out of balance.

Sir Nil

And another army joins the war.

Sunday

Absolutely wonderful chapter, the world is CHANGING

Xinci

Well, Kairos said it pretty well, Fates a tug of war. I am rather curious about how the cultures of Helike, Stygia, Nicae, and possibly Mercantis will meld together as it becomes an empire. May take a while for Hierarchy to either be broken or break out of his contest with Judgement if he is indeed given continual observations as such due to the vote Basilea achieved

zenanii

My current theory is that Bard will arrange for Hierarchy getting deposed after the grand alliance have committed to the judgement angel corpse weapon plan, so I very much doubt we will see him return any time soon.

ninegardens

CAN you depose a Hierarchy.

And even if she deposes him... I don't THINK his name will care. His title isn't the conviction driving Anaraxes, even if he lost it, he is still the madman that Kairos fell in love with.

[TeK](#)

Better romance there never were...

Insanenoodlyguy

Won't happen. Remember, the Hiearch wants to be disposed. He would be happy to tell you he never should've been given the title in the first place, he was supposed to be executed for crimes against the people! Which means he's pretty much invincible to that avenue of attack. I do agree he's not returning anytime soon, but his whole creation was crafted such that the bard can't fuck with him.

jamesc9

Because she can't help someone to do what they want?

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

In this case? Absolutely not. Not the story. He got his job while not wanting it the whole way. He got his name while not wanting it the whole way. That kind of story can't be broken by him trying to get out of it. He's been trying to get out of it every time we saw him, or at least refusing to acknowledge it. That only made him stronger. Deposing him wouldn't work, because his deposition would not come from the will of the people, but from outside influence of an insidious foreign power, making it an invalid. For all that he hates his roll his madness and his embodiment of his peoples ideals means he will express their righteous fury over those that would control them, be it even the celestials. He made Bard fuck off just with words. Unless Glorious Bellaphoran does it all by themselves, he's near invincible. And his utter lack of desire for his name or position, in his story, make him unequivocally qualified.

kinghaart

Maybe if Bard was put into the body of A Bellephronian she might have a chance, but I think even she knows not to mess with that kind of crazy.

Myles

But he could lose his Name Powers

Insanenoodlyguy

Again story trends. He doesn't WANT his powers. That means Hes not going to lose them without serious character development or some dramatic named moment of the kind Bard can't give him.

nick012000

And so the last of Malicia's schemes outside of Praes crumble into dust.

Reader in the Night

Which is fucking dangerous. Providence is conspiring to corner Malicia, and a Villain is never as dangerous as when they are cornered.

Malicia is sitting on a Tower-full of doomsday weaponry, and she won't go quietly into the night. It really looks like the Age of Wonders is coming to an end, and the Tower of Praes is one of the last true Wonders standing.

dadycoool

Everything seems to be pointed to Ater at the moment. The way is clear for Cat, Black is herding the people he wants dead there, and there Malicia sits, Empress upon her Tower, ready to unleash untold horrors in one glorious Last Stand. Not only that, but every time Cat has stood on a precipice, her gut has told her either "not enough" or "not yet". There is no Precipice greater than the spire of the Tower, and old-style Villains have a dangerous habit of tossing their enemies off of those type of balconies, only for the fall to unlock "More power than they can possibly imagine."

aurikdomi

seems vaguely heroic gaining your powers after defeat by being thrown of the metaphorical or literal cliff

kinghaart

Seems like this might be Bard's play. She doesn't need Malicia to win, just to take Cat down with her.

siva chandra

A tower full of doomsday weaponry... Just within range of a madman with tons of goblinfire.

[kaldurak](#)

Yes, but what happens when a Villain is cornered by an even nastier Villain?

I'm looking forward to the answer!!!

Adrian_V

Or Black will burn it all down with goblin fire

Frivolous

Reader in the Night: I think at this point Malicia is actually in more danger from her Praesi subjects than she is from Catherine and her army, or even Amadeus and Ranger.

Rationale: Malicia's Rule aspect is crippled. Her ability to control others by Speaking is weaker.

She summoned her subjects to the Tower for a party expecting to be in full control, but then Catherine and Juniper and the Painted Knife's band of five intervened and wrecked too many of her schemes.

She's gonna be in a Tower full of ambitious Praesi who will think she screwed up. Nim might be there, too, and Akua Sahelian.

Iron sharpens iron, etc.

agumentic

Malicia spent half a century running circles Praesi nobles with tremendous success. If there's one thing I trust her to do well and mould to her control, it's this.

Frivolous

nick012000: I wonder how much of what happened in Mercantis, and thus its consequences for Basilia and the League of Free Cities, can be attributed to Catherine crippling Malicia's aspect of Rule.

Rationale: The Painted Knife's band of five detected the plot of the fake Merchant Prince only because he'd been doing relatively obvious things like killing mercenary captains and consolidating power to defend against a coup.

But those seem to be relatively recent actions. I suspect they were done -after- Malicia's Rule aspect was crippled, and thus the actions were a response to that, a hedge against the Forty-Stole Court suddenly losing interest in doing Malicia's bidding, because Malicia stopped being quite so charismatic.

So the attempt to keep the fake Merchant Prince in power resulted in his unmasking.

What do you all think?

agumentic

Nah, I think this is just the obvious outcome of putting a villainous plot with shapeshifting devils against a (mostly) heroic Band of 5. Malicia would be consolidating power with or without Cat, controlling as much as possible is her tragic flaw, and the rest is just Providence.

Insanenoodlyguy

So far it seems that they can successfully ride both sets of troupes. As long as they have a consensus on actual goals, that will probably remain the case.

Itarion

The Merchant Prince wasn't being controlled by Rule, as Malicia had a policy of not using the aspect on Named. Instead, he was murdered and replaced with a devil wearing his skin.

Albert Wen

Was Merchant Prince a Name? I thought it was just a title, like First Prince. You can see it in the way it peacefully and consistently transitions from one person to another, rather than popping up at random like Kingfisher Prince.

Insanenoodlyguy

When she killed him, she even commented on it more or less "huh. Your title is becoming a Name. Whelp, good thing I was already nipping this bud.

Earl of Purple

We've got WoE that it's been a Name before, but isn't always. I can't recall which side of the line it falls on, but with the War Against Keter raging now is the time for all nations that get Named leaders to have one, because Calernia hangs in the balance.

ninegardens

Yay yay Basilia.

She is, as always, mighty cool... I wonder what her Name will be? Hell, is she going to just straight up codify a name as "Defender of the free cities"? If so... probably it will be a weak name? A grove not yet dug deep?

Or maybe all names are powerful, and that itself is a pattern.

Ironically, I can't help but think that this is what Bard was aiming to do 1000 years ago when she made the league, and created the first Hierarch... though if the current events are any of her doing, or wholly unrelated, who knows.

[Liliet](#)

A groove can be new and still powerful, that just has steeper initial requirements to get started (like how Cat's been a claimant for several years)

kinghaart

Warden of the South seems possible.

I don't really buy the Warden theories though, at least I don't think they will fix things enough to satisfy Cat. Also leaves out the Levantines.

dadycoool

The awkward moment of "Wait, were we wrong?" when the holy water was released was hilarious. So was the whole process Basilia had to go through to call for a vote from the People. I'm sure she was right, that the shiver in Creation was Kairos laughing his ass off at her antics, picking at and burning the corpse of the old Age, looking for materials for the new one.

[Liliet](#)

The Bellerophon vote part was my favorite one.

Shveiran

Honestly, whenever they are on screen they make me feel... unclear? I know they are supposed to make us laugh, but everything Bellerophonian just makes me ill at ease.

Evgeny Permyakov

Well, they are mockery of sacred democratic traditions of the West, are not they?

dadycoool

Mockery, or taken to its farthest conclusion? When literally everyone has an equal voice, this kind of madness is what results. It's why America is a Democratic Republic instead of a true Democracy, which is in fact Mob Rule.

Evgeny Permyakov

> It's why America is a Democratic Republic instead of a true Democracy, which is in fact Mob Rule.

There is a nice episode in Adam Ruins Everything show about US democracy. You might be interested in it.

>Mockery, or taken to its farthest conclusion?

I dunno, 'farthest conclusion' is a good way to make a mockery.

Miles.

Nah the madness stems from the constant threat of execution by serial-mind-rapist.

It's not democracy taken to an extreme but post-Orwellian Fascism.

AbraKadabra

Maybe it was inteded to be. But today? The US is an oligarchy. And, since almost every country on Earth copies the US, all of them are oligarchies.

[TeK](#)

Arrogant of you to assume people can't find brand new ways to make an oligarchy.

AbraKadabra

Eh, copying is a thing. Like lobbying become legal, half the world legalized it in some form right after.

Christian Oaks

Its more of a managerial society i think.

Shveiran

Them being a mockery doesn't concern me.
It's their forcing me to look at the systemic flaws in our own system that makes me quesy.

Miles

I always thought they ignored the biggest systemic flaw, at least in the US take on democracy.

The opinions of large crowds of people can be bought and controlled in so many ways by just using money.

[TeK](#)

Not if money are too a subject of the Vote By The People. If one person has more wealth than 51% of the population, it's far easier to just vote this wealth be redistributed back to the People. The foundation of this systemic flaw is the idea of merit and private

property, both of which are neatly countered by the Superiour Bellerophonian Democracy. Thus, Bellerophon is much closer to communism than so called "western democracies". It's democracy like it was in Athens, not anything like the modern mutated abomination.

Liliet

That was my initial reaction to them too, but with how they've been getting treated by the narrative ever since, I've come around on liking them as a narrative device one hell of a lot.

lordcirth

It's because they are so damn close. They have an actual democracy, they will tolerate no hierarchy, their people and leaders are fanatically incorruptible – but they have fallen prey to the tyranny of the majority rather than true freedom. It's like the uncanny valley of countries.

TeK

Or a reminder that "true freedom" is utterly nonsensical if applied to reality.

irritantseraphim

Yeeeeees.

Bellerophon is so gloriously mad in its entirety, I love it. I would give a lot for more chapters dealing with this people of utterly deranged men and women.

Juff

Typo Thread:

Forty-Sole > Forty-Stole
her mastered > he mastered
almost when to > almost went to
fortresses, stood without allies and > fortresses and stood
without allies, and
a surmountable > an insurmountable
every being > ever being
no pretend > no pretence
of seventh > of the seventh
were negotiation > were negotiating
follow in footsteps > follow in the footsteps
defence if its > defence of its
at finish > at least finish
are trick > are a trick
in power > in my power
until the votes were counted > for the votes to be counted

Reader in the Night

Noticing a pattern here:

The Fairfaxes of Callow are dead; the Tower is about to be brought down; The Dominion of Levant had their ruling dynasty turned to dust; Procer is basically on its last spasms; and now the Free Cities are about to undergo a huge change and possibly become a federation. All of this in the process of taking down the longest-reigning monarch on Calernia, the King of the Dead.

The only real power left is the Titanomachy, and really, the narrative of 'a Dying Race of Big-Good Giants with Powerful Magic Cast from Lifespan Doing a Last Sacrifice to Defeat the Big Bad' writes itself.

By the time the Uncivil Wars are closed, the entire political face of the Calernian continent will be different.

Someguy

You forget the Rats. The Rats are still a seasonal problem.

agumentic

Not much of a political face there.

[Liliet](#)

Only until the drow get to them, it sounds like.

It won't be QUITE the feeding frenzy it would have been before the Night was Ruined, but the situation will still be HELLA different.

Insanenoodlyguy

I could see them showing up to discover the rats are now all undead, but it'd accomplish the same thing of the rats no longer being a constant.

[irritantseraphim](#)

That would be sick, but I don't see it happening, as nothing so far has alluded to it. Not a single undead rat (except for the Named Horned Lord The Skein) has been sighted in the entire War against Keter.

I think the Chain of Hunger will either stay a seasonal issue used to bloody new recruits and the way the Lycaonese harden their people, or the Ratlings will be utterly wiped out or massively decimated by the Drow (or the Grand Alliance).

aurikdomi

I think vermin waves were mentioned somewhere

kinghaart

Ratlings are humanoid though, not traditional vermin.

Sparsebeard

So in the end, the rats eat the world. Hmm, I wonder where I heard that before...

dadycoool

I always figured the Rats would basically be the food that runs into the Drow's open mouths. When their placement was revealed, it sounded like the Drow were all like "Oh, sweet! Free darkness!"

hakureireimu

What about the elves.

agumentic

They are making a play for the Crown of Spring, which, whether it'll backfire or succeed, will change their political disposition.

Passenger

Don't forget the Gnomes! We haven't seen anything about them in a long, long time.

agumentic

Gnomes are not a part of Calernia and there's no indication they will play any role in the story.

kinghaart

Maybe they meant the Dwarves, they may change too?

Insanenoodlyguy

The Tyrant always went for melodrama, but he wasn't joking. He murdered the age.

[Casey Glick](#)

I think with Cordelia's reforms, Procer is probably closer to being a true Federation than ever before. The people have way more freedoms against the nobles, the First Prince is stronger, but the Groove being cut is that she is fanatically bound to

help Procer and its people, rather than herself. She let Rhenia fall because she couldn't spare the resources, for example, and she is more than willing to be hanged at the end of the war. The Assembly has had a lot of corruption fairly aggressively purged, as well as the House of Light.

I would not be shocked if Procer becomes something closer to a true republican democracy. Or at the very least, with the fall of so many nobles, there is likely to start being some democratic electors.

I think when Rosala takes her place, Rosala will continue the consolidation and reforms. More, she will absolutely not be interested in returning to conflict with either Callow or the Dominion, because she has grown too much as well for that petty bullshit.

In all, Procer is not the same country as it was at the start of PGTE, when it was in civil war because of Malicia's prodding and their own idiotic divisions.

kinghaart

It's not the same, though I bet plenty of those in the south will vie to return to the "glorious civil war days before the Northener made us have to act like responsible adults". Hm...

Miles

The Fairfaxes are dead but the noble house of Foundling has consolidated its base of power quite well.

So much so I suspect they may just be handed rule of the entire continent, except the drow and elf regions, if they're only willing to receive the land.

mamm0nn

Malicia is sulking in the corner.

What's wrong, my lady?

Malicia: I had this great plan, of propping a pro-Praes successor to the Merchant Prince and making him anti-Praes kinda, to make it seem like he was not in my pocket for everyone but maybe Cat to be fooled by. It was foolproof!

You forgot to account for 'Heroic' splash damage and collateral?

Malicia sulks more Stupid heroes. We never just blow up a whole bunch of important people in our ploys. Servants and minions, sure, but no Praesi would've caught a fellow High Lord or even a foreign figure like the Merchant Prince in our schemes. Not unless it was intentional, of course. We don't flounder around

like that. But those stupid heroes just throw around their powers wildly and it somehow works without making everyone hate them.

Burlyraven

I was just wondering how this band of five was getting along. Stumbling around into the right answers and being congenial edgelords is pretty solid.

leoturite

first mention of Basilia Family name i believe. I wonder if she just choose one right now or if she was only using her first name as props for Tyrant or something like that

letouriste

how exactly Letouriste got changed in that monstrosity? haha

Evgeny Permyakov

>The word shivered in approval and somehow she knew that, somewhere down Below, Kairos Theodosian was laughing.

Ah, I miss the little shit. He was glorious.

irritantseraphim

Kairos was an unbelievably mad madman and I loved him for that.

One can only wonder how much of what just transpired came from the plans that little shit had made and foreseen...

Some Smartass

Yeah, but it'd have gotten old real fast if he didn't have to deal with consequences, and he just wouldn't be him if he cared more about avoiding pissing people off to the point of successful murder than being awesome.

Evgeny Permyakov

Oh, I understand. They guy didn't care about his life as long as his actions left a lasting mark on the world, and went down ensuring so. Doesn't make him any less entertaining for us, the readers.

kinghaart

Was so we'll written. I have never really had much sympathy for Akua given Liesse and her Hubris (which isn't too say she has a badly written or uninteresting story, quite the opposite), but Kairos had more believable moments of

vulnerability to me, E.g. When the Skein taunted him about Wishing his life away.

I hated him so much at third Liesse but by the end of the book I felt... Not really sympathy, but more like the Pratchettian "oh, well, that's OK then."

aurikdomi

we all do I think

Earl of Purple

Yay, Angelique is back. Best cuddly murder aunt. And she played an important part in unmasking the devil, too.

And I think Malicia is no longer the only Named Empress on Calernia. Empress of Aenia, perhaps. I wonder if she really did eat those fortune teller's hearts, or was it eyes? The ones Cat heard in rumour last book.

Two dozen snakes

I don't quite get what the conclusions kallia's band made were... did they think malicia was puppeteering a bunch of merchants and the prince's plan was to use mercs loyal to him to, what, free those merchants from malicia's control? And then cede control over the mercs back to the city proper?

Love the free cities part, bellerophon as always steals the show

[sengachi](#)

They thought the Prince was aware that Malicia was going to use mind control and/or possession to depose him. They thought to protect himself from this he was securing personal loyalty from Mercantis' mercenaries so as to be able to keep his position anyway, banking on being able to reverse the mind control / possession afterward to avoid the backlash of using mercenaries to override his own deposition. And in fact, freeing them in this turnaround would ensure their gratitude to him while establishing a very powerful precedent for his use of the mercenaries.

The band of five thought he wasn't telling them about this supposed Praesi plot because he had it in hand and was planning to ride the gratitude wave. They figured they might as well steal the gratitude wave out from under him though and beat him to beating the hypothetical possessions.

What was actually happening though is that Malicia is a control freak. She wasn't comfortable negotiating with the leader of Mercantis, she needed to own them (as a devil). And she wasn't comfortable with the typical Mercantis mercenary arrangements

which worked well enough, but were not technically directly beholden to her puppet. So she overplayed her hand replacing the mercenary leaders with people either more directly loyal to her puppet or Ruled by her directly. By performing this unnecessary consolidation of power, she alerted the band to an active power play they could investigate. They came to the wrong conclusions because they assumed the leader of Mercantis was acting rationally, when really he was making irrational moves on the behalf of someone with serious control issues. But nonetheless, providence plus a thread to pull on was enough to undo Malicia's influence.

[Liliet](#)

YEP

> They came to the wrong conclusions because they assumed the leader of Mercantis was acting rationally, when really he was making irrational moves on the behalf of someone with serious control issues

PRETTY MUCH THIS

Abnaxis

Would you look at that... we have the makings of a Warden of the South.

Akua in the North, Hakram in the East, Hanno in the West, and Basilia in the South. One Warden for each cardinal and Catherine Named above them all to manage them from the city of Cardinal.

magesbe

I'm not sure where you're getting Hakram and the East part. Yeah he's negotiating with the orc clans, but that seems like a rather weak justification for thinking he'll be the warden for the entire East. I feel like Catherine is a far more obvious choice for that role, considering she basically said on screen that was what she was doing.

Abnaxis

Catherine is most definitely NOT that rule. Whatever her name is, her authority extends beyond Praes and beyond villians—when she has Spoken she's been able to affect both Hanno and Tariq, neither of which have any reason to fall under her authority (which is required for Speaking to succeed on powerful individuals) if her nascent name is a Warden of the East.

I think it's going to be Hakram because the upcoming conflict is going to completely destroy the current ruling class of

Praes as the Tower burns with the Praes aristocracy inside—a unified Steppes will be the most consolidated power bloc to be able to step into the vacuum that leaves. Plus, Hakram's personality very much fits into a Warden archetype

matesbe

Hakram's personality doesn't fit a Warden archetype; he is the Adjutant; Catherine's second; her go to man for all sorts of tasks both small and large. If anything it'd be weird for him to suddenly stop and become Warden of the East.

Abnaxis

ALL of the Wardens are effectively Cat's "second" according to me theory. They're her lieutenants responsible for their respective realms that she manages from her seat in Cardinal (which I mean cmon, having a city called Cardinal that rules over East, West, North, and South is just TOO on-the-nose to not be a thing...)

Miles

The warden hypothesis has been so thoroughly debunked that we're facing a serious lumber shortage right now.

Stop trying to make more bunks for it, it's not gonna happen.

[Darkening](#)

Sadly, Cat declaring herself warden of the east has thrown so much fuel on that fire it's not burning out anytime soon.

Insanenoodlyguy

If anything Hakram will become Warlord. Cat won't be warden of the east though. Warden of the East couldn't use the voice the way she did outside of the east on named not from the east.

[onedollargum](#)

I love how maniacally ocd the Republic of Bellerephon continues to be. They're a machine composed of people.

[irritantseraphim](#)

It's not OCD at all, in my opinion.

They are all just utterly mad, a “democratic” autocracy of the people, cluttered with millennia of weird laws and rules.

Utterly mad and even more glorious for that madness.

Hail to the Glorious Republic of Bellerophon, May She Rule Forever.

Abrakadabra

It was my favourite part too. There is just no bigger Tyrant than the Dead King. Being his flesh puppet forever must be the biggest oppression and violation against freedom. A Tyrant that never dies.

So it was good seeing them making some vote on the issue, also hilarious.

[308924810a](#)

It's odd that Malicia's largest impact on history might ending being her coining the phrase 'age of wonders'.

[308924810a](#)

Might end up being

[TeK](#)

She did not coin the term. She did, however, in the fit of maddened irony wrote a thesis called “The Death of Age of Wonders” while being the last holdout of the same.

Darkening

Y'know, I'd be really interested in a 'center' interlude or something to show the attitudes back in callow during all this, but I don't know if there's a single existing character still alive that's currently in callow to be the viewpoint. The northern barons I guess, but they're barely characters. Hm

kinghaart

Duchess Keegan?

Ben Serreau-Raskin

I would read a whole god damn book about Basilia, protector of the free cities.

mindsword2

Mauricius was the merchant prince that betrayed Malicia back in the Ebb Interlude. Him being replaced by a Devil probably was

seen as a way to remove the dangerous element while preparing the way for the puppet Malicia would want up there.

Frivolous

I think it's funny that Bellerophon decided Neshamah was an Egregious Millennial Despot aka a Millennial.

It's funny in the context of modern lingo anyway.

Bart_KF

Has anyone else commented on the fact that *everyone in Bellerophon* has a shared capital-letter title ("the People") and series of established behaviors (voting on everything, drawing decisions out through bureaucracy, being afraid of their unelected rulers despite being founded on opposition to tyrants) that are firmly shared across the entire population because of their requirement to swap jobs at random?

I have to wonder if the whole damn city is in a position to stumble backwards into a Name and Role the same way Anaxares did. After all, everyone knows what The People are like, just like everyone knows what to expect from a Warlock or a White Knight...

Interlude: North II

"Twenty years will blend friend and foe."

– Taghreb saying

Hakram Deadhand stood in a shadowed corner of the tent as his allies raucously argued, watching them in silence. The leaders of the dominant clans of the alliance, the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields, were trading the usual insults and boasts with the representatives of their allied clans. Dag Clawtoe and Oghuz the Lamé towered above all others in that conversation, as had been the case from the start. Their clans were the largest and wealthiest, their deeds the greatest – in Oghuz's case, anyway. Juniper's father had been a famous champion for the Red Shields before his leg wound. Dag instead must rely on lesser deeds and the reputation of the cousin that'd overshadowed him all his life.

He was only the *jemmek* of the Howling Wolves, the camp-leader, even though Grem One-Eye had not returned to the Steppes in decades.

Adjutant did wade into the talks. He preferred not to. The moment to speak would come when the tent was empty and it was only he and Catherine, when he could complete her vision with what he'd seen and she hadn't by virtue of not being so close to it all. Detachment had been in Hakram's blood since he was but a boy but he'd made his peace with the feeling. Found the uses in having blood that rarely went red. Calm was what let you see with clarity and tonight, calmly looking at the alliance in this tent, what Adjutant saw was a losing proposition. The conversation was going through familiar, pointless circles.

It would take more than champions and challenges to cut into Troke Snaketooth's support. It was attacking the symptom instead of the sickness: Troke was not popular because he had many champions, he had many champions because he was popular. The chieftain of the Blackspears was growing more powerful by the day, and the longer the conversation went on the more Hakram realized that none of them had any idea of what to do about it. It was not that they were fools, or dim, but that they'd never had to deal with being this position before. The Blackspears had a foul reputation, while the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields had been held in high honour for decades.

They were still popular even now, but the ground was shifting under their feet. Hakram thought that under all the boasts and shouts he might be hearing a thread of disquiet. They could feel it too, the wind turning against them.

There was no point in staying here, Adjutant realized. No solution to be found in this tent, only the same conversation had in one of a hundred different ways. Yet he was not discouraged, for Hakram Deadhand had already figured out where he *would* find his answer. Adjutant was one of the Woe, and so he knew that one could learn from enemies as well as allies. Still silent, he slipped out of the tent and into the muddy grounds of the great camp surrounding the fortress of Chagoro. Not too long ago, Hakram had received an invitation by Sigvin of the Split Tree Clan to begin private talks with the Blackspears in Callow's name.

He still held no intention of accepting that invitation, but it brought something to mind: the Split Tree Clan itself.

As early as the delegations that'd been sent to Wolof he'd thought that alliance strange. The Blackspears had a reputation as feckless liars, while the Split Tree were known instead as cleaving close to old ways. They were known for their shamans, many of which could use magic, and for being willing to serve as mediators in the disputes of others. They were not a large clan, though, or one known for its warriors. So Hakram had assumed the alliance with the Blackspears to be a marriage of convenience: they were large and powerful but of poor repute and without a

speck of magic to call on. The weaknesses of the Blackspears would make the Split Tree influential over them, difficult to dislodge even after Troke Snaketooth took power.

Except something didn't fit in that story. Adjutant hadn't noticed it the last time he'd gone to the edge of the territory claimed by the Split Tree Clan, but now that he knew what to look for it was hard to miss. Troke Snaketooth had been showering his allies and servants in wealth so that the display might attract others to his banner, but there was no trace of that wealth in the Split Tree camp. No herds of sheep put to roast, no great barrels of aragh and batak freed to flow, no baskets full of pottery and ivory and furs. No thick rings of gold and jewelled earrings. The Split Tree Clan was the most important ally to a wealthy chief on the rise, but it was not visibly gaining from that position. So what was it getting paid in, power? That was not enough.

Power might satisfy the chief and his closest circle, but a clan was more than these. They would see their friends and allies growing wealthy while they did not and there would be rumbles of discontent. So what was it that the Split Tree were getting? Hakram's instincts told him that behind that truth lay the key to the alliance around the Blackspears, the key to understanding his foe. Perhaps even the key to turning this around. Unwilling to simply retreat after having come all this way, Hakram wandered off to the closest marketplace and bought a few skewers of horse before returning to lean against the tall post marking the edge of the Split Tree grounds. He'd been seen from the start, so he was not surprised when someone came out to meet him.

Or who it was that'd been sent. Sigvin wore one of those tunics showing a generous eyeful of her scarred shoulders, which a thick braid only drew attention to, but this time Hakram's gaze did not stray. The calm was on him, the itch to understand what made something work. The same part of him that'd made a game about stacking stones to see how people would play it.

"If it's my tent you're looking for, Hakram, you'll have to offer me a drink first," Sigvin said, flashing her fangs flirtatiously. "And maybe tell me about Keter, since tales insist you've been there."

The tall orc did not answer, continuing to look at her clan's camp as he finished the last bits of his meat and tossed the skewers aside.

"Adjutant, then," Sigvin mused, tone changing.

Hakram inclined his head to the side in agreement.

"You would have gone into the camp if you meant to accept Troke's invitation to talk," she continued, humming in interest. "So what is it that does bring you here, Deadhand?"

He had half a dozen lies ready, but what would be the point? What he wanted here was nothing for them to fear. Nothing they would not want to give him.

"I want to understand what the Split Tree gets from this," Adjutant said. "Why this alliance, why now? Why are you so tightly bound to a clan you wouldn't have looked at twice a decade ago?"

Sigvin did not look reluctant or cautious but pleased. He'd thought she might. And why wouldn't she, when for the first time since Hakram had come to Chagoro he was trying to understand her clan instead of stepping over it?

"The answer is in your question, Hakram Deadhand," Sigvin said. "A decade ago. Give or take a few years, that's how long you've been gone isn't it? Since you took to the Legions."

"Give or take a few years," Hakram agreed.

"The first of our kind Named in centuries," Sigvin said. "And you never even came back to the Steppes."

There'd been a lot of that talk when he first came here, especially as an envoy of Callow, but it'd died out after the first few crushing victories in duels. It wasn't his people's way to question strength.

"I wouldn't be Named if I had," Adjutant bluntly replied. "I found my path far from here and it did not lead back until now."

And, for all that it had cost him and might yet, he did not regret it.

"An even more damning answer," Sigvin replied just as bluntly. "You don't see it because you were of the Howling Wolves and then a soldier far away, but we are not so blind: the Legions of Terror are eating the Clans, bit by bit."

Hakram felt like scoffing but restrained himself. It was obvious she believed every word and Adjutant believed Sigvin to be an intelligent woman. She would have a *reason* to believe this.

"The Legions are making the Clans richer," he replied instead, "and without the need to fight each other for that wealth. Our people return home with learning and allies. We have more influence in the affairs of the Tower than we've had in centuries because of the same ties you condemn."

She shook her head.

"It's the wrong sort of wealth, Adjutant," Sigvin said. "It's imperial coin, which we use to trade with them instead of each other. Our people come back using the Praesi system of measurement, building forges the goblin way, organizing warriors in companies instead of warbands. It's hollowed out your own clan without Dag Clawtoe realizing it. The Howling Wolves don't war for cattle and land anymore, they send their youths south and wait for the gold to return with them. Only gold's not all that comes back. They began training their youngbloods in Legion drills a few years back, did you know? To give their youths an edge when they send them south to enrol."

Sigvin paused, strong face twisted in disgust.

"Not if," she said, "but *when*."

There was much he could answer to that. Praesi measurements were superior in almost every regard to those used by learned orcs and them alone – horns and fingers – while goblins were the finest metalworkers on Calernia and warbands were unfit for anything but raiding as a military formation. It would have been easy to dismiss her words as that of someone from the old order, afraid of change even when that change was for the better. Except Sigvin was not a fool. So he looked at the camp of the Split Trees again with fresh eyes. Hide tents, but it was rare for a tent to be made all of the same hides. Different hunting grounds, trade with other clans. And on the people the jewelry was of many styles, be it thick torcs of the eastern steppes, the silver piercings from the headwater clans or the looping earrings of the south.

The Split Tree Clan was traditionalist, Hakram had known that, but he'd not truly considered what that would *mean*.

Their wealth, their gains, were made in the traditional mould of orc clans since the founding of the Empire. To the Split Tree, wealth was something temporary. Won when the clan claimed good riverside land for a season and pottery could be made from clay, when good grazing lands allowed the clan to stay long enough for smithies to be raised and weapons of quality forged. Surplus was traded to other clans to fill needs, and when the clan was in a strong position it went raiding – either other orcs or humans. That stolen wealth was brought back and used to strengthen the clan, sometimes even to absorb smaller neighbours. If things went well for a few years, the clan grew.

Clans too large were unsustainable, so the largest ones would then split into two and head different ways.

It was a rough way of life, but it had worked. The harshness of the Steppes culled the weak but it also ensured that there could never be a kingly clan standing above all others: hunger bit victors just as deep as the vanquished. As a closed circle, the old ways of the Steppes really did work. Only now the circle was

no longer closed. The Legions since the Reforms were not the same as the armies of the old tyrants, which had once a reign drafted orcs by the hundreds of thousands for a campaign and then sent them back to the Steppes after the war. The modern Legions kept orcs for decades, taught them Praesi ways and enriched them before sending them home.

And Hakram Deadhand had seen this same machine at work before.

"The Carrion Lord really is a magnificent bastard," he admitted. "I had little sympathy with the moaning of Callowans when his works were improving so many of their lives, but I understand a little better now."

Sigvin frowned.

"I don't follow," she said.

"You think what you've found is a coincidence, then," Adjutant mused. "That's understandable, as you never saw the same unfold out west. But this is happening on purpose, Sigvin."

Because that was the Carrion Lord's way. The Clans could not truly be a part of a stable Praes as they were, so the man had set to smothering the aspects of orc culture that weren't compatible with the Dread Empire he envisioned: the raiding, the nomadism, the factionalism. And as was typical of that particular monster, he'd gone about it through a method that the people being changed would not fight because it benefitted them. Because Sigvin was right to see the Clans being made dependent on the south, being bound tighter, but she was missing something: most orcs were better off this way. It was why the Legions and the Carrion Lord remained wildly popular in the Steppes to this day.

The Legions introduced wealth from the outside instead of the same limited wealth being competed over by clans, which meant that the Clans could actually grow now. And the way to bring home that gold was war, which Hakram's people loved, and it just so happened that it drained the Steppes out of the same youngbloods who'd be pushing for raids and fighting between clans. And it was a form of war that required training, which took time, so why shouldn't clans move less? They could afford to now that they were wealthier, anyway. Which they would remain, so long as they kept sending warriors to the Legions. Then once those soldiers returned home, having fought side by side with each other and humans, they found that fighting with the Clans and the rest of the Empire lost its allure.

How many of your old army friends would you have to kill so you could steal cattle worth less than a few months of Legion pay?

Hakram sighed. This wasn't Malicia's work. It was not the Empress' way to change a system when she already mastered it. Yet

she'd likely recognized the trend and was not against reversing it, because orcs truly integrated into Praes were yet another power block she must handle. One that espoused military virtues she distinctly lacked, to boot. Shortly before the Liesse Rebellion, Malicia had forced the Clans to pay the tributes they'd withheld during the reign of Nefarious, which had had the effect of lowering orc enrolment in the Legions. This now seemed less like an isolated incident and more the like the beginning of a comprehensive policy that had just recently received its crowning jewel.

Malicia made lords of the Steppes, Adjutant thought, *which seems like bringing us into the fold but is functionally the opposite.* Her lords of the Steppes did not hold land. They collected the orcish tributes on behalf of the Tower, which was an additional layer of separation between Praes and the Clans. Gatekeepers of influence who, by the very limitations of their role – duties that would see them despised by other orcs, authority that derived directly from the Tower – could never rise to be a threat to her reign. Now *that* elegant little twist, the gift that doubled as clipped wings, had Malicia's signature over it. And it explained why the forces behind the Blackspears were so willing to cut a deal with the Dread Empress.

"So when Troke makes cause with Malicia, your clan backs him because he's not just looking to be a lord of the Steppes," Hakram gravelled. "He wants to be the *High Lord* of the Steppes."

Someone in a position to undo Legion influence, who by virtue of their title could stand between the Clans and the Empire and force a heathy distance. Sigvin bared her fangs at him, openly pleased.

"So you do understand," she said, then slightly bared her neck in a display of vulnerability. "I had feared you might not."

No wonder the Split Tree were good as sown to Troke's side, he thought. Both the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves were heavily tied to the Legions and had no intention of changing that policy considering how it'd paid off for them. As far as the Split Tree Clan was concerned, the alliance behind Hakram was perhaps the sole coalition of clans they could not under any circumstances allow to win. Otherwise the Legions would sink their hooks into all the larger clans and the trend would grow irreversible. Adjutant pushed off from the marking post.

"Leaving already?" Sigvin asked.

"I need to think," Hakram simply said.

About how this could be turned around.

About whether it should.

—

It took time to gather two hundred stones, enough that darkness fell.

At the edge of the great camp that'd risen up around Chagoro, Hakram Deadhand sat alone in the dirt with a bright moon hung high above his head. Before him lay only flatlands of long grass and the distant rising expanse of the Northern Steppes, a horizon of nothingness crowned by cold stars. And just the way he had when he'd been a boy, Hakram stacked stones. Seventy in a pile to the left. A rough estimate of the clans that backed Troke Snaketooth and his Blackspears, the orcs that stood behind the dream of a High Lord of the Steppes. Forty-six in a pile to the right, Dag and Oghuz and old loyalties. The promises of the Conquest, faithfully kept, and hunger for more of the same.

In between the piles stood a sea of undecided clans, smaller alliances that a day's turn could make or break. Orcs with their ear to the wind, waiting to hear how it would turn.

Through this, Hakram had laid out the bare shape of the *taratoplu* taking place at the fortress of Chagoro. This was the game he had been playing since he came here, promises and sigils and duels. It was the game Troke Snaketooth had been beating him at, would keep beating him at. Hakram did not know the lay of this land the way the Blackspears chieftain did, the friendships and feuds and shared stories that bound the Clans together as a people. Which meant, in truth, that he had been playing the wrong game. So Hakram leaned forward to trace three symbols in the dirt with a finger of bone: a helmet, a skull and a fang.

The helmet he knew best, what it stood for. The clans that had tied themselves to the Legions, to the Reforms, to the empire promised them by the Carrion Lord. The chiefs who wanted to make some camps permanent, kept through all seasons. Only part of the clan would stay at first, for forges and drilling warriors and trade, but it would grow from there. Southern wealth pouring in, ever-closer ties to the empire, old ways abandoned in favour of more practical ones. Clans that heeded this new path would flourish, those that resisted it would wither and die. That path for the Clans had its roots in the alliance under Dag and Oghuz, a tie strong enough that repeated defeats had not shattered their faction.

The skull he'd only begun to understand today. The clans that saw ahead of them a world where the Steppes were swallowed up by the Empire, where orcs forsook Kharsum for Lower Miezana and began singing of emperors instead of warlords. Where the Steppes grew ugly towns like tumours, imperial colonies of greenskin legionaries in the heartlands of the orcs. Those clans wanted disengagement. Ties with the Legions weakened and a unifying leader – be they warlord or high lord – to keep the Tower at bay

so the Clans could become as a nation. Because that was what lay behind Sigvin's talk of culture: the Steppes as a kingdom within the Dread Empire.

That path had its roots in the backers of Snake Troketooth, but would not have great loyalty to the man. It had chosen him as a candidate because he could be influenced and served their purposes, not out of any love for the cheiftain

And the last, the fang, was somehow both the simplest and the most complex of the three. It was everyone else, the chiefs and clans who cared nothing for either sort of talk. Hunger had no philosophy, for all that the Wasteland liked to pretend otherwise. The great majority of the clans would follow who promised the best plunder, the most food, who allowed them to settle grudges to their advantage and earn glory in battle. Some of these had gone Troke's way already because he looked like the winner and they wanted to be on the winner's side. There was no vision of the future behind them save a gaping maw biting down on the world, and more orcs thinking this way than the other two put together. It was a path without intent, the Clans remaining as they were and letting Creation pass them by. Walking away from the end of the Age of Wonder, guests in their own world.

These were, Hakram Deadhand thought, the three paths now laid out for the Clans: integration, disengagement, abstention. Only they were all flawed, he thought, and so he turned to address the night.

"You would argue for the helmet, I know," Hakram said. "Even though you refused your own people that fate and crowned Vivienne so she could reforge the broken shards of the Old Kingdom."

Catherine would lean the way of the Legions because the Legions were as much her home as the land she'd bled so much for. It would change the orcs, she might argue, but would it be for the worse? Raiding put the Clans at odds with everyone around them, internal wars weakened them as a people and permanent towns would make life better for tens of thousands of orcs. It would be a greater good than evil, she'd argue.

"But there will be a price," Hakram told the night. "We will become the Duni of the north. Good for fighting and labour but not *truly* Praesi. We lose everything that we are without becoming equals."

Perhaps in one or two generations if the Reforms held that would become untrue, but that was a roll of the dice. *Would* the Reforms hold? Even if the Carrion Lord came to rule, as Catherine wanted, would his successors continue his policies? It was betting the fate Clans on trust in a Tower whose steps dripped with the blood of a thousand coups. Hakram's gaze drifted to the left, where another ghost waited for him to argue with. There was not a doubt

in his mind that Vivienne Dartwick would be on the side of disengagement, of the skull.

"You'd argue that the Split Tree are right," Hakram said. "That Praes would ruin us and only distance can prevent it. A High Lord of the Steppes would keep away the Tower and let us strengthen ourselves, make our own laws and change on our own terms."

But that, too, was ignoring some truths. Because even Sigvin, who cursed the Legions with her eyes, had not spoken of ending ties with them entirely. Engaging with Praes enriched the Clans in a way that isolation simply could not. Starvation was no longer decided by the year being good or bad, by a raid or a war having gone one way or the other. Already the Clans traded almost as much with humans as they did with each other, by the estimates of the Eyes, and ending that trend would starve and impoverish half the Steppes. The Clans could live without Praes but to grow, to *thrive*? The Dread Empire was needed.

As for the Praesi, the land the orcs lived in was a heavy hand on the fate of the people.

"I don't believe we would hold, without either war or Praes," Hakram told the night. "We are not Callow, Vivienne. Even at our peak, we were not a nation in the human way of it. We unite against something, someone – or when there is another way to gain aside from eating each other."

How long would the closed kingdom that Sigvin dreamed of truly last once the war ended? How many clans backing Troke would stay loyal, when their bellies were full and their chests filled with plunder and there was nothing left to do but return home to the same old feuds? It was building a tower on sand. And that left only one path, the fang. Burying one's head in the sand, failing to make anything of the great gathering at Chagoro. And so the night could only wear one face: golden eyes and dark skin. Akua Sahelian. Another who now sat at crossroads, the threshold of changes only dimly felt.

"I can break it," the Adjutant said. "The taratoplu. I would only need to raise another two past forty stones to take the wind out of Troke's sails, and I... know that it can be done."

The aspect pulsed in him faintly. **Find**. If he went looking for the hammers that would bring down this house, he would find them. This he knew, sure as dawn. Hakram could prevent anyone from winning, play on greed and fear and hope. Had he not stood at the side of the uncontested mistress of that method for many years? And it was what he was meant to do, as the Adjutant, if he could not secure the help of the Clans for the Grand Alliance. It was better than letting them side with Malicia. And yet he did not rise.

"What is it like, Sahelian, where you sit?" he asked the night.
"It is cold away from the fire, cold enough madness earns the ring of sense and certainties turn to sand between your fingers?"

Hakram had gotten a taste of what it would be like, losing Catherine. Losing the Woe. Becoming just another of those left behind, buried or forgotten. And while the shard of fear at the heart of that had been put to rest by the Grey Pilgrim as a city died around them, there could be no return to the way things had been afterwards. It was different now because he was different and she was different. Pretending otherwise did neither of them any favours. Now they both knew they could hurt each other in ways they could not, would not forgive.

There was no unlearning that.

"I don't want to ruin them," he admitted. "To give them a nothing-future, to rob them of the pivot everyone else was allowed."

And this was something he wanted for himself. What a small, terrifying truth that was to be echoing so large in his mind. Because Hakram knew that, as much as he would like to blame the ghosts and the night, he was the only one here. And already he knew, deep down, that if he was not satisfied by any of the paths others would lay out for the Clans then there was only one answer left.

He just didn't want to look that truth in the eye.

Instead he looked back at the camp, the torches lighting up the night around the tall Soninke fortress. What did he owe these people, anyway? Hakram had left for the War College and never looked back. Life in the Steppes had left him adrift, a leaf in the wind. It had been a long way from here, from this land of gnawing, that he had found a home. What did ten thousand miles of snow and the poor fools in it matter to him, that he should sacrifice for them? And it would be a sacrifice, he would not delude himself otherwise. He and Catherine had been bound by an oath under moonlight, and it would be the end of that oath. Even if it was taken again, it would not be the same.

So Hakram turned his gaze ahead, finding... nothing. Empty plains as far as the eye could see, bathed in white. The same kind of emptiness he had glimpsed in Scribe after she was cut adrift. He'd wondered, sometimes, if she had been like him from the start. If becoming one of the Calamities had been like someone blew colours into a world of grey, like finally she could taste and hate and want to *be someone*. Only it'd not been about the Calamities, had it? It'd been about the Carrion Lord, and the Carrion Lord had set her free of his service in an act of loving cruelty. Cat still thought Eudokia would turn on them, but Hakram knew better. No one would risk being scalded like that twice.

And had Hakram not, this very day, boasted in the privacy of his own mind that he knew how to learn from enemies and allies both? The Webweaver had been one and the other, at different times, and ever a warning since they encountered each other in Salia.

"A temple built on a single pillar will fall," Hakram said, quoting an old Miezan proverb.

And he still did not want to ruin his kind. To make them less than they could be. There was a path to chart, he thought. One he could dimly make out in the gloom of the night. A way to take from the empire without being taken, to stand without standing alone. It would be dangerous and delicate, play great powers against each other and raise a banner that could not be easily lowered. But it could be done. Hakram just wished that someone else could do it in his stead. Yet the stones did not lie, he thought, looking down. They never did. In a game of diminishing returns there could be no winner, only shades of defeat.

And if not Hakram, then who?

Moonlight painted the empty plains pale, and the stones at his feet too. Adjutant – no, not that anymore he thought. Perhaps never again. He was not making the choice of that path. Hakram Deadhand rose to his feet, bathed in moonlight, with no one to pull him up. A western breeze rustled across tall grass, a shiver, and old words came to him. The Old Boast, which orcs had once sung blade in hand when the hands and blades were still theirs.

"I made an empire out of nothing

So,

Warring under the summer sun

Rivers ran red, the sky did weep

As I raised a city of clay

To rule men from far away.

But as my glory fades to gray

And rides to me my own red day

Now I know clay does not keep,

And that rivers, both ways they run:

So,

I made an empire out of nothing."

Stillness reigned in his wake. *Warlord*, the wind whispered against the grass. The poem was an old boast, an old warning. Kingdoms came, kingdoms went and so much for their petty kings. People were never as important as they thought they were.

But if not Hakram, then who?

So he went back to the torches, to the camp.

To the work that needed doing.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

"I don't believe we would boost, without either reminders or quotes," Hakram told the night. "We are not Worm, Vivienne.

ruduen

After the first Interlude: North, this isn't too surprising. There were certainly signs that Adjunct wasn't fitting, when there were question of what he wanted. There were still a number of doubts hanging in the air.

Now, the question is, how will he follow through?

And it does seem like we're at the point in the story where the Woe are finding their new places in the world. Everybody's struggling to find their place in the new age, and that includes the people trying to carve it out to begin with.

Still, there haven't been signs of Hierophant or Archer attempting to find a new role, and with the cascade of events happening, with the two major combat events on the horizon, and with just the Tower and Amadeus's current stash of goblinfire...

It seems the Climax of Praes and Cat's new name is on the horizon.

Agent J

Well, the Ranger showdown promises character development for Archer if nothing else. With three of the Woe already on their way to new Names, it might just cascade.

[Darkening](#)

Four if you count that Vivienne's gonna be Queen instead of Princess at the end of all this.

[Liliet](#)

Vivienne doesn't count twice as "one of the Woe"

[Darkening](#)

Yeah, I miscounted and then realized right after I posted lol. The lack of edit and delete functions on wordpress is a real bummer.

Agent J

Exactly. She counts as "twice of the Woe", duh.

[Liliet](#)

Good point!

hakureireimu

I'd say Hierophant already has his transition from Apprentice, and he already went through his character arc. I don't see Archer transitioning to a new Name since her Name is about her skill rather than her position in a hierarchy.

shikkarasu

The only way I think she would change is if she took up the title Lady of the Lake, which would just about require Ranger to be killed. I think that is a bit of a longshot, but it's the only major change I could see in 'Drani's identity. She's already changed a ton since she joined the Woe -even since the Everdark- and none of it made her any less *Archer*.

... That said I would love it if Lady of the Lake became a Name some time after Ranger dies. A mentor Role, but more hands on than Grey Pilgrim. An apprentice of the previous Lady all but mandated to transition in the same way that Squires become Knights.

Sinead

I love the idea of 'The Lady of the Lake' becoming a Name. However, this would have to be Archer replacing Ranger as the 'head' of Refuge as sort of a 'Neutral' Cardinal for those Names focused on excellence of a skill for the lack of a better term. However, I think it may refine down to 'The Lady/Lord'. It would mess with Praesi convention around Named though!

I do not know if that works with Archers professed desire to wander. Unless she decides to develop a 'wandering school' that doubles as a retrieval.

If there was a concept of 'mantles' in PGtE (something that reflected the lesser epithets that Named accrue as 'proto Names' that further expand or refines a Named Role), I could see Lady of the Lake (or considering the geography of the Red Vales 'Lady of the Pass' being a mantle that those that followed in sphere of Named similar to Archer could take up as a mentoring Role.

Frivolous

ruduen: Masego's upcoming change is not a new Name. It's apotheosis.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I don't know about that – he seems unimpressed with gods. But then, there's a bit of paralellism – the Dead King looked into the void, and found it wanting. Hierophant looked into the inferno, and he did not flinch.

Frivolous

Mental Mouse: Pardon?

As per Kairos Theodosian, Hierophant's greatest Wish is Apotheosis. I'm assuming that hasn't changed.

Or am I forgetting something?

Shveiran

His greatest wish IS apotheosis, but Kairos described Hierophant's concept of it so deeply rooted in High Arcana that no one else could likely understand it.

My personal interpretation of that is that Masego never really moved from the realization that caused his transition: the godhead is a trick of prespective. He doesn't want to "be" a god as much as he wishes to "think" like one. To understand it all and master every single mistery that makes creation tick beyond the surface reality we experience.

Functionally, they are the same thing, which is why it is not incorrect to say he is aiming for aphoteosis. It's just that my understanding is that his actual goal is a little to the side of that.

Frivolous

Shveiran: I think I follow your reasoning and conclusions.

My own thought is we have no idea what Masego will look like after he achieves apotheosis. He might look the same. He might become almost entirely mental, but may create a body from time to time so he can interact with regular people.

Masego's path to apotheosis clearly has very little in common with Neshamah's or Sve Noc's. It's much cleaner, you could say.

It makes me wonder why Neshamah bothered with the death of Keter at all. Sve Noc at least had the excuse that they were trying to save the drow from extinction.

It makes me suspect that Masego is much much smarter than both Neshamah and Sve Noc.

Earl of Purple

Neshamah wasn't trying for apotheosis, I don't think. That was, I believe, a side effect. What he wanted was to be king forever. And he's managed to be king for several millenia, so it's almost worked out for him.

Cpt. Obvious

If I remember correctly there were also a war going on, and his nation were losing badly. They had better mages, but their enemies were more numerous, used more modern tactics, had better trained soldiers or perhaps warriors and finally they used iron weapons and armor while Neshamah's people were still using bronze weapons and armor.

In short, they were being slaughtered and were facing total extermination.

So in a way the ceremony that turned him into the Dead King and killed off all of the country was a last resort. It snatched the victory from the enemy.

Now Serenity is interesting. We know it's a plane of Hell that DK appropriated and turned into something akin to a utopia. The weather is perfect, the earth is rich, there's no sickness, no dangerous animals, no wars or strife. And he populated it with people who have never wanted for anything or have known hardships. They are educated and taught about the many dangers and sources of misery that plague creation.

So they live their lives in Serenity under the guidance of the Dead King being taught from the cradle that he's protecting them from the horrors of creation, and once they reach a certain age their king will raise them as undead to spare them from the hardship of aging and so they can serve him forever. I don't remember if it's been stated what that is, but both 40 and 60 sounds familiar.

Now this sounds perfectly horrible, but for those living in Serenity it's just the way it is. And they know the DK loves them all...

Something we don't know is where he got the first of them from. While it's been said that he fueled the ceremony with the lives of all living in the nation I can't shake the feeling that with the amount of work he put into the creation of Serenity it might just be that he populated it with the remains of his own people.

So did he really do it all just for power, or was it the only way he saw to save something of his people?

Mental Mouse

I had not recalled that.

Liliet

Well, he's not particularly impressed with gods, but he's not all that self-impressed either if you know what I mean. He just wants the thing, he doesn't think it's The Greatest Thing Ever. It's just what he specifically wants for himself personally.

DC

Well, Hierophant and Archer are finding new places with Archer and Hierophant respectively.

Konstantin von Karstein

Masego already has his new place, and maybe had it since book 2: that of the mage staying all day in his tower and experimenting about the wonders of magic.

Miles

Sure we have. Archer and Hierophant are gonna get married, when early on they were both loner types.

Archer is gonna settle down in one place instead of wandering.

Zeze is gonna accept another person in his tower, keeping him away from his research for bells at a time.

[Liliet](#)

Archer is not going to settle down "instead of" wandering. She's going to get her own place then go wandering with it at her back as somewhere to come back to. She's established this much.

Shveiran

Unless they go wandering together. I mean, I don't see why Masego and Indrani wouldn't.

She wants to see new places, he wants to find new secrets and glimpses beyond the curtain of reality. Traveling really sounds like a way to achieve both.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but Indrani ALSO wants a warm home to return to. That'll be Catherine.

Miles

Cat's new name is a variant of Empress or possibly Conqueror.

Dread Empress is an option but I expect a variant we haven't seen so far.

Steven Silver

There's been talk in the comments about Cat becoming Warden of the East. She even have that line a while back: I'll be the warden rattling the bars when you get uppity, something, something. I forget exactly how it went, but it was cool.

jamesc9

How does this grab people?: if there are wardens of the north, south, east and west, then Cat is Warden of the Compass.

Moobs

This might be a side plot by black. Losing Hakram would be a huge blow to Cat

jamesc9

Yes. Less of one since he was weakened enough to create the Phalanges.

[jerdenizen](#)

I don't see this a Cat loosing Hakram, even though he'll no longer be her loyal Adjutant. Cat will understand this decision completely, and I suspect Hakram's new role will benefit both the Orcs and Callow.

kinghaart

Carry won't blame Hakram but WILL eviscerate HERSELF.

Lictor Magnus

Now every me ever of the woe has had a name change except for Archer. I wonder if she'll become the new Lady Of The Wood.

KiltedBastich

And so now Indrani is the only one of the Woe who's name was not ultimately transient, a step to something greater. I wonder if that will remain true?

[Darkening](#)

If anything is gonna change for Indrani it's going to be during her and Huntress' confrontation/test with Ranger.

Anon

Cat gettin her efforts (or at least, her intent) swept out from under her on multiple fronts, it seems.

I wonder if the continued hardship is just another methodology of ensuring her ensuing name ends up stronger for it.

RIP to the Woe, though – lost 2 (3 if you count Vivienne changing to Princess), and now I'm worried about the potential fight with Ranger.

Curious that Hakram seems disillusioned enough with Cat's reforms to believe them not worth their weight for making a decision, though – yes, Cat isn't infallible, but that future is something she's striving harder for than almost anything else she ever has.

Hakram the oathbreaker warlord....not a great end in a story like that, no matter how morally 'lose the least' aspect he's trying to put into the narrative

Aristel

Weren't the Reforms mentioned the ones that Amadeus used to give the orcs more rights after the Conquest? The ones Malicia is actively setting up to get completely repealed?

Aristel

Weren't the Reforms mentioned the ones that Amadeus used to give the orcs more rights after the Conquest? The ones Malicia is actively setting up to get completely repealed?

agumentic

Hakram was talking about Praes's Reforms. Cat's have relatively little to do with mundane culture and rulership.

This was not a broken oath. It's more that the oath has lost power on both sides – Cat is no longer a Warlord, and so Hakram is no longer an Adjutant. It was grown out of, step by step, and so, in the end, was released.

[Liliet](#)

Cat isn't losing anything here, except for Hakram's personal labor and time spent with her. He's not going against her, that would be stupid. He's just forging his own path alongside her – but no longer literally side to side, and that's what he mourns.

Also, Cat's been pretty insisting that the Woe does not lose members so easily. P sure Hakram will still be part of it under whatever Name.

Shveiran

Yes, but also no, I'm afraid.

Hakram is not just one of the Woe: he is the first soldier who ever swore to her, her staunchest supporter, the one who has been there since the beginning. Catherine has unquestioning faith in him, and that comes, in part, from the fact that Hakram highest aspiration has ever been TO BE USEFUL TO HER.

I don't want to diminish a beautiful relationship by drawing some parallel to a mistress/slave dynamic, but I think it has to be addressed that this relationship was built on that foundation: Hakram loves Catherine the way a knife loves a steady hand.

That faith is not a small part of what they are. In Book 4, Hakram contradicting her in public shook Catherine to her core. In Book 6, the realization that Hakram wanted things made her uneasy, because she was suddenly no longer sure of what lines they moved by, and what her approach was supposed to be.

Hakram transitioning is not really a change with regards to the WoE. Just like it wasn't for Hierophant, or Vivienne.

But his no longer being the Adjutant?
Oh, no. THAT will have to be addressed.

And that is why he knows this will cost them.

[Liliet](#)

You are right about a lot of this, but there's the other part of their relationship: the reason WHY Hakram latched on to her personally. The ideological part, the fire she lit in him. He wanted her to succeed because she embodied the force he wanted to see in the world. There's a reason he's the only one of the Woe to ever really have talked her down from taking an evil-er path to a good-er option (the Helikean riders in Book 5).

dadycool

Whew, this was deceptively intense. Hakram learning that his own people were being dismantled the same way Callow was, leading him to realize that there aren't any paths that end up good for them, leading him to follow his Warlord's example by blazing a new trail, through fire and blood. Dead the man, dead the hand, and dead the enemies who would rise against this new Warlord. I wonder if he really will break away from the Woe with this, or if he can still be a part of it. It actually sounds like he's doing what Malicia did, leaving the group to become the leader of a nation.

[Liliet](#)

Malicia never left any group. She was never one of the Calamities, when they earned the title she was still a concubine plotting behind everyone's back.

I am 100% certain Hakram will still be part of the Woe.

dadycool

I imagine that if Cat was staying as the Black Queen, the Woe would fall apart, with Vivienne and Hakram transitioning into ruling Names, but since she's becoming a Ruler of Ruling Named, the group itself will endure, even if the nuances will be different.

Reader in the Night

Catherine ruling over the East as a whole, with Vivienne in Callow, Akua in Praes, and Hakram in the Steppes.

[Liliet](#)

Cat's dynamic with them was never really about ruling them

dadycoool

No, but she was always the leader, if for no other reason than her insane plans. It was always essentially a bunch of friends trying to put out what fires they didn't cause, and some they did, and that doesn't sound like something that would change with two or more of them ruling their own people with Cat technically a step above them but only really acting as mediator and troubleshooter.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, true.

shikkarasu

"It was the royal seal below but there were fresher words, the ink a little smudged. *No matter where you end up*, Catherine Foundling had written in that ugly scrawl of hers, *you will be one of mine. Sooner or later, I will come to collect.*"

One does not simply walk away from being one of Catherine's Foundlings.

[Liliet](#)

e x a c t l y

therealgridlock

The Woe will leave ripples through all time and stories, every single member is going to rise to the pinnacle of a station, and lead great numbers of people to better futures, more well structured and balanced futures that limit the Game to only those willing to participate.

Heiropant seeks to understand, percieve, break, wrest divinity from the puny beings who use their world for fun. Doing so, he leads the forces of magic research.

? (Cat) wants to judge, rule, control, limit, and rewrite the stories of their world into something safe for the masses, yet still useful for themselves and the gods. It's why she wanted countries to not be run by names. Doing so she leads the forces of Named, of leaders of countries, and of Cardinal.

Princess will eventually become Queen, probably, if not, it's still a good Name. She will lead Callow.

Warlord? Wants to be useful to cat, yes, but leading his people into the future is of use to everyone, not just cat. Cementing their future solidly in the new dynamic means that they follow

Cats vision into the future side by side, not lagging behind, or fighting against. Doing so he leads the orcs.

Archer, Huntress, and Ranger will likely disappear into the woods, and we won't see what happens until a flashback interlude later, but whoever emerges (money's on Archer) will be the pinnacle of the Role, not having changed names, just reached the peak of it. Taking Rangers role doesn't have to mean taking her Name. Doing so, she leads a large contingent from Rangers place, as well as being an easy hand of death for Cat to send after anyone breaking the rules.

? (Akua) will likely be dread empress, unless she does the twilight city trap, either way she will serve a valuable puzzle piece for Cat. As twilight crown jailer, she gives fast travel to the masses and removes the world's greatest evil from play, for a millenia at least. As empress she leads Praes. If Amadeus leads Praes, then the same goal is achieved.

Cat already has a Name in the dwarven country backing her. She has literal (lesser) gods in the Drow. She has an ally in the Principate. The only people she wouldn't have backing her (directly and obviously) is the elves, the goblins, the gnomes, and maybe the dragons, if there's more than one left.

I believe that even if not on purpose, Cat has placed a Name in power in every force on the continent to allow the ending of the age to pass all at once, rather than broken into pieces. To allow it to pass at all, she needs the support of all the nations, fighting as one to slay a rule breaking evil, an evil greater than the petty squabbles of countries.

Whether the story continues on after that goal is accomplished, I don't know. We may see the gnomes arrive in helicopters and give Cardinal a green letter for the first time, to tell them that they've gone in the correct direction for civilization, rather than progressing too fast.

Xinci

Mm, new worlds forming up. More connections slipping away from Catherine as she grows into something bigger. It is indeed quite notable that the orcs finding a proper path would be rather risky, and charting out their own synergistic path rather fits the Age of Order. Groups strong but not quite strong enough, with distinct value held at a Cardinal point.

I wonder then what path he may make as a Warlord, its been a long time, so perhaps some of it may be shifted. A grand war is still on the horizon too

KageLupus

I imagine that Hakram's plan is to turn the Clans into their own political entity. They already have enough Legion training and vets that they could form their own fighting force instead of joining up with Praes. If Hakram can get himself declare Warlord and then bring the full might of the Clans against Keter, he can leverage that to get formally recognized by the Grand Alliance. Sign on to the Liesse Accords and gain some legitimacy from that, as well as opening up some more trade routes.

That would all thread the needle between keeping the Clans relevant and a part of the new age, but not having them just be another second class citizen of Praes. They could cut their major ties with Praes and stem the cultural bleeding that Black set in motion. But it also gives them an outward enemy to focus their energies on, in the form of Praes being shitty about losing their hold on the Clans. The Orcs' culture is going to change, but that has to happen if they want to be anything more than pawns in the future. But I think Hakram can take guide that change in a way that doesn't see the Clans losing their core identity.

Darkening

The problem with that idea is that the orcs and the Steppes don't really have any resources for trade aside from sending their young to serve as soldiers for other nations, which would be rather difficult if they were keeping their troops as their own military.

Linnus42

Yeah I saw this one coming. I think all the characters in transitional states right now in Cat, Hanno, Hakram, Viv and Akua have some degree of mirroring with each other really. Though I don't really think Cat and Viv are evolving too much as people right now like the other three. But the connections between Hanno and Hakram (as they were paired) are kinda obvious insofar as they both don't have much interest in ruling or playing politics. But have kinda reached the point where they feel its all going to crap and if you want done right you have to do it yourself.

I don't think Masego is going to change Name though since he created that Name himself. I also don't think Archer is either quite frankly. I suppose defeating Ranger could unlock something but honestly that seems more Cat's pet project and maybe Silver Huntress then anything Cocky or Indrani are super into.

Oshi

Masego has had his moment. Archer's will be found in her final meeting with Ranger. She doesn't need to change because who she is works.

IMO, the Woe as the were are done with their first tale. They aren't a band of five anymore in the classical sense. Instead they will grow to encompass new Roles or go on to the greater path their name leads them to. Doing so just incidentally separates them. I don't think this is typical of villains does anyone else? It's the end of the heroes tales. Its the tale of the scrappy band becoming kings and queens to lead their folk into a new age while some disappear to parts unknown to seek the mysteries they always said they would when they went adventuring. The Woe as they were are gone. The bond will remain but they will not if that makes sense.

Insanenoodlyguy

But it could lead to nostalgia boost. The rare time they are all Together again and a threat comes up, they will kick ridiculous amounts of ass as it all comes back for a bit and they are a band of five to make you shit yourself in fighting them once more.

aurikdomi

Culture shift for the Orcs too, good stuff.
I wonder how much of the old name of warlord will shine through and how much it will change with the new age?

Frivolous

I don't know why anyone could believe Hakram is slipping away from Catherine. They love each other.

Hakram's Role is changing, and so also his Name, but he's still the same man. He's still Hakram.

I also don't see why or how this change can mean he leaves the Woe. If Vivienne's losing her Name didn't do it, why would this?

Hakram is merely reinterpreting Catherine's wishes as per the situation he found. Catherine can hardly blame him for that.

The only real issue is that Hakram and Catherine will have less time for and with each other, due to Hakram's new Role. But villainy grants unending youth anyway, and there are always scrying rituals.

[Liliet](#)

Hakram and Cat will drift away from each other as a result of this because the original position was basically "siamese twins". They will still be friends, but there's no stepping around the truth that it will not be the same again and they

will not give each other the security they used to. They'll be too busy for that.

Oshi

This chapter is Hakram acknowledging the truth that Catherine has been struggling with since the arc where he got injured again. He won't survive in the story she made for herself. Hakram has no place in it really. She knew it but could never admit it so she focused a bit too much on keeping him alive instead of being honest with him. It hurt them both in the end. The Woe mirror the whole heroic tradition right? This is Hakram's rise from his existential fall.

[Liliet](#)

HELL YEAH HELL YEAH HELL YEAH

I... adore this development? I feel bad for Cat but also THIS IS THE BEST

Sinead

I expand this as 'I feel bad for Cat because she may take this the hardest way possible.'

Because RSD is a _bitch_ like that.

[Liliet](#)

Yup, that.

Rynjin

RSD?

john

Rejection-Sensitive Dysphoria

[serpentrose](#)

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria – basically extreme difficulty in dealing with rejection. (there's more to it than that which you can look up if you care to. I really only know what it is in a vague way.)

[Liliet](#)

See also: Catherine "I am a villain unrepentant and am not doing this to be *liked*" "AAA PEOPLE LIKE VIVIENNE MORE THAN MEEEEEE" Foundling, bless her mess

Sinead

Her desire to be loved and having these moments of despair is why I started thinking the 'Cat gets bound to Twilight as the seal on the Dead King' because I can really see her making that choice as Vivienne comes into her own, Hakram establishes his powerbase, Idrani and Maseago are their own thing, and Akua straight up decks her with the proposed plan.

However EE has said there will be one more 'full band of 5' moment, so that may not yet happen, since my theory is based on Cat at a low point making an irreversible choice. And while they are not 'happy moments', I don't think one feels quite so isolated to make these choices.

However, Cat may also make the choice on the basis that she 'wouldn't throw any of [her friends] under the bus'

Sinead

Also, minor note: I was thinking Akua chewing Cat out as a rejection of her offer was what I wanted, but I think Akua giving Cat a black eye and just being done with her is better, with no words exchanged. She still keeps to the Accords and all that because they are a better way, but she is done with Cat as a person.

Maybe I'm harsh, but Cat has a tendency to be the moral equivalence of a stepping stone in mud at times: she gets people out of the mud and onto better paths, but she herself sort of stays down in the mud.

She argued against Bonfire, but there is a log of civilian casualties here at Kala with the poisoning of the lake, for one.

I liked Akua's arc for it's own sake, not necessarily how it directly relates back to Cat.

[Liliet](#)

RIP.

I honestly want Akua to take care of Cat? I feel like she understands and appreciates Cat on a level even the rest of the Woe doesn't, not really. And I feel like she would be able to really see Cat's self-destructive bullshit, take her hands and say "nope no more of this".

...I just really want that.

Sinead

I've said before when I mentioned giving the 'bleak ending' serious thoughts as likely strongly biased because I'm not necessarily in the best of places at times recently, so my predictions skew negatively here. Plus, I can really easily see Cat's Name as being something that has grown beyond what the 'system really expected (in the sense of authority/power of a single 'piece' on the board) which makes it easy to make her the hanging sword over an empty throne that is 'supreme rule over Named'. Sort of like how Hierarch is still the basis of authority in the League that Basila plans around, even if she doesn't expect him to come back.

If the Elves were more engaged with the current conflict, I could see a twist of turning the Forever King into the Twilight King, but I think the Elves would need to be around more than they have been to see that make sense. It would also end the Deorai the exile though, which would be interesting since their definitive source of conflict would have been resolved by Cat, even if they despise her for keeping Akua around.

I do appreciate the idea of Akua being the one to bring Cat back to herself. While they never really mirrored after First Liesse (you yourself pointed out that Second Liesse was between the Truebloods and Amadeus /Malicia, with the kids stuck in the middle), they are mirrored as being people who have done a lot of harm and are wanting the peace and quiet. Perhaps they can just be two distant figures at the heart of Cardinal.

If your prediction is correct, it might fit into Amadeus personal reflection of Akua as a 'wild card' he doesn't understand, if we get a scene between himself, Cat, and Malicia like at Second Liesse. As I noted previously, Cat's self destructive bullshit is something that in my opinion she learned from Amadeus, and I kind of want him to get an eye opener when it comes to 'teaching should not come at the expense of the children' lecture that he gave Ranger. I may agree with him, but it's a bit rich considering the consequences of his own teaching style. Having Akua, of all people, pull Cat back from the brink would drive the point home.

I'm not saying this as a 'break Amadeus' plot point, but more because I do not know if he sees

the bad side of what he has taught Cat really. His reflections of Cat is pride and where she has done better than he did.

=====

Sorry for the ramble, this ended up being way to many interconnected ideas at once (par for the course I guess). TLDR; I like the idea, and I can see how it could happen. I just am not entirely sure if that is what will happen.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus was earnestly trying to teach Cat better than he knew himself, including the self-destructive bullshit. Too bad “do as I say not as I do” didn’t work out for him lmao. (In other words, I agree completely)

Oh I am not sure if that is what will happen either. I want it to, which is a completely different thing.

Honestly, maybe someone other than Akua needs to first slap Catherine out of her “I am forever guilty for Liesse and there is no forgiveness” mindset. She’s projecting on Akua like she’s a TV screen, but that is complicated by the fact Akua DID, uh, do *that* consciously, deliberately, uncoerced and with full awareness of her actions.

IDK, I love everything about this arc. I just want Cat to snap out of the “long prices” nonsense which she even ADMITS OUT LOUD is nonsense, jeez Cat!!!!

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think the Elves will probably be doing the Arcadia thing, probably doing the same shard-into-realm thing that was used to create Twilight. They already have the crown.

jamesc9

I wonder under what circumstances spring (with elves) and autumn (with fast travel, GP and an imprisoned DK) would merge.

LuxInSomnia

I don’t believe Zeze’s name is changing until he dismantles the last wonders of this age.

Archer though can easily transition into something bigger and better. She's already quite different than what she used to be. As soon as she acquires the knowledge and intent for a new name she's ready, and that can, and likely will, come when they confront Ranger.

Juff

Typo Thread:

instead must rely > instead had to rely
Adjutant did wade (should this be did not)
only he > only him
being this position > being in this position
in, power? > in? Power?
when she already > when she'd already
the like the > like the
good as sown > good as sewn
Snake Troketooth > Troke Snaketooth
more orcs thinking > more orcs thought
fate Clans > fate of the Clans

[onedollargum](#)

This feels like a "The enemy's gate is down" moment. A drastic, unthinkable action. A simple goal with finessed execution.

Make war on Praes and tear the tower down.

Or mass-migrate to Arcadia I guess. Lots of people to fight there and winter doesn't really exist.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Apart from the fact that Arcadia is basically inhospitable to mortals for long time. As Cat stated before: Arcadias waters are not potable (which is how she poisoned the enemies water supply in the last battle.

beleester

Even if the Empire was completely destroyed (which it won't be, since Praes needs to be mostly in one piece to fight the Dead King), there would still be the question of what role the orcs should play in whatever comes next – how do they keep the benefits of civilization without losing their culture?

jamesc9

Where 'civilisation' means non-portable forges, trade in manufactured goods, exchange of people with the Legions, and probably some things that I've forgotten; many of which are inhospitable to nomadism and raiding.

Burlyraven

So this definitely isn't a betrayal on Hakram's part. He hasn't been "Adjutant" in truth for a long time, anyway. What it is is Hakram catching up to the rest of the Woe's stories.

Cat is pointed towards a position of supreme rule, Vivienne is to become Queen of Callow, Archer is likely meant to take over for Ranger as the Lady, and Hierophant is making steady and terrifying progress towards apotheosis. If Hakram didn't make a move towards a crown of some sort, then he was dead.

Frivolous

Burlyraven: The war against Keter has been good for Masego, I think. He's learned so much from both allies and enemies like Keter and the elves.

On the other hand, I wonder sometimes if Masego already has enough raw data to begin his ascent to apotheosis, and he's only delaying to help Catherine and the other Woe, and for revenge against Neshamah for making him blow up Indrani's head.

Masego is basically a nice person but I believed him when he said he wanted to torture Neshamah.

As an aside: This is probably a silly idea, but I wonder if Archer's big advantage over her teacher the Ranger is that Archer has a sense of humor and Ranger basically does not.

Another possible advantage is that Archer has suffered near-death and actual death, and I'm not sure Ranger has ever had either experience.

Sometimes I wonder how deep Ranger can possibly be. She may actually be a kinda shallow person.

ninegardens

I mean... maybe Ranger does have a sense of humour. But aside from Maddy, who would ever SEE the damn thing?

Frivolous

ninegardens: Also the Dead King. She jokes with him when she visits/raids Keter.

Earl of Purple

This was an excellent chapter. Hakram didn't beat a fool when reciting ancient orc poetry, but the poetry was there and gods was it scary. Hakram the Warlord, huh? I was half expecting Juniper to go this route, but she is not here and she is not orc enough, besides. Her war is the direction of strategy, leading

from rear and controlling it all, and she has no poetry either. Don't tell Juniper I said that, though.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Juniper is too deeply rooted in the Legions/Army of Callow to be Warlord. If I had to ascribe a Name to her it would be Marshal

[Liliet](#)

Juniper is orc-er than Hakram in all the toxic ways.

Sinead

I wonder if Juniper will join Hakram in the end though.

Her epithet in 'future quotes' refer to her tribe, not her as Marshal of Callow.

Wonder

So how is this going to work? The orcs are based in Praes and Cat is going to be based in Callow and Cardinal.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Hakrams task was to keep the Clans from siding with the tower. This escalated into a more deeply rooted debate: new ways or old. Or the third. The third meaning that Hakram will have to take off from the immediate companionship of Cat to forge the new ways of the Orcs.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, that's the tragic part. Hakram is leaving Cat's literal physical side.

daniel

I might be confused.

Didn't Hakram have a detailed plan for future Orc society that he was working the kinks out of?

I feel like this wasn't addressed directly in this chapter, were they just a refinement for the helmet path? In this section Cathrine represented the helmet path but there was a whole thing about them not seeing eye-to-eye on this issue.

We're seeing Hakram adrift deciding to forge his own way for Orcs but I thought that was **always** his thing. The plans he made for the steppes were always separate from Cathrine's, he put in a lot of careful thought into Orc future – was he being so naive that he needed a visit to understand some Orcs actually like the old

ways? (rather than the smaller revelation that those have a good reason to support Troke)

His realisation that he needs to take the mantle of leadership is dramatic and moving but It seems he also had a change of heart about Orc future and I don't understand what it was exactly.

[Liliet](#)

He did not realize that orcs might have a point about liking the old ways and that the old ways were something distinct and valuable enough to be worth protecting.

Also, he had hoped he would be able to nudge orcs towards the future he wants from Catherine's side, without taking the center stage himself. Just prepare the conditions and then they'll do the thing that's best for them, right?

I do agree that this has clearly always been His Thing. He just didn't admit to himself that that means he's got to do it himself.

[theothin](#)

I think his plan was based on his experiences with orcs from pro-Legion clans. He'd already understood that side of his homeland, just not the perspective of the other clans, ones he hadn't had that kind of contact with until this.

Bellaco

GOOSEBUMPS

beleester

Troke Snaketooth's plan of "make yourself a high lord so that nobody can interfere in how the orcs rule themselves" isn't really a bad plan – Hakram admits that it's similar to how Catherine protected Callowan culture – the only problem is that he's on Malicia's side.

So Hakram needs to steal that plan out from under Troke – either backing him while finding a way to drive a wedge between him and the Tower, or setting up his alliance as "the same but better," or maybe just killing Troke and taking over if that's a thing orcs allow.

(He also needs some way to ensure the new system endures past one High Lord and one Empress, which I really have no clue on, but that's a problem for Future Hakram.)

[Liliet](#)

The problem is, the old orc culture is horrible and toxic in many of the same ways as the Wasteland's Age of Wonders culture.

The improvements to be found in the new way [™] are not minute. Reread Hakram's musings on that path again. Yes, it will lose them some, but it will gain them so, so much.

Hakram needs to find a middle way...

...and steal Troke's plan from under him 😊

Rynjin

You know, it's in ne of funny. In any other context, any other story, this would be a happy thing. The triumphant rise of the self-doubting hero as they realize they are truly the best, maybe only, hope for the future of their people. The final actualization of their sense of self, duty, and resolve.

But here it's just sad, mostly because Hakram is the sort of person who probably feels he'd be better off without a sense of self at all.

[Liliet](#)

I disagree with you. Hakram clearly talks about having a sense of self as a positive thing, and resolves to NOT be Eudokia. That factors into his decision for his own sake.

nick012000

I find it interesting that Hakram gets the Name of Warlord right after playing a game of Tower Raising (a game which he invented) with himself.

Vetrom

Oh no, everyone else is playing too, even if they don't know it. I'd give it even odds of becoming an aspect like Connect.

[Tohron](#)

I'd thought Hakram was almost certain to die at Keter, but with this development he might actually survive.

letouriste

i absolutely love this. gods damn it EE, you did it again. It was a long way coming i think but it somehow managed to blind me once again haha

JRogue

I will not be surprised when Cat had this planned from the beginning. I believe that she knew what would happen if she sent Hakram to the Clans.

Hakram is, and always be, part of the Woe. Once a member, always a member.

Cat and Hakram's relationship will change, it is rare when a relationship does not. Their priorities have changed, and have been for a while. Change hurts, but not always in a terrible way.

They will always be friends, as only friends who have been through the fire can be. They genuinely love each other.

Cat knew, or at the least hoped, this would happen in my opinion.

Frivolous

JRogue: Agree. Catherine's facility with Story probably means she anticipated this at least in part.

There is a non-trivial chance she did not, though. Catherine has her blind spots, and love is a big blind spot.

BargleNawdleZouss

Catherine Foundling, the Beast of Cardinal
Warlord Hakram Deadhand of the Orc
Good Queen Vivienne I Dartwick of Callow
Masego the deity
Indrani the Archer

Warden of Autumn Akua Sahelian (aka Twilight Jailer/Gaoler,
keeper of the Dead King's prison)

ohJohN

It's interesting how Hakram thinks about the Steppes, the land itself. Their "harshness", the "land of gnawing" and "ten thousand miles of snow", finding "nothing" when he looks out at the "empty plains" that he likens to Scribe's hopelessness.

He considers how the ever-present threat of hunger shaped the "closed circle" of the old ways, and how even proponents of the skull path wouldn't completely break with Praes, lest the Clans starve. He summarizes the shield path as "the promises of the Conquest, faithfully kept, and hunger for more of the same." The clans of the fang path would follow whoever promises better rewards, because "hunger had no philosophy".

We've seen throughout the story that hunger is at the heart of orcs; certainly, there's a biological component to this (Ehioze's Measure comes to mind), but I wonder how much of it is shaped by their environment, the Steppes. Limited resources and the constant threat of starvation would have a serious cultural

impact, especially given that orcs have lived there for millennia.

I also wonder how essential that environment is to the parts of orc culture that Hakram wants to preserve. The shield path was unacceptable because even fully integrating with Praes would see orcs be second-class citizens: "We lose everything that we are without becoming equals." The skull path would fail, because they can't thrive without Praes's resources: "We unite against something, someone – or when there is another way to gain aside from eating each other." The fang path offers no direction for his people, just blind stumbling towards irrelevance.

What if the orcs left the Steppes? Better land would let them thrive on their own; better neighbors would let them integrate as true equals. Callow has been slowly growing more friendly to greenskins and has already transplanted a goblin tribe, the ravaged south could likely sustain much greater herds than the Steppes, and he's got an in with the queen. Or somewhere near the ratlings, which would provide the Clans with a common enemy and a steady supply of meat (so long as they can get along with the drow).

I don't think it's likely – narratively, we've already seen an exodus of the drow, and then only because they faced annihilation – but it's interesting that Hakram seems to have no love for the Steppes. It feels like the orcs were left unmoored by the Miezens: so much of their culture lost, their holy sites razed, and essentially suborned to Praes ever since. What would they actually lose by leaving?

Earl of Purple

They may lack their old holy sites, but they still have others – and even razed, a holy site remains a site, so even if their temples are fallen and the treasures looted, there's still history there. The orcs can't move to Callow because they don't keep sheep, they're herders yes but they follow herds of... something like reindeer, I think, for meat and fur and antler. If they left they'd lose the last things they have of being orcs, and in Callow they'd remain second-class citizens, and their obligate carnivory and cultural cannibalism would not see them welcomed there. The goblins are an insular people by choice, and so Callowans do not have to see or deal with their more questionable practices. Orcs do not have that option. Besides, there's too many orcs. The only place they could go where they could all fit is Keter, and that has been promised to the drow.

[Liliet](#)

This.

superkeaton

Lovely.

Interlude: North III

"The diplomat's victory is to let the opponent win on your terms."

– Prince Fernando of Salamans

Hakram hadn't put armour on.

A loose shirt, trousers and boots were all he wore as he held his axe loosely in his grasp, watching his opponent move. Dag Clawtoe had laughed off the challenge at first, thinking it a jest, but the laughter had gone away when Hakram failed to join in. The older orc was taking the duel seriously and had come in champion's garb: helm, mail and greaves. Dag kept his shield up and his sword raised, circling as warriors pounded the ground around them. The jemmek was liked by his clan and their allies, but orcs liked a good fight even more.

"I'll end it without killing you," Dag Clawtoe growled.

Hakram did not answer. It was one of his weaknesses as a champion – the way his people saw it – that he had no taste for that sort of banter. The rough edge of his tongue he reserved only for people he was going to kill. The tall orc took a step forward on the black earth and without missing a beat Dag attacked as he moved. A short push forward, shield steady as the blade thrust up towards his armpit. A smooth movement, well practised, and Hakram's limbs of steel were not as quick as those of flesh had been. It didn't matter, because he'd been waiting for the strike: the moment his foot touched the ground he was already pivoting, carrying his momentum forward as Dag's thrust passed him by.

His elbow smashed into the other orc's helmeted forehead, slamming him to the floor.

Warriors roared in approval as Dag cursed and rolled away, slapping away Hakram's light swing with his shield before rising into a crouch. He'd lost his helmet, as Hakram had wanted. The leather strap had snapped and the helm fallen into the grass, shaking free Dag's hair – a long black braid going from his forehead to his back. Hakram almost rubbed at the elbow that'd

struck the helm, but he knew he was imagining the ache. Steel did not grow tender from striking at steel. Hakram rolled his shoulder, loosening it, and waited for the wary jemmek to come for him again. Dag hesitated, but he would be jeered at by his own warriors if he looked afraid of the fight.

So he came, measured this time. A feint to the left, trying to draw Hakram's blade, but when it passed without answer the other orc shot forward. Surprised, Hakram took a step back that saved him from being swept entirely off his feet when Dag's shield bashed into his chest. His footing slipped but he backed away again, only to earn another bash – at the head, but he was ready this time. Hakram's axe came down and though he'd misjudged the distance it still came down on the shield arm Dag had exposed by striking. Instead of the axe-head against mail it was the shoulder that found its mark, a clean blow that had the jemmek shouting in pain.

The arm wasn't quite broken but it was hurt. Dag was no greenhorn, though, and pain didn't stop him. Hakram was hit in the shoulder by the shield, forcing him in a backwards stumble, and in a discreet thrust under that cover the jemmek's sword came for his belly. That he caught with fingers of bone, steel scraping the pale, but the other orc used the grip to tackle him. Hakram rocked backwards, swallowing a curse – if he was pushed to the ground this was lost – as Dag smashed their foreheads together with a hellish scream. He dropped his axe, useless so close anyway, but even pushing back he found that Dag had the advantage on him. Hakram growled and tried to smash their foreheads again, but Dag put the shield in the way. Inspiration. Steel fingers closed around the rim of the shield, yanking it down. The other orc roared in pain, his wounded arm twisted, and fangs flashed as he ripped through his own shield straps to break free.

That'd been a mistake.

Hakram arm rose and he bashed Dag's head in with the freed shield. Dag drew back, yelping, but it wasn't enough. One, two, three more hits to the head and down Dag Clawtoe went. Eyes wide and unseeing he dropped onto the black earth, only barely conscious. It was done. Hakram breathed out, tossing away the shield. Howls and shouts of approval erupted around them, dragging back Dag to some semblance of wakefulness. He rose to his knees, expression still dazed.

"Why?" the other orc asked, quietly enough he was barely heard beneath the shouts. "I'm not the chief, Deadhand. What would you take from me, being *camp-leader*?"

Hakram shook his head.

"They backed you," he said, gesturing at the warriors around them. "And they still will."

Dag scowled, confused.

"They back you," Hakram calmly said, "only now *you* back *me*."

Confusion turned to anger but the other orc did not argue. It was not the place of the defeated to argue terms with the victor. Yet there was still an argument ahead of him, Hakram thought as he left the duelling circle and traded backslaps with cheering warriors. Further back Oghuz the Lamé, chief of the Red Shields and the other leading light of the alliance, was waiting with a few of his warriors at his side. The old orc snorted when Hakram approached.

"You're not a Red Shield," Oghuz said. "Unlike Dag I don't owe you the courtesy of accepting a challenge."

"It's not a fight I'm looking for," Hakram said.

"Isn't it?" Oghuz scoffed, but after a moment he sighed.

He barked at his warriors to give him space, room enough that the two of them would be able to speak without being overheard.

"That was a mistake," Oghuz said, gesturing at the duelling grounds. "Dag had weaknesses as a man to front for but you have even more. You think we'll just let ourselves be pressed into Callow's service in, Named or not? It's a worthy queen you're serving, Deadhand, but she's not one of ours."

Hakram did not bother to answer that. It was a pit of an argument, one he wouldn't be able to climb out of should he fall. So he took another path.

"The duel," Hakram said. "What did you think of it?"

"You're more used to using a shield with that axe," Oghuz replied. "And you still cover for the metal like it's flesh when you don't think about it."

Hakram waited a moment, knowing the old champion would have more to say.

"It was unkind to Dag to stretch it out," the older orc added. "You could have knocked him half dead with that first elbow strike."

The tall orc smiled without showing teeth.

"No," he said, "I could not have."

Because he could no longer feel his aspects. Could barely even see his Name through the shadow cast by what he might yet become. Oghuz did not miss the implication. There weren't a lot of reasons why Hakram would be losing his Name, and only one that walked hand in hand with forcing himself to the front of the alliance between their two clans. The old orc let out a low hiss, worrying his lip.

"I do not seek service to anyone," Hakram said, and like that the other man knew it to be true.

Now it was on Oghuz to decide whether or not Hakram Deadhand was someone he could live with as the Warlord of their age. Tension stretched out.

"Ours are hungry Gods," the old orc finally said, leaning on his cane. "Best to eat our fill before they catch up."

A look up and down.

"You'll do."

A pause, then a calculatingly casual question.

"Do you get on well with my daughter?"

Hakram grimaced. That wouldn't be happening. Even if Juniper didn't kill him Aisha absolutely would – and she'd probably get away with it too.

"Too much woman for me," he replied, and the old man laughed.

That was one alliance behind him then, Hakram thought. Time to visit the other.

—

He was being watched.

The twins were already waiting for him when Hakram reached the grounds of the Split Tree Clan. Sigvin and Sigvun were easiest to tell apart by the ritual scars on their bodies: the latter's looked like woven crescent moons, the former's like crisscrossing bite marks. Sigvun had once implied he wouldn't mind Hakram getting the sort of closer look at those scars his sister had been granting, but the tall orc had turned him down. His preferences were well set. The twin had shrugged it off and Hakram was on amicable terms with both – as amicable as one could be while trying to have opposite warlords elected, anyway. He might kill them, or they him, but it wouldn't be killing done in the red.

"Back already?" Sigvin teased.

Sigvun cocked a hairless brow.

"Should I speak to our kin about raising a pillar?" he gravely asked.

Hakram rolled his eyes. Old-fashioned, the Split Tree. Hardly anyone still hung woven crowns on sculpted pillars anymore: weddings were family feasts under a shaman nowadays, not ceremonies to attract the blessings of spirits.

"Take me to your chieftain," he said.

Though both kept light expressions, he could see the stiffening in the way they stood. Uncertainty in Sigvun's eyes but triumph in Sigvin's. *She thinks she has swayed me*, Hakram thought. In a way she had. The twins agreed without trouble but the light conversation died and they walked the rest of the way in silence. He spent the time considering he knew of Hegvor Allspeak, chief of the Split Tree Clan. Which was little, for though Hakram could think offhand of half a dozen feuds she had mediated and how he did not even know the old woman's age. Much about the chief herself was obscured, which he suspected to be on purpose.

He was not made to wait long before being led to a great tent where three orcs, by the looks of them none younger than sixty winters, waited seated. Introductions were briskly made. The oldest shaman of the clan, Bjarte, sat to the right. To the left sat Gulda Hardhead, the most honoured champion of the Split Tree, and between them sat a woman of long white hair with a hard scar across her nose. Hegvor Allspeak, whose eyes were of an unsettlingly pale yellow bordering on green. Hakram was invited to sit across from them at a low table, an honour that was not granted to the twins. They sat on the ground, near the back of the tent. The two were trusted, Hakram thought, but their age meant their influence was limited.

Hegvor pushed across the table a small bowl and cut of dried meat.

"I offer you meat and drink from my table," the chieftain said.

Brutally salty sheep and hard aragh were what Hakram wolfed down, but that was an old and well-known negotiating trick. At least they hadn't used Taghreb spices, which would have had him panting for water throughout the entire talks.

"Hail, Hegvor Allspeak," he said.

"Hail, Hakram Deadhead," the old woman replied. "The twins say you ask of my time."

"I do," he said.

She frowned.

"Not, I think, for what Sigvin hopes of you," Hegvor said. "So what it is you have come for, Deadhand, if not to lend your name to the better cause?"

Hakram's dead fingers laid against the table, its intricate carvings dimly felt to his senses. Like a... pressure, nothing like what a hand of flesh had been. And the pressures were lighter now, for the same reason that Hakram thought he would no longer be able to Find something he sought.

"Before I answer that question," he said, "I want to describe something to you."

The bone fingers drummed against the wood, a sound like a rat gnawing.

"Within a week the taratoplu will have to disperse because it can no longer be fed," Hakram said. "As the pressure mounts on all clans to gather behind a banner, the Graven Bone and the Stag-Crowned will cede territories to some of the clans bordering them. Those clans will then come to support Troke Snaketooth and get him elected as High Lord of the Steppes."

The Graven Bone and Stag-Crowned were the two strongest supporters of Troke, despite being the two largest southern clans after his own, because Malicia had also named them lords of the Steppes. They would be his natural lieutenants, the highest under him after his election. That was well worth territorial concessions to their own rivals, especially when this was an offer that the Blackspears themselves could not make – if Troke was seen to be weakening his clan to rope in others, he would be made into a laughingstock.

"Dread Empress Malicia will recognize the title and formally charge High Lord Troke with putting down the rebelling High Seat of Nok," Hakram said. "Most clans will fall in line at the prospect of plunder and even the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields will join the host."

Utter silence from across the table.

"To secure Troke's position after the sack, the Wolves and the Shields will be given the honour of being the first into the breach at Nok," he calmly continued. "You'll collude with either Malicia or High Lord Dakarai to make their losses crippling, then keep them crippled after you withdraw to the Steppes by keeping away returning legionaries."

His fingers skittered across the wood still.

"You keep propping up Troke, after that, but begin looking to the future," Hakram said. "Marry a rising name in the Bones or the Stags to one of your kin, then lay the grounds for them to be Snaketooth's successor. Then you begin pushing for what you actually want."

The tall orc showed teeth.

"At a guess? Bringing back the bronze urus as our coinage, a council of shamans to mediate clan disputes like in the ancient Hordes and fixed yearly gatherings under enforced truce," Hakram continued. "If Troke backs you, all the better. If he doesn't, he has an accident and you get the prepared successor in power where they will be duly grateful."

Hakram's dead hand went still.

"How close am I?" he asked.

A long moment of silence.

"Only one yearly gathering," Barjte said, the shaman smiling. "We would consecrate holy grounds for the first time since the Miezens, our High Seat of the Steppes."

Good, Hakram thought. They had, without knowing it, come to agree with one of his own notions in principle. Now he just needed to survive the rest of this conversation. His eyes were on Hegvor, so he was surprised when the answer came from behind.

"I *told* you, grandmother," Sigvin erupted. "We should have tried to bring him from the start, it's such a waste that-"

"Be silent, girl," Hagvor peevishly cut in, "until you stop thinking with your snatch."

Sigvin's mouth closed with an angry click of fangs. Her grandmother – the things you learned, Hakram mused – turned a cool gaze on him.

"You're a clever man, Deadhand," she said. "So tell me the reason you've come up with that I should let you leave this tent alive."

So much for drink and meat from their table, Hakram thought amusedly. His people were not the Taghreb, to hold the law of hospitality as sacrosanct, but that's been a rather hasty turnabout. Still, there was nothing like the threat of death to get a man's blood flowing.

"It won't work," Hakram said. "Even if you kill me and get away with it, even if I say nothing, it won't work."

Gulda Hardhead bared her fangs.

"You think us fools, boy," the old champion said. "Think we haven't thought it through, maybe, that since we keep to old ways we're just sav-"

"I think you haven't read reports of the Eyes of the Empire annotated by the Scribe," Hakram calmly interrupted.

A start of surprise.

"You know things I do not," he said. "That I could not learn or did not care to. Are you so proud to believe the opposite cannot be true?"

Because if it were so, if they were a closed door, then he would have to kill them all. Something pulsed in his belly at the thought, almost eager. A craving not entirely his. He had rustled feathers with the brusque answer, but where Gulda was growling and Bjarte looked politely skeptical their leader only looked thoughtful. Considering. Examining where she, too, might have been wrong. Something like hope bloomed in Hakram, chasing away the bloodthirst.

"Trade," Hagvor Allspeak finally said. "You think trade will bury us, even if we restrict it."

"You're a decade too late," Hakram said. "The total volume of goods traded between the empire and the Steppes is now about three fifths of what is traded within the Steppes, by the Tower's estimates."

Surprise from all of them, but only the chief and the shaman grasped what that implied. Hagvor grimaced.

"You can't cut the flow of goods without impoverishing and starving too many people," Hakram said. "Either Troke turns on you to keep his seat or he'll be facing rebellion from half the clans."

"An empty tent is an invitation," Bjarte quoted.

They realized it too, then. Their measures were all sensible ones. Bronze urus could be minted in the Steppes, there were rich deposits of tin and copper barely touched, and it would mean no longer being dependent on Praesi coinage. A council to mediate disputes would clamp down on internal wars save those sanctioned by the 'High Lord', which would be used to purge enemies of the throne. Holy grounds bound to the title of High Lord would make an effective capital for the Clans that could serve as a place of truce and a way for the Split Tree to begin their revival of what they considered to be the heart of orcish culture.

Only none of this could be done if Troke bucked them off or the Clans fell into civil war. In Hakram's opinion, Troke cutting

them loose to keep his seat would likely result in civil war anyway – without their diplomatic support and reputation, he was a much weaker man and their people responded only one way to weakness. And while that civil war burned, Praes would turn its attention to them. It might be that the exiled orc legionaries would return with the Tower's backing or that the Empire would raise other lords of the Steppes outside Troke's authority, to be honest the exact form didn't matter.

Whoever held the Tower would not tolerate a troublesome and rebellious bloc just like the Tribes existing in the north of the Dread Empire, so they'd intervene. Weaken and divide. The end result would likely be what the Split Tree were trying to avoid in the first place with their grand plan: southern clans tied up with the Legions and permanently at war with the fading clans further north. A buffer state the Tower could use as manpower for its armies and could never rise to become a threat to Ater.

"We will adapt," Hagvor Allspeak finally said, tone weary. "Change our approach. For this chance I thank you, Hakram Deadhand."

Hakram hummed. He did not take the implied dismissal.

"Your answer's not in closing the door," he said.

"It's even less in being eaten by the Tower," Hagvor curtly said.

"It's too late to cut ties to the degree you envisioned," he bluntly replied. "It would cost too much to too many people who have no reason to listen to you except force. But that's the wrong approach, anyway, because distance isn't what you actually want – it's just the method you decided would get you that."

"And what would you know of what we want, Adjutant?" Gulda Hardhead scorned.

Hakram wondered if she truly disliked him or whether this was a ploy. One friend, one foe, Hagvor striking the balance. Regardless, there was an odd pall on the room after she spoke. Most faces were touched with a frown, Bjarte even casting a wary look around. *They can't feel the Name anymore*, Hakram realized. *The pressure of it*. The longer the conversation had gone on, the more the last wisps of his moonlit oath had gone away. Casting the Name in his face rang wrong to their ears because he no longer held it. The chieftain considered him with wary eyes. He smiled amicably, never showing teeth.

"You want a unified orc state with strong enough foundations that the empire can't absorb it," he said. "You want to avoid the Steppes being empty because all the youths went south to the Legions, coming back only to live in Legion towns and raise their children to do the same. You want to avoid clan weavers

abandoning the trade because it's easier to buy ten baskets from Okoro at a copper each, to avoid storytellers reading from Praesi books instead of learning the old sagas by rote. You want for there to be someone other than Soninke scholars able to read our glyphs in forty years."

Gulda rocked back like he'd just slapped her across the face.

"I understand what you want perfectly," Hakram Deadhand. "You're just going about it wrong."

His steel hand clasped the edge of the table, making it creak.

"You think that by making a few opportunities you'll turn our people away from Praes, but you're not looking at the numbers," he said. "You'll make a standing army at your holy grounds, but how many warriors will be able to be part of it? A thousand, five? The Legions will take *anyone* and make them rich. And maybe destroying the clans with ties to the empire would make room, free land and wealth, but it won't work like that in practice. Not unless you slaughter the entire clans and none one has the stomach for that so they'll move into the Empire, migrate, and then it's the same problem you thought you avoided only the border's thirty leagues south. Your fundamental mistake is that you are denying opportunities instead of offering better ones."

"We cannot outbid the Dread Empire," Hagvor quietly said.

"Then stop kneeling to it," Hakram flatly replied. "You are trying to mend this from a position of weakness that no one has forced on you but yourself."

"There's not enough support for rebellion," Gulda Hardhead told him.

Her tone was, he noted, significantly warmer than before.

"Not for secession, maybe," Hakram replied. "But rebellion? We're already rebels just by gathering here. How many clans do you think would scream their throats sore in approval, if the proposal was instead to march on Ater and cram our terms down the Tower's throat?"

"Many," Bjarte said. "But what would that solve, Deadhand? We get lenience for a generation, that is all. All the dooms are pushed back, not ended."

The white-haired chief hummed at him.

"You want to make... opportunities," she said. "That rival theirs. Only they'll be ours, not the Tower's."

"Trading with Praes, learning from it, being tied to it – this is the trend of the Steppes," Hakram said. "And it cannot be

reversed without prohibitive costs. But none of these are unhealthy if they don't lead to our being digested by the Empire. And the key to that is for us to offer another way."

"There is not enough wealth in the Steppes," Bjarte said. "Ours are not rich lands, save in grass and frost."

"So why does the Empire care to assimilate us in the first place?" Hakram replied. "Manpower. Warriors. That is what we make that they want from us, Praes and Callow both. Orcs soldiers have been the backbone of the two most successful armies Calernia has seen since the days of Triumphant."

Hagvor caught on first.

"Mercenaries are illegal in Praes," she pointed out.

"Laws change at the end of a sword, in this empire," Hakram calmly said. "All the time. Why should it not be ours, for once?"

Rumbles of approval from the twins at his back. The older heads needed more, though. Could see further.

"These armies took more than orcs to be victorious," Hagvor said. "They make war in a new way. Companies, not warbands."

"Let warbands do the work of warbands and companies the work of companies," Hakram said. "If we must raid, let us raid. But battles are a soldier's trade and best left to soldiers."

They didn't like hearing it, but that was the reality of it.

"Clans can't make an army like that," Gulda Hardhead said. "Not on the move. It takes too much training for the drills. You'd need a settlement to support it."

"A settlement where the wealth of retiring legionaries could flow," he replied, "and be put to use to benefit the Clans instead of unmake them."

Many orcs who'd lived in towns and cities for decades would balk at returning to tents anyway. They all knew that. A solid roof over one's head was a comfort few liked to let go of. And while they didn't like the face of it – a town for Legion orcs, for those who wanted to leave the old ways – they'd already agreed to a city in principle. Their holy grounds for the High Lord of the Steppes would have been the same thing, only smaller and poorer and badly run.

"It might grow to threaten our ways, this settlement," Bjarte said. "The sole city of the orcs yet not bound to their ways."

"So send shamans and teachers," Hakram said. "And if you worry of the Clans being adrift, raise your holy grounds in the Steppes to rival it."

Hagvor's eyes narrowed, the eerie tint of them making them look like jewels in the light.

"You speak as if this settlement would not be in the Steppes," she said.

"No," Hakram said, "it wouldn't be."

A beat as she figured it out.

"You mean to keep this fortress," she said, sounding a little impressed.

"If the Dread Empire of Praes would keep us in the fold," Hakram Deadhand said, "then let it pay for that privilege. Lands and rights. Is that not what all the High Seats rebel over?"

Hard smiles all around. He had them, he thought. Only the mirth went away.

"Troke has made bargains with the Tower," Hagvor Allspeak finally said. "They would not pair with the path you describe."

"No," Hakram quietly agreed, "it is true that Troke Snaketooth cannot deliver this to you."

And he said nothing else, only meeting her eerie eyes with his own unflinching stare. Silence stood, stretched, stayed. Like a physical force, strong enough to cut with a knife. Until the white-haired chieftain rose to her feet, limbs cracking and back bent. Hakram did not look away.

Risen, she knelt.

"Warlord," Hagvor Allspeak swore, and so it was true.

Hakram breathed in as every other in the tent knelt the same, letting the feeling settle over him. The claim. Already he could feel his rivals. One the south, distant and faded. An old claim, long set aside but not quite gone. Grem One-Eye still stood with few equals in the eyes of his people. And another one, closer and sharper and just as aware of him as Hakram was aware of them. Troke Snaketooth had been further along his path than anyone else dreamed of.

And so, Hakram thought, it would end in red.

—

Within the hour Troke Snaketooth gave answer.

With unfortunately characteristic cunning, the chief struck where no one had expected him to. Four fires erupted across the camp, which was not unusual given the loose approach of some clans to precautions against this, but these were no accidents. They burned down three of the largest repositories of dried meat in the great camp surrounding Chagoro and the largest tent of the Brazen Bird Clan – whose territories near seaside salt flats made the main trader of salt in the Steppes and the sole clan to have brought a large amount of it to the taratoplu. Troke had burned the food reserves and the ingredient needed to preserve butchered animals. Clans would now live on the cattle they could butcher, which would not last a week. Three, four days at best.

Now that a rival had appeared Troke meant to force a vote while he still had numbers and the wind in his sail.

It was a good strategy, Hakram was forced to admit. The chief of the Blackspears tried to summon the clans into the fortress barely an hour after the fires, claiming they needed discussion, which would make things even worse. It would deny Hakram time to grow his support: the Split Tree were mustering like-minded clans in his behalf, but those talks would take time. Two hours was not long enough. It was Oghuz who found a solution: he ordered some of his warriors to terrify their own clan's herds and let the cattle loose, resulting into a stampede away from the camp. The Red Shield refused the summons, as they urgently needed to gather back their sheep and pigs.

Oghuz's champions then loudly implied that this scattering was no accident and that all of Troke's opponents might come to face the same troubles, which had enough clans wary of the Blackspears the Snaketooth had to push back the talks until sundown.

Torches lit up the great hall of the fortress of Chagoro, which in truth had been the mess hall before being made into gathering grounds for the Clans. No more than three heads could enter by clan, which still meant more than six hundred orcs packed tight between the walls. Each chieftain came with a painted shield, their vote to cast, though counting them could get... combative. Accusations of miscounting or lies were common and usually settled in blood – every chief had come tonight with a champion among their three. The Blackspears and their allies had come first, at least an hour early, so they had the back of the hall to themselves and an imposing position. They looked many and strong, which mattered more than most like to admit.

Hakram would make Troke rue that trick before all said and done.

He came as one of the three for the Howling Wolves, standing with the clans of his birth as the shaman whose day it was to officiate – a woman from the Arrant Axes, a Blacksphear ally – sang one of the old songs of praise to the Hungry Gods and reiterated these to be truce grounds. Only duels would be allowed

here, no red fights. Unsurprisingly, though half a dozen chiefs clamoured to be the first to speak it was Troke who was chosen by the shaman. The chieftain of the Blackspears was a tall and well-formed orc, with short choppy hair and three golden rings in each cheek that made the pale scars on his face stand out. He was not built as thickly as some orcs, but as a warrior he was second in his clan only to his husband.

Skarod Longaxe, the envoy that had come to Wolof and now stood at his husband's side with cold eyes. Hakram would rather avoid fighting that one. There were a lot of dirty jokes about the reason for that wedding being that Skarod should have been called Longspear instead, but the champion was one of the finest killers in the Steppes. He'd killed three dozen warriors in duels without taking a wound, it was said, and only gotten better since. Hakram was not certain he would win should they fight.

"We're about to go hungry," Troke Snaketooth said.

His speaking voice was smooth and carried clearly. That'd been practised, Hakram was sure of it. The man had always been ambitious. There were murmurs among the assembled orcs, but no great exclamation of disagreement or surprise. Most chiefs had either put it together or made a friend who had, by now, though only the two larger alliances would have a decent idea of the days left before it happened.

"Three days, my shamans say," Troke revealed. "Three days before we'd forced to leave behind this fortress and the choice we're meant to make here."

He swept the hall with his gaze.

"Shame," Troke Snaketooth snarled. "Shame on you, on *us*. How long are we going to stand here quibbling when Praes lies open to our south? Are we going to have to skulk back to the Steppes with our tails between our legs because we couldn't agree on how to swallow the meat in our maws?"

A chief from the far north took offence to that and was given turn to speak by the shaman, but though the man was right that High Lord of the Steppes was a larger choice than what Troke pretended it was not a popular refrain with the hall. Seeing that, the man turned insulting and that was a mistake. Challenges were traded and Skarod Longaxe stepped forward. The chief's two warriors were slain and his own leg crippled as Skarod forced three duels back-to-back. It was a statement, meant to cow smaller clans, but Hakram thought it a mistake. Skarod had taken no wound and tiredness would pass, but if Troke sent out his husband on his behalf too often he'd look like a coward.

The next challenge he'd have to field himself, Hakram thought, or take a hit to his reputation.

Other chiefs stepped forward to accuse Troke of using the situation to grab power, but all toed the line and their accusations weren't winning the hall so they petered out. No one wanted to fight the Blackspears if it won them no support. It wasn't going to be that easy to call for a vote, though. A chieftain from the east, baring her teeth wildly, tossed out a different sort of challenge.

"You speak for you and yours, Troke, but there are others," she said. "Other claims. Will Dag Clawtoe not speak up, if he seeks to be our Warlord?"

That hadn't been arranged, though if it took much longer Hegvor had seen to it someone else would speak along the same lines. Chiefs just liked seeing bears fight in the pit, so many were willing to get that fight started themselves if need be. Only this time it was Hakram who stepped forward, axe at his hip. He could feel Troke's stare on him, the recognition of the claim. The hatred from him and soon his husband. They'd not know for sure until now, then.

"Dag Clawtoe is not who we would we acclaim for Warlord," Hakram said. "I am."

Surprise, some laughter – he was a cripple, after all – but more murmurs. After the initial beat, though, the sound of blades on shields. All save three of the clans that'd supported Dag for Warlord were making known their support of him. Fools had listened to the nose, Hakram knew, but the clever had been counting shields. The shaman called for silence, then reluctantly granted him the right to address the hall.

"You've heard of me," he said, without false humility. "I've fought more battles than anyone in this hall, led armies to victory in the west. I've killed fae and Revenants, monsters and Named. I've been to Arcadia and back, walked beneath the gates of Keter and seen the First Prince of Procer kneel. I'm Hakram Deadhand."

He stared down the hall.

"You've heard of me," he gravelled.

Blades on shields, not only from his allies this time. His people did like a good boast. It didn't mean votes, but it meant he was being heard.

"I stand for Warlord by the weight of my deeds," he said, using the old turn of phrase. "Let them raise or bury me."

A voice finally cut through, belatedly given right to speak by the shaman.

"You're one of the Black Queen's," a chief shouted. "Are we going to kneel to Callow? *Fuck* that."

"That oath came to an end," Hakram said. "I am the Adjutant no longer."

A beat of silence, an idea.

"Do you not agree, Snaketooth?" he added.

Troke looked unpleasantly surprised at being called on, hesitating at the answer. *I win whatever you do*, Hakram thought. Either the Blackspear would lie and deny their shared claim, an action that would weight on any confrontation between them afterwards – a finger on the scales, Catherine would put it – or Hakram would be vouched for by his strongest rival. A word none would gainsay.

"He's not the Adjutant," Troke said, and tried to speak but shouting drowned him out.

The shaman called for silence.

"He's not the Adjutant," Troke repeated, "but he's worse. You're a *guest*, Hakram Deadhand. You left for the Legions and now you come back for the crown Callow can't give you. What would you know of the Steppes?"

Rumbles of approval. Particularly the northern clans, from the Lesser Steppes or close. Some of those thought it suspicious when orcs even talked to humans, much less fought at their side.

"I am an orc," Hakram laughed. "What more do I need to know?"

That landed too, to Troke's visible distaste. Orcs were not so united in their answers about what it meant to be one of their kind that everyone – or even most – in this hall would agree with what Snaketooth would mean by it.

"Funny, though, that making war west would make my scalp less green in your eyes," he continued. "Do you enjoy killing other orcs so very much, Troke?"

Blades on shields. The Blackspears were not beloved even if they were on the rise. They'd crossed many of the clans closest to them over the years, some under Troke himself. The Snaketooth was wise enough not to engage in that, which left room for another chief to speak up and keep questioning whether Hakram was a Callowan spy or not. The woman insulted him quite bluntly, obviously looking for a duel, but Hakram wouldn't fight her himself. Her clan was too small for that and she was likely looking to make a name through this. He looked back, and though Dag was visibly eager to be called on Hakram spoke another name.

"Oghuz."

The old orc laughed, appreciative. Oghuz the Lamé's blade stayed in its sheath as he walked up to fight Chieftain Sarai of the Drifting Leaves. In front of a crowd of hundreds, the old champion brutally beat to death the challenger with his blackwood cane. All it cost him was a cut on his bared arm, which some in the hall would recognize as a habit from his old champion days: there was one such scar on his arm for every kill he'd made duelling. It was not a statement as bold as Troke's, but it served as a stark warning for anyone trying to make a name off of fighting him: try it and you might be remembered as a figure of fun instead.

The right to speak was spread around after that, the shaman granting it to every chieftain trying to drum up support for their own candidature as Warlord – or High Lord of the Steppes, as some took a page from Troke's book instead. Neither Hakram nor the Blackspears spoke up again, not openly anyway. The alliances behind both of them sent people to speak with other clans at the back of the hall, trying to buy support of their own more quietly. For all that many oaths had been given outside this hall, there was a long tradition of deciding which horse to eat only at the very last moment.

Maybe an hour passed and people were getting restless. Dag came to him as Hakram listened to the chief and shaman of the Ice Eaters, who was promising that he knew a ritual involving bathing in human blood that would give magic to all orcs should he be chosen as Warlord. Well, he was definitely standing out from the others.

"We're up to fifty-four," Dag told him. "Troke's nearing on ninety, we think."

Hakram nodded, thinking.

"Call a vote," he said.

Dag looked confused but nodded anyway. An allied chief asked for the right to speak after the Ice Eaters chief left in sullen silence and used it to call for an acclamation, a demand the hall took up with relish. It was rare for an assembly to last so long without a vote being called, often one was asked at the very start, to make it plain where everyone stood before the talks began. Troke smelled something was wrong, Hakram thought, because otherwise it would not have been wariness on his face. All those who would stand for Warlord or High Lord strode out, and without further ceremony shields began to be tossed as their feet. Troke and Hakram's supporters threw their shields quickly, already convinced, but most of the hall did not. A handful of other chiefs earned about thirty shields between them, but most clans were holding off to see what happened to the leading candidates.

That patience was rewarded when the Split Tree Clan and its seventeen closest allies walked right past Troke to throw their shields at Hakram's feet. They moved to stand with the alliance after, to roars of surprise in the hall. Hakram almost smiled, because suddenly the back of the hall that Troke had claimed and filled no longer looked like a solid wall of support. It looked a little empty while staying very, very visible. *Didn't I say I'd make you rue that trick?* The final counts were hard to be certain of, but Hakram trusted his eyes: seventy-two to eighty-one. Troke had received more support than expected but the gap had closed.

Now everyone in the hall knew that this ended with one of them the victor, so the real fight began.

Champions first. It was a roughly even trade of victories and defeats, with little unexpected save that Dag distinguished himself by winning thrice – though, unlike Skarod Longaxe, not in consecutive duels. The first few duels were without rancour, but by the seventh the tone had changed. Champions went for kills, not blood, and enmities were made. Without a clear victor in the violence, the fight was passed on and so Hakram stepped out of the crowd as Troke did. Armed, both of them, but it wouldn't begin with steel.

"Deadhand," Troke Snaketooth said, enunciating every syllable. "Pretty name. How did you get it again?"

"When I faced a hero and lived," Hakram replied. "Without a Name of my own."

"When you lost a hand to a hero," Troke said. "Only you've lost more than that since. How much orc is there left in you, Deadhand?"

It'd been a certainty the man would bring up the crippling, but Hakram still had to push down a grimace. He was past doubting himself over what he had lost, but his kind had poor opinions of the crippled. Having borne a Name – still having a Name, for those who did not understand the details and there would be many – made up for it some, as such things were forgiven in the renowned. Grem famously lacked an eye and was not held in contempt for it. But that was only an eye. Hakram had lost three limbs, nearly a quarter of his body was steel and bone.

Even among those who supported him, many faces agreed.

"All orc, where it matters," a woman's voice called out.

Hungry Gods, was that Sigvin? Whoever it'd been there was a gale of laughter as Troke bit down on a scowl. That was one way to disarm the line of argument, Hakram supposed.

"You like to talk about who I am," Hakram noted. "Who you are."

"Because I don't know you, Deadhand," Troke said. "Who here does? You boast you've fought in many wars, but what I hear is that you've fought for everyone but us."

Hakram snorted.

"Us, Troke?" he said. "Who's that? How many of the clans in this hall get to be called *us*?"

"We're orcs," Troke scoffed. "We get-"

"We're *nothing*," Hakram cut through.

Something like glee passed through Snaketooth's eyes as rumbles of anger passed through the hall. Troke kept silent, all the better to give Hakram enough rope to hang himself with. The tall orc cast a long look around, unmoved by the anger.

"You don't like hearing that?" he said. "Good, you shouldn't. It doesn't make it untrue."

He gestured around them.

"Look at us, huddling in a Soninke fortress arguing which Praesi city we should sack before we run back to the Steppes," Hakram scorned. "Half the armies on Calernia are fighting the greatest war this continent has ever seen and what does Troke Snaketooth offer you – *Nok*?"

He laughed, sharp and mocking.

"The least of the High Seats, and after the Ashurans already looted it," Hakram said. "For that privilege we're supposed to lick the Tower's hands like loyal hounds?"

"So you want us to lick Procer's arse instead," Troke said. "Is that what you're getting at? We ought to sign up with the Grand Alliance and go die for some fucking idiot princes in some nowhere out west? So much for the fucking War College."

Laughter and blades on shields. The War College was disliked by some, Procer by nearly all. Callow was respected, in a way, but the Principate? It was the decadent idiot of orc stories, the avatar of excess and cupidity. There was not a thimble of esteem for the Principate of Procer to be gathered in this entire hall.

"Procer's not my trouble," Hakram dismissed. "But this kind of talk, Troke? It's why I called us nothing."

The Snaketooth had a wary glint in his eye. Last time that utterance had not burned Hakram like the other orc had thought it would. The tall orc instead turned to the chiefs around them, the clans.

"In five hundred years, when they talk of the fall of Keter, the war to end all wars – what will they say of the orcs?" Hakram asked the hall. "Where will the Clans be in that story?"

He sneered.

"Knifing each other over a few dozen chest of loot while the real powers of Calernia carve the land up into great realms, the empires of the coming age. That's what it gets you, playing the Tower's game."

"So you want us to rebel, like Callow-"

"You talk more of Callow than I do, Troke," Hakram cuttingly replied. "Do you need a recommendation to enrol in its army?"

Hard laughter, not kind to the chieftain of the Blackspears. It put the man on the back foot long enough for Hakram to keep speaking.

"We became part of the Dread Empire of Praes because of the promises made under the Declaration," he said. "Do you think those promises were kept?"

Rumbles of approval.

"Well?" Hakram challenged. "*Do you?*"

Shouts, some harder to parse than others, but the screams of *NO* were clear.

"If the Praesi don't keep their end of the bargain, then why are we still on our knees?"

Blades on shields. Troke's face darkened. He was losing the hall and knew it.

"High Lord of the Steppes," Hakram scorned. "What a way to call burying your head in the sand. Troke offers you Nok and Malicia's blessing, do you want to know what *I* offer?"

YES, the assembly shouted.

"I give you Ater and all the Tower owes us," Hakram said.

A roar.

"I give you *Keter*, riches and glory for a hundred years," Hakram said.

The roar grew.

"And when we come home at last, we'll raise a city from the stones we took from theirs," Hakram Deadhand thundered. "One

great enough that even in a thousand years they will tremble at the return of our Horde!"

The roar drowned out everything, and as it rose something grew within Hakram. Sharpened, refined it. And, the tall orc thought as he met Troke Snaketooth's eyes, the same thing was weakening inside his rival. The tide was turning, and that meant there was only one way for Troke to win now. The chieftain of the Blackspears slowly unsheathed his sword as the roar finally died down.

"Castles in the sky," Troke Snaketooth bit out. "Their fall will kill us all. Answer for that, Deadhand, with a blade."

"If you champion nothing, Troke," Hakram replied as he took his axe in hand, "that is the sole prize you can win."

The other orc was quick. Quicker than he should be, even as tall as he was. There was an unnatural swiftness to his limbs, the kind that came from a claim settled into one's bones. Hakram was fresher to his own, but he knew Names in a way that Troke did not. The chieftain's slash found only steel as Hakram turned and let his arm take it, while he continued to pivot and swung at the man's head. Troke dropped below the blow before the arc had even begun and Hakram bared his teeth. He knew how to win. They broke and circled each other as feet stomped against stone and blades against shields, their steps careful until Hakram went on the offensive.

A wild chop, cutting down with the beginnings of Name strength, but Troke caught the haft of the axe with the side of his blade and withstood it. Hakram drew back and the chieftain's footing shifted as he gathered momentum, preparing for a throat that would go through Hakram's throat. But then the tall orc took a hand off his axe, his bone one, and slapped at the side of Troke's head. It was a blow that'd hurt but not kill. Catherine would have taken it and finished the thrust, Indrani would already be wrenching her swords of his eyes. But Troke had not yet learned to set aside the instincts of a Name, and so he went to block the slap with his sword instead of finishing the thrust. He'd begun to move before his mind could catch up to the choice.

And so Hakram caught the blade in his dead hand and smiled. He squeezed, steel grinding against bone with a horrid sound, and then the sword *broke*. Troke's eyes widened and he was pulling away, but the man found the head of Hakram's axe resting against the side of his neck. Someone let out a hoarse shout behind them. The Snaketooth's gaze did not waver.

"I knew it might end this way," Troke said, grinning ruefully. "But I was *hungry*, Deadhand."

He breathed out.

"No regrets. Finish it."

That was the way, wasn't it? The red, blood and rage and victory all in one. But he'd never had the red in his blood before, so why start? Hakram's axe drew back and he swung, Troke's eyes closing as the flat side of the axe head came to rest against his neck.

"It is finished," Hakram said.

The man's eyes opened in startled surprise.

"I have a use for you, Troke Snaketooth," the Warlord said.

All around them shields were cast down and orcs knelt. The shaman had not called for acclamation, but some things were beyond ceremony. Two hundred shields fell at his feet, as inevitable as the coming of dawn. It was done. The Warlord thought of a moonlit oath, then, and part of him felt like weeping.

But it was done, raised and buried.

Linus42

I mean I did expect Hakram to get Warlord. Didn't expect this followup so quick but I guess it makes sense. Hakram is kinda on the clock to show up and be relevant to Ater. A fast resolution to the plot though, Hakram has a merciful streak kinda like Akua. Granted I suppose it makes sense the opposition is brand new character really so how much difficulty can it cause.

Wonder

I just couldn't resist taking a page from InsaneNoodlyguy's book;

"And when we come home at last, we'll raise Our Story from the votes we took from theirs," Hakram Deadhand thundered. "One great enough that even in a thousand years they will tremble at the return of our EE".

Insanenoodlyguy

I love you.

Tenthyr

It helps Warlord is an established name. Unlike Catherine, Hakram doesn't need to spend his time hacking creation into the right shape to make his.

Insanenoodlyguy

It was badly crippled though, due to their cultures ties to Praes. Troke was finding a way to fit his hand in that bent glove, Hakram just twisted it back into shape.

Thanatoss

Good point

Stormblessed

Damn that was so fast. If it had been Catherine's story it would've went on for a long time, but I suppose it couldn't go on for too long here.

Still, it was enjoyable and one of the final lines " The Warlord thought of a moonlit oath, then, and part of him felt like weeping." really packs quite a punch.

aurikdomi

A punch right to the feels yeah.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Yeah. Literal tears in my eyes. Hope that he and Cat can stay together, somehow.

shikkarasu

Hakram doesn't want to abandon her, but work with her as an allied ruler. Cat considers him her oldest friend. And if Fate meddles in this? Cat has been working on a way to physically stab Fate since Book 1, it best back off if it knows what's good for it.

Yeah, the nature of their friendship may be changing, but they will always be together in some capacity.

[Liliet](#)

Not physically together presumably, but they'd been apart a bunch of time ever since the Northern Crusade anyway. Hakram was always too good to be stuck doing Cat's laundry.

Scrying exists ^^

ruduen

Boost!

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

I do think he and Cat are going to have a lot to work through. Here's hoping they can keep up the pace until the Tower's dealt with, and at least have a night for drinks before it comes time to head back to the war with Keter.

Linnus42

Also eh Look Aisha and Juniper confirmation.
Poor Cat probably going to get drunk and bang someone random....Barrow?

Still Hakram going his own way does make me wonder again what Hanno and Hakram are beefing about and how all these new names and new leaders is going to shift the GA balance of power. Next Leadership meeting and Named meeting will be interesting heck they might basically be the same with generals included lol.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat had already once thought of how Aisha was gorgeous but she was NOT getting in between her and Juniper if you paid her.

Junaisha is still ??? in many respects but that everyone can see SOMETHING is happening and that something is indeed happening has long been canon ♥

KageLupus

One of the recent chapters basically confirmed that Juniper is into Aisha, they both know it, and they also know she won't act on it while they are on campaign (which they've been on in one way or another for basically years on end).

My guess is a very cute little "where are they now" section of an interlude where they are officially shackled up once the war with Keter ends and the Army of Callow can finally go on leave.

[Liliet](#)

Well, Juniper being into Aisha is not exactly RECENTLY confirmed... ♥

Charles

Rest in peace, Adjutant.

dadycool

The Adjutant is dead. Long live the Warlord!

RoflCat

And now we say hi to the Jailer with moonlit rejection under her resume and very thirsty for our Warden.

Insanenoodlyguy

No. Cat explained her plan to us too soon. And we already know Akua just isn't hearing the song. It won't go how Cat plans.

Zach

Yeah, Catherine fucked up by internally monologuing her plan. Now it's guaranteed to not work out as she expects it to, lol

Cpt. Obvious

Personally I think no one, girl or not, is going to be climbing the Tower anytime soon. Akua isn't hearing the song because Amadeus is going to use all the goblinfire the tribes were able to scrape together to turn the Tower and all the crazy it contains into the largest torch in Creation.

Then he and Cat will fight about who will be the next ruler of Praes. And the winner will be whoever scares fate the most.

Now the real question is if the intercesior can keep her grubby hands out of this.

kylepcarlson4577

I just get the feeling The Dead King still has the best long game here. I think Akua is really on the chopping block for being killed off, likely for good this time. I also think the Wandering Bard will take a crap all over Cat's jail plan for her own mysterious reasons, whatever they are. The Wandering Bard wants something big involving The Dead King's Name. Maybe including her own freedom/death or something by the end of it.

Miles

I love that the last time he used an aspect it was to **Find** the way to get the Warlord Name.

Isaac Martinez

Cat would be so proud of him... And maybe pick something in exchange for that broken oath. Catherine no longer wishes to rule, and Hakram is now who wields the knife for his people.

...Could it be a new cycle? Will a new Adjutant be born for the New Warlord? Mixing Praesi and Horde cultures?

caoimhinh

Heh, the next Adjutant is probably Abigail's right hand.

ninegardens

Abigail would hate it so much.

And we readers in turn, would love it.

beleester

Abigail already has Scribe, but close enough.

Earl of Purple

Scribe's in Praes right now, and she's had Krolem longer besides. Abigail's accidentally found her way into one of Cat's grooves- Callowan nobody, promoted to officer, has a reputation as a good tactician and a brave fighter. If Abigail gets a Name, then Krolem- as her right-hand orc, the man behind and to one side to pass her wine when she wants it, will probably get Adjutant. But Abigail's too scared to want a Name, and probably won't get one.

Insanenoodlyguy

I just realized that Abigail is probably the new Warden of the East if such does end up existing.

Zach

Named are almost invariably defined by having some strong belief they want to impose on themselves or the world, and Abigail doesn't have such a belief.

agumentic

Named are defined by having a Role and a story. Belief one wants to impose is one way to get those, but not the only one, as the oft-brought example of baby Cursed shows.

OutliveTheHand

Remember that the Hierarch was adamantly opposed to getting a name. He just wanted to be left alone. The tyrant forced him into it. If Kairos can force someone into a name I'm sure Cat could force Abigail into a name.

Insanenoodlyguy

I just realized that Abigail is probably the new Warden of the East if such does end up existing.

Jason Ipswitch

AS Hackram comes into his name, it makes me think about how big Cat's name is going to be, with everything leading up to it. There's definitely room for a Warden of the East to match the Warden of the West, but I don't think that's a big enough name for Cat, now. Whatever her "Overseer or Named" Name is, it won't be Warden of the East.

But you know who would make a good Warden of the East? Amadeus of the Green Stretch.

[Casey Glick](#)

I'm still betting on Akua, because it's hilarious. Warden/Mashall/Protector of the East is going to be a different name from Dread Emperor/press of Praes, and it seems decently likely that Amadeus and Akua are going to be the two. But Amadeus' story has been about *Praes* and securing for it a new future. It is Akua who has been caught between the stories of the two.

But mostly it would be fucking hilarious.

Insanenoodlyguy

Crackship moment: Akua becomes the Thirst of the East, married to the orcs hunger. She sympathizes with the person on the other end of the spectrum, one who knows attraction but has been hurt by Cat in a way that can't be forgotten. And so Hanno and Akua start doing it and never stop.

Big I

Could be Arch Heretic of the East. Could be something like Overlord or Dark Lord, which would be a very meta take on the "Evil Overlord" trope.

Miles

Still? The dead horse has been eaten what are you even trying to get by beating its chewed up bones?

Metalshop

I honestly think her Role is going to end up being bigger than Warden of a direction for the simple reason that her story spans the whole continent. Everyone in basically every faction in every nation, tribe, or polity on Calernia knows about her and has to account for her behavior and her resources when planning their course of action. The only exceptions to that are the rats, with whom she's had no interactions with living

individuals. In literally every other case, she figures as at least a major player in whatever narrative is happening at both the continental scale and at the national level.

She's going to end up in Triumphant's weight class purely on narrative face time accrued while in transition between Names.

Reader in the Night

And so the Woe take a massive blow. Though Hakram is still of the Woe, his final loyalty can never be to the Woe, and so their power dynamics (or how close their sit is to the fire, to use Akua's metaphor) shift.

Vivienne got away with never having her final loyalty be to the Woe, but she was also the most distant member and at times even questioned her position in them. Now Hakram is in the same position, only worse because his loyalty is not to Callow.

This could have the interesting consequence of Hakram questioning his place in the Woe and Vivienne reassuring him, in an interesting reversal of a conversation held in Laure what feels like a lifetime ago.

[Liliet](#)

> his final loyalty can never be to the Woe,

This was true of Cat and Vivienne both already. Hakram is only joining the club. Woe was never the kind of circle that demanded loyalty to itself above all. Just a group of friends respecting each other's causes.

dadycool

And Masego was just along for the ride.

Ed

No, Masego is still loyal to what he always was and always will be. Scruting the inscrutable, demystifying the mysterious, tearing forbidden knowledge from it's musty recesses and holding it close to his heart. His loyalties will never change.

Reader in the Night

Yeah? I said as much in the post, I didn't even imply Hakram wasn't part of the Woe. There will just be a large shift from being Cat's Right Hand/Shadow to being a Head-of-State in his own standing (and by definition, trusted with less).

... Also, I just realized that Hakram's oath to Cat needed to die because he named her his Warlord, and the Warlord cannot have a Warlord of his own.

[Liliet](#)

Yep!

[Liliet](#)

...Now I'm curious if Catherine could feel this on her end.

anyway HELL YEAH HELL YEAH HELL YEAH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Darkening

She definitely is going to feel something when he stops being Adjutant, she's mentioned a number of times how his name complemented hers and she could feel him. Probably less strong with her currently unformed name, but she's definitely going to feel something disappear. And probably assume he's dead or something.

dadycoool

It's extremely fortunate that not only did Hakram already start to fade in relevance back out East, but Cat's Name is evolving in such a way that Adjutant isn't as intrinsic to it the way it was to her former roles. Then again, Adjutant was more Cat's personal extra limb than any of her Names' or Roles'.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure Adjutant has been losing the relevance of his Role since Book 4, when Indrani started playing the role of Cat's confidante and therapist and Vivienne started covering the blind spots of her and Hakram put together. His relationship with this fact has been deteriorating pretty badly, what with his jealousy of people taking on minute aspects of his job – I do not think Book 2 Hakram would get into a competition about who got to hand Cat her cloak ffs

Ever since they made it to big leagues, the writing was on the wall that Hakram's best was moving in a direction separate from being Cat's shadow. He was still her best friend and he held onto the shadow thing tooth and claw but like I said it was turning increasingly toxic. He's always been more interested in ruling and administrating than Catherine herself, they would end up separating invariably when she got to her dream retirement – either that, or one of them would have accepted being miserable for the sake of staying with the other, and wow, no.

[Liliet](#)

I think she'll be able to distinguish he isn't, or at least believe that it's an alternative viable explanation. This story is Like That and I love this about it.

That said? If she can't tell either way THIS GETS EVEN MORE FUN HEEEEEE

dadycoool

Cat: "Oh no, Hakram's dead. Much sadness."

Cat: Lays siege to Ater

Hakram: shows up to help with the entire Hoard

Cat: ^_^

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, I think it's refined enough to know that. She said she'd know if Black was truly dead, and he was close to it by multiple definitions at that point. I'm guessing if Hakram died, she'd feel pain and anger and know he was gone. Instead, I'm guessing she felt a very similar sadness to the one Hakram felt and knows her Adjutant is no longer l.

Yunamed

Yeah. Like losing a sixth sense, no one to throw her burdens onto. No one to forge her signatures now.

[Casey Glick](#)

I cannot believe for a second that Hakram wouldn't forge one of Cat's signatures should the opportunity arise.

The "Black Queen" will be providing resources to the Steppes long after Cat disappears. "The signature matches the one one file", says the bank teller.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I can imagine a black crow appearing amidst the gathered orcs, to deliver Cat's congratulations and perhaps a few gifts.

[Liliet](#)

...Eh, she's got Scribe.

And Vivienne can put her own signatures on stuff now!

Juff

Typo Thread:

barked as his > barked at his
considering he knew > considering what he knew
mediated and how he > mediated, he
and cut of > and a cut of
bring him from > bring him in from
that's been a > that was a
authority, to be honest (either add a but or change to semicolon)
none one > no one
One the south > One in the south
made the main > made them the main
Red Shield refused > Red Shields refused
Blackspears the Snaketooth > Blackspears that Snaketooth
most like to admit > most liked to admit
before all said > before all was said
the clans of his birth > the clan of his birth
we'd forced > we'd be forced
They'd not know > They'd not known
listened to the nose, > listened to the noise,
would weight > would weigh
being called, often > being called; often
dozen chest > dozen chests
swords of his eyes > swords out of his eyes

therealgridlock

"preparing for a throat that would go through Hakram's throat."

>Thrust that would

therealgridlock

Let it be known that the Deadhand is stronger than any
pretender's blade!

Hail, Hakram!
Hail, Deadhand!
Hail, Warlord!

mamm0nn

I know Adjudant was already Named and thus it was easier to
transition into Warlord, but still. We should've seen Warlords
rise amongst the orcs in the last few centuries if the Name is
still available, especially if the likes of the Blackspear was
already well on his way to get it at the time of blooming. We've
seen and heard of Named becoming for lesser reasons than the
stakes here, after all, and Warlord is far from a forgotten Name
to resurface or come with a specific Role that orcs rarely dabble
in.

therealgridlock

Fact of the matter is, until now, the orcs weren't united. They were a people left struggling and inundated by new culture.

Now, for the first time in decades, they are unifying. That's why names are coming to the fore.

Hakram was right, they were nothing. They were nothing, they did nothing, they had no great stories to fulfil. Adjutant proved that orcs still had a role to play in the conflicts on calernia. Warlord proves that they finally have a purpose to unite under once again.

It isn't coincidence that it is all coming together for a climactic battle at the Tower, because after that's settled? There's only one book left, conquering death.

dadycool

In addition, Grem actually was a Claimant, so he's likely had the echoes of Warlord for decades, except he and the Steppes were so established as subservient to Black and Ater that he couldn't get away with saying that he was truly leading his people the way a Warlord should.

therealgridlock

Very true. Forgot about that bit. Likely Black had a hand in convincing him to just hold on to it and do nothing. Or Grem is smart enough to figure out what was best on his own. Hopefully it doesn't come to too many blows between Grem and Hakram, that would be a scary fight.

[Mincheriit](#)

I doubt they would come to blows over the name, iirc it was mentioned that grem's claim felt old and accepted that it would be or something. I took that as he could have become or worked on his claim to warlord but let it go.

Insanenoodlyguy

I suspect it will be gentler. The fight itself may happen between forces, but Hakram is already Warlord. I think Gren will acknowledge this is the correct way of things and that will be that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

He might also be able to announce to whoever's nearby, that a Warlord has been chosen.

Miles

Grem can get another name now, now that that claim is settled.

Maybe he'll be Amadeus's Adjutant.

[Liliet](#)

Pretty sure Grem could already get another Name. He was just never the Adjutant type.

mamm0nn

Except of course that in the centuries since the Miezian occupation, there would've been plenty of times for the orcs to unite against various threats. Not to mention the Tower's occupation and slavery conscription being a constant reason for orcs to unite and rebel.

You can't tell me that after centuries, now is the first time ever that the orcs thought that 'Yeah, maybe we should try to do something together, you guys.'. That there hasn't been a single orc hero or chieftain with a power bloc or suitable Role to become the Warlord. A Name that is literally just about being strong and gathering the tribes to be loyal towards you, something orcs have been doing constantly. Other Names like Shining Prince have been popping up regularly for much less.

Right now is one of the least likely times for a Warlord to rise, because orcs are neither powerful nor weak right now, and inevitably just part of a larger tale. The orcs aren't truly united in a brutal fight to break the mold, and Deadhand isn't the archetype of a Warlord.

Hell, he doesn't even want to change things to his own will by violence and might, as is Below's creed. Might makes Right. Warlord is a penultimate form of that, yet here we see someone who doesn't seek to just conquer until the conquering stops or the country is in shambles. He seeks to break the Tower not with his own might, but because he wants to strike a balance in the orc's lifestyle. That's not a Warlord, and if he suffices then there should've been dozens of Warlords in the last few centuries that would've been more the stereotype. This is just going against how we've been told Names work.

Earl of Purple

It's like Procer. The orcs only had enough weight for Names when united, and after the Miezans destroyed the Broken Antler Horde, the clans of the Northern Steppe have had very little to do with the south. They lost all their magic-users, the Gift almost entirely removed from their

population, a whole raft of Names that would go with that disappearing as a consequence. And not just the Names- the role the shamans played, as mediators, diplomats, spiritual guides and keepers of history, they all went too.

They haven't unified because Praes kept them at arm's length, it swooped in every so often and grabbed a bunch of orcs from the nearest clans and forced them into war and few to none ever returned. In exchange, the orcs... got very little. There was no trade, for the orcs had no wealth. There was raiding, but most was internecine, and a clan that raided the Soninke too often would likely be destroyed by the High Lords. Without shamans to keep the orcs together, and intervene in conflicts before they grew out of hand, they could not unify. Too many feuds, and the Praesi didn't affect every clan, just the ones in the south. Until forty years ago, when Grem One-Eye managed to get a claim on Warlord, but he backed down at the last minute to get orcs trained as soldiers, instead of used as fodder. Maybe other orcs have been claimants for Warlord in the past, but got murdered by Praesi assassins or killed in a duel or even shot by a Deoraithe on the Wall before they could actually cement that claim.

mamm0nn

Praes swooping in to grab some orcs and all that stuff to keep them divided seems like exactly the kind of stuff that would birth a Warlord with the Role to unify. And while some may indeed die to assassins or war, they would've still felt the Claim (which orcs haven't felt for years for no reason until Hakram) and the ones that avoid such fate as is a Name's wont would've only been more likely and quickly to ascend to a Name. What you're saying is only more reason that there should've been orc Named before, not a reason for their complete absence. And the Miezan slaying killed a whole lot of Named culture, sure, but the Warlord faith remained and became only stronger for it.

[Liliet](#)

> the ones that avoid such fate as is a Name's wont would've only been more likely and quickly to ascend to a Name.

It is really, really not this easy to accomplish, and much much easier than you're imagining to swat down whenever it starts trying to crop up.

mamm0nn

You wouldn't start swatting it down until a Name is blossoming, most Dread Emperors weren't as learned in Name lore nor with a farsighted policy to assassinate possible Names the way Black did, and the moment that a Name even has Claimants we're already at the point that orcs would know it's possible for them to get Names. By the time Praes would know who to snuff out, it's already too late to make orcs think they can't have Names.

Liliet

Orcs did know they could have Names, they just never managed to.

TeK

Well, they clearly actually tried to unite, and there has been claimants to the Warlord, the latest one being Grem, but noone managed to succeed. That is why the claim is still alive all this years. It did, however, change, as did the orks. So now the Name means something else, as should be the case in the dawn of the new Age.

Shveiran

I believe it was mentioned in Book 2 that Grem was the first (known) orc claimant to a Name since a very long time. I'm not sure how many there have been before.

therealgridlock

Don't forget, Captain killed one of their gods. That likely had had something to do with why it's taken so long to make a new Name.

Fact of the matter is, idunno what you want me to say, the story implies they had no reason for names, that they weren't united, didn't have a role to play in the stories.

Feel free to criticise the story, if you think it a bit absurd, but the story we are reading is the main story, we don't know much about what's not talked about in the story. All we do know is names pop up around Cat like they're going out of style.

Maybe black killed all their other claimants like he did heroes in Callow. Maybe the cultural zeitgeist was happy just eating meat and staying away from the rest of the politics.

But the author says there aren't any, or haven't been any notable ones/that we know of. Arguing with that point is a

bit like telling god he is doing his job wrong. If we don't like it, we can opt out any time we like.

I agree, feel free to criticise his writing. Maybe it is unrealistic, but all the author has to say is "there's a reason for it. That's why it's written that way" and all your arguments are moot.

mamm0nn

I'm not talking about the last 50 years or so since Captain killed a demigod of theirs and Black was around. I'm talking about the centuries to millennia between the last orc Named and Black's ascension, where there have been no orc Named. EE did give some reasons for that, and those worked. Until this chapter, when it turned out that Warlord could've been taken all along, and there must've been dozens of situations when a more suitable and stereotypical Warlord could've risen than Hakram.

Orcs have been kidnapped by Praesi to use as fodder, and they hated this. Did they unite against Praes? Probably. Did a Warlord rise for the very Below purpose of 'raging against the heavens and/or breaking the world to fit their liking by raw strength'? No. Praes has been weakened and divided before, after losing against Callow or due to civil wars. Orcs must've tried to use that, and the last few chapters state that raiding Praes in times like these is certainly not something new. Did a Warlord rise? No.

Before, why the orcs had no Named was kept vague enough that it worked. There was some reason for them to not have Named, why they couldn't get them. Maybe they were losers and Below doesn't back the losing side like this. Maybe there was a Warlord who simply never died somewhere else but Calernia, keeping the Name indefinitely occupied. Maybe there was some kind of block on Named in a Praesi ritual somewhere.

But this chapter said that 'Hey, Warlord has always been up for grabs, generations of repressed orcs in centuries of turmoil and conflict have just never seen anyone fit to take it. Or for new Named to rise from their new culture.' And that just makes no sense at all. EE usually has better background history than this.

kylepcarlson4577

I think one reason the orcs, goblins and drow don't get Names = civilizations/species in decline or being successfully culturally assimilated are not driving the Story. (Are there any recent Gigantes or Elf Named by the way???) The orcs were not just oppressed. They're

being assimilated. They're not REALLY rebelling and haven't been for hundreds of years. It's unquestionable that the best military victory they could get over Praes is a temporary occupation of nearby regions for maybe a few decades after a periodic Praesi boondoggle. Some orcs are materially better off because of this assimilation, if not culturally. Their population on the steppes and overall has boomed because of trade with Praes and with Praes's conscriptions removing mouths to feed. I think the goal of a Warlord Named is more flexible than we thought and that the various Orc factions may have been pulling it in too many directions until now to coalesce. It's really more of an expression of a unified purpose for the species rather than seeking "war" per se, but war has been the most common unifying purpose by far. One could argue Grem got close to the name at the high point of Orc unity over the past couple hundred years, which was an agreement to secure higher social status in Praes via the Legions. But he didn't coalesce because there is obviously still a lot of resistance to the cultural costs involved, and Greg's loyalty is divided between the multicultural Legions and the orc people.

I dunno some spitballing here. Also gotta wonder if the dwarves or gnomes have Named. Or I guess the non-seclusionist elves on other continents.

mamm0nn

That's indeed fair and a good point. Below needs not back losing horses. And yes, just because orcs would continue to be repressed and assimilated because they have no Named while a Warlord could change this eternal slippery slope of insignificance, doesn't mean that Below gives a shit. But Callow is also kind of a losing horse but Heroes were popping up regularly, and a lot of Procer Villains were pretty much just trash destined to be defeated by a Hero from what we've seen.

Orcs having no Named at all, not even small ones born from their new culture, is kinda weird. Hell, even the ogres were getting semi-regular Named and they've got just one city somewhere. The orcs are stronger and more numerous than them, at least.

(We've seen the Dwarves having at least one Named, the guy that Cat made her deal with.)

[Liliet](#)

This is? a pretty big plot point?

Orcs have had NO Names since Miezans conquered them and broke their culture. The orc culture is undergoing a huge, unprecedented revival since Amadeus's rebellion, one they were previously NOT ALLOWED. They were treated as slaves in all but name, and their neighbours did the work it took to make sure no exceptional individuals among them were ever allowed to accomplish anything.

Hakram becoming the Adjutant made him a target of non-stop assassination attempts back in Book 2, and that's with the explicit protection of the current Black Knight and his Squire?

mamm0nn

Yes. Orcs had no Named since the Miezans broke their Antler clan. But in this chapter we also saw that orcs have entire tribes still dedicated to their old culture, and several shamans able of magic apparently stronger than the 'knucklebone throwing' or whatever weak sauce they mentioned in previous books.

They most certainly had a culture and numbers that weren't actually complete slaves, they had all the means to awake Named to change this situation of theirs. They weren't cotton pickers, every one of them either under a personal watchful eye of the Praesi with a few escapees in the swamps. These were still clans and tribes living free if repressed as a vassal state.

There's no reason for the orcs to have never had the chance for any of them to grow into a Claimant at all. Those may have been assassinated afterwards, but they would've popped up first and made waves. Instead, they got no Named for no reason, because the Praesi of old had no Scribe and Black levels of organisation and Name lore to kill Named before they appear.

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

No they didn't. they have a FRACTION of their old ways. Most of them were lost to history. The orc riddle of steel is now answered with "our conquests smashed the tablets." The real underpinnings, the legends, the facets those chosen by fate could fit into, all of these were gone. They were the MOOKS. You don't see exceptional mooks very often at all. You might see a mook with character, some personality, but that one usually dies first. Being just the low tier minions of the evil empire means there's no expectation in or out of your people to be more. Oh i'm sure those shamans wanted names to re-emerge, but that doesn't mean they had enough weight

to do so. Even Hakram himself got a name that was not of Orc culture.

But that in and of itself started the shift. Because even if it wasn't an Orc Name, it was, after so long, an Orc with a name. Proving a name was possible. Suddenly the idea of an Orc not being able to get a name was no longer something Orc's had convinced themselves of. These conditions you are talking about? They just happened in the last few years. Oh I'm sure over the long years there have been efforts here and there, potentials that just never got past that, but now the momentum had started. It was more possible to have a Warlord now than there had ever been in that long stretch of time. Once Hakram got a name, this was bound to happen. And if Hakram had died in callow during the first stages of Cat's adventures, never having been named, Snaketooth never would have had this chance.

[*Liliet*](#)

> they had all the means to awake Named

I don't see how this follows.

> Those may have been assassinated afterwards, but they would've popped up first and made waves.

So maybe they did? I don't recall any statement that orcs didn't have any claimants.

Also, Praesi of old absolutely had Namelore, are you fucking kidding me. There have been orders to the Legions to never engage Callowans when they are absolutely sure they will win, etc.

Earl of Purple

We know gods keep their Names, if they had one, and that Names don't duplicate. That god could have still been a Warlord, and so been in the way of a new one. It took Sabah murdering it to free the Name up, which she did at about the same time Grem One-Eye had a claim to Warlord.

[*Liliet*](#)

We know gods keep Aspect powers, it seems quite likely they don't keep Names like this. Sve Noc was never again referred to as Priestess of Night since apotheosis.

agumentic

>You can't tell me that after centuries, now is the first time ever that the orcs thought that 'Yeah, maybe we should try to do something together, you guys.'

Maybe not the first time they thought about that, but, as North I tells us, it is the first time a taratoplu has gathered since the Broken Antler Horde.

[sengachi](#)

It's not that it was easy for Hakram to ascend to the Name. He couldn't have, say, decided a month ago he wanted to be Warlord and just done it.

The people who made the elevation possible were all the orcs in the tent, and all their clans behind them. And what they did, gathering in a unified truce for the purpose of unified war? *That* was new. *That* was unique. Orcs standing unified on their own feet, without a slavemaster's boot on their back, hasn't happened in a very long time. That's why the Name Warlord didn't happen before this in the last few centuries.

Hakram was just the person with the experience, the reputation, the skills, and the familiarity with wearing a Name necessary to be the person standing tall in the tent when it came time for the power the orcs had gathered to find a mantle.

mamm0nn

I find it very hard to believe that there hasn't been a single orc fighting against their suppression or trying to gather the hordes, in the centuries of Praesi occupation. When Praesi were pretty much enslaving them in all but name and made precise study of how much meat to feed an orc to keep them dazed yet effective. Hell, the last 50 years have been the least repressed and united in misery that the orcs have been in a very long time.

See my reply to the previous reply for more.

[TeK](#)

Well, you kinda answered your own question though. The orcs were little more than a livestock for a long history of Praes, specifically kept as such. Anyone trying to gather them into unifying would've been noticed and drowned in blood and hellfire. Warlord is NOT a sneaky Name. It took many decades to make orks even slightly recover, a literal claimant to the Name, an actual orc Named, Praes being pushed to the brink and it's Tyrant getting a bit too clever and try to actually spawn a Warlord Name (let's not kid ourselves and think that Malicia didn't see Trok coming).

mamm0nn

There has never been a time when Praes was too much in shambles to keep a close eye on the orcs, despite their eternal folly of wars with Callow and mad Dread Emperors? There has never been enough orcs unified for a Claim, despite that these chapters also suggest that raiding Praes in times of its weakness is a common orc habit? There has never been an orc sneaky enough to get a secret bloc going in times that Praes underestimates orc cunning and intelligence?

No, I didn't argue against myself. The circumstances here should've been present a hundred times over before, and better too.

agumentic

Yes, such things have never happened before in an opportune enough time. You have to understand that there's nothing casual about what is happening now. Orcs were mostly fighting each other for most of their history, so trying to unite was always a difficult proposition. When Praes was weakened, so were they, usually in a bigger proportion, because they were fighting on the frontlines. There was little desire to rebel against Praes, because they too believe in the rule of the strong and every time there was an attempt to challenge it, it was smashed back down before the Name could emerge.

The situation right now came out of orcs growing strong enough for a claim decades ago due to a particularly negligent Emperor, then a new ruler siding with them instead of just smashing them down and giving them decades of relative peace, enough that Names started to emerge, then Praes growing very weak and the whole age changing. It is entirely believable that this particular confluence of events just never happened before.

[Liliet](#)

Hakram becoming Adjutant made him an immediate target for countless assassination attempts even despite his position at the side of the Black Knight's Squire.

Remember how the faction Akua was part of called itself "Truebloods" and based half of its ideology on anti-greenskin and anti-Duni racism?

ALL High Lords had skin in the game of not allowing orcs to rise again. And with their resources, with their sorcery, yes they succeeded at it for the entire history of Praes.

The Name of Warlord cannot be claimed without a taratoplu. And you cannot have a "sneaky" taratoplu.

[sengachi](#)

A) Grem One-Eye actually was a viable Warlord decades ago during Nefarious' reign. This circumstance *did* come to pass once before, the Claimant just personally turned it down in favor of backing Black's reform efforts.

B) This gathering is *being endorsed by Malicia*. She has her own candidate in the running. So yeah, even now with all of this chaos and upheaval and infighting, it's still totally plausible this wouldn't have been able to happen without the Dread Empress allowing it.

dadycool

Well, it sounds a lot like he's breaking away from Cat, at least in a Junior Officer kind of way. They'll certainly be allies, keeping Callow and the Steppes closer than any other alliance for a while, but he's a Ruler in his own right now, with a nation behind him that depends on him. There simply isn't enough space in her shadow for him anymore. Interestingly enough, Hakram and Vivienne are "growing up and leaving the nest" at essentially the same time, gaining their own followers and ruling their nations without Cat's oversight.

Frivolous

I'd like to point out how truly shocking Hakram's achievement is. He became Warlord so quickly and decisively.

He hadn't returned to the Steppes in many years, and yet it took him LESS THAN A DAY after he decided he was not content with things as they were, the futures for the orcish race, to become Warlord.

Three meetings, then the final gathering, and poof! He's Warlord! First in centuries!

This, in contrast to Troke and the other possible claimants, who must have spent years working towards it, and despite the efforts of Malicia to make Troke a High Lord.

I'm sure Catherine will be proud of him. Unhappy with the loss of her Adjutant, but oh well.

There was plenty of foreshadowing, by the way. The long intense conversation between Catherine and Hakram in Adjournment was full of it.

I'm rereading Adjournment now with fresh eyes. Hakram's ascent to Warlord is only the culmination of all the potentials in Adjournment.

Earl of Purple

There was a Warlord coming. The orcs had united to elect one, and Troke was gathering support. He had a claim from every orc that backed him, and Hakram had a claim from those that followed him. The diplomacy solidified in everyone's minds that one of these two would be Warlord, and the fight was over who would get it. He didn't need to spend years getting support, because he could take advantage of the support they had gathered.

Frivolous

Agree. Hakram hijacked Troke's and Malicia's plan.

Much more efficient than doing it himself.

Mental Mouse

Cat taught him well...

Miles

He used Find in North I, to find the way to make that happen. This is technically a huge loss of power for him, since Find had basically evolved to rival Contessa's (from Worm and Ward) power at this point.

Miles

He used Find in North I, to find the way to make that happen. This is technically still a huge loss of power for him, for now. Find was basically evolved to rival Contessa's (from Worm and Ward) power at this point.

Frivolous

Miles: Losing Find was a blow, yeah.

Basically all the perception aspects are great. Behold, Witness, See, Listen, Wish, Doddering Sage's Perceive, Nim's Survey – all massively useful in both combat and day-to-day life.

For the same reasons, Thinkers in Worm and Ward were also considered the most dangerous and to be taken out first.

On the other hand, Hakram and Vivienne now have 3 new aspects to look forward to!

I wouldn't be surprised if Hakram gets something Find-adjacent as Warlord. After all, Masego traded Glimpse for Witness when he went from Apprentice to Hierophant.

Anonymous

Chapter felt like trash. Suddenly orcs can just claim the name of Warlord by wanting it and rallying some clans when previously there was much greater difficulty in becoming a named Warlord. Hakram gets his claim to the name rather effortlessly. "If not Hakram then who" is used to justify Hakram's sudden pivot and yet there are plenty of others who would've made more potent warlords than Hakram. I think the real point of this mini-arc is basically to elevate the members of the Woe through that magic protagonist power, but plot armor has always been a weakness of PGTE. It's lazy and lame. None of this felt earned, and Hakram still does not come across as having what it means to be a warlord.

saithorthepyro

I have to heavily disagree. Hakram forging an independent path from Cat for the sake of his own people and their increasing distance was established pretty definitively in the last book.

As for Warlord arising, it is not just the Orc's willing it into existence, circumstances have arisen that has forced the orc tribes to unify requiring a Warlord take place as leader of the tribes. Praes yoke on Orc Society has been broken, their ties that Black was attempting to forge tiring their story to that of Praes are being cut, and they for the first time in a long time have an opportunity to be a significant entity besides a slave race for the Praes in all but name. Circumstance and events have made the unification of the tribes and the name of Warlord possible, not just a bunch of Orc's really wanting the name.

Anonymous

Hakram forging an independent path is not the problem, but this wasn't so much a path forged as much as it is casually taking a few steps, cutting some backroom deals, and suddenly Hakram is blessed with the name of Warlord where he has a very weak claim (Hakram leads no armies and is not really in the warrior's trade anymore and does not have any sort of fanatic loyalty behind him that breathes that sort of aura of a titan of war), a path which used to have massive requirements for claimants to stand a chance. Now, suddenly Hakram, a guy who has spent most of his time away from the Burning Steppes and decides "oh, I guess I'll take the name of Warlord in order to get some stuff done the way I prefer – I mean if I don't do it I'm not sure someone else will, so I suppose I will – hang on, do I even owe these people anything? – eh, I guess I'll do it" gets to duel a person,

rustle some votes, and instantly has enough creational weight to get WARLORD as his name. I mean, no. EE can do it, but it's not something I consider a reasonable or persuasive flow of events.

saithorthepyro

Cats claim to her name was being a girl with a knife who Black kept an eye on. Pasquale's claim to her name was some unskilled natural abilities with Light and praying. Hakram's claim to Warlord is being an expert buerecrat, logistician, and planner who can see what is happening to the Orc people and realizing what needs to be done about it. Warlord having to be focused on martial army combat isn't a hard rule in the same way that Black Knight having to be a destruction focused combat name was shown to not be a hard rule by Amadeus and Nim. It's been a thing throughout the series about how Names change and evolve as both their bearers and the cultures they are built one change.

Also the entire point of Villainous Names are that they are for those who see what is in front of them and forces it to change and take power for themselves. In this way Hakram's claim is very apt, since he saw the unfolding events of the tribal meetings and forced them to bend to him. He even did it with a fight at the very end if you want to argue a martial component is required.

And finally, Warlord was going to happen regardless. For the first time the tribes are free from Praes to choose their own path for the future and where they will fit in the new world, and tens of thousands of Orcs are there to decide it. Whoever can get those 200 clans to back them is Warlord, because they have the unified backing of the orc race behind their backs. That has always been the Warlord, the one who can unify the fractured clans.

Anonymous

Cat got her claim to Squire by having the Black Knight directly put her in the role (probably also helped that Above was also already scouting her for that name), which gave her weight. Don't know about Pasquale. Nim I think honestly represents a similar deviation. Early on it was established that the Black Knight's role wasn't so much to lead armies (Dread Emperors tended to do that) but to crush heroes and be a big bad scary dude (which is why Amadeus was so weak and only retained his claim to the name through being a nevertheless skilled and effective combatant who did kill a lot of heroes) but I think EE couldn't work a black knight antagonist like that because the Woe would crush him and EE likes to involve armies in the story and pretend they're relevant.

Generally speaking, strength of will or no, acting against your role diminishes the strength of your name or your claim to it (it is, after all, possible to just lose your name doing this). Villainous names are demonstrably not an exception to this.

Claiming the name of Orc Warlord through being a bureaucrat and logistics manager is hilarious and rather ill-fitting, especially when Hakram did not employ these talents in a significant way as part of his climb to the name. In fact, there was barely any climb at all. The duel was practically a token event in order to try to satisfy pretenses of a Warlord doing Warlord things. Hakram did not earn the name so much as he had it casually handed to him.

The fact that the name of Warlord was going to happen anyway is something I agree with, but that doesn't mean that this way of doling out the name was good. The notion that getting the clans to back you is enough to make you a Warlord is at odds with the historic difficulty of claiming the Warlord name. It's not like orc society rallying behind a Warlord is somehow a new direction they had to get culturally ready for.

Abnaxis

The Name of Warlord is like the Name of Hierarch— if all the clans say you're the Warlord, you're the Warlord. Anaxares was disgusted by the even *concept* of being Named, but the Free Cities voted for him unanimously—making him only the second Hierarch in the history of the Free Cities—so he became the Hierarch despite his wishes.

By and large all of the ruler Named become Named by succession—whether the succession happens by vote (Free Cities, Steppes), coup (Praes), or primogenature/noblese oblige (Callow), all you need to be a rule named is to by-and-large legally be the rule of a nation that has Named rulers.

The only reason there hasn't been Warlord in centuries is because, like the Free Cities, the orc tribes have never agreed to one until now. You might say that it was too unearned for Hakram to have convinced the clans to unanimously back him, but there's plenty of precedent for rulers becoming Named purely by technical fiat to be upset that he got a Name from the votes.

Darkening

Ehhh. To be fair, it's been stated a number of times that plenty of rulers *don't* get the Good King name or w/e when they ascend to the throne, though it seems pretty universal for Praes. So you could probably have a warlord that wasn't a Warlord. On the other hand, this moment is a massive gather of clans gathering to decide the future of their very species at a time when they have the leverage to actually push through a change, during a momentous era in history where old norms are being shattered and the Gods are handing out names like candy to balance out how overpowered the Dead King is. Could be the Gods Below are trying to raise a new villainous throne in light of what Amadeus is planning to do to the Tower. Could be they want the orcs ready for the new Age of Order so they can have a united faction to bet on.

Abnaxis

My impression is that even when there wasn't a Good King in Callow the monarch was still always Named of some sort (e.g. Rebel Queen). That's Callow's thing, always having Named royalty to oppose the latest flavor of Dread Emperor/Empress.

[Liliet](#)

No, Callowan monarchs were Named "half the time" (c) text.

Abnaxis

Also, you're still ignoring the fact that all it took was a vote and a "shrug, I guess," from the rest of the free cities to Name a Hierarch. Sometimes Names happen purely because the right people say they do, regardless of weight.

ninegardens

How dare you insult Anaraxes, Diplomat of the Belephrone (May She Stand Forever Tall).

Seriously though, the vote was a thing, but also... Anaraxes wasn't exactly a wimp. He WAS hard edged, dedicated to an ideal. His pivot came not from the vote, but for Refusing the physic spy dudes who claimed he was a "Person of importance".

His pivot came from his insistence of HIS story on the world, from his repeated denial of the Tyrant. If I remember correctly, Tyrant introduced him to

the Bard, and the bard was all look “hmm... interesting”, well before any vote was called.

Anaraxes the diplomat was serious business.

mamm0nn

By that logic, either they shouldn't have felt the Claim and its powers, or orcs should've had Claimants all throughout their history (we've been told that they've not had any of those), which would've been urged by Providence to unify all the orcs after they unify enough or find themselves striving to unify.

The claimant status shown in this chapter negates the validity of your argument, which could've worked otherwise.

[Liliet](#)

Who says they didn't have claimants? They didn't have Named, because all potential claimants got killed, simple as that. There was a whole “rest of Praes” making sure of that in a decentralized yet united in the sentiment manner.

Abnaxis

I think this was a response to me?

To “unify the orcs” one of two things needs to happen—either all the tribes need to fall in line behind a single chieftain, or one tribe has to grow large enough to overtake all the others.

The former would never happen because the orc way is “no-holds-barred war with your neighbors, trade with anyone not your neighbor.” Finding accord among all the tribes would require chieftains to vote for a Warlord who probably literally ate some of their relatives during a raid on their camps.

The latter would never have happened because orcs are nomads. Running an empire requires police to put down unrest, roads to carry news and respond to crises like famine and draught, cities with all their underpinnings like farms and smithies and banks... all things orcs look down on as a society.

The only reason ANYONE is a claimant is because the Legions created by the Reforms broke tribal lines. The Reformed Legions force Blackspears to stand in shield walls with Red Shields without infighting, and

reward obedience with loot and state-condoned violence.

That makes any orc who heads the Legions one step away from being Warlord because he has orcs from every tribe under his banner.

The only reason why anyone but Grem is a claimant is because Malicia recognized Grem's historic claim for what it was, and started enobbling orcs so orcs would have an alternative banner to the Legions they can declare allegiance to in return for economic gain.

Hakram can only come in as a claimant because the orcs are already deciding on which claimant they want to support between the two presented to them by Amadeus and Malicia. NONE of the claimants would have been possible before the Reforms, that's why there never had been one after the orcs were "freed"

[Liliet](#)

> The notion that getting the clans to back you is enough to make you a Warlord is at odds with the historic difficulty of claiming the Warlord name. It's not like orc society rallying behind a Warlord is somehow a new direction they had to get culturally ready for.

Orcs were specifically kept from ever getting together for a formal gathering like this. They were, like... oppressed? With force of arms?

There has been an opportunity for the Name of Warlord ONLY since Amadeus's civil war and Grem One-Eye (who was also a claimant but chose not to do the thing).

[sirfury](#)

I may be wrong, but I think you may be overestimating the creational weight of the Warlord name, based on the success of the last(only?) Warlord at the peak of his reign. I'd bet he's started off much like many other Ruler names, as having the potential for greatness. The Warlord doesn't have a lot of examples, but if you look at the others like Dread Express, Tyrant, etc, there were successful ones and unsuccessful ones. Whether any ruler name ends up being worthy of greatness is up to the individual who claimed it, not by virtue of having the name in itself. Hakram only got through the first of the hurdles, winning the approval of the other clans in a fate created situation where they were all gathered up to already vote for a leader, based on the

strength of his victories in battles and his keen intellect, and by being the best candidate.

[sirr fury](#)

Furthermore, the impact of Hakram becoming Named cannot be underestimated amongst the orc clans.

The 'weight' of Hakram's Adjutant Name may very well have moved the hand of fate towards the creation of desire and regaining of lost hope that orcs can indeed be allowed Names again and the previous Warlord was not a one time deal.

[irritantseraphim](#)

There was no unified Horde of Orcs for centuries, so the tropes and weight needed to claim it might have worn thin. Back when Warlords were challenged and regularly had to defend their Name, you had to be mightier than everyone else.

Now, the Orcs are coming together to decide on their fate, Hakram being caught in the middle. Of course, he owes nothing to the Orcs, but there won't be any "Orcs" in that sense soon, if he doesn't step in. So he has to.

And Cat claimed her first Name the same way. By defeating her rival Claimants. Hakram defeated his rival, winning the vote of the clans and unifying them behind him.

While I agree that the development felt rushed, I like it a lot and it actually makes a lot of sense, to me.

Snappy270

Okay first of all "massive requirements for claimants" ??? All you need to be named is a story, a pivot and then the will to see it through. Stained sister just got it from praying while her village was being eaten. Witch of the woods got it from being a girl in the woods who knew magic. Not all claims need big, dramatic instances. There are many ways to gain a name, hierarch became one from the free cities voting for him with tyrants backing. Malicia only became the dread empress when she was crowned.

For warlord this is was this first gathering since there heyday. The first! You kept saying there would be more warlords but the fact is there haven't because the orcs were united in purpose since their first horde was destroyed. So there always was going to be a warlord after this.

The pivot was when hakram had to give up his name and his love for catherine for his people. Also "oh i guess i'll

become warlord to get things done my way" is the exact line of thinking for many people wanting to get names.

Finally when on earth was black considered a weak black knight ? When his name weakened in procer ??? Black was the most successful villan in his generation. He used tricks to win fights cause he knew heros had an inbuilt advantage, but he was an equal to Captain a martial name. When did he act again his name, his name was to be killer of heros and the martial arm of the empire which he did brilliantly

Darkening

Black is hilariously talented and brilliant, but he has a lot less raw power than he could. He mentions early on that his predecessor could have blown up a tower with his shadow powers, where black can basically just use them as a couple extra arms. Which is useful, but not the same sort of raw power we're talking about here.

ninegardens

Black was... kind of a "minimize collatoral damage" kinda of dude. He was a policy wonk, and idealist, and the kind of dude who would mentor up a young orphan to replace him, as opposed to brutally murder her in her bed.

He didn't betray his Empress.

He completed one conquest and the sat on it for 40 years, rather than continuing to extend himself further.

I don't think we've seen many previous Black knights, but seriously: historically my guess is that they were very much "the bloody knight"/ "The dragon" archetype. The Black knight is meant to scary and bully thier underlyings into submission. Amadeuas is... not that. He only barely fit the groove.

When he went full "Tactical leader" in Procer (as opposed to battlefield bruiser) he was punished for that, but he had been leaning pretty heavily in that direction for a long long time, and he explicitly said (often) that his raw power were weaker because of it... but also that by dodging that grove, his Name railroaded him less. He was more flexible, less of freight train (headed for a cliff) and more of a go cart (with sharp cornering ability).

mamm0nn

Hakram just casually becoming Warlord shows that there's no reason for the orcs to not have Named, though. They've been under Praes's joke for centuries, developed a new culture and there have been plenty of opportunities during

Praes civil wars and Callow's victories for them to do something. If there was no different, hard reason for orc Named to be unreachable, then why hasn't it happened somewhere in the first century after the Miezens left? Or the centuries past that?

We've been told that the Warlord is THE orc, but I don't think we've ever been told that the Warlord has to unify ALL of the orc tribes. And even if they did, if one can become a Warlord Claimant and get the powers, then they'd just have to unite a few large tribes and seek to unify them all, and then Providence could take care of the rest. We've even been told these chapters that orcs regularly unite and raid other Praesi lands during times of turmoil and weakness like these, meaning there would've been plenty of times that enough orc tribes unified for a Claimant to rise. And the very rising of a Warlord Claimant would've excited the orcs so, that Providence could've definitely just picked a suitable lad or lass and see all the leftover tribes join in afterwards.

[Liliet](#)

> We've even been told these chapters that orcs regularly unite and raid other Praesi lands during times of turmoil

Raid, yes. They're always raiding someone, might as well take advantage of neighbours.

Unite? That's a much bigger proposition, and they've never been given a window of opportunity large enough for that.

[Liliet](#)

> when on earth was black considered a weak black knight

He was a weak Black Knight in Name firepower. He had a small "mana pool" to use for his Aspects and Name tricks. He was wildly successful despite this, but he WAS always weak compared to "destroy a fortress with a gesture" predecessors.

(He destroyed a fortress with a gesture once. Sent him into a coma for three days)

You are completely right about the rest of this.

[Casey Glick](#)

IIRC, Amadeus wasn't weak, per se. It's just that he was spreading his powers out over the army more than Black

Knights usually did. It's part of why his armies were so good with him at the head, but why he couldn't personally, like, destroy an army.

[Liliet](#)

No, he was specifically weak.

> "It's been two days since you last used an aspect," she said. "I expected you to be in better shape by now."

>

> "I drew deeper than I have in decades," he candidly admitted. "**And you know my well is shallower than most.** I expect within a fortnight I'll have recuperated."

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/10/10/interlude-queens-gambit-declined/>

There have been other references but this is the only one I remember the exact location of

[Liliet](#)

> All you need to be named is a story, a pivot and then the will to see it through.

Correction: all you need to be Named is a story, period. A pivot and the will to see it through is FREQUENTLY a part of said story, but there's been a number of Named who only realized they were a fair way into it because there was no specific moment, just a slow solidification.

(Also, newborn baby Sabah)

Tom

> Now, suddenly Hakram, a guy who has spent most of his time away from the Burning Steppes and decides "oh, I guess I'll take the name of Warlord in order to get some stuff done the way I prefer – I mean if I don't do it I'm not sure someone else will, so I suppose I will – hang on, do I even owe these people anything? – eh, I guess I'll do it" gets to duel a person, rustle some votes, and instantly has enough creational weight to get WARLORD as his name.

The foundations for what Hakram did in this chapter run very deep:

> "I'm an orc, sir," my officer spoke carefully. "We don't really do the Name thing."

> Masego clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth in disapproval.

> "Inaccurate," he chided Hakram. "Names were fairly common in the Steppes before the Miezan occupation."

> "That's the better part of two thousand years ago," I replied flatly.

> The Apprentice seemed utterly indifferent to that fact, much to my irritation.

> "It's still nascent in form," the Soninke noted. "If it makes you feel any better, you might get yourself killed before it turns into anything concrete."

> It was becoming apparent that social skills were not one of Masego's no doubt plentiful talents. Still, this had implications. I'd never heard of an Adjutant before and that was a little worrying, but there was also the fact that for the first time in a millennia and a half a greenskin was coming into a Role. That was... shit, the political ramifications of this alone went way above my head. Black always said that Names were a reflection of the people they sprang from: was something changing with the orcs, or was this about my own burgeoning influence? This is about the Reforms, has to be. But why was the Role appearing here and now instead of forty years ago, when they'd first been implemented? Gods, this was going to be such a headache. I cast another look at Hakram and he seemed more troubled than elated at the news. Evidently I wasn't the only realizing how much of a mess this could turn into.

From: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/12/16/chapter-5-recognition/>

> "There's another part to that tale, Adjutant," the thief said. "One you forgot to tell. You see, there's quite a few Callowans in the army who have kin that got eaten by orcs. Not even thirty years ago. What the Wasteland did to your people is a horror. What they went on to do to mine is a fucking horror as well, and one does not expunge the other."

> "I know that too, Thief," Deadhand said. "You asked, in your own roundabout manner, what it is I care about. I have answers you won't care to hear, but this one you will. I care about seeing a world where, when I tell this story, the woman on the other side of the table can't reply the way you did. Where we're more than hunting hounds for those who measured our starvation."

From: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/10/05/interlude-zwischenzug-ii/>

> "You want to use the Legions of Terror loyal to Black as a bulwark between us and Malicia," I suddenly said, opening my

eyes. "Grem and his legions to be put up on the Blessed Isle, I'm thinking, with a neat supply arrangement the crown would handle the grain part of."

> "And more," Hakram said. "I have been speaking with the Clans willing to take my envoys. There are some who still remember the Steppes nearly bucked the Tower's rule, when Nefarious still reigned."

From: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/03/11/chapter-19-precedent/>

> The pair from the adjunct secretariat had been dismissed, leaving me with a pile of papers where the words 'maybe' and 'should' came up uncomfortably often. While the phalanges who'd spoken to me – an orc and a Callowan, nice touch that – had been well-versed in the details, looking at the plans I recognized the careful method that lay behind them. This was Hakram's proposal, and not one he'd begun working on recently. Too much groundwork had been laid, and some of those numbers would have taken months to get. I was honestly astonished he'd managed to get his hands on estimated fighting strength for the greatest of the Clans, as the Jacks were completely blind in the Steppes.

> As far as proposals meant it was well-crafted, and made it clear that not only was propping up an orc state in the Steppes achievable but it would benefit Callow in several practical ways. Establishing treaties with orc leadership and trading ties with western clans would ensure that raiding of my kingdom did not resume down the line, while a mutual defence pact would mean that if the Dread Empire turned on us both Wolof and Okoro would be knocked out of the war before the first sword was drawn. The Clans weren't rich in much besides amber and fur, but trading those goods south in Mercantis would mean steep profits for Callowan traders given the demand for both.

From: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/08/28/chapter-54-kings-fianchetto/>

(Also some relevant bits in chapters 51 and 52 of that book)

If you want to dig for more: <https://www.google.com/search?q=site:practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com+hakram+steppes>

medailyfun

The ties between the orcs and the Empire are not cut, economic dependency is not something to overcome easily as well as the Legion stuff, the orcs just got a chance for a different story alongside the Empire/Calllow.

Konstantin von Karstein

To be fair, nearly every story has plot armour for its characters.

Anonymous

Yes, but most stories don't go out of their way to insist the protagonist does not get plot armor (ie. providence).

saithorthepyro

I think you are confusing the two. Providence is an extremely blatant Deus ex machina, something that is not foreshadowed, demands no cost from those saved, and really lowers the tension and stakes. Pretty much all the times Cat and Co has survived has typically been by the skin of their teeth and by their own skill and planning, and they have payed for it. Cat is essentially a copy of herself whose had two different eldritch abominations mess with her head and soul on top of her limp and missing eye. Masego has been blinded and stripped of his natural ability for magic. Hakram has been crippled. Only Archer, who is about to go up against Ranger narratively, and Vivienne, who is the most heroic of the group, haven't had those kinds of wounds. One of the few actual Deus ex machina was Cat coming back from being a zombie which was her literally stealing providence from Above. And this isn't getting into the emotional stuff or trove of dead supporting characters. Yes they are still alive, because their character arcs are still in progress, they are useful for the story, probably till the climax they'll be relatively safe but that does not mean they have been plot armored to the point of removing the tension, because even when they survive losing the Woe do lose in permanent ways that affect them.

[sengachi](#)

That is in fact **exactly** how ruler Names happen. When people come together and acclaim someone with enough social and cultural weight behind it, they become a Named. Tens of thousands of orcs have rallied together for a great war, fought and bled and died to promote their champions. They've politicked and jockeyed for position and thought deep on the cultural importances which matter to them. **They** and **their** weight were going to elevate a Warlord, whoever it was that may be standing victorious in the center of the tent at the end of this.

The reason this couldn't happen before this was because the Praesi had the clans fractured and disunified. They haven't been able to get such a gathering of clans before this day, to acclaim in one voice a Warlord. And that's been foreshadowed.

The clans having enough of a unified (Legion) culture to raise an Adjutant was part of it. The clans becoming more story relevant, having a place in the big plays, getting the power to make a difference rather than be used, all of that was leading up to the clans being able to raise a Warlord again.

Also, Hakram has literally been training to understand political games since before the academy. The stone game, remember? It's his **thing**. Like, loyalty, cool blood, and having a better mind for the mechanics of politics than anyone but Amadeus are his three Things. They've always been his three things. And you're unhappy that he's good enough at that last thing to be uniquely qualified here? To be the only one who can thread the political needle and the trials which will come after?

If you're not happy with this, I don't know what you would have been happy with.

Anonymous

Names are earned, and if Warlord went to every orc with acclaim who rallies the orcs there would've been a lot more Warlords long before now. Hakram basically casually took the most important name to his entire people just by deciding he'll take the name, fighting a duel, and rustling some votes. The creational weight he has to be **the** Warlord is absurdly dubious. Vivienne becoming Princess of Callow felt earned. Hakram becoming Warlord did **not**.

Troke's claim was also dubious, considering how weak weak-willed his plan of action was for a Warlord. He was basically seeking internal power rather than external conflict.

Rynjin

Hakram has been building toward this name for at least two books now, you just haven't been paying attention. He's always had plans to change his people and make them something more than brute pawns. That is exactly the kind of thing stories are made of, and Named are living embodiments of stories. This writing was on the wall from the time he had that spat with Cat after he presented his "help the orcs so they can help us" plan last book. He's had years to revise that plan since then.

Fast this certainly was; made that way by the other claimant, who rushed the confrontation. Unearned? Not in the slightest.

Frankly though, I'm pretty sure you know that. I don't really trust the motives of people who post anonymously in comment sections like these.

[sengachi](#)

Just going to blatantly ignore all of the people (and several books of this story) telling you why the orcs couldn't raise a Warlord before this point I see.

mamm0nn

But the whole Claimants popping up and a Warlord being chosen like this, kind of counters and negates most of the things that they've said, though. In the end, why there were no orc Named was mostly because of some unknown reason tied to but not solely their loss of culture to the Miezens and their suppression by Praes. That unknown reason kept things logical enough, but when someone can just casually decide to become Warlord regardless of foreshadowing in other regards, then that reason stops working.

[Liliet](#)

There... wasn't an unknown reason. The reason was known. They were not allowed to unite and gather an army, they immediately became a target for their more powerful neighbours deeply interested in preventing that from happening and not shy to toss some demons their way if they had to.

Their culture was suppressed because they were not allowed to practice it, not because they forgot it.

(Though they forgot plenty of things too, just not this one)

[sengachi](#)

Unknown reason?

You mean the literal slavery, rule by force of arms and magic, assassinations, and other such direct oppression used by the Praesi? Those reasons that have been mentioned over and over and over again every time the historic Name of Warlord has come up?

mamm0nn

But the Claimant thing means that the orcs didn't all have to unite. If a chief would've unified enough tribes or enough important ones with the intent to unify them all, then they should've become a Claimant. And once a Claimant, Providence could've seen them through to unify, or fight the other tribes that would never yield which Below would only find amusing to watch.

A gathering of all the tribes shouldn't be the only possible way, such a thing seems counterintuitive to the Warlord, Below and orc culture. Remember, a Name is what people tell tales of. Either orcs knew that their chiefs have to gather and choose a Warlord, in which case they would've been moved to do so many times before now, or orcs don't say that and thus there's no good reason why the Warlord would be limited to being elected like that before even getting a claim at all.

Liliet

> And once a Claimant, Providence could've seen them through to unify

Unfortunately, enough brute force shatters any amount of Providence – especially in a villain vs villain context, which this was.

And until the recent devastation following on the heels of Amadeus's and Malicia's deliberate decade-long campaign to weaken the High Lords, there was a lot of brute force poised on the orcs' borders to respond to any perceived potential threat.

Earl of Purple

Orcs also don't just raid Praes and each other- they raid Daoine, too. And a hero-vs-villain fight has plenty of providence, but not for the villain. An orc warlord raising an army amongst the Clans to throw against the Wall and making a claim on the Name Warlord will get ended, by the Commander of the Watch if nobody else. And if the warlord tries to go against Praes, then it'd be a villain-against-villain fight, between an orc relying on ancient lore and instinct against a Praesi villain- Black Knight, or Warlock, or Dread Emperor, or something else- that knows what they're doing and has a wealth of lore and experience to draw from.

Matthew

It does feel fast, but I would object to it being unearned or unwarranted.

The orcs method of war hasn't been relevant for centuries. Raids clans produce warriors but they aren't actually a threat to callow or praes in any real sense. They can be a nuisance, but the settled societies can stop them.

Hakram comes in as an orc for the new era.

He is an orc warlord who can fight praes or callow with modern methods.

It's too fast, I agree.

I guess it's sort of the Genghis Khan story. The Mongols had been just one of many steppe tribes who had been fighting the Chinese for centuries. It wasn't until Temujin lost a civil war and, in response, entirely transformed Mongol society to turn the fearsome mongol warriors into a functioning army full of soldiers that he became Genghis Khan and crushed all before him.

That's sort of the thing here. Old praes used orcs as warriors, black used them as soldiers. Hakram is an orc soldier who will use them for themselves.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sudden... not really, this is just the climax of the story. A seismic shift a mile beneath the ocean can send a faint swell across the ocean –barely a foot high, but it can travel thousands of miles. And then it reaches the coast, and the wave breaks... as a tsunami.

[Everyton Nothington](#)

I disagree with like all of that. Hakram didn't pivot "suddenly" there have been drift between him and cat ever since he was crippled. There has also been foreshadowing regarding Hakrams desire to make the orc clans more prosperous by drafting treaties between them and callow (the desire was there even though he didn't push when Cat didn't allow it). He just didn't see the scale of the problem until being there in person, if he didn't step in, the orcs way of life and cultural identity would be lost, in one way or another.

Even if there are "plenty of others" (like who? Grem? Juniper?) they where not there and if they where, they didn't have the information or the vision to give the orc clans a desirable outcome.

As for Hakram not having what it takes to be a warlord, he is pragmatic so he has previously followed those who he thinks best can help him achieve his desire, but if cat was not present, and the anger he describes in book 2, chapter 16, was evoked in another way, I think he could have attempted to raise a banner on his own, just less successfully as he was less experienced.

But yes, Hakram isn't what you typically think of when someone says Orc Warlord, but this could be yet another pivot in named.

We have seen many archetypes shifting to being more nuanced in their approach to good and evil, and generally becoming more pragmatic. Hakram becoming warlord could be either the effect of, or being the cause of, the name Warlord shifting to a less chaotic / destructive force.

But either way, Hakram is one of the most competent characters in the series. You complain that the main characters become powerful and have plot armor, but first off, if the main characters aren't powerful, they will stop being relevant to the story, and thus either be killed like Ratface and Robber, or gaining a story pivot where they gain power like Vivien and now Hakram.

In addition, as Cats story shifts, side characters must fill new roles as their old become superfluous to the story, or be written from it. I personally much prefer Hakram, a character with history and depth, being the new orc warlord rather than a new character I have no understanding of or history reading about.

As for plot armor, it is indeed a thing in the story. Complaining about it makes as much sense as complaining that Praes exists. As you must know, fatalism is a theme in the story and plot armor is a thing that explicitly exists in the setting and is something characters are aware of. But that aside, plot armor isn't something that is bad by itself in any story, just when it breaks immersion, and or takes away consequence, and from where I'm standing there have been plenty of consequences resulting from fuckups by the characters previously. It might not have harmed them physically every time, but plenty of sub plots have started because they have to resolve a issue they caused, which is a consequence.

Finally, the thing about Troke denying Hakram as no longer being the Adjutant (and implicitly denying him being a claimant to Warlord) putting a finger on the scales was not something Troke had to be aware of for it to be true. It was only Hakram's namelore we saw on display.

We know the name Warlord encourages being brutal and unyielding in your aims as we saw when hakram thought about having to kill the leadership of the Split Tree Clan. Denying Hakram as a challenger would not be in attunement to the name as it would be an indirect way of facing a problem, so not acting in accord would weaken your claim/position. Hakram knew this, we do not know if Troke did, Names subconsciously drive people to act in a way consistent with the role, and have to be consciously fought to subvert, again, this has been a theme for a large portion of the story,

I know can't change your mind, literature is subjective after all. But I find your view offensive.

Liliet

Catherine and Hakram have been drifting apart ever since she became Queen of Callow and her duties expanded far past what one Adjutant could cover the blind spots of.

The breakdown upon him being crippled was just the tip of the iceberg finally rising to the surface.

KageLupus

Hard disagree, on pretty much every point. First, I don't think that the Name came on suddenly. Hakram only consciously decided to aim for it in the last chapter, but there have been any number of story points leading up to that moment. Even as far back as the last book, Hakram was trying to get Cat to provide weapons to the Clans so that they could fight against Praes. He has wanted more for his people for awhile now and has slowly been getting more hands on about it. Narratively, ever since Hakram was injured in the Arsenal his story has been leading up to this point.

I don't think it was an easy thing to become Warlord either. Think about the series of events that made it possible. The Clans all gather with the explicit purpose to choose a leader, already a rare occurrence. And while the stated goal was choosing if they should raid Praes or not, the underlying narrative is "What does the future of the Clans look like?" So in general this is a pretty special occasion and should be a narrative fulcrum. Considering there were two claimants to the title I think that is safe to say.

As for Hakram not being the best choice for Warlord, I would personally disagree. In my mind he is exactly the kind of Warlord that the orcs need right now. He has deep-rooted ties to orc history (trained as a shaman when young, sings battle poems while fighting duels) while also being much more worldly than the average orc. One of Hakram's strongest suits has always been his analytical mind, and that only gets more true the more information he has to work with. All of that combines to make him one of the few people who can see the pitfalls with the current setup and have a viable alternative.

Previous Warlords just had to bring the Clans together to go on massive raid campaigns, but the world has changed since then. This time the fight is for the future of orc culture and whether they are relevant in the world or just a footnote people mention when they talk about Praes. It is a new kind of war and requires a new kind of Warlord, one who is intelligent and politically savvy as well as an able fighter. In other words, everything Hakram has been characterized as since book 1.

Liliet

Considering Hakram's initial stated reasoning for joining Cat's cause was "she's going to kick the asses of EVERYONE who looks down on us and I want to help with that", it's been narratively coming a MUCH longer time than since Arsenal.

I've heard "Dread Emperor Hakram" predictions since I caught up.

Miles

Try reading instead of skimming and you'd find that every complaint you made is actually the opposite of what happened.

Abrakadabra

It is not weak at all. Hakram was always a potential warlord, the first named ork in centuries!

Unlike others, he do not have to go trough great journies to steel his heart, because Unlike the rest of the orks, he was always one WHO uses his head and restricts his emotions. All he needed to do was to make a decision. Because when Hakram makes a decision, he makes it with full conviction. No half-heartedness in him.

It was the same when he kneeled before Cat. One conversation convinced him, and when Hakram is convinced about something, he is fully convinced.

Anonymous

I'd also like to add that it's silly that Troke had to confirm Hakram's claim to Warlord lest it somehow become a finger on the creational scales (that's some serious namelore for Troke, an orc who comes from a society where no one is named) in their conflicts while immediately moving on to point out what a newcomer Troke is to knowing how to fight like a named. That's some very conveniently narrow expertise right there.

sengachi

Nah.

1) That's not even necessarily namelore, that's just having a lick of political acumen.

Hakram may have known it would put the finger on the scales for him, and been confident that Troke lying would do Hakram more good than harm.

But *Troke* didn't have to know that to make the decision to not call Hakram out. All Troke had to know was that his opponent had spoken a truth and Troke didn't know what kind of

evidence he could back that up with. If he lied, he was banking on Hakram not being able to otherwise prove it. Cus if he lied and then Hakram Spoke or dumped some Name pressure on everyone, or even pulled out a baby Aspect, Troke would be named a liar in front of everyone, and a cowardly one who couldn't even face a counterclaimant directly.

2) There is a **mountain** of difference between knowledge and combat drills. The kind of combat trick Hakram got Troke with happens faster than the speed of thought. Literally, the nerve signals from eye to brain to arm are slow enough, and a blow fast enough, that there's no time for higher order processing. If you have to think about how you'll react in a fight, you aren't reacting in time. The only way to fight better than someone else is to drill, drill, drill, drill, drill, drill, drill, drill, **drill** until your reactions happen at the same automatic level as a flinch reflex.

It doesn't matter if you **know** how to respond to a combat trick, if you haven't drilled how to counter it, it'll get you. And Troke has only been wearing the Claimant's mantle to Warlord for, what, a couple weeks? Tops? He hasn't had time to drill like that, nor another Named to do those drills with. His mantle came in, plopped a new set of reflexes in his brain that his opponent is more familiar with than he is, and even if he knows to do so he hasn't had the time to drill in a new set of replacement reflexes yet.

So Hakram won. When your opponent knows you have a bad reflex and is skilled enough to exploit it, you'll lose every time, no matter what you know.

KageLupus

Not only that, but this is not even the first time we have seen this trick in the story. Cat did the exact same thing way back when she fought that goblin that picked up Squire for all of a fight. She knew that Named instincts take time and effort to overcome and exploited that to create an opening and defeat her opponent.

Hakram doing the same thing is a really neat callback and mirroring of that fight.

[sengachi](#)

I like this end for the Woe. Because the Woe are friends. And they will always, to the end of their days, have each others' backs. But they are not the Calamities, sworn in service to a master and cleaved to her purpose. That's a brittler tie than what they have.

No they each have their own paths, their own goals, and their own drives. And their bond is that they will always value and honor each other's paths.

Hakram's path has always been his own. It started with a curiosity about the forces which shape the world he lives in. A game of stones representing Lords and a Tower. It expanded to include Callow, when he realized they were important. And he joined with Callow's purpose, with Cat, because he saw the importance of being important. Because he knew that to improve his people's lot, what was needed was him supporting her dreams. And she was worth it, and he found worth in kneeling to a worthy Warlord.

But always, even when he was distant from the Steppes, it mattered to Hakram that he was an orc. And he can't sit by and let them not be important, not be another player in the game, when he can make that happen. That's worth setting aside the role of Adjutant for him, however much he might love Cat.

The thing I love about the Woe though?

They're not the Calamities. This isn't a betrayal. And it's not actually an end. Cat will back Hakram in this with a smile on her face and with every drop of love his loyalty has earned. It's sad, yes, that he won't be at her side in the years to come. They'll both have heavy hearts over this. But that doesn't mean he's not still part of the Woe, and that they don't still matter to each other. Cat just gets to be proud of Hakram in a whole new way now.

[Casey Glick](#)

The Woe are a *family*, not a *team*. It isn't a betrayal when your sister takes a job across the country, or when your son moves out for college. It's sad, but that's how life happens.

But it the careers aren't a change to the family itself. New jobs broke up the Calamities, for all that they remained bound to Amadeus. The Woe are tied to Cat, yes, but also to each other. And it doesn't matter if none of them can fight, or if they aren't *useful* in some way. Remember that Hakram cut off his own *hand* to get Vivienne out of a dark place. Can you see Ranger doing that for anyone, possibly even Amadeus?

For the Woe, wherever two of them gather will always be home.

[Liliet](#)

This.

nick012000

So, Hakram's goal here is to turn the Orcs into Prussia: an army with a country attached to it?

[Liliet](#)

Sounds like it, and sounds like it's currently their best bet...

beleester

Yep, stealing Troke's idea and doing it better.

Although I didn't predict "orcish mercenaries" as the middle ground. I suppose if you want to fight but don't want to fight in an organized army, that's the best way to do it.

Miles

Basically the fantassins all over again.

letouriste

" "All orc, where it matters," a woman's voice called out.

Hungry Gods, was that Sigvin? Whoever it'd been there was a gale of laughter as Troke bit down on a scowl"

It tells a lot about hakram sleeping habits he does not know for sure whose voice it was haha

really great chapter. I'm really glad i didn't have to wait weeks to have the falling out of the last one.

The Dragon of the Marshlands

So Cat won't be Warlord. Thought she might be for a few chapters, because war is such a large part of her.

How about a Name Black Queen? Or soething about Foxes (the song in her mind when dealing with the Wandering Bard in Arsenal might be forshadowing). Or some High Priestess of Below. I dont think the Warden of the East sticks.. More suitable would be Dread Empress Catherine with her Chancellor (or reborn Black Knight) Amadeus.

Miles

Her Name will be Name Loremastre, or some other Owner of Named/Pwner of Named theme.

She's pulling away from the ruling business but leaning into the Thrashing of Named role.

Steven Silver

Sooo many one-liners in this I had to stop to "oooooh" "ahhhhh" and "sick burn!!!" For half my reading time ♥

Also, I like how Hakram was such a good fit for Warlord that he kind of got it in an afternoon XD

Creation: "you should be warlord"

Hakram: "No, I'm just here for Cat"

Creation: "but you'd be really good at it~"

Hakram: "...no, I want to keep my oath to Cat."

Creation: "Look: it ain't gonna go good unless you step up"

Hakram: "...I'll think about it"

Creation: "DONE! No backsies!"

[Mental Mouse](#)

Nah, it wasn't Creation forcing him into it, or not exactly. He noted explicitly that as Adjutant, he could have sought to **Find** a path toward dragging an Orcish High Lord into Cat's alliance.

But that would have been "solving the wrong problem", and he was always good about avoiding that mistake. In analyzing the conflict, he found it was rooted in a more basic problem for his people... he decided to solve the *right* problem, and he was uniquely qualified...

Because this was also the culmination of his own story. Not an unquestioning tribe member, but someone who'd had to go away from his people to reach "now I am an orc", who had then spent a decade gathering knowledge, wisdom, and power, and had now returned to his people at the critical time.

Steven Silver

Hey, you say he was uniquely qualified, I say Creation had a groove just right for him. Po-tay-toe, po-tah-toe 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

The difference is, Hakram himself was the one who made that groove. (With Cat's encouragement and training in story-fu.)

Steven Silver

Careful, that's a dangerous misconception. Hakram is a **fit** for Warlord. He did not pioneer the name himself; Orcs already had a concept of what a Warlord should be.

[Liliet](#)

See, you're right, but it's funnier to phrase it the other way.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Am I the only one here who imagined Hakram and Troke in a WWE ring trash talking with a mic before finally fighting to the delight of the fans?

Steven Silver

Not anymore XD

Cicero

Hmmm... so Hakram is looking to make the Orcs into something like the Swiss?

Agent J

What? No. The Swiss are an independent nation that is staunchly neutral. That's not remotely what he's after. Hakram is swinging for a fully autonomous region within the Empire, with strong ties to Callow to boot.

Evgeny Permyakov

>What? No. The Swiss are an independent nation that is staunchly neutral.

Google for 'swiss mercenaries'

[boballab](#)

Yep the Swiss mercenaries were so feared that they became part of a continent wide treaty that limited them to one client: The Vatican.

Cicero

Swiss Mercenaries, back when Switzerland was part of the Holy Roman Empire.

Evgeny Permyakov

>What? No. The Swiss are an independent nation that is staunchly neutral.

Google for 'swiss mercenaries'

[Casey Glick](#)

Ohpleaseohpleaseohplease

Swiss Mercenary outfits for the orcs! Please!

[boballab](#)

Here is food for thought: All of the Woe are moving up to more powerful Names. It started with Zeze becoming the Hierophant,

Vivienne went from Thief to Princess, Hakrum is moving up to Warlord and Cat is moving up to something that can overrule other Named. That leaves Indrani and Cat suspects a fight with Ranger and with the way the story is flowing that is bad for Ranger. I wonder if Black has noticed it yet? Also Ranger has two pupils left one is considered a Hero, the other a Villain, but even though she was a Calamity Ranger comes across as neither Good or Evil. Wonder if the story will force the two pupils to fight each other as well, or if they will have to split Rangers heritage along Good/Evil lines after they beat her?

ohJohN

Three of Ranger's pupils are still alive, not two: Archer, Concocter, Silver Huntress. Alexis the Argent is undeniably a heroine (she can use Light, after all). I think Indrani flirted with neutrality when she first appeared in the story, but at this point she's pretty clearly one of Below's. As for Cocky:

Book 6, Chapter 15: Machinations (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/03/06/chapter-15-machinations/>)

[Liliet](#)

Indrani was a very powerful Named ever since she joined, she was kind of a step above them in even not-her-specialty melee combat until Cat went OP bullshit with Winter.

She doesn't need a more powerful Name, that's not her story. She has the power, she just needs to figure out what she wants to go with it.

[Adrian_V](#)

Mmmm many people think this is the end of the WOE, personally i just see it as each one finally really growing into adults because what is growing but being able to stand on your own for your own sake?

They are simply maturing, and part of that is accepting that each person must walk their own road to their own goals in life, before they were forced to grow but still retained some naivety? childish delusions? whatever you want to call it, point is that like the calamities before them they each will have lives of their own beyond being a band of five.

I think they will end up stronger because of it.

As for the chapter i love how Harkram's pact is basically saying "we suck ass right now, so lets do something and become important", he is taking the best points of each side and adding

more thanks to his experiences, he has seen more of the world so he simply knows more

Frivolous

I wonder to what extent orcs use birth control.

If they don't really, Hakram is very easily going to end up with a lot of kids. Dozens, maybe hundreds.

Good for him.

Miles

They must have some contraceptive artifacts he keeps with him all the time. Otherwise the cost of raising those kids would make it impossible to leave his well paying job to try and be a warlord.

Frivolous

This is irony or sarcasm, right?

I'm really really bad at recognizing either.

Frivolous

I wonder how Cordelia and the Levantines and the rest of the Grand Alliance will view this development.

They didn't resist much the inclusion of the Empire Ever Dark into the Alliance, because the drow were very mysterious and magical, and Catherine led them, but the signatories of the Grand Alliance have a lot of history with the orcs. Familiarity breeds contempt, and hatred.

I'm not sure Hakram will seek membership with the Grand Alliance, but I think he will.

Given that, I'm assuming Catherine will vouch for him, regardless of their personal troubles. It helps that Hakram was always very polite and all when talking with Cordelia and Rozala and the Levantines.

On the other hand, I'm sure EVERYONE will think that it was all Catherine's plan that Hakram became Warlord. She sent him as the lone envoy to the orcs, and bam, he's Warlord! Absolutely no one will think it was Hakram himself who decided it, since he's always been seen as Catherine's henchman.

Many people will be happy, because orcish warriors are good, the situation is desperate, and the more the merrier. Many people will be very suspicious because an orcish Horde led by

Catherine's right-hand man is going to look really scary, especially during mealtimes.

The Horde, the Army of Callow, and the Empire Ever Dark means there are 3 armies led by members of the Woe. That's really scary.

Heaven knows what the heroes will think about it.

Liliet

The drow are not a part of the Grand Alliance. They're a part of the coalition aligned against Neshamah, of which the Grand Alliance is one political entity, but the Grand Alliance itself only includes Levant, Procer and Callow (and used to include Ashur). It's the Good Nations' Club, specifically to give their non-Good neighbours a big fat disincentive to touch them. Cat is planning on making a separate defense treaty with Praes so that should the GA break theirs Callow can call on their Praesi allies and should Praes break theirs Callow can call on the GA.

Hakram is going to be joining the Accords when that becomes relevant, but not the Grand Alliance.

hakureireimu

"Familiarity breeds contempt, and hatred."

Considering how ignorant Procer are wrt the orcs, I'd say they don't have any real familiarity.

Frivolous

hakureireimu: I'd forgotten that, yeah. I remembered just now that the Tenth Crusade had to invade through Callow to reach Praes.

Also that the Exiled Prince (from the Free Cities) thought Willy was racist for hating orcs.

So, retract that part about hating orcs.

My main point that everyone will think Hakram becoming Warlord was all Catherine's plan, though, remains.

Earl of Purple

As a corollary to this, I wonder if he has to re-sign the Truce and Terms. His name's already on there, but he signed it (probably) as Hakram of the Howling Wolves, the Adjutant. Now he's Hakram of the Howling Wolves, Warlord of the Orcs.

Frivolous

Earl of Purple: Don't know. It is an interesting question, yes.

This is the first time someone has changed Name since the start of the Truce and Terms.

At least Hakram didn't change allegiance. He's still of Below, not Above. Becoming a hero would have been really interesting, and problematic for everyone, though not as bad as the Red Axe.

Shveiran

Considering that Transitional Names are a thing, I'm sure the T&T have a provision for this even if we never saw it on screen.

Miles

Volume is a really weird term for economic comparisons, Hakram.

The hides and spears or food that tribes might trade between each other have much lower volume than the water they're undoubtedly shipping into the wasteland but have much higher value to the traditional orc way of life.

Miles

Weird measure*

[Liliet](#)

I think "volume of trade" is a term of art, and measured in \$\$

Xinci

Mm the foundation for any long term stability for the orcs will be transhumanance pacts for the migration of the orcs cattle, probable introduction of more vibrant flora to further add nutrients and variety to the steppe(likely sourced from Cardinal when it becomes active, but the wasteland itself is a treasure trove for such things), and those migrational pacts being enforced somewhat similarly to what Cat plans for the accords, likely with the Warlord as a guarantor/forceful adjudicator. Given how complicated such dealings may get, a Warlord around to help ensure it, is quite helpful.

As the orcs are obligate carnivores the crux of them thriving isn't on is on their cattle and thus what their cattle eat. The steppe is a closed loop in part because anyone one tribes grazing lands determine how big it can grow and any other tribe using that land acts as a threat. Working out transhumanance pacts allows the land to grow more vivacious due to the grass generally being younger and more nutritious at time of consumption, it also

mitigates internal warfare that disunifies as it means that any interfering clans have to deal with multiple defending clans. Notably the Split Tree are in an excellent position to enact these pacts, with the new Warlord Hakram as an enforcer, ...and both the Soldier town orcs and the Raider ones on the steppes would enjoy or likely be drawn to it, even if the soldier town orcs could import grain to feed cattle or goats and such from Praes. This gains the Warlord that needed loyalty as the orcs gain more by cooperating than they do by infighting further, it aids the mitigation of further fragmentation.

The nutrient level in the cattle they eat will depend on the quality of what they eat in turn. So if the orcs can introduce varied high quality flora they can overtime raise both the number of possible cattle sustained by the land as they migrate across it, but also the overall possible number of orcs sustained as they can live off of less meat per cattle, or better said be better fed per cattle, and thus be more likely to survive various environmental pressures and stressors. Aksum's interest in designing monsters and Callow possibly should Masego introduce the Summoners art for making possibly custom made fauna, are probable exporters of aids for generally vivifying the Steppes further. The more orcs the steppes can hold the better they can act as a mercenary state.

The Legionaire Orcs and the Steppe Orcs are possibly going to have a schism in the future unless they are under a similar integrate paradigm, one can already see the competing philosophies within them that may cause eventual infighting unless suborned to a shared sense of purpose. The Legionaire's desires for static towns actually make good possible trade post for guarding the migration of Cattle, while the more mobile raiders are quite useful as counter-agents against dissenting clans who raid those who have accepted migrational pacts.

In other news its quite interesting to see how undifferentiated Names seem to come at a precipital point after a great change has caused the culture its coming from into a kind of clean slate state. Either having lost much of itself so that a new iteration comes as the shattered sub-cultures ameliorate, forceful adaption due to great change, or like in the orcs case erasure of known precepts. Its an interesting pattern in that it can be seen in both Above's "from the ashes" style where Good loses but comes back in the end, and in Below as Villains suborn known groups or resources to bring their vision of how the world should be into fruition often meaning remolding and changing an existent structure. Its kind of like evolutionary change after an extinction, with new creatures filling in niches rapidly.

I do wonder if Hakram felt that bloodlust due to a kind of inbuilt part of the Name that was carried on or if it was there because orcs felt that a Warlord would feel bloodlust and thus that was writ into the Name. His rejection of this and his own

thoughts do make one wonder what his own groove will be for it(similar to how Black was making a new one for Black Knights).

mavant

So are Juniper and Aisha confirmed together, or just kind of obviously pining for each other?

Martin Hrádela

They are interested in each other and both know it by the looks of it.

However they (especially Juniper) are very professional so they are basically waiting to not be on campaign or maybe even retire first. Also the interspecies thing seems to be extremely uncommon so it doesn't help either.

Interlude: West II

"The easy wars are the ones where one side's right and the other's wrong. The terrible ones are where they're both right, because once they know that there's no wrong they'll flinch away from."

– Aretha the Raven, Nicaean general

They were losing the war one victory at a time, Hanno thought.

There'd not been a defeat in Hainaut since the great battle that'd destroyed the principality, and still its defenders were losing the land. Hanno among them. Undaunted by a string of defeats in the fields, the Dead King had begun attacking with renewed vigour and it was working. The trouble was that while Hanno's army had been crushing the dead wherever they met, it could only be in one place. It could not both prevent the dead from reopening the tunnels at Malmedit and prevent them from breaking through at Juvelun, it could not both fight the army coming from Luciennerie out west and relive General Abigail from the latest siege at Lauzon's Hollow.

Hanno's army was spent and exhausted, ever victorious and ever smaller. And even worse was that they were no longer truly an effective shield. The Dead King had begun ignoring the defences in Hainaut and sending large flying constructs – named Pelicans, for their head resembled those of the birds – over the walls to disgorge warbands in Arans and Brabant, where they wreaked havoc

before being slain. The Pelicans themselves avoided fighting, however, and though Antigone had brought down several with storms and lightning more kept coming. General Abigail believed that soon Keter would begin landing mages the same way to create disrupting forces by slaying and raising villages.

The Fox's instincts were sharp enough that Hanno was not inclined to doubt them.

From what he heard, it was much the same to the west. Princess Rozala and her Named had pulled off a miracle just south of Peroulet but the defence line there had still failed for a time and it'd been costly to restore it. To the northwest, the Kingfisher Prince had smashed through every army on his way south to Brus while a sea of undeath nipped at his heels. Then to win his home some respite Frederic Goethal had turned back with half a dozen Named and his retinue to destroy a Crab, getting severely wounded. He would have gotten himself dead instead, had Otto Redcrown not ridden to his rescue and led their retreat through an avalanche. The love ballad about it was highly popular in camp.

Yet for all that the singing did the souls of soldiers good, it did not change the truth of things: the defences south of Cleves were teetering on the brink of collapse and those north of Brus would not hold when the tide came. Everywhere the war was being lost, and as was always the way when doom crept close men looked for someone to blame. The Army of Callow was the least harmful, simply insisting that if the Black Queen were there the dead would already be routed, but others were not so measured. The First Prince was cursed for weakness, Amadis Milenan men lost at the Battle of the Camps that might now turn the tide and the League of Free Cities for having made it all worse.

It was worse between Procerans. Lycaonese blamed feckless southerners, having lost half their princes and all their homes defending strangers they held in contempt, while Alamans cursed the Lycaonese for having drained their lands of men to defend the indefensible and Arlesites for being miserly in helping with the defence of the realm. As for the Arlesites, more and more they questioned their very presence in these parts. Why should they stand against nightmares when their own homes were yet untouched? Should they all die and leave their homeland undefended for when the storm came? Desertions would have been common if there was anywhere safer to flee to. Hanno had kept the army from coming anywhere near Neustal, knowing he'd lose hundreds to Julianne's Highway overnight should he approach the fortress.

Hanno had been giving hope where he could, though not always in manners comfortable to him. Too many called him Lord White, and some of the rumours from further south... He had pushed down the discomfort, it was a small price to pay for keeping the armies

from despair. The Lycaonese captains he had supported when the northerners had almost split over returning to their homelands had begun to look to him for orders, like the Brabantine levies, and even fantassins now sought his commands instead of Princess Beatrice Volignac's – she whose very lands they were fighting in. There was a time where Hanno would have taken a step back, after realizing he now led what was effectively the second largest military force left in Procer, but no more.

The Truce and Terms had been forged under an understanding: he and Catherine would see to the affairs of Named while Cordelia Hasenbach saw to the affairs of state. It was never to be a perfect arrangement, not when Catherine Foundling was also an influential ruler in her own right, but there had been a balance. All contribute, all held up their part. Only now the First Prince no longer did. Reinforcements were no longer coming, the flow of soldiers and supplies tapering off. Salia was not holding up its part of the bargain, the promise that mortal law could see the war prosecuted without need for Named to step in. So what reason was there for Hanno to step back?

He would not hide behind a broken bargain when his duty was clear.

And so he had spoken with Antigone, who had spoken in turn with the only father she remembered. Which led him to a cool morning, standing with only her at his side as in the distance the sun rose and a brisk wind twisted around them. In the distance smoke rose in curtains, Keter's armies ever making a hundred fresh devilries to unleash, but here on the hills the only thing to mar the green grass was soft dew. Greenery and water shivered both as the Witch of the Woods finished the last of her spell, clouds high above dispersing as if they'd been swatted through. A weight settled on the world, dew turning to mist as the grass began to twist and grow.

In the rising mists stood a giant out of the old stories. Bronze-skinned like others of his kind, but none of the Gigantes would ever dare to claim kinship with Kreios Maker-of-Riddles. It would have been absurd, in their eyes, as a fly claiming kinship to a hawk. The Titanomachy kept to no king, but that was only because it kept to something simpler: a god. There had been many, once, but now only one still lived. Crippled, left a shadow of himself. And yet Hanno knew without a doubt that even the spell-shadow now staring down at him could snuff his existence out with a thought. The ancient Titans, the founders of the Titanomachy, had done a great many arrogant things.

Calling themselves gods had not been one of them.

"Antigone."

The voice was fond, thick with affection. Hanno's comrade shifted, head dipping down and to the side to show both love and reverence. What had led Antigone to be raised by the Titan he did not know, much less what had convinced the ancient creature to teach her of the powers of the Gigantes, but their closeness had been evident from the first time he'd seen them. The Riddle-Maker had no such fondness for him, however, and the gaze was not so kind when turned to Hanno.

"White Knight."

"Lord Titan," Hanno replied, simply dipping his head.

Reverence but not love. Insincerity in the language of the Gigantes was seen as highly offensive. Worse than an insult, which at least was clearly conveyed.

"I am told you would make a request."

He straightened.

"I would," Hanno said. "This war, Lord Kreios, is one we are losing."

"So it is."

The indifference was plain to hear. The Riddle-Maker did not involve himself much in the affairs of his own descendants, much less these of humans. To that pale and patient gaze, they were like mayflies: come and gone in a moment. What did petty wars matter to the last of the Titans?

"It will not be like the others," Hanno said. "The Intercessor has meddled. Should it be lost, there will be consequences."

The Titan's gaze was cold.

"To you."

"You are wrong, Lord," Hanno replied. "If this were a crusade, perhaps, but this war is not that. The east came as well, and now the south rises. The world stirs. *This war will not be like the others.*"

Consideration.

"The Young King no longer withholds strength."

A concession.

"Your request?"

Hanno breathed in. Many a time he had thought of what he might say, of what words might sway an entity that had known more years

he had known breaths. A hundred speeches he had crafted and discarded, only to admit the truth to himself: there were no words that would do it. Convince the Riddle-Maker should he not wish to be convinced. All he could do was ask and hope.

"Fight," Hanno of Arwad said, and the word rang of power. *"Stand with Calernia, with life and hope. Stand with us and fight."*

Silence.

"All things pass," Kreios Maker-of-Riddles said. *"You and he alike. Fate cannot be gainsaid or turned back: what must be will be."*

"Apathy?" Hanno replied. *"Is that your answer, last of the Titans? Is that the wisdom your many years have to offer us?"*

He glared, defiant.

"I see no wisdom in this," he said. *"Only weariness, and what worth is that? Who in this world is not weary, Riddle-Maker?"*

"There is no word in any tongue your mind can comprehend," the Titan said, *"that would touch a sliver of what true weariness is. How could you? You grope at a speck of dust in the face of eternity and call it an end. You are not even a beginning, child. You are the dust of dust."*

"Then what holds you back?" Hanno challenged. *"If none of it matters, if we are but dust, what stays your hand?"*

The dark-skinned man raised his chin, glaring up at the shape in the mist.

"Retreat from the world all you like, it does not retreat from you," Hanno said. *"It will knock at your door, Maker-of-Riddles. It may be that you would weather our destruction, but would the Titanomachy?"*

"All things pass," the Riddle-Maker simply said.

Hanno scornfully laughed.

"It may be that you are worse than the elves," he said. *"Even they, in the face of oblivion, can muster more than a shrug."*

That, at last, earned a reaction.

"If you knew the truth of your insult, you would swallow your tongue," the Titan said. *"What the Dawning King schemes is abomination. Parcelling godhead into children, forcing a spring rightfully denied."*

"And this shines kindness on you?" Hanno coldly said. "What a prize to claim, that your apathy is less a curse on Calernia than abomination."

"Your fight means nothing," the Titan said.

"He's right," Antigone said.

Silence. Surprise.

"Antigone?"

"We don't deserve saving," the Witch of the Woods said. "It's still true, what you told me when I was a child: we are petty creatures, humans. Most of us are not worth the saving."

The last of the Titans watched the woman he had raised, wearing her face of painted clay, and said nothing.

"But it's not about us," Antigone said. "It's about you."

She moved her head to the side, tilted it back. Grief, question.

"You stand at the crossroads again," Antigone said. "Do you want to be the seven or the one?"

Hanno's eyes narrowed. He had known that pattern to be older than most suspected, but whatever ancient lore she was speaking of was beyond even the reach of Recall. The Riddle-Maker's pale eyes stayed on the woman he'd raised, silence stretching, and suddenly the pressure vanished. The mist dispersed and the wind began to blow again. The spell-shadow of Kreios was gone.

"Will he come?" Hanno asked.

Antigone's shoulders were tense. *I don't know*, she signed. Hanno of Arwad ruefully smiled, looking up at the sky. This morning the answer had been a no, he thought.

It was a small step forward, but still a step.

—

It was Lyonis that had done it, Cordelia decided.

On the great map at the heart of the Vogue Archive, the grey of death had spread. Bremen and Neustria were both lost to the dead and already the norther border of Brus was being tested. Once the generals of the Dead King had found paths through the swamps, once the thousands of Lycaonese slain were armed and assembled into battalions, the push into Brus would begin and the death knell of Procer would ring. And yet those news had not resonated strongly, down south — only Lycaonese principalities had fallen

and Cordelia's homeland was barely considered part of the Principate in some parts.

It was when the dead had smashed through the last few strongholds in Cleves and toppled the hastily raised defences in northern Lyonis that the panic had begun to spread. Princess Rozala had done the impossible – won three battles in three days with the same army across a breadth of sixty miles – and broken the enemy offensive before restoring the defences, but some had still slipped through. For the first time since the war had begun, bands of undead had made into Lyonis. One had even made it as far south as the border of Salia before being ridden down.

Despite Cordelia's best efforts to maintain the calm, planting rumours it'd been bandits instead, panic had spread like a disease in every direction. The people of the Principate were being confronted with the fallibility of the realm they'd been under all their lives, the thought finally occurring that this wasn't simply another crisis: Procer would be annihilated if it lost and it was undeniably losing the war.

Riots had been only to be expected. In Salia at least Cordelia had been able to put down largely without blood using the alchemical compound the Concocter had sold the Assembly the recipe to. Elsewhere the rioting had been put down violently if it had been put down at all. Entire swaths of Iserre were now in revolt against both Cordelia and their own prince while the ports of eastern Creusens had seized grain barges meant for further north before beginning to turn away all ships. That was not the worst of it, of course. This very morning her spymaster Louis de Sartrons had brought news of a smaller but more personal grief.

Princess Francesca, her friend and ally of almost a decade, was dead. Her palace had been swarmed by a mob of rioters and disaffected soldiers, who'd dragged the sixty-four years old princess into the streets and splattered her head with a rock before displaying her on a pole. It had happened, Cordelia was told, because Francesca had refused to consider what her distant cousin and successor proclaimed within the hour: Tenerife was seceding from the Principate of Procer. Envoys were being sent, Louis had told her, to Empress Basilia of Aenia and the League of Free Cities. Tenerife was leaving a sinking boat in favour of the protection that might be offered by a rising one.

The principality of Orense had followed suit within the week, deposing its distant prince still fighting under Princess Rozala and installing his youngest daughter in his stead, a thirteen-year-old girl who signed whatever the rebel leaders put in front of her to avoid having her throat cut and her ten-year-old brother shoved into the seat instead. Those were the open rebellions, but there were those more discreet.

Cordelia's steadfast ally Prince Renato of Salamans had regretfully informed her he would no longer be able to send food and men north. If he did, he would lose this throne within the month. Prince Salazar of Valencis had done the same thing but less honestly, speaking instead of 'unforeseen delays' in sending both. Cordelia's authority strengthened the further north one went, it could be said, but even there it was thinning. Orne, Cantal and Creusens now refused refugees at their borders no matter what was ordered. The only principalities that still obeyed Cordelia were those who felt the Dead King looming over them and even that rule was not ironclad.

Panic was making men do foolish things. Prince Ariel of Arans, spooked by the growing incursions of the dead into his lands, was trying to approach Callow for protection again – and willing to go under Laure for it, should that be the price. Cordelia was more amused than offended, knowing that neither Queen Catherine nor Princess Vivienne would be remotely interested and that Duchess Kegan, the regent in the capital, was of the opinion that everything east of the Parish should be left to burn. Worse than that was the talk in Brabant, where civil unrest had been placated only by the ruling princess abdicating and promising the offer the crown to the man the people saw as their salvation: Hanno of Arwad, the White Knight.

Cordelia's agents had told her when the Brabant levies had begun to call the man 'Lord White' but, now that the sentiment was spreading through their homeland, she was facing the very real prospect of *Prince White*. The First Prince was not sure she had the votes to prevent confirmation of such a title by the Highest Assembly if the matter came before them. It was a sign of the times. Salia's authority was weakening and now a hundred petty kings were emerging from the cracks on a once-great realm. And yet what could she do? So very little, when it came down to it, but that was no excuse for inaction and apathy.

Cordelia Hasenbach would not stand before the Heavens having known idle hands while the Principate of Procer burned down around her.

And today she would be laying eyes on one of the ways she might yet stem the tide. The weapon had been moved out of Aisne, which was now too close to for her tastes, and brought to Salia itself. Outside the city proper, requiring an hour's ride there and back, but Cordelia would make the time to look at the angel's corpse with her own eyes regardless. The test done in Aisne had made it necessary: if the First Prince was to use such a weapon, she would first gaze upon it. It was the last of what was owed. The man she'd chosen to oversee the matter awaited her at the edge of the grounds, mounted as well, as Cordelia allowed herself a genuine smile: even in these circumstances, it was a pleasure to see Simon de Gorgeault again.

"Your Most Serene Highness," the older man said.

"Simon," she warmly replied.

She had not forgotten his actions during Balthazar's attempted coup, or his loyal service since as her Lord Inquisitor. He'd put down the title to serve here instead, but it had taken little urging. They both knew that spending time curtailing the House of Light now be much like closing the blinds on a home aflame. Besides, she had needed someone she could trust to handle this. He led her through the small houses where the priests and soldiers lived and to the temple that had been chosen to host the corpse. Larger than such a temple out in the countryside should be, for it hosted the tomb of some distant Merovins, but not a structure of great beauty: it was all worn pale stone and tall angular ceilings.

Once windows of tainted glass would have added some charm, but over the years some had been broken and replaced by simple green glass. Yet the temple was large enough and it was placed far from prying eyes, which was what had been required.

"I would advise that you gather yourself before entering, Your Highness," Simon said after they dismounted. "It is... an experience."

Cordelia silently nodded, eyes going down to her palm. She could faintly feel the burn of laurels against it, a pale echo of the searing pain she had felt the night she caught the coin of the Sword of Judgement. Simon de Gorgeault led the way into the temple, guards closing the gates behind them, and silence washed over Cordelia. It was as if the air had turned to water, and though she gulped down breaths she found her heart going wild. Simon's cheeks were flushed but he seemed otherwise unaffected, perhaps from practice. Cordelia eventually gathered her bearings, smoothing down her dress and proceeding further into the temple.

There must have been rooms and halls she walked through, but she could barely see any of them. The slipped through her mind as if it were oily fingers. All that the First Prince recalled was movement, and then she stood before it. The weapon. The ealamal. It felt like the bones of a grand creature, curving along the ceiling, but there was nothing natural in this: wings of burnished copper spread wide, touching... something. A spine, Cordelia's mind insisted, but it was not of bone. Her eyes shied away from it and what she could glimpse seemed like stone sometimes, though impossibly small compared to the burning wings of copper, and yet at others it seemed like translucent spike of swirling colours. Her eyes watered from trying to look at it.

"Only priests capable of wielding Light can look directly at it, Your Highness," Simon said.

"The wings seem as though they might be simply copper, but the... spine," Cordelia quietly said. "That is not of Creation."

"You have not looked long as the wings, then," Simon said. "That is for the best. I have known shallower seas."

Cordelia shivered.

"But it worked, when used?" she asked.

"It is as an amplifier for Light, and something more too," Simon agreed. "It carries something of the Choir of Judgement within itself and spreads it wherever it goes. It would incinerate undead and devils it touches, certainly, but beyond that the matter grows complicated."

"It did not kill anyone who could use Light," Cordelia said.

"But it killed soldiers as well as the criminals, Your Highness," Simon said. "Not all of them, but many. Should a wave of such power pass over Procer, hundreds of thousands will almost certainly die."

Judgement was strict and not inclined to mercy when doling out punishment. The weapon, when used, seemed to mimic the harsh attentions of that Choir. And people were only people, with all the frailties and wickedness that implied. Should the weapon be used on a large scale, many thousands would be slain. But not all of the Principate, Cordelia thought. Many, too many, but not *all*. And even should Catherine's worst predictions come true and the Intercessor seek to influence such a weapon – which should not be possible, with Judgement silenced by the Hierarch's spirit – to spread over all of Calernia, it would not represent annihilation. Some would survive. It would be a monstrous order to give and a horrifying outcome, the First Prince would not pretend otherwise.

It would still be preferable to letting the Dead King kill every living thing on the continent.

"Have it prepared for use," Cordelia rasped out.

The former head of the Holy Society stiffened.

"I have misgivings, Your Highness," Simon said. "I understand your instinct: it will take months of priests pouring Light to make of the corpse something that would give the Dead King pause. Yet such power, when gathered, has a way of demanding use."

"In five months, the Principate will collapse," the First Prince of Procer said.

The older man paused.

"We have too many refugees, Simon, and not enough fields," she said. "I have been staving off the end by buying every scrap of grain I can borrow and beg, but the point of no return has come and gone. We have too many refugees and not enough fields, we are no longer sustainable."

"Can Keter not be toppled?" the older man asked.

"Undead will be at the gates of Salia by the time our armies encamp below the walls of the Crown of the Dead," Cordelia said. "I expect by then the south will have effectively seceded anyhow. I have ensured our armies will have supplies to carry on that last strike, but I can do no more than that."

"Can the Chosen not turn the tide?" Simon asked, almost plaintively.

"The Chosen," Cordelia hissed, "are the backbone of our defeat. How much time did we spend wrestling them into order as again and again they threatened the foundations of the alliances keeping us alive? The Damned might be a pack of rapacious killers, but they never gave us half the trouble the *Chosen of the Heavens* did. The Red Axe, the Mirror Knight, even the White Knight himself."

She clenched her fists.

"I was promised that the Named would be seen to, but in this only the Black Queen kept her word," Cordelia Hasenbach harshly said. "The White Knight failed utterly in this, and I will not now rely on him when the fate of every living soul in Calernia rests in the balance."

She stared down Simon of Gorgeault.

"Have it prepared for us," the First Prince repeated, and this time the ring of an order was unmistakable.

The laurels burned against her palm, but Cordelia did not flinch. She would do what she must so keep the west in the war until the last moment. And should it stumble, should it fail?

She would, again, do what she must.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Steven Silver

"Will he vote?" Hanno asked.

Antigone's shoulders were tense. I don't know, she signed.
Hanno of Arwad ruefully smiled, looking up at the sky. This morning the answer had been a no, he thought.

Linnus42

To ErraticErrata, I know what "niggardly" means but I strongly advise against using that word period. I would suggest using any sort of synonym you want quite frankly.

Oshi

+1

Tenthyr

Yep.

icouldbeusingmytimebetter

Strongly agree

[TeK](#)

I mean, I understand why, but WHY? Is there anyone in the world who will find offence in the word that sounds like another, even though it has absolutely nothing to do with it? By which point it gets too absurd?

Linnus42

I mean you say that like the word EE used is the only one can convey his point. I think he is much better writer then that. What is the harm in simply using a different word that has the same meaning but doesn't sound like a heinous racial slur?

Velrix

Sounds like a racial slur ? Sounds ? Hey stop writing you're insulting. If you're indisposed by something that Sounds like another, go see a psy, you're indisposing Me.

isioisi

You are the ones continuing to give that word power by trying to strike down any that even share passing similarity. See it, recognise it is not the same, and move on. Don't make an issue out of something that isn't.

[sengachi](#)

The word was given power by a lot of extremely evil people and their extremely evil actions. That well is poisoned, and you can't unpoison it by insisting on drinking from it anyway anymore than you can undo antebellum slavery.

AbraKadabra

Extremely evil, huh? How Extremely? Like dread empress triumphant evil? Or Just Malicia evil? Or you are Just throwing around big words?

Miles

May she never RETURN!

glares

Insanenoodlyguy

And if we were attempting to use that word, "take it back" sure. This word however, is not that word.

[Adrian V](#)

The simple fact that it isn't, changing it because it sound ssimilar is not only stupid but dangerous because it gives power to that other word, instead of help it only agravates things

Iceember

I think most people don't and won't have issue if EE does decide to use another word.

The issue stems from the fact that someone is policing a word that sounds like another word that has been used in a negative context for a long time. To add onto that, the policing of this word is grounded in the guess that someone may take offense to the use of the word.

ISiejek

I think you got it bang on, Would EE changing that would be offensive, no, is somebody claiming that you should otherwise someone might be offended by utterly ridiculous, yes (not the claim that somebody might get offended that's probably true, but those are the people whose opinions we really want to enforce now are they...).

[Hargabga](#)

No harm. I, however, resent the precedent of self-censure on the grounds of "it sounds similar". A line has to be drawn somewhere. Getting rid of established historical racist

slurs is a good thing, because it shuts down on the ideas of the olden days not allowing them to propagate itself further. It makes an objective impact on the world.

Getting rid of everything that can be even remotely construed as offensive serves noone and just makes things worse, because this kind of thinking does not stop. Because you are not fighting harmful ideas and stereotypes, you are creating them.

Say you forbid everything that even sounds like a racial slur. Now the real racists pick up a new word to do the same. You forbid it and it's lookalikes. Congratulations. They pick up a new one. The cycle continues. You have no language left after a few iterations. That is what happens if you just never stop.

caoimhinh

In this day and age, some people just love to find something to be offended about, no matter how ridiculous it is.

Onos

+1

[Liliet](#)

I'm with Linnus42 here.

Abrakadabra

Nobody cares...

Daltos

You obviously, seeing as you care enough to comment.

Abrakadabra

It means that offering 'I am with this side' is a worthless comment that is akin to saying 'Einstein said that' which is also stupid since it appeals to authority, but it does not even have that dubious authority here.

[sengachi](#)

It's not about finding something to be offended about. It's about recognizing that some people have very good, very personal reasons to flinch and have bad reactions to the word. (Yes I know there's not etymological connection, that's not the point). A whole lot of deeply fucking evil people poisoned the English language for any word which

sounds like this. If you have an issue with the fact it's a word people have a bad reaction to, take it up with *them*, not the people pointing it out.

Shveiran

It is not my habit to diminish pain, but in my opinion anyone having a painful reaction to a word someone uses without any ill intent because it sounds like another, unrelated word needs to work on their own knee-jerk reactions; that burden is not on the speaker. This is not about respect, for no disrespect is being offered.

I'd also humbly put forward that, if we mean to ban similar sounding words and not just the offending ones, we'll never get it done.

After all, a shrimp is not a simp, a boar is not a whore, a rope is not a rape, I often have a shave but I never had a slave, and a bastard is not made of mustard.

Asking people not to be offensive is reasonable. Asking them to go this far is simply impractical, and therefore doomed to fail even if we agreed it would be more courteous to do so.

webster_json

'simp', 'whore', 'rape', 'slave', 'bastard'... are all not particularly offensive terms. At most 'rape' can be triggering, but it remains a widespread word largely because it is common and useful (as a word, not the act itself).

The word we're talking about... I think a lot of people in this thread aren't American. I don't know if you are. Maybe. But it's not a swear word, it's not an insult per se, it's not a 'bad word'. If you use that word, it's because you want to be seen as signaling that black people are inferior.

The period of slavery is America's greatest shame, multiple centuries of what cannot be called anything but evil, evil committed unrepentantly as a society... and more to the point, it *still echoes today*. Race relations in the US may be always improving, but they are *not good*. You can trace a direct path from police violence, or deeply-entrenched poverty, or segregated schools (which still exist de facto in many cities, even those like NYC that are naturally highly diverse), and take that back to the Civil Rights era, or the former decades of redlining, or the prior history of the Jim Crow Era, all the way back to the Civil War – a war that

killed more Americans than all others in our history *combined*, despite a smaller population, and a war which is still, again, extremely visible today (I've seen Confederate flags (which technically weren't, but anyways) waved at rallies by the dozen before – in a Northern state, no less). And, of course, centuries of enslavement prior to that, on which our very country was *built*.

Other countries don't follow the same linguistic standards, which is why telling Spanish-speakers not to use 'negro' is silly. Other countries don't have the same history of enslavement within the bounds of their own country, which is why they may be more blase about such things. But in this one case – especially when, frankly, 'niggardly' is an extremely rare adjective with a meaning easily covered by synonyms – I think it's absurd to equate it to 'being afraid' of common slurs.

Shveiran

I am not American, but what of it? I'm sorry, but English is not just the American language, and is being used on a large portion of the internet by non-native speakers like myself besides.

You tried to explain why that word (which is not niggardly) provokes such a strong reaction in the U.S.. I dare say I understand, but I don't think it matters, for the same reasons you too are applying to my examples.

You say "they are all not particularly offensive", and I assume you are in good faith and speak from your own personal experience.

My experience is different.

In Italy, until not so long ago, being born out of wedlock was a real cause of social stigma; trying to explain to them that being called bastards as they were growing up was not offensive would not go over well.

Insulting someone by calling them a simp means to champion a toxic view of sexuality that is rampant in my country, which influenced my own upbringing and I can see impacting the kids I follow as part of my charity.

Insulting someone by calling them a whore is both punching down on women often enough forced into such a career (at least here, I don't know how many are "freelancers" in other countries) and again perpetuating the stereotype that men play the field but women shouldn't.

As of slavery, well, here the word you are fighting

against is only used to mean “black-skinned foreigner”; the foreigners I’ve met don’t like it, obviously. But they don’t flinch. Their eyes harden instead when someone uses a turn of phrase like “I was worked as a slave”, because slavery is what they suffered (some, sadly, even in Italy in the work-camps of the Mafia).

Please understand that I am not claling you out because you said those words were not offensive.

I’m just trying to say that, in my opinion:

- if we try to rank words for offensiveness, most of our criteria will not be objective but based on our experience;
- the Internet is not on American soil;
- giving heat to words that sound like others seems rather silly and impractical to boot.

We are a long way from learning to talk without using actually offensive words with each other; to already include in our focus innocent words that sound almost like those is doomed to fail. Trying to fight on all fronts may be (may be) right in principle, but it nevertheless guarantees defeat.

ISiejek

I just like to say I’m really impressed with how respectfully and effectively you made your point here, that’s rare to see on the Internet nowadays

Josh

Care to explain why choosing a different word is such an unfair burden to place on someone, and how you imagine the moral calculations between someone being upset vs the seconds it would take to look up an online thesaurus would go?

While I’m asking these questions, care to add how someone should know if another person means them ill-intent other than by judging behaviors and the person’s response to being told that one of their behaviors has causes some harm? Exactly how much etymology should someone have to study before you’d allow them the human decency to request that you not do something that hurt their feelings? Do you have a bunch of tests you carry around so that you can accurately judge whether or not anyone you speak to that might take offense at your word choice has the prerequisites for you to care? Would it make any impact at all in your life for you to think a little longer before using a word that might be misinterpreted, at least an impact other than the outrage you might feel that someone out there might not

have to feel hurt and alienated because you can't use a word that only barely was used before people raised a fuss about it?

It is a matter of respect. If someone asks you to not do something for them and you turn around and either condescend and argue with them about their feelings validity, or you straight up tell them you don't care about them and will continue doing it anyway, that is disrespectful and unkind.

Abrakadabra

I am sniggering at your stupidity, snowflake.
Yes, sniggering another Word to ban. After that you can burn all the books that ever used such words. Just like the real racist did in Berlin way Back.
Anyway, good crusade to you, little reverse ayan, and good night.

Hakram's Dead Hand

Yeeesh. "Snowflake" "little reverse ayan" All you've done is belittle and insult in this entire thread.
Maybe you should take a step back and calm down, or try having a civil conversation. There's no reason to be intentionally toxic, Abrakadabra, and it might do to have some consideration for others.

Abrakadabra

You are correct, and I might have overreacted. But I think he just asked for it really.

Zach

There's a very big difference between the word in question being used in writing and being used in speech. With the latter, it's actually reasonably possible to mistake it for a racial slur. In writing, however, it is not. There's also a difference between a situation like this (where there's nothing actually wrong with the language used) and something like misgendering someone (where the language used is incorrect and a specific person is the target of the language). These things should not be conflated.

It's kind of sad seeing this sort of thing, because this meaningless nonsense is basically what people are forced to focus on when they realize that they can't actually influence any of the things that materially impact people's lives. Since there's nothing people can do about the issues that cause actual material

suffering, they just endlessly quarrel on the internet about cultural minutiae.

veritas

It's not unfair, it's ridiculous. You can't go through life expecting to not be offended. You do not have the right to not be offended. You can't have disagreement without risk of offense. You can't really have progress without ideas being challenged, therefore risking offense.

You're asking people who are trying to do something great (like provide us content) to waste time trying to avoid every little thing that might offend someone in this big wide world. The sheer arrogance of that request is astonishing because you're asking for an exercise in futility. It doesn't matter if it takes only a second. We all have very limited time on this planet. Engaging in something as pointless as using different words is a waste of their life. No, you don't get to make this kind of request without ridicule.

Also where is the line drawn? Any time someone doesn't like an argument, they can claim the argument was offensive. What is even the point of discussion?

There's a big difference between respect and civility. Most people are civil to people they don't know. That is NOT respect. And most people haven't done enough with their lives that they merit real respect.

Evaluating intent is always contextual. It's part of social interaction. If this is a serious question, you need to learn how to actually interact with people.

Raved Thrad

This. Exactly this. People have gotten so used to shouting "waah I'm offended" and having others chime in on it online and subsequently bullying people into capitulating to them that they've forgotten one simple thing:

Offense gets you nothing. You are owed nothing due to your being offended.

Being offended is a *choice*. You saw something, you processed it, and you chose to get your dander up. *Nothing* is inherently offensive, and citing that you are offended by something is you expressing a subjective situation, not an objective one.

And again, it gets you *nothing*.

You can shout to the highest heavens about how something offends you. Offenditard religiots and conservatards get in my face all the time about how I'm a hellbound atheist who offends their moral sensitivities. They can shout themselves hoarse until they turn blue and it still gets them nothing.

Something offends you? Then go unoffend yourself. That's the only sane, logical, and adult thing to do. Everything else is a childish tantrum.

Rynjin

No one is obliged to acquiesce to every asinine request someone has. Refusing to do so is neither condescending or unkind, it's simply a matter of not letting someone else's raw, unfettered selfishness rule their life.

If it were actually something offensive, certainly. If your best argument is "it sounds vaguely like an offensive word but I know it's not", no, absolutely not.

This is that debacle with the Japanese streamer getting banned on Twitch for saying "nigerundayo" (run away) in his own language all over again. Absolutely fucking stupid.

Raved Thrad

Ugh, you should have seen when duhMurrican SJWs discovered that a region in my homeland is named "Negros," completely overlooking the fact that we were enslaved by the Spanish for almost 400 years. They went on long diatribes about how it was racist and offensive and demanding that we change the name of the place.

Fucking idiots.

M4X1MAL

Stop being ridiculous. What about the country of Nigeria? Should we avoid speaking its name because it reminds people of a certain slur and makes them uncomfortable? Should Nigeria change its name for that reason? I bet you're an american, right?

Abrakadabra

Ah, and when I eat the candy that is named negro after the italian inventor? Because that was his name. Should we Just throw away everithing that EVER offended someone?

Josh

No, but you should take steps to avoid using words, ideas, and concepts that would probably offend someone, regardless of whether or not you agree with their feelings.

At least you should if you want to be a person that can be called kind. The validity of anyone else's feelings but your own aren't your business to litigate. Their feelings belong to them and whether they're valid (or not) is up to them as well.

If you could avoid a behavior that could cause harm to someone else but don't, you're an unkind person. If you could easily avoid a behavior that causes harm (like opening up a thesaurus and picking any other word) but you dont because you have this idiotic belief that what you think is offense-worthy is the only thing that should be offense-worthy, then I'd call you a shitty person.

Other people's feelings matter more than your own, and everyone like you's, moral grandstanding about censorship.

AbraKadabra

Well, then I am a shitty person. And fuck you.

[Sparky \(@ProsocialSparky\)](#)

Correct, that's how we describe people who don't prioritize the well-being of others.

When people don't like you and decide to screw you over because you're useless, now you know why. You have no one but yourself to blame.

AbraKadabra

You are a selfdeluding jackass WHO thinks know others by a couple of words written. I care a out people. But strangers who wants to rule the way I speak and think? They can go to the deepest Hell and drown in their own shit.

In your heart you and your buddy think yourself the master of those you would guide towards your

'better world', or whatever you have. Because you believe you know better. You don't.

Josh

I feel like I had to come back to this and respond, share my opinion. I don't like the drive that people have to try and paint a person by a single aspect of their life. What everyone has seen of them (pronouns unknown, feel free to clarify Abrakadabra) in this comment thread is a negligible part of who they are.

Abrakadabra is a person who has done and will do awesome things for people around them. There are people that cherish them and for good reason. It's hella rude to say that they are useless and not liked, even if I were to grant that the measure of a person's worth is usefulness or popularity (which I'm not). I think it's a mean, petty, and inconsiderate act to try and attribute the issues we have with their perspective as a fundamental character flaw, especially if you have no intent to try and address those things and are just attacking someone's character and self-esteem because of the gratification it gives you.

This topic and Abrakadabra's responses might have a lot more of a profoundly negative impact on your mood than it does on mine because of your experiences, in which case I'm not above being a jerk when I'm upset either and it's a lot easier to say that you should be kind to others when you're not also trying to deal with personal emotions. That being said, I'm not obligated to stand aside when I feel one person is doing things that might hurt another person, even if we both nominally agree that Abrakadabra's view can be really insensitive. I mean it seriously when I say that I care about other people's feelings, and that doesn't stop being true just because I think someone is doing cruel things.

Abrakadabra

Like I care about pronouns and whatnot... For all intents and purposes I might be not even a human but a sentient ice cream machine. Because it matters not on the internet... Similarly you cannot REALLY be cruel to someone over the internet, though I saw some who went great lengths to do that, and the attacked party just turned off the computer and had a laugh.

Because noone can force the other to do anything over the internet, and that is what makes it great!

So yea, because of the suggestion that I have to do something like opening a thesaurus for the sake of someone I will never meet I myself might got offended without noticing.

I am sorry about reacting harshly.

But my main point stands, forcing others to something, and presuming to declare what is moral and what is not, moreover having the gall to Tell that whoever does what I want is good, and who does not is evil (or insensitive in this case) is really rude and offending in itself, far more than a misinterpreted Word might be.

Which misunderstanding can be cleared up immediately anyways while the intent to define for others what they should do and what is forbidden cannot be misinterpreted.

Josh

Since I'm already here to respond to Sparky, I might as well take the time to respond here. I don't think that's true, and I don't think you think that either, so I don't know why you felt the need to respond with a lie and an insult. Rather, I don't see why you would feel the need to do that other than to be a disingenuous dick.

Message received, you care nothing for my opinion, your mind is made up, and there's nothing I could say to get you to reconsider. I'll not try anymore, and I wouldn't have even come back in for this response if not for the dishonesty and hostility. Hope you change your mind at some point in the future, cause I want to live in a world where people care more about each other than they do trying to dismiss and not care about others because of their own limited perspective.

AbraKadabra

Limited perspectives have a thing for going them, you must admit. They are honest.

'Those are friends with everyone really friends with none.'

So I hope you will come to really, REALLY care about someone or a narrow group to the exclusion of everyone else, and realize that the opinion of strangers not matters to you that much.

[sivarajan](#)

I feel offended by all your comments. Are you going to take the easily-avoidable step of never posting here again? Or are you going to question the validity of my feelings?

Josh

I'll post because I believe that arguing for understanding and tolerance is more important than trying to tolerate intolerance. I think that trying to explain or share my pov is a worthy cause if it means that I could maybe change someone's mind and they then become a little bit more sympathetic and compassionate to others. I weigh that my doing something to achieve that goal is more important to me than stepping down because someone doesn't want to listen to me.

If the topic was less fundamental to who I was and what I cared about, then I probably would just stop if asked. I realize in not doing that, however, that you said my comments offended you, and while I won't necessarily stop speaking on fear of offending you, I will apologize and ask for clarification on how I offended and the emotional context of why so that I could maybe find a way of achieving what I want while also not hurting you.

It's a compromise, not a battle to the death. What could I offer to make things easier on you while still getting what I want? And if there's an impasse and nothing can be worked out, I try to empathize and be kind but continue with what I was doing and let you handle yourself until a compromise can be reached. I care about your feelings, not the exclusion of my own, but just because you're a person and have inherent value.

Rynjin

The "tolerating intolerance" tack only works if you're combating actual intolerance. Instead, you are IMAGINING intolerance, because you...don't understand English very well? I'm not sure.

Yes, absolutely, if someone is being racist, or sexist, or otherwise discriminatory, you are not obliged to hear them out. But that, again, only applies if they are actually doing so. You lose the moral high ground the instant you change tactics from combating actual injustice, to pushing the idea that anything vaguely resembling intolerant speech should be censored; and I'm not even talking about dog whistles here, before you change the subject, I'm talking about this literal situation where a word "looks racist" through whatever twisted lens you want to view it through, regardless of its actual meaning, and so should be censored.

Your own misunderstanding is not an excuse to claim victimhood.

Josh

I'm not arguing for censorship, nor do I think the word is racist.

What I'm saying is that you shouldn't need either of those to be true before you bother to care about what other people are feeling. That the entire facade of trying to determine the etymology of a word and whether it's racist or not is just an excuse to try and change the subject. Notice how you are not engaging on the grounds of "if something makes someone uncomfortable, I should try not to do that thing to them" and instead the topic gets drug back to racism and how evil censorship is.

I have no desire to dictate what words, phrases, feelings, ect that you have and use. What I care about is trying to share my value of compassion and empathy, and I think that if I communicated correctly, someone would understand that starting a flame war over an uncommon word isn't worth the strife it would cause people.

Maybe some people don't understand English words, who gives a shit? Does that make them any less deserving of compassion? Not to me, and I hope not to anyone else either.

Rynjin

The problem here is your definition of "compassion" seems to be "everybody does what I

say". That's not compassion. It is, as I put it before, selfishness.

If 99% of people have no problem, but you have a problem, the problem is typically you. No one is obliged to tiptoe around saying anything for the sole benefit of you, and only you. The compassionate thing to do here is to realize that something has hurt you, but no harm was done, or meant, or could be inferred without your own specific hang up and so...you move on. Get the fuck over it.

Here's a quickie example. I fucking hated my dad, right up until he died last year. I get a twinge of anger, tinged with jealousy, any time I see excitement over Father's Day festivities, whether it be ads or just people on social media posting stuff about how much they love and appreciate their fathers.

That's a me problem. Full stop. How much of a prick would I have to be to go out there and say "Yeah, hey, I know you're all having a great time, but I don't actually give a shit. Father's Day makes me feel bad, so can you all stop celebrating?"

It would not be compassion if everybody suddenly decided to make their lives worse to make my life marginally better one day out of the year. And if you multiply that among the ~7.5 billion people on this planet, your definition of "compassion" is untenable. You can't expect everyone to cater their entire lives around your whims.

Henry

If a word used with no racist intent that only barely sounds like a racial slur causes you pain of any variety I think that's more on your deeply seated issues than the person who used it. Like can we not say Niger because it vaguely sounds like the N-word. Of course not it's completely unrelated. Like I get the urge to be respectful to people and acknowledge their feelings but you have to recognize that asking someone to change your word I just vaguely sounds like something bad is patently insane.

[Adrian V](#)

You can almost see where the people grew up because of their reactions, to most people outside the US the whole thing seems ridiculous, by your flag I remember you are Colombian

so i bet you know 1 or 2 people that others just call "Negro" as an alias or something without ANY offense

caoimhinh

Yep, here in Colombia racism isn't that much of an issue except in some very isolated cases, since there was a lot of miscegenation here, so most people are mixed race, even if some may want to pretend to be pure caucasian or pure African American.

I supposed is a similar phenomenon to how the people who use the word "nigga" the most are black people but their use of the word wouldn't raise any eyebrows, while it would be scandalous for a white person to use that word.

About people being called "negro" or "negra", I know dozens actually. I live in Cartagena, which is a coastal city, and due to its history, the skin tone of people here tends to be darker than those near the capital, and our cultural heritage is a bit different too. Here, there are many that are called "el negro" o "la negra" and there is absolutely no disrespect or offense meant nor taken.

A word has power because of how it is used, and due to the meaning attached to it. And it is ridiculous to avoid or ban words because they are similar to other words.

Here there have been cases of someone using the word "negro" as an offensive term, and that's immediately noticeable by anyone who hears how it is spoken, and that is not okay here, it's not tolerated. It's immediately obvious when someone uses the word as an insult or with ill intentions.

Josh

I'm calling bullshit. Im going to go out on a limb and make a sweeping statement: there isn't a country in existence that doesn't have any issues with racism. Even a cursory Google search reveals several articles from Colombian human rights groups with damning statistics regarding afro-colombians as a minority group.

To be compassionate to you, a report from one of those human right groups does mention that this idea of a post-racial Colombia with a "no racism here, no sir" attitude was a deliberate myth spread by politicians.

That sort of propaganda has been spread by a lot of ruling classes with (probably) a lot more signs of overt racism and was still swallowed by millions, so I can understand why you'd believe that, but I'm pretty sure you're incorrect and that if you called up a local human rights group they'd be more than happy to tell you all

the specific ways that there is a racism problem in Colombia.

Abrakadabra

Human rights groups, huh? You do realize that the very livelihood of those people depends on finding offense everywhere? They would be without a job pretty soon otherwise, so I take statistics like that with a grain of salt.

Josh

Ask anyone working for a human rights group how many of the people they know would gladly sacrifice their job if it meant that they would accomplish their goal.

Ask the leaders of those groups what percentage of the labor that occurs under them is volunteer driven, as opposed to a paid position, and even further as opposed to a well-paid position.

Or, you know, you could look that stuff up if you truly believe that so many people are willing to put so much effort and misinformation into keeping a supposedly make-work job.

Abrakadabra

Yeah, if asking would provide honest answers, right? And what they believe not make it true in any case. Self important people WHO thinks themselves heroes are everywhere. Some even makes a living out of it.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

While I agree that words like "niggardly" should not always be avoided, you're clearly just a racist who's annoyed that people frown on racism. Stop projecting your self-serving, cynical nature onto others for a moment and you'll find there are plenty of honest activists in the world. But of course, you're too weak to do this.

Abrakadabra

Do you know Why cinicism never dies out despite being so looked down upon? Because it is mostly correct in describing human behaviour. Because of that 'mostly' part I am a realist instead. And honestly self aggrandizement is a very common

motivation for many people. To fight for a 'worthy' cause, yes that is a great temptation. And also the reason why it makes many people biased in looking at and correctly understanding reality.

[Adrian_V](#)

Read again, he says it does exist but in a minority, for that matter don't trust everything the internet says because i bet most of the racism present involves the group we call "guajiros" rather than black people, here in venezuela is like that, well only in the parts that have a frontier with colombia.

Personally i trust my own experiences living here and of those i know personally and it all tells me serious racism is almost not existent here, in almost 30 years the only case of racism i have seen came from a family of relatively recent immigrants (yeah the irony is great, just goes to show you the kind of logic those people have)

[Liliet](#)

I'm Ukrainian, yet I can somehow follow the argument without problem.

It's about empathy and respect, not about origin (though origin does play a role, I'm sure it's easier to have empathy and respect for issues closer to home)

[sivarajan](#)

The word "empathy" sounds like "psyscopathy," an ableist slur against neurodivergent people. Please stop using it.

[sivarajan](#)

*psychopathy.

[sengachi](#)

It really doesn't matter if they're etymologically distinct. The first flinch reaction for a lot of people when reading it is negative, there's a good reason for that negative reaction, and there's just no point when other words with less baggage will do.

[anonymous4968](#)

There is no point. If it makes people uncomfortable for no justifiable reason, particularly when other less offensive words could be used. It happens all the time anyway.

One great example is Rapeseed. Even if the etymology of the word is the old Latin word Rapa, literally meaning Turnip. The sheer word Rape sensitive enough to be avoided. That's why in most countries it's called Canola now.

therealgridlock

You hear about that time feminists got upset over rape yellow paint?

You know, cuz they thought it was piss yellow, not the plant that's yellow and grows in massive yellow fields.

Funny how the more things change the more they stay the same.

[anonymous4968](#)

That sounds like like "feminists" to me and more like multiple supposedly higher intelligence somehow not realizing the multiple outs that could've avoided any problems throughout the whole release cycle. For example, calling it turnip yellow.

It is also highly off topic.

[anonymous4968](#)

Less like*
Higher intelligences*

Why can you not edit nor delete wordpress comments?
That's somehow worse than twitter.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, there are people who will find offense. Many of them. Trying to dismiss them as "absurd" just doesn't fly. Bluntly, that fight has been lost.

[sivarajan](#)

To paraphrase Kairos, "The Age of Reason is not dead yet. Not while I breathe."

Shveiran

In hindsight, perhaps championing the Age of Reason with a quote from a self-proclaimed madman was a mistake.

tmightyquinn

Because the fundamental purpose of writing a story is to evoke an emotion in the reader by immersing them in a world and making them care about it, I would agree that taking out the “niggardly” is the right call. *Not* because the word should be illegal for all time, but because it probably evokes the wrong emotion in readers like myself who are familiar with the colossal fallout of the N-word.

The word “niggardly” breaks immersion for me, because when I come across it I think “holy s*** is that allowed?” for a moment before realizing that it’s a different word. Suddenly the reader is thinking about racism and linguistics instead of whatever cool thing is happening in the story. Case in point: this comments section

Whether the word *should* be tainted is kinda beside the point, because for many readers, it already is. That’s not to say you can’t use it, just that doing so might have an emotional effect. This is, incidentally, why you’re more likely to see things like the verb “retard” (as in to hold back) in papers or articles, because those writings are more about information than emotion, and the baggage doesn’t matter as much.

To summarize:

- you can use the word “niggardly” all you want, I don’t think anyone will be offended so much as surprised
- I personally won’t ever use it in a story, because in my cultural context it will likely evoke an emotion I do not intend

jamesc9

I’m used to stories about USians who can’t distinguish between ‘pediatrician’ and ‘pedophile’, and enact vigilante justice against doctors. A web search finds events that purport to be instances.

I don’t know that forestalling such people is a just thing. I could imagine thinking it a pragmatic thing. If the other alternative is criminalising stupidity, I would not vote for it.

[GoodGirlJW](#)

An extremely large portion of the world would, yes.

Anonymous

The word “niggard” does not share any common root with “nigger”. It isn’t particularly offensive language. This is

simply being oversensitive, imo. It's one thing to avoid words that can give genuine offense and another to avoid words because they sound vaguely similar to offensive words even though anyone can tell that it is a different word.

At this stage what you are doing has no relation to the concerns of actual black people and nothing is bettered for it, practically speaking. You're simply frustrating the ability of people to express themselves for the sake of misplaced moralization.

Raven

not to mention the fact that the word "nigger" is only really a thing in the US, whereas I'm willing to bet that a lot of the readers are from other parts of the world (myself included) and don't draw any parallels to the n word unless its pointed out

[Kharn](#)

As a black man living in the U.S. y'all sound dumb as shit. Nigger and Niggardly are two different things. Sure, I get the obvious point everyone is making but that's just being a bitch, in all honestly. The moment I read the word I knew a hundred hundred people would make a fuss about it

Henry

I know I didn't and I am from the US. I'm pretty sure if we were to take a straw poll of people asking them if they got any connection before it was pointed out to them most of them would say no

ISiejek

Yeah I didn't even notice that it was a little bit alike, I read the word knew what the word meant because I've read words before and I'm not a four-year-old and have no problem with it, did run out of popcorn while reading all of the comments though 😂

caoimhinh

Lol yeah, the moment I saw the word niggardly written there, my reaction was to snicker and think "Oh, I have been on the internet enough to predict that someone is gonna get triggered by this, I just know it"

jamesc9

@ISiejek, so if running you out of popcorn was not the point of the story, then it seems that an author

choosing this word rather than another has,
pragmatically, had an unintended effect.

Ilncos

To ErraticErrata I, in the other hand, strongly recommend you use any word that you prefer. I dislike censorship and more if it is based in something as childish as a word sounding similar to other. congratulations for creating such an inclusive world where there are people of different races and sexualities and they are not discriminated against for it

Abrakadabra

Yes, one of the main attractions of the series is not making it about the sexuality and racial issues. Different people exist, yes, and nobody blinks. And that is far more preferable to me Than having to watch these people struggle because of the way they are and having to wait till they defeat the obligatory racist/sexist/whateverist bad guy. This book is about real issues with real conflicts, like how praes really starves without attacking its neighbours, economy, even politics(!) not made up bullshit designed to divide people.

(Because I really think that a great part of the réal world politics is nothing else but a gigantic diversion to divide people while the richest 0.1 percet walks away with the loot.)

Shaerick 68

Don't be such a child.

Abrakadabra

Bullshit on that. Language is there to be used. Dont listen to all these naggers... They are Just nagging.

Raved Thrad

I'd say it's a niggling sort of nagging, but that might be throwing fuel on the fire.

[kal durak](#)

Speaking as someone who has had to endure the slur used against him, I still would object to relegating "niggardly" to the PC void!

We can't keep hiding from the possibility of people taking offense where none was meant. If we do, we might as well just crawl into a hole and pull the dirt in after us!

[sivarajan](#)

Snigger at the nagger's niggling.

Abrakadabra

Yep. While traveling from Niger to Nigeria... Between the two there are 2 hundred million people whose very name for their country offends someone a continent away...

Bra bra

You do realize that there is a country called Niger? And that there is Nigeria too? Between the two they have 220 million people. Most of them black. Why not in true proceran style we try to make them change their names? And if they refuse to comply, then we can start a crusade... I mean we can bomb them Back into the stone age for being racist.

SomeGuyWhoReadsThings

Yep, I think it's very telling that no replies even write out the word in question. Not even the ones defending the use of the word. Let's not pretend the connotation isn't there, even though I understand it shouldn't be. But we live in the world we live, not in a purely theoretical one.

ISiejek

That's not about the connotation that's about just being respectful using the actual word would be disrespectful to most people, based on how they were raised, note however that nobody even the people against the word have a problem writing niggardly

[ErraticErrata](#)

I actually thought I'd used the word before to no comment – I certainly have in other works of mine – but going back it appears I haven't.

Comes a little out of the blue for me, but this seems common enough an opinion in the US there's a Wikipedia article about the controversy so you're hardly alone. And while I was on the fence at first I've since had to clean up some pretty heinous and racially charged comments that were in pending.

Change it is, then.

therealgridlock

Feel no need to change for an American audience who fear words. I trust in your ability as a writer, and have never suspected you of anything morally reprehensible.

Ultimately if the reader doesn't like your story they are free to not read it. I've defended your work before, and that's what it ultimately comes down to.

Critique of the story is one thing, grammatical critique is another, but it's just a word, and it's not as scary as some people think.

To answer you as to why people are scared to even write out the word, in the west, there exists a thing called cancel culture, and if one speaks certain words too loudly, they can be fired for it. In the UK they can even be jailed for it. So needless to say it is not the word that has this power, but the mob mentality that destroys those who say it.

ISiejek

Change if you want to because it makes things easier for you just now there are reasonable people out there who understand that the two words have nothing in common

Clmineith

You do what you want.

But honestly? I'm disappointed you bowed in front of such idiotic arguments.

kinghaart

Sounds more like idiots weighed in with racially charged comments and the author has every right to say they don't need that evoked from their work, even if unintended.

It might not detract from the work but this comment section is proof that it distracts from it.

therealgridlock

Has anyone here even considered that EE isn't a native English speaker and that they have literally no comparison for cultural context of which everyone here complains of this evil word?

Has anyone here even considered that EE may have chosen this word specifically to spark this debate, knowing that many would fear a word for being too close to another word that just means black in most latin languages, and that many would cry out that it's just a stupid word?

If we speak, it may well be what the author intended. If we do not speak, it may also we'll be what the author intended.

It is my opinion that if it is not a spelling error, or grammatical error, then it is not our jobs to police the writing of the author. They have the freedom to write their art, and we have the freedom to consume or not consume, according to our free will.

Never has EE even come even remotely close to insinuating that they could have even vaguely racist beliefs. In universe EE has had people of all colors, all species, even some trans people, all working together as equals, so why should we be suspect now?

Trust the author, or move on. That is enough.

AbraKadabra

'Never has EE even come even remotely close to insinuating that they could have even vaguely racist beliefs. '

Like it matters...

Or next time we May ban from say communists from becoming heart surgeons, because they might poison our hearts that way...

AbraKadabra

"Beware he who would deny you access to information, for in his heart, he dreams himself your master."

I think it applies here too, oh great denominator and final arbiter of words. Just please dont beat me with your stick for speaking up against your mighty self.

AbraKadabra

Calling someone something hurtful is not hatespeech. It is namecalling. Children do It all the time. So yes namecalling is childish, and pitiful if it comes from an adult. But it is hardly 'evil', only assholeish.

Real hatespeech is when someone incites others to hate something or a group. Please all of you get yourself informed.

Sir Nil

Well, there's the time limit, 5 months.

5 months to wrestle Praes into order, send legionnaires and diabolists and orcs into the thick of war. 5 months for the new Empress of the League and potentially the Hierarch to show the Egregious Millennial Despot the power of DEMOCRACY. And perhaps 5 months for the Drow to actually become relevant again.

5 months to win, or the ticking time bomb does what a ticking time bomb does.

Linnus42

DK showing the advantage of Numbers as the armies of Man cannot hold even with Named stemming the tide. You can win every battle but still lose the War. Also shows the military advantage of an Air Force against people who don't have reliable Anti Aircraft Options.

Typical girl brings boyfriend home and Father hates boyfriend. Hanno's Influence grows while Cordelia's wanes. Of course now that Cordelia has moved the weapon to Salia its not secret and DK has a chance to target it with the priest taking months to charge. Especially given his new airforce allows him to drop troops in behind. Made even easier by Cordelia not relying on Named support who are the only ones holding the armed forces together but she is biased. Still if Cordelia is unsure she can win a vote to hold Procer by what authority does she claim to fire such a weapon? Beyond that Cordelia is being kinda arrogant in assuming Bard cannot intervene considering she doesn't understand Name Lore, Stories or Bard at all.

Shveiran

Meanwhile, her "rival" has come to believe he knows how to rule better than Cordelia. While never having held any kind of office and never personally led an army larger than five people.

F#ç@ing Heroes, man.

caoimhinh

Hm? He is not thinking that.

He is simply not shying away from the responsibility of leading when it is falling on him during the campaign, where their victory represents the survival of the whole continent.

Nowhere does he say that he is better than Cordelia, or that he is suited to rule anything at all. He is just no longer keeping away from the things happening around him like he did before when he was all "I do not judge, I won't get involved in politics, I won't get involved in any discussions. If you want me to intervene or arbiter in something, I'll summon the Coin and kill at least one of the parties involved".

Now Hanno is being dragged into the position of leader of people and armies, taking command and making decisions

beyond simply leading Named or tactical actions on the battlefield. And he HAS to do it, because there's no one else, and shying away from that responsibility when there's so much at stake is something he simply cannot afford to do.

He does not like this, he doesn't want this, and does not think himself suited for it.
He will still do it, though. Because he must.

Snappy270

Aah but he did say that Cordelia has not done her duty but supporting the troops even though she literally can't. And last west chapter he gave misgivings about allowing her to keep the angle corpse.

He isnt wanting to depose her. But he is starting to think someone else should do the job

Thorsten Rapp

Pretty sure that in the last West chapter, he outright stated his point of view, which was "I can do better" which means, to me, shveiran is right.

Shveiran

See, but there IS someone else.

<<>>

Who knows more about war, or supplies, or the factions involved, between an Ashuran hero who has never held command outside Named skirmishes, and a Princess of Procer who trained fro command her whole life and was acknowledge as a skilled tactician by the Iron Prince and the Black Queen?

Hanno has clout, and that has its uses.

I wouldn't mind even if he was to act as a figurehead for her, but he ****is not the best person available to make decision on a tactical or strategic field****.

It is not something Hanno is good at, and now is not the time to learn.

Stepping up is GOOD, abandoning his humility is ill-timed at best.

Also, again, he has done nothing wrong so far. But these...

<<>>

...these are not the words of a man planning NOT to interfere with rulership.

If he is not taking a step back, that only leaves stepping FORWARD, and his duty seems ALL but clear.

Shveiran

Where... where did my quotes go? Godsdamnit. Sorry.
Reposting:

See, but there IS someone else.

@@@ The Lycaonese captains he had supported when the northerners had almost split over returning to their homelands had begun to look to him for orders, like the Brabantine levies, and even fantassins now sought his commands instead of Princess Beatrice Volignac's – she whose very lands they were fighting in.@@@

Who knows more about war, or supplies, or the factions involved, between an Ashuran hero who has never held command outside Named skirmishes, and a Princess of Procer who trained for command her whole life and was acknowledged as a skilled tactician by the Iron Prince and the Black Queen?

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Stepping up is GOOD, abandoning his humility is ill-timed at best.

Also, again, he has done nothing wrong so far. But these...

@@@Salia was not holding up its part of the bargain, the promise that mortal law could see the war prosecuted without need for Named to step in. So what reason was there for Hanno to step back?

He would not hide behind a broken bargain when his duty was clear@@@

...these are not the words of a man planning NOT to interfere with rulership.

If he is not taking a step back, that only leaves stepping FORWARD, and his duty seems ALL but clear.

shikkarasu

...I think you missed the point.

He is 100% planning on interfering, but it is because the soldiers are following him whether he likes it or not. He is most certainly bitter and letting personal opinions enter into his judgement (the very thing he was worried about) but he isn't wrong that Cordelia is losing control of the situation. He is taking what Raphela told him in North I to heart and choosing to do

something rather than nothing, because doing nothing would doom the entirety of the north.

He has been angsty over how unclear his situation is and how short-sighted he as a human is since before he became the White Knight, now he is dealing with the only thing that is clear: someone has to try, and Cordelia can't do this alone.

Is he making the right choice? I think given what he knows yes, he is. We all have faith in Cat, but he is, ironically, looking at the practicalities of the situation and getting ready for some Necessary Evil. Not unlike a young Catherine.

Abrekadabra

I think Cordelia just gave a villainic speech? Or something like that. Almost like raging against the heavens. She may get a villain name out of that attitude.

Shveiran

I might be. I would prefer you being right to the alternative, honestly.
I just don't see many suggestions that he is taking practicalities into account, and am therefore worried that a new instance of "uncompromising hero makes a stupid (if somewhat sympathetic) stand" is coming.

We shall see.

ADzen

Well, did he prevail in leading "moral" portion of supposed herd of cats? On which grounds he thinks this responsibility over people is his to bear? He never actually mustered command of anything, and now because of pivot in his story he's suddenly all arrogant now. He was least inadequate hero before, which made him representative under Truce and Terms, and now without Peregrine to navigate him seems like his judgement sailed the way of his Chore.

Ilncos

Probably He can do some Recall to remember some predecessor with that knowledge. As ugly as that cockiness is, is way better than the "i don't judge, only a tool" stuff

Linnus42

Actually since Cordelia is not sure she win a vote to hold onto her title and First Prince is her elected title and the only one the Hierarchy actually respected. I wonder if her lack of ability to win a vote means Hierarchy would stop the weapon from firing or mess with it.

Shveiran

I seriously doubt Anaxares respects the office of the First Prince.

It is an elected title, but the only electors are Princes, whose rights are inherited; it is a far cry from a democratic institution, and the Hierarchy has never been about the "good enough" approach.

Still; one does not expect a fish to fly. It would be rather late for the Hierarchy to start making sense now.

Steven Silver

It was put to a vote of the People and found that, indeed, fish can fly. XD

Real talk: I have no idea how Belerophon is still standing, but oh boy, is it hilarious!

Reader in the Night

She is not sure she can win a vote to not crown White as a Prince of Procer, not a vote to keep her job. While the peasants are blaming her, the real powers are preferring to skip ship than change the government.

Sir Nil

And another interesting point about Villains is brought up again, sure they might be evil, psychotic and murderers, but twenty bucks is twenty bucks. They won't throw away money or a roof over their head over something like ideals, in general, the fact that Villains made themselves, make them feel more sensible than a Hero who was made to fulfil an agenda.

dadycool

In the face of the End of the World, where legions of Good might falter and cower, the Evil generals and taskmasters tolerate no hesitation in their ranks as they march into the very jaws of death. And when the chips are down, where Heroes might quibble about the morality of putting the Big Bad down for good or try and find the good in their enemy, Villains will go in and just finish it, with no time for moral dilemmas, or giving their enemy another chance to stab them. Where the righteous will sacrifice themselves for the good of

the innocent with their whole life ahead of them, trading current ability to get the job done for a gamble that the next generation might be enough, the damned can be relied upon to look out for themselves before anyone else and appreciate the simple art of a good stabbing. I think this might be the essence of this whole story, that the ideals of Heroes pale in comparison to the cold and hardness of a ruthless Villain, when there isn't a brick on the scales, at least.

caoimhinh

Another thing is, that Cordelia is being a hypocrite here. Because it has always been her that didn't or couldn't hold her end of the bargain in the deals, and it was always because of what I came to call "Proceran Bullshit" in past chapters.

It can be summed up as this: Politics. But more accurately, it is pettiness, delusional behavior, and selfish acts by Procer's populace and especially its upper echelons.

The villains kept to their end of the bargain because Catherine actually enforced it, while Cordelia was always "oh no, I can't make the Highest Assembly obey and they are scheming to depose me.", "If I do this, the princes will get angry", "This could leave a precedent that could be exploited in some years by someone", and so on.

With Cordelia and Procer, *every single time* that there was a reasonable course of action, she refused it because of ~~Proceran Bullshit~~ politics, only to be forced to do it anyways after many sacrifices were made, and this goes all the way back to the Crusade.

Look at the idiots in the south rioting and rebelling while there's a freaking army of undead invading them. And she has the nerve to blame the Heroes for the mess that her own country is causing. Heck, even the Heroes who caused trouble were from Procer (Red Axe and Mirror Knight), and even that mess in the Arsenal was a minor thing compared to what the stupid princes of Procer keep doing, like scheming to betray the Drow or dragging their feet to send help to the North.

Linnus42

I argue Cordelia's best chance to stem the tide was when she was offered the Name, Warden of the West and she turned it down. Because she thought a Name shouldn't rule Procer. So its kinda rich she acts like she did everything she could to hold Procer together when she said no to her best option on Purely Emotional grounds cause she didnt realize Procer needs to evolve. Now you can argue well if she took the Name it play into Bard's Plan but that has

two issues. First, Cordelia didn't know jack about Bard at that point so it was not part of her calculations. Second, she doesn't have a Name now and still wants to use the weapon so I am not sure what the difference is.

As for Red Axe, I argue such a situation was inevitable when you let the Damned have free passes for all crimes before joining. Some Chosen was going to have a tragic backstory and try to run through a Damned who massacred their village and raped them. I am not even sure Red Axe would have been able to not try it manipulation or not cause that is the core of her name. Still the main point is Cordelia is blaming the Chosen for a crisis caused by a Damned. Said Damned doesn't rape and slaughter a Village this issue doesn't occur. Beyond the fact that MK didn't really do much to have long term impact and was impart corrupted by the daughter of Proceran Prince so Cordelia's department. And plenty of traitors on both sides and screw ups like say Indrani who brought Red Axe in not watching her closely enough.

[sengachi](#)

I'd absolutely agree that the Red Axe conflict was inevitably baked into the Truce and Terms, and that that was an incident caused by the Damned rather than the Chosen. But I'd disagree that blaming the Chosen instead of the Damned is what Cordelia's doing wrong.

The problem is she's blaming someone other than the Dead King or the Intercessor.

There was no better option than the Truce and Terms. They knew what problems may come of it, and set up a justice system to deal with that. They tried to have contingencies. Yes that system suffered problems because of members being imperfect human beings who were not all in perfect lockstep but ... well but that's literally something inherent to *all* justice systems (except a certain Choir's coin). Sure all of these problems could have hypothetically been resolved better, but in real life human practice?

It's a miracle their system held up to the Intercessor's attack as well as it did.

But rather than acknowledging that she's watching humans, real fallible humans, reach their limits and hit breaking points and be imperfect in predictable and understandable ways, she's blaming them for it. Rather than the entities which pushed those humans and the systems they're in to the breaking point.

And in doing so, she's doing the same thing all those fractious blame-layers she mentioned in the beginning of the chapter are doing. Finding someone, *anyone* to blame other than the unstoppable monster they can't do anything about.

Mental Mouse

The Red Axe situation wasn't "inevitable", but merely a possibility – until Bard started leaning on it. She's the one who pushed that story into paying out despite all the safeguards against it, making every roll of the dice come up snake eyes.

Mincheriit

Ngl i felt this too, proceran bullshit politics. Though to be fair, Cornelia is doing the best she can from her proceran side of things and she cant help at all if some incompetent is titled first prince instead. You gotta play with the hand you get. She had a shit and and quitting just puts a worse player on. Still, damn it procer.

Abrakadabra

I think Cordi May get a villainic nama out of that attitude. Or prevent her from getting a heroic one which raisesbthe chance of Hanno becoming warden of the west. Or she becomes a villainic warden but that is unprecedented.

Abnaxis

I think that's a bit unfair, to Cordelia at least. Procer itself is determined to destroy itself like lemmings running off a cliff, but Cordelia is doing the best she can.

In the West I chapter, we saw her doing exactly as you said–forcing measures in the Assembly to grant her the unilateral war powers she needs to fight the Dead King. Now since she's unpopular they're blaming her and withdrawing their food and troops from the war because they're idiots. And she KNEW they were going to do that, but by that time she had no choice.

I don't really blend Cordelia for playing politics when Procer is just SO anxious to join the army is the dead...

beleester

This comment section: How dare the heroes force people to obey them and call it righteous?

Also this comment section: Heck yeah, villains cutting through the bullshit and just *making* people do the right thing!

Laws don't mean anything if the people in charge can bypass them when it's inconvenient. For better or for worse, Procer actually takes its laws seriously, and Cordelia, a Proceran, is trying to find a way to get shit done without burning down Procer's institutions entirely.

(The same dilemma that every ruler on Calernia has been facing, in one form or another. It's kind of a central theme.)

Insanenoodlyguy

She was. She's not anymore. She's the First Prince now, and that is not the name the Gods Above offered.

Sir Nil

Lol, I was just thinking Villains don't stab each other in the back until victory is in sight or after winning.

Zach

What in the world are you talking about? This isn't even remotely true. This doesn't apply at all to the most important heroes of the age (Saint of Swords and Grey Pilgrim). Hell, Saint of Swords' whole issue was that she never quibbled at all about killing Bad Guys. And Pilgrim was just as ruthlessly pragmatic as Catherine.

And the "cold, pragmatic" villains are also a minority; people like Catherine or Amadeus are exceptions. Most of the time villains are just terrible lunatics like Akua as Diabolist and doom themselves in pursuit of some (usually extremely harmful) ideal. They're only as helpful as they are during the Dead King war because they're being wrangled by Catherine.

It's bizarre to me that someone would get this far into this story and come to the conclusion that it's point is "villains are smarter than heroes."

Shveiran

Villains do seem SMARTER than the heroes.

That doesn't mean they are better, though.

Insanenoodlyguy

Black said himself Cats growth was so insane because he never told her how it was meant to work. We've seen the Champion ignore ghosts because they aren't real. Ignorance is an incredible power that shouldn't be underestimated.

Reader in the Night

If we learned anything about the Doom of Liesse, is that a ticking time bomb can't not blow up. It can be destroyed, it can be turned against its supposed masters, but it just sitting unused by the end of the War is not really a possibility.

nimelennar

It's worse than that.

"Yet such power, when gathered, has a way of demanding use."

Five months, and then, even if they do win, the ticking time bomb does what a ticking time bomb does.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not if Hanno destroys it. The Warden of the West and the First Prince are each no longer willing to accommodate the other.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And Hanno's been there before... unfortunately, he apparently hasn't learned the right lessons.

Insanenoodlyguy

Depends. He might be absolutely right about this.

SpeckofStardust

Well crap, if the food is going to run out even if they beat keter there might not be a west to be warden over. At least not the west that would make a warden.

Insanenoodlyguy

This is actually where Praes comes in. They are actually agricultural experts, though it's certainly not what they are best known for. But they can do a lot with actually farmable land, I'd wager.

Cicero

And thus are the Gods Above condemned as frauds.

[boballab](#)

Not really, it is just bringing back to the forefront what the war is really about as stated way back in the Prologue for book 1 and reminded by the Titan in this chapter: "The Gods disagreed on the nature of things: some believed their children should be guided to greater things, while others believed that they must rule over the creatures they had made.

So, we are told, were born Good and Evil.

Ages passed in fruitless argument between them until finally a wager was agreed on: it would be the mortals that settled the matter, for strife between the gods would only result in the destruction of all. We know this wager as Fate, and thus Creation came to know war." This is the first page of the Book of All Things. You must ask yourself which set of Gods are trying to guide and which are trying to rule because the mortal characters we see now appear to be the ones that are going to settle the wager of the Gods.

[marillius](#)

Seems to me everything we've seen about Below kind of suggests they're not the ones that wanted to rule.

jamesc9

In the Age of Wonders, sure. In the Age of Order, I'm not so sure.

Ilncos

There is other land apart from Calernia. I mean, look like a the better of X more than a single match

Konstantin von Karstein

And the Gods Below as pro genocide and mass murder, so I still prefer Above.

[marillius](#)

Read this chapter again. The gods above are ALSO pro genocide and mass murder. Every time an angel shows up, they either kill or brainwash everyone in the area.

Konstantin von Karstein

Read this whole story again and watch carefully the historical precedents. Who is more supporting of genocide and mass murder, who does it more often?

[marillius](#)

"And the Gods Below as pro genocide and mass murder, so I still prefer Above."

This was your original point. You're moving the goal post here. First it was 'Well above doesn't do genocide' and now it's 'well above doesn't genocide as much'. And someone else is trying to say that above doesn't like it as much but even if that were true, which it's not because angels don't do 'without intent' because they're all intent as far as we can tell, they are still GENOCIDING. So... does it matter who does it more?

Hell, I could argue back that at least below doesn't pretend it's a good thing the majority of the time. They call it what it is, a slaughtering of enemies, and not a 'cleansing' or a 'holy bath' or whatever the church tries to justify these moments with. So are we going to say they're better because they're honest about it? No.

The point is both sides suck. Cat just chose the side that's honest about it.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yes, it wasn't very honest of me. Sorry. But you say
« The point is both sides suck. Cat just chose the side that's honest about it. »

Both sides indeed suck, but one does so much more frequently. As the history of Calernia shows us, there were way less Heroes doing mass murder and genocide than there were Villains. If the choice is between the team who rarely slaughter innocent and the one whose standard operational procedure involves regular mass human sacrifices to power flying fortresses, I know which one I would choose.

« Hell, I could argue back that at least below doesn't pretend it's a good thing the majority of the time. »
Except that Above IS good most of the time. Look at how many people were saved by Heroes historically, look at who held the line first against the deads at Cleves (or Hainault, I don't remember), Tariq who stopped Black from causing tens of thousands of deaths at the price of a few hundreds? Cat and Black are the exception among Villains, not the rule. The rule is Akua or Kairos.

[marillius](#)

Oh that's entirely fair and you're not entirely wrong. I'm not arguing the point because I think Below is necessarily better. Just that Above isn't Good in this world. Even what Tariq did, while it might have saved

many lives, still probably killed children. There's no justifying that from our sensibilities.

Konstantin von Karstein

Personally, I find it completely justifiable to kill a few children if it saves thousands more. It's extremely ruthless and maybe heartless, I know.

But I completely agree with you that Above isn't good, it's just less bad than Below.

someone

Does Below commit genocide more often than Above though? History tends to be written by the victors, and as Amadeus likes to remind us, Above usually wins.

Konstantin von Karstein

That's just bad faith. Even records from Evil polities agree with the fact that Villains commit more genocides or mass slaughters. Villains are not ashamed by the atrocities they commit and tend to gloat a lot.

caoimhinh

The thing is, so far we haven't actually seen the Gods Below making statements or giving commandments beyond the "Do as you will" kind of thing.

It's not that the Villains slaughter people because the Gods Below say so, they do it because they want to or because it serves their goals.

On the other hand, we do have examples where the Heroes commit genocide because the Angels told them.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yes, but there's much less case of Angels telling someone to slaughter people than Villains doing it.

caoimhinh

True, and that's the point of what I'm saying:

They do it because of their own reasons, while the Heroes would actually get a commandment from Above to do that.

So, technically, the only side that's pro genocide and mass murder would be Above, as Below explicitly

has a hands-off policy in what their "Champions" do.
Below simply doesn't care.

Konstantin von Karstein

Technically maybe, but in practice no.

caoimhinh

It's like that meme of "Well, yes, but actually no" hahahaha.

Team Evil definitely causes more horrible deaths and mass killings, but what I wanted to point out was that it wasn't ordained by the Gods Below. It was done by people.

Whereas a Champion of Above can actually come and commit genocide out of a divine commandment.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, true. Above isn't good, only less bad than Below.

Shveiran

Every time an angel's power is ACTIVELY unleashed on Creation without even the intelligence of that creature guiding it.

And I'm not defending the Hashmallim, but we have seen instances of Angels acting in a more controlled manner. We never saw an instance of demons acting out that was not FUCKING TERRIFYING.

I don't like Above, I don't like the Angels, and honestly loathe defending them, but let's try to keep objective here... there is just no comparing Choirs and Demons.

Vylus8

The way I've always seen it is that Below doesn't actually champion anything (Genocide included) what they champion is essentially "do what you want and we will back you up". The unfortunate downside of this is that they have to put their money where their mouth is even when the thing the person wants is objectively evil e.g. genocide. Cat is proof that you can belong to below and not be a cackling mad man intent on murder and subjugation.

Above's whole deal is do as we say because we know best. The issue with this is they don't think like mortals and can't sympathies on our level. This leads to decisions

like Contrition mind raping a whole city. To the angels a totally reasonable step as it would get them a nice strong crusading army. To actual people this is a horrifying decision.

[marillius](#)

We have nothing to say that the angels aren't intentionally doing it and a LOT of indication from multiple HEROES that say that it is intentional so... Both sides do the genocide. One does it more, the other pretends it's a good thing.

malekdeneith

Demons aren't Below's equivalent to Angels though. Devils are. Demons are something else altogether and as far as we know they weren't created by Below (even if Below's *champions* like to use them)

Piromin

Except demons aren't actually from Below?? It's been stated several times they come from outside and aren't included in the whole gods game. Evil uses them more often? Yeah, people suck, but that's more on the individuals than on Evil itself.

Also Angels acting in a controlled manner... The choir of kindness making an entire plague to get Amadeus, the let's brainwash an entire city, the... endurance? choir trying to straight up smite Cat because their hero lost and above are petty as hell, all of the people White Knight has executed because a coin said so, even when their crimes likely weren't execution worthy, the humbling of the giants, where Heroes, from Above, tried betrayal and attempted genocide

Yeah, terrible things happen in the name of Below, but just as many terrible things happen under orders from Above, only these are seen as just and heroic, because Above never loses, and when it does it flips the table so it hasn't lost.

Shveiran

Honestly, we agree on the "many terrible things happen under orders from Above", it's just the "just as" I can't let pass.

Because... no, that's... no?

aurikdomi

Demons are outside entities separate from below

Snappy270

Technically they aren't pro those things, they just have no qualms about doing it. They only promote gaining power in any way their follower can. Above though approve or encourage killing for the slightest "evil", mass murder as a mercy instead of allowing a villain to roam or just mind wiping slavery. At least below can be bargained with.

saithorthepyro

Honestly I actually still prefer Gods Below? Gods Above believe that a moral order needs to be forced onto the world for it to function, that everyone must adhere to a standards set by them. Gods Below don't seem to have any structure, hierarchy, etc., and seems more content to give power to people who seem ambitious enough to try and change the world around them, and seems to think that mortals should decide for themselves how they act. And as the books have shown even historically at times it has not been as simple as good vs evil.

saithorthepyro

Actually let me reclarify, I consider both sort of equal but only because the Gods Below seem to prefer testing egalitarian ideas using some of the worst people possible, but I suppose it would be a cop-out for them to only give powers to those who would behave the best.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, but most Villains historically were monsters. Those standards set by Above seem (at least to me) a fair trade in exchange of not being use as ritual fodder or be killed by a magical plague. And changing the world include people like Triumphant and Neshamah. I'm not saying Above or Heroes are perfect paragons of morality, just that they're much more safe to live under than Below.

saithorthepyro

I think however we are seeing a shift in it. I've got a theory I put up on the Reddit about how the Bella's response to Tariq and Laurence's effectiveness was not Dead King but instead Amadeus, Basilia, Cat, and Cordelia and that while Below has changed their playbook to be less monstorous on purpose and instead towards more an egalitarian, free will bent, and Above has not changed their playbook at all, it's resulted in the current

dichotomy were the Below-Above conflict is shifting off a good-evil axis.

Insanenoodlyguy

Above's heroes just are able to ride the stories, better. But that's not an inherent property of "good" just of the hero story. First it made a man who could avoid such stories, then it gave him the next step to train: a villainous hero.

Isaac Martinez

Ominous. Cordelia is holding Judgement over almost all Creation. Like an unintentional villain that has a doomsday device, with good intentions.

dadycool

At least she realizes that she's holding the pavement and staring at a path to Hell.

Steven Silver

She gets no points from me just for being self-aware <_<

Insanenoodlyguy

Not unintentional anymore. She is the First Prince now. And on her at least, that is a villain name.

Konstantin von Karstein

She isn't Named rn tho.

nick012000

I think she is. She got the Name at the end of this chapter, when her palm was burning and the narrative referred to her as the First Prince.

Konstantin von Karstein

The narrative often refer to her as First Prince, with F and P, that means nothing.

She also got that scar just before behind offered WotW.

Furthermore, it wouldn't make sense from a narrative standpoint to make her a Claimant for WotW in one chapter, and in the next one make her receive First Prince. She clearly is presented in opposition with Hanno in this chapter, it's certain she's the other Claimant.

Finally, I think that Cordelia getting a Name would be announce with little more fanfare by the narration.

aurikdomi

Just most of Calernia, not all of creation

Tenthyr

I don't blame Cordelia for feeling how she does, and honestly Hanno is still at a dangerous crossroads. He might become better for what he chooses. I can also see Catherine being... Not so okay with what he will have done by the time she comes back.

caoimhinh

I actually do blame her for feeling that way. Cordelia is being a hypocrite, in my opinion.

Her hatred and distrust towards Hanno stems from that incident in the Arsenal when he didn't like that she and Catherine acted behind his back to satisfy the whims of the Highest Assembly, despite the accord that had been reached previously being clear on how to proceed.

Hanno was in the right there, though Catherine acted in the most pragmatic way in order to solve the issue quickly, Cordelia still has no cause to be resentful, as she indeed did not hold her end of the bargain and demanded the Highest Assembly to judge the Red Axe, despite having already agreed that such would only be done by the delegates of the Truce and Terms.

I don't see how Cat would have anything to complain about Hanno when she returns. He is also not doing anything wrong now, he is in fact doing what is necessary to keep the forces fighting North together and active. All this while Procerans are making a mess south and rioting like idiots instead of helping or doing anything productive towards their survival.

Shveiran

Hanno was not in the right in the Arsenal: he acknowledged the existence of a problem, refused all offered solutions, proposed none of his own, then acted pissy because a solution was still acted upon.

Now, I see him walking the same path.

He has done nothing wrong, YET.

But if Hanno claims political power during this kind of crisis without the slightest idea on how to keep grain and steel flowing, you can bet your ass that Catherine will not pat him on the back.

Is Cordelia failing to deliver? Yes.
Could Hanno deliver more? No.

Hanno's place is knocking on Keter's door, as the champion that a martial hero is supposed to be.

It is NOT leading the Highest Assembly or reforming Procer.

caoimhinh

He was in the right, the terms of the agreement on how Named would be judged were clear.

Cordelia wanted to breach it to pacify the Highest Assembly, and Hanno didn't agree because the terms were already signed and she couldn't expect to back off from it the moment it became inconvenient for her.

Catherine was the middle ground and satisfied both, Hanno was pissed because her solution was done behind his back and defiled the corpse of the Red Axe, all to satisfy the demands of Proceran princes.

Now, Hanno is NOT claiming political power, he doesn't want to lead the Highest Assembly or reform Procer. He has zero interest in that at all. The only thing that he is doing now is actively participating in the decisions of the campaign and acting as a leader of people, something that he refused to do before because it was the commanders, princes, and so on that were to lead the people, Hanno usually kept to only Named affairs and kept away from other stuff.

He has no interest AT ALL to lead Procer or having control of a Principality. All he is doing is keeping people together during this campaign because they are turning to him to act as a pillar, and he needs to do that in order to prevent the collapse of the army keeping the undead at bay. Really, even that princess that promised the crown of her principality to Hanno only did it because she was facing riots and decided he could act as a beacon of hope to keep the people calm and under control.

Shveiran

If that is all Hanno wants to do, why does he spend so much of his thoughts pondering Cordelia and her failures? There is no connection between that and being a "leader of the people" on the frontline. Whether he admits it or not, he is not thinking about stopping to this.

Also, again, I am not a fan of Hasenbach, but I really feel the criticism is unwarranted here.

You are presenting as a tantrum the fact that the Principate wouldn't let go that someone tried to murder one of their rulers. We have a treaty to allow French

citizens to be judged in France, for instance, but if a Frenchman came here and shot the Prime Minister, you can bet your ass we would try him in house.

THIS IS NOT AN UNREASONABLE STANCE.

The T&T were a simple treaty without too many clauses; this situation was clearly something that had not been considered possible, and that justifies an exception. Now, I realize while C&H did not grant it, but let's be real: there was a very good reason to ask for it.

caoimhinh

But that's a different thing, and it *is* an unreasonable stance, because there's already a regulation that says that certain individuals with a special denomination must be judged by an international tribunal.

People who had been given amnesty for their previous crimes in exchange for service for the international organization known as the Grand Alliance, and who had been placed under the legal jurisdiction of not any one member of it but selected individuals and an international court with representatives of the signatory nations.

If a nation signs a treaty, it can't just break it whenever it wants if the treaty is to have any value.

Your example of a random french citizen trying to murder the (British?) Prime Minister is not an accurate comparison to this situation because it blatantly ignores the special status of the individual committing the crime and the international treaty that is already in place and clear on how to prosecute individuals of said special status.

A more accurate case would be something like the International Criminal Court.

You can't just consider the Named random citizens, they are more akin to a member of an International Special Task Force going rogue or something like that.

Also, do you honestly believe that the Truce and Terms is just some vague agreement that wasn't scrutinized and had many angles considered by all involved in the creation? That an international treaty, especially one of the main treaties securing a fighting force for the War On Keter, which included criminal amnesty and jurisdiction of law for the Named, was a "simple treaty without too many clauses" in which that scenario wasn't considered?

This is just a case of Procer liking treaties up until it is time for them to fulfill their end of the bargain, which is why Callow and Levant had so much distrust for them, as mentioned in various chapters.

[sivarajan](#)

Perfidious Procer, huh?

nimelennar

The solution was done behind his back only because he'd turned it on them. They tried to involve him in finding a solution that would satisfy the Truce and the Terms but also keep Procer in line so they could keep fighting the war. He refused, choosing his personal integrity over every practical consideration.

If you walk away from the negotiation table, you lose any voice you had in what deal is struck. That's what he chose to do, and so the person he should blame for a deal emerging that he didn't like is himself.

caoimhinh

Not exactly.

If you recall, Catherine also refused Cordelia's claim to have the Red Axe judged by the Highest Assembly. Because the Truce and Terms is the precedent of the Accords and thus couldn't be weakened by letting Procer breach them the moment it became inconvenient.

Hanno didn't turn his back on the issue. Cordelia tried to convince him and Cat, and failed in both cases. He was part of one decision, and in that decision he was supported by Catherine, because there was realistically no way it could be done otherwise as the proceedings were clear and they couldn't just let Cordelia back off from fulfilling the Terms.

Cordelia resents Hanno out of pettiness, because he was the one with the final word as the representative of Heroes and thus the one with the authority to pass the sentence. But the Red Axe being judged by the Tribunal of the Truce and Terms was never in question, as the signed agreement was clear on the matter and Catherine agreed wholeheartedly with Hanno in this. It wasn't Hanno being inflexible or standing up for an empty principle, both he and Cat agreed that it had to be done as that was what had been signed.

What Hanno took issue with was what happened afterward: them taking the corpse of the Red Axe and raising her as an undead just to satisfy the pettiness of Proceran princes who wanted to feel that their power wasn't threatened. They did not include him because they assumed his response and thus opted to act behind his back.

And Cordelia doesn't resent Catherine because despite agreeing with Hanno, Cat provided a means for her to delude the Highest Assembly and pacify them through the raising of undead Red Axe.

nimelennar

"They did not include him because they assumed his response and thus opted to act behind his back."

Not true. They tried to include him. At the end of Chapter 37, Cat is basically begging him to let her include him in the process of placating the princes. He refuses, turning his back on the idea, and stating that there's nothing he can offer them, so she goes to work behind his back. But it wouldn't have been behind his back if he hasn't turned it first.

[sirfury](#)

Regarding Cordelia's anger towards Hanno, my understanding is has more to do with how Hanno was unable to keep the Red Axe and the Mirror Knight in line (like Catherine did the Damned), which cost her politically (favours, which she was using to ensure troop and resource supply to the frontlines) and to a lesser extent that Hanno was being obstinate about Red Axes verdict and didn't have her back (like she previously believed), because Catherine provided a solution(for the verdict) in the form of an undead Red Axe.

Linnus42

Cordelia is being super biased.

I mean Hanno did check Mirror Knight but Hanno is not always around Mirror Knight. Meanwhile Cordelia was stonewalling Cat on the Drow Backstab Plan from one of her Princes whose daughter was trying to rope in Mirror Knight.

As for Red Axe, the crisis started due to a Villain raping Red Axe and murdering her village. So kinda weird Cordelia is saying that Damned aren't the issue. Bard is on neither side. Meanwhile it's Indrani's Band (A V and Cat's close Ally) who brings in Red Axe (a fresh Chosen who Hanno has never met) and doesn't watch her leading Red Axe to sneak off to murder her rapist. She also has a traitor in the Band

she normally runs with. Meanwhile at Arsenal itself we have Masego missing a whole smuggling ring not really example of sterling Damned leadership there. Mirror Knight bumbles it with a hastily constructed band also including traitors. Meanwhile Cat is on command on the ground when it all goes to crap, she sends Frederic to guard Red Axe who only pulls off her backstab because a Damned Cast an Illusion. So I am not sure how anyone can look objectively at the whole Arsenal debacle. And says its mostly the Chosen fault and Hanno's fault lol.

sirfury

Everyone is biased. As for the events that led up to the Red Axe incident were many, including enemy involvement. But Cordelia didn't care about the Red Axe killing another named, only when she attacked a Named, who also happened to be a political figure in her domain (a loophole their enemy exploited)

I'd gather, Cordelia, or any other non-Named ruler in the same position frankly don't care for the specifics as it is Named business, and how they deal with it is up to the self appointed figureheads for the Chosen and Damned, as long as it let's her do her job, which is keeping in-line not only all the corrupt Princes and ensuring they give their due share of troops and resources, as well as the other usual stuff a Ruler has to do, including looking after the wellbeing of millions (?) of subjects, there needs, especially at a time of crisis.

Right or wrong, possible or not, the fact Hanno could not keep a leash on the Chosen as Catherine seems to have been able, especially as Chosen are "supposed" to be the better (behaviourally) of the Named, is all Cordelia cares about. She was also under the wrong impression Hanno had her back, and he "failed" her on both accounts. Hence her disappointment in him. You have to remember, she never was fond of Named to start with, like a lot of non-named rulers. But Catherine, despite being the poster-child Queen of the "evil" faction and someone she had attacked herself, turned out not only more reliable, but more understanding of the problems a Ruler faces and the bigger picture, which Hanno did not (at the time), based on his lack of experience in Ruling, and his narrow focus of looking after "his" folk before others. This is obviously, Cordelia's perspective of the situation.

TeK

Interesting. Both sides do what they think they must and blame the other for not upholding their end of the bargain. Even though none can be faulted for it. Hanno cannot enforce his will upon the Chosen, nor scare them into submission like Cat does, and

Cordelia cannot really conjure fucking bread out of thin air. I still lean with Cordelia though. She done everything, gone above and beyond to do her end. Hanno buckled the same agreement he took the moment it became inconvenient. The sheer balls on the guy, to blame Cordelia for it. I respect him a lot less for that.

caoimhinh

I mean, Hanno *IS* right.

Their disagreement was because he didn't agree on letting Cordelia take the Red Axe to be judged and executed by the Highest Assembly while she demanded it on account of needing to pacify the princes of Procer.

But he was the one in the right, the Truce and Terms that Cordelia and Procer had signed established how Named would be punished for their actions, and it was Cordelia who was buckling the moment it became politically inconvenient for her, which has been her whole tendency ever since her first appearance, it's like how she started war against Callow and refused peace because of Proceran internal politics.

Hanno didn't give in to her arguments because he had no reason to cater to Procer's politics, that's for Cordelia to handle and if she can't then that's her problem to solve, a head of state can't sign an international agreement in the name of her nation and then back off from it the first time it's personally inconvenient for her. Catherine helped her and bend the rules to solve the issue because she didn't want to deal with that mess and Cordelia was obviously incapable of solving it herself, but that doesn't mean Hanno wasn't in the right within the agreed terms.

She simply resents him for not letting her openly breach the agreement she had signed, she resents him for not catering to her needs, when she is incapable of keeping the Highest Assembly in line.

Right now, Hanno is taking command of the armies fighting North simply as a matter of sheer survival, doing what is needed just to ensure they can keep fighting. Meanwhile, Cordelia has lost control of Procer. It's rich coming of her to blame the Named when this whole mess was caused because of the pettiness of her own country.

Reader in the Night

I think we might be missing sight of what the opening quote tells us: Both sides have a point.

Hanno cannot expect the common populace of Procer to act like rational agents concerned with JUSTICE, because that's just not how normal people operate.

Statecraft does not give a ruler the room to stick to the spirit of any agreements they signed, because otherwise the system collapses. Hanno has been Named for so long he forgot to factor in the normal people.

caoimhinh

The thing is, the way I see it, Hanno isn't blaming the common people for not acting in accordance with justice or anything like that (I doubt he even knows right now about what's happening in southern Procer), but rather that he used to be like a priest that was never involved in secular life but that now is forced to take part of the decisions of the community.

It's also not about statecraft.

His comment about how Cordelia is not keeping her end of the bargain and so he is not "stepping back", refers to how he used to refuse to participate in any council or decision outside of his direct responsibilities as a Named. He wasn't a leader of people, and when people came to him for advice or to make a decision, he always sent them to their respective authorities. He always stepped back.

Now he isn't doing that. Because now he can't afford to keep minding the sensibilities of rulers nor keeping away from leading these people, because he needs to keep them together to fight against Keter.

Shveiran

Look.

It's one thing to say that Hanno and Catherine had good reasons to disagree with Cordelia on the issue of jurisdiction over the Red Axe.

I even agree with that position.

But it's a whole other thing to say Cordelia had no good reason to have her own position, or to diminish it saying it was "petty politics" or the need to appease stupid Princes.

She wanted to prosecute the ATTEMPTED MURDERER of one OF THE PRINCIPATE'S RULERS.

The idea that a member of a fledgling alliance would surrender jurisdiction over that to someone else without an issue is LUDICRUOUS. It would mean that a Named can murder the First Prince herself without answering to the Principate itself.

I despise the Princes of Procer. Seriously, they are close to the High Lords in my book (well, my read of EE's book,

actually) but they are not throwing a tantrum, I'm sorry. The T&T were signed with the unspoken understanding that Named would not go around murdering the leaders of the Grand Alliance; and unspoken as it was, it's not exactly a small breach of faith.

Keep in mind, the issue of jurisdiction is not just legaleese. There was no real guarantee that teh Red Axe would be put to the sword. If she was spared, was Procer supposed to just sit back and take it? Would Levant have done so, or Callow?

caoimhinh

But *that's what she signed for.*

What? Do you think it's fine to back off from an international agreement the moment it becomes personally inconvenient?

It was agreed by the Grand Alliance how Named would be judged, and the representative of Procer is part of the tribunal that would pass sentence, even if it would ultimately fall on the representative of Above or Below to decide and carry on the punishment.

She KNEW that was what she had agreed to. And the moment she had to fulfill her end of the bargain, she balked at it.

Yes, it's normally ludicrous that a nation would give up the right to judge criminals, yet it can happen, and that's what Procer and the rest of the Grand Alliance did, because Named were treated as special international assets given special privileges and heavy responsibilities for the duration of the war against Keter. These are special circumstances.

Named, under the Truce & Terms, are an international task force, and there is a designated officer and tribunal to judge them if they commit a crime. This was agreed by all parties involved, so wanting to walk away from fulfilling her part of the bargain is simply unacceptable.

In any trial, there is no guarantee of what the sentence will be before the trial is carried out, although the punishment for a certain crime can be known beforehand. And it was already a given that the Red Axe would die. Cordelia knew that, the thing is, she had to satisfy the petty Highest Assembly and had the sentence be given by Procer.

And yes, they were supposed to accept it, **BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT THEY AGREED TO.**

Shveiran

THEY AGREED TO give amnesty and renounce jurisdiction over individuals, whether criminals or not, meant to become a task force that empowered the Grand Alliance's war effort.

It shouldn't require clarification that such an agreement stands on the basis that the task force will stay pointed at the enemies of the Grand Alliance, and not start murdering its very leaders.

If this was a court of law, it would be trivial to void that compact in most countries, because such an egregious breach of faith has consequence. The keeping of good faith is one of the pillars of contracts in nearly all western democracies, and is considered a binding part of the contract EVEN IF IT IS NOT written on the document.

But this is not a court of law, and so it doesn't matter whether the compact is legally binding or not: unlike signing a contract with a devil or fey, international treaties lack a superior force enforcing them, and thus survive because of consensus.

If you push them too far, they break; and murdering a country's ruler is pretty damn far.

caoimhinh

" international treaties lack a superior force enforcing them, and thus survive because of consensus"

YES! EXACTLY!

They put in place protocols and mechanisms for this kind of things, and those are agreed upon and signed by the respective parties. And the treaty needs to be obeyed if it is going to last.

They had already decided what they would do if one of the Named decided to break the Terms, and that was the international tribunal we saw carrying sentence over them.

What Cordelia wanted was the exclusive right to prosecute them, but that went against the treaty. It's not complicated to see that it goes against what was already agreed.

Shveiran

I can't help but feel you kind of missed my point, here.

[sirfury](#)

You are thinking about rights and wrongs, promises and agreements.

Now add to that realities, like the extinction of humankind, and how likely other corrupt Princes (with powerful armies and resources) are unlikely to take the optimum actions to prevent it and instead make short-sighted personal choices that would only hasten their own, their subjects, and their allies demises.

The bottom line has always been winning the war. Any agreements made earlier, were only made in the assumption that they would best achieve the end goal.

If Cordelia sees that bending an agreement to gain favours that she can later turn into more troops and resources for the war, and in the worst case prevent the collapsing of the fragile Principality and allow her to keep her seat to further ensure the State keeps churning out soldiers, is that the right decision on her behalf, or wrong? If she gets deposed, would her successor still be bound to the agreements, and would they even care. Would there still even be a Principality that can coordinate and provide massive armies for the war?

As the quote in the beginning of the chapter aptly describes, the 3 main figure heads of the alliance believe they are doing the right thing for the people they are responsible for. Now that doesn't mean they are right, just that they believe they are. None of the three are vain rulers simply looking to save their asses for personal profit. Even Cordelia has confessed to scraping the barrel of promises and favours just to ensure a steady supply of manpower for the war effort, and believes she'll get deposed even if they survive. But she believes she is currently the best person in her position of power in the Principality during the War.

Not saying Cordelia took the best course of action, but I find your use of "satisfy the petty Highest Assembly" missing important context for the realities of the situation. Call them petty if you must(they are), but don't ignore the actual power they have in the form of manpower and resources that they could very well decide not to provide for the war, without the political cajoling of Cordelia.

caoimhinh

True, but also keep in mind that this wasn't Hanno being stubborn about it. Catherine backed him up in this, because the treaty had to be respected.

Cat refused Cordelia's demand of having the Red Axe judged by Procer, remember?

Cordelia just keeps resentment towards Hanno for keeping to his responsibilities in the bargain and not letting her break the treaty, but Cat backed him on this too.

The difference is that Cat offered something afterward, the raise of the Red Axe as undead in order to pacify the pettiness of the Highest Assembly. Another important fact is, that Hanno didn't back away from that, he was simply unaware of it, because Cat and Cordelia did it behind his back, assuming he would not be fine with them making an undead out of the Red Axe.

Shveiran

Yes, which is why I (we?) argue that it is not unreasonable to DISAGREE with Cordelia, but it feels kind of brash to discard her position as "petty politics".

Abrakadabra

You are correct. Cordelia is good, but practical good! While Hanno is the idealist one. And practical good And practical evil are so similar, they might Just be siamese twins.

saithorthepyro

Well at this point Cordelia has apparently become one of Below's by embracing the name of First Prince... although that's more on their extremely broken morality system.

Konstantin von Karstein

Cordelia is not Named, she's still a Claimant for WotW like Hanno.

saithorthepyro

Some have theorized that this
""Have it prepared for us," the First Prince repeated, and this time the ring of an order was unmistakeable.

The laurels burned against her palm, but Cordelia did not flinch. She would do what she must so keep the west in the war until the last moment. And should it stumble, should it fail?

She would, again, do what she must."

is if not the claiming of the name First Prince a pretty clear sign she is extremely close.

[Mental Mouse](#)

If she was bucking for First Prince to be a Name, she wouldn't have it in common with Hanno. They are competing for the Name of Warden Of The West.

Abrakadabra

Maybe she will be warden of the west, but a villainic one... Probably.

Zach

Where in the world do you people come up with this stuff?

Genuinely baffled that someone could read this story up until this point and think that Cordelia is Named

[Hargabga](#)

That is correct and something that I failed to consider. And that's the issue here, isn't it? Hanno thinks that the moment Cordelia asked for Red Axe, openly breaching agreement she herself signed, that was their breach of trust. Cordelia thinks, the moment Hanno let his principles trump over the matter of state survival (and to a lesser extent the fact that Red Axe (Heaven's Chosen, mind you) attempted to kill the Prince of Procer) the moment he failed her trust. Both sides have a point if you look from their position.

And I still will be leaning with Cordelia. She stood for the real breathing state, for lives of millions (even if it was in the shape of a few crowned heads). He stood for the empty principle, a stillborne thing that helped noone. The fact that he refused to compromise (which is basically diplomacy as far as Cordelia is concerned) was such a powerful Vietnam flashback to Saint of Swords, that he fell out of her trust ever since. And for good reason.

caoimhinh

From Hanno's POV, the breaching of trust was going behind his back to turn the Red Axe into an undead so she could be judged and killed by the Highest Assembly, just to satisfy the pettiness of the princes of Procer. But that was the issue with Cat.

With Cordelia, the issue was that she proved once again that politics due to having to keep the petty members of the Highest Assembly happy so she would not be deposed by them meant that she would potentially back off from deals and agreements, which was a fear that many parties had raised before, as Procer is notorious for historically backstabbing allies while keeping to pretenses of righteousness.

Cordelia didn't stand for her state, she stood for satisfying a few princes and cared about leaving precedents in law. And also because she wanted to use the death of the Red Axe as a warning for that prince that was scheming against the Drow, remember? The reason I think that Hanno was still in the right is that this wasn't just an agreement between three people, it was an international pact signed by representatives of various nations and factions, and it stood for something greater than any of the parts.

That the head of a nation wanted to back away from an international agreement because her own personal reasons, or even because of the internal politics of that nation's congress like a few congressmen getting angry, is simply unacceptable. Especially because she wanted to back away from fulfilling her part of the bargain while still keeping the Truce and Terms.

This is a different thing from how the Saint of Swords acted. And in fact, even in the case of the Saint of Swords, that whole mess started because of Cordelia, who was the one who started the crusade, the Saint simply bluntly told Cordelia that a Crusade was out of her control and couldn't be used for her own personal reasons.

Hanno simply told her that if a country signs an agreement, they need to abide by it. I don't think it's anywhere as extreme.

Snappy270

I can see your point but you still are doing what Hanno did. Not provide an alternative. No other way within the rules you wish to up keep that can resolve this situation. Just keep stating the rules.

The FACTS are that Procer was the one propping up the alliance with its resources and Cordelia diplomacy built the arsenal and feed the whole army. It was Cats armies and alliances that made the alliance possible. The white knight had no significant clout to the scenario as he couldn't keep his heroes in line. So is just an obstacle in the way of keeping the alliance together.

So they signed agreements they and bent over backwards with some loopholes to keep them. The white knight has done nothing to help, just kept repeating the treaty. And now he may not want to lead but he will do his duty if he needs to and if that takes Cordelia off the throne he will and Cordelia fears this.

Also she hates other heroes for just doing what they want such as the grey pilgrim killing a whole village to get

black. While villains like Cat she has come to understand can be bargained with.

Hargabga

Except it wasn't exactly that. Cordelia didn't have to satisfy a few congressman, she had to satisfy all of them, because the precedent was someone killing a congressman. Now yes, it was totally petty and unreasonable but politics often are. She didn't "back out of the agreement", she asked Hanno to understand her position and cooperate with her to help her preserve the war effort. He had every right to refuse to budge, and just like him, Cordelia technically didn't break any agreement by raising Red Axe. Both broke an unspoken agreement while keeping to the letter of law, because White Knight refused to budge on petty principle over realities of the world. This is why, while both sides have a point and are equally wrong (right), I lean with Cordelia still. It would've cost Hanno nothing, aside from petty principle, to cooperate with First Prince and holding a joint trial, for example. He refused to compromise just because he had the right not to.

caoimhinh

1) No, it couldn't be done. On account that treaties must be obeyed otherwise they have no strength. If they start making exceptions then no one will respect the treaty.

2) It wasn't Hanno standing up for petty principle. Both him and Catherine agreed on this: the Red Axe had to be judged by the T&T tribunal, not the Highest Assembly. Cordelia went to Cat first and hoped to get her help to put pressure on Hanno, but Cat refused her. Because of point 1, and because the T&T are predecessors to the Liesse Accords, and thus Cat cannot let them be weakened on such a weak basis of the sensibilities of princes being harmed when it comes to them fulfilling their part of the agreed treaty.

3) The tribunal of the T&T is a sort of a joint trial already, with representatives of Procer, Callow, Levant, Heroes, and Villains. Also, it was Cordelia who wanted exclusivity, having the Highest Assembly alone judging the Red Axe, her demands went against everything that had been agreed and it was her who didn't budge.

Again, Hanno and Cat were in agreement that Cordelia couldn't demand this, as the mechanism were already agreed and in place for such cases, she couldn't back off from it. What Hanno takes issue with is by what

Catherine and Cordelia did afterwards, defiling the body of the Red Axe and making her an undead to satisfy the princes of Procer. And it was a decision that he had no control over, because it was done without him knowing.

Cordelia resenting Hanno for abiding by the law and respecting the agreed-upon treaty is just hypocrisy on her part, considering how she is all about how Procer is a nation of laws and rules that must be obeyed.

Abrakadabra

Cordelia is practical good, she is the mirror of Cat I think. She May get a name out of this I think.

[Hargabga](#)

1) Yes, it could've been done. Hanno had supreme authority over Named. That authority, in recognition of a situation that wasn't specified within treaties, could've been ceded. Hanno just didn't want to, because he thought it was "unjust".

2) Both agreed that yes, under normal conventions Red Axe needed to be judged under T&T. However, Cat also agreed that such situation wasn't exactly thought about in the design of a treaty. Which is why Cordelia asked for renegotiation. Which is entirely reasonable. If a contract you signed has a loophole that will let someone loot your house, why on Earth would you still continue to sign on it? Procer could always back out of an agreement completely, if forced. That is a consequence of not recognising realities and refusing to negotiate further. That is what Hanno does. And why? Well, because he just don't like it.

3) True. Except it wasn't her demands. It was demands of reality. She isn't a Tyrant. She can't force people to follow her against their will. I can't fathom why you cannot see that. I can fathom why Hanno can't see that though. He thinks "personal agency" is a punchline, and not a very good one.

It's not hypocrisy to recognise that world doesn't run on movie logic.

dadycool

Interesting how Cordelia and Hanno are blaming each other for failing to keep their people in check and supporting each other. The quote is right, they both think themselves in the right, so they're each bringing to bear their final solutions in desperation, thinking themselves all alone in a hopeless situation.

Interesting how Cat, who was once thought to be the worst enemy

they would ever face and a monster beyond humanizing, was the only thing keeping them together. It makes sense, since her being Named means she can see Hanno's side, to a certain extent, and her title means she can see Cordelia's side, to a certain extent. Unfortunately, she'll likely return to a shattered Procer, a broken alliance, if not Grand Alliance, and a problem greater than she can easily solve.

ninegardens

I think it wasn't just Cat keeping them together.

I'm pretty sure the inevitable bootcrunch of **failure** is driving them apart here.

saithorthepyro

TBF, Cat and Hanno were also drifting apart after the Arsenal incident because Hanno really seems unable to grasp politics, diplomacy, compromise, or that a lot of common people really, really don't care about abstract concepts like justice and honor when there is a hoard of ravenous undead on their doorstep.

Burnsy

So much happening, but I wanna take a quick moment to say; fuck Antigone and her 'most people aren't worth saving' crap, and fuck Kreios and his ancient arrogant ass. EE does such a fantastic job of making the 'Good' guys just absolutely insufferable.

Reader in the Night

I mean, look at the people in Procer who decided to riot in the middle of an active war for their own survival; or look at the people who decided to try and jump ship and act like the War isn't their problem, despite the fact that it very much is. It's like they are trying to get themselves, and everyone else, killed. Do they deserve to be saved, despite their best efforts?

Shveiran

Who, the ignorant peasants that are scared to death? I'm not a fan, but they are not leaders nor do they have access to a bird's eye view of the matter.

I'm not a fan and sure, that makes a mess, but that's just scared people acting irrationally. I'm not really comfortable making a judgment call on whether someone is "worth saving" based on the fact that they make wrong choices during the end of the world when they don't have the tools to deal with the

problem.

It's not exactly a moral failing, you know?

Reader in the Night

Oh, I totally agree. Humans are flawed, and that's not bad. They clearly don't deserve to die.

But does that make them "deserve" saving? Think on the perspective of an immortal giant: Should anyone be expected to self-sacrifice to rid other people of their own problems resulting from their own actions?

The question being asked of the giant is not, "Do these people deserve to live?", the question is "Is it your problem if these people live or die?"

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I hold that if "these people deserve to die" is false, then "these people deserve to be saved" must necessarily be true. I get what you're saying, it's just that Kreios is himself a flawed person, and his refusal to concern himself with this, to make it his problem, is part of what's imperfect with him. Not that perfect characters would do anything but weaken the story, of course.

C_B

Yes. Obviously yes.

People don't need to be morally flawless or perfectly rational in order for "they don't get massacred" to be a better outcome than "they do get massacred." I don't understand how this is controversial. Lots of civilians getting massacred is bad. Preventing that from happening is good.

[marillius](#)

All those people who have been stepped on by nobility their entire lives and are still being stepped on, always being told it was necessary and important and right, that they HAD to? All of those people who have NO IDEA what's going on beyond rumors and some fricking undead showing up because the First Prince decided to go with Propaganda and INTENTIONALLY leave them all ignorant? All of those people don't deserve saving?

Shveiran

Honestly, we could stop at "all those people" and the answer should still be a resounding "yes".

marillius

Fair. I'd have to do a little bending to give you an example where the answer might be no, honestly.

Zach

In real life there is no guarantee that wars can be won, or that you or your family and loved ones will survive a war. These people don't have access to full information about the situation, and they frankly aren't even wrong if they think the government is lying to them (because it totally is – Cordelia was spreading rumors that the dead hadn't invaded as deeply as they actually have). So they're panicking, because the situation is one worth panicking about. For all they know, they're just going to be fed into the meat grinder and might be able to escape or otherwise avoid the conflict. They have no magical way of knowing otherwise.

saithorthepyro

The issue when you are chosen to be the standards of good morals in a world of complications, is that eventually one sees all who cannot match your standards as equally evil.

In the end despite things like the Plague, Tariq was probably the hero furthest away from that mindset.

Mental Mouse

I'd chalk that up to Antigone knowing how to manipulate the Titan.

Henry

I think it's partially fat but mostly the fact that she is a True neutral forest druid. Those types are known for caring about much outside of themselves and whatever druid traditions they come from.

Juff

Typo Thread:

lighting > lightning
Milenan men > Milenan for men
All contribute > All contributed
in the distance (repeated the next sentence)
years he had > years than he had
put down largely > put them down largely
promising the offer > promising to offer
now be much > now would be much
The slipped > They slipped

long as the > long at the
must so keep > must to keep

Evgeny Permyakov

And so it's begun. Cordelia and Hanno are now competing for the Name of Warden of the West. Who is going to win – an unflinching politician or an unflinching knight?

ninegardens

General Abigail, the Fox, swoops in for the surprise nomination.

Or... more honestly, Rozalia might be a good Compromise pick, keeping both Hanno and Cordelia on as minions with their respective skillsets.

Evgeny Permyakov

Oh, I'd love for Abigail to win, it would be a great irony. But I very much doubt it, even if it isn't impossible.

dadycool

Her thing is failing upwards despite her best efforts to get herself exiled or something. If she can badmouth a bunch of politicians to their face and get a laugh and pat on the back from those same politicians, do you really think there's any position she can't blunder her way into?

jamesc9

Her thing was explained many chapters ago, shortly after Cat formalised her promotion to General (defined de-facto as the most senior surviving person in an army). She wants to be fired for mild incompetence, into a position that is less gallows-adjacent.

caoimhinh

#TeamHanno

Do what must be done, enforce law, be just within certain boundaries, don't fall to pettiness and bullshit political excuses of why things can't be done.

Shveiran

So, basically, kill them all if they step out of line.

That is where this ends, is it not? For all that Hanno was so uncomfortable with the Iron Prince dealing with the revolting fantassins, that would be his only solution.

Not because he is cruel, but because he DOESN'T HAVE ANOTHER SKILLSET.

Abrakadabra

Yep, he has a hammer, and everithing around will be resembling a nail if the shit hits the fan.

Henry

To him Credit he actually is pretty good at gaining personal loyalty. He may struggle with big picture politics but I have no doubt he could come up with a heroic speech to get a bunch of captains to back down

Shveiran

Sure! Which is why I'm GLAD he is stepping up. What worries me is that I see him looking for the next step to take, and he seems to be looking to places where "big picture politics" are kind of THE requirement.

hakureireimu

Who is this? Certainly not Hanno.

Snappy270

And so begins round 2 of the procer civil wars and hanno tries to battle the largest country on the continent. With the preisthood becoming his zealots, his "Judges" maybe and slowly becomes the thing he hated. A Tyrant.

saithorthepyro

Really tired of hearing that attempting to kill foreign rulers and pretending that not doing anything to concede to entirely reasonable fears about Heroes doing purges of those they don't like is somehow bullshit political excuses. Things like that have consequences that need to be handled in a way that doesn't cause rebellions, or the Heroes can go ahead and go to war against the Dead King with no armies, coin, or support to help them out.

Also Hanno obeys no Laws but whatever a weird alien force that calls itself an angel whispers in his ear, and now that is gone, the law is what Hanno is decides. All hail the new Tyrant!

Xinc

To be fair, given how rotten Procer was and is, fear of such things happening was justified. Very much a "you dont burn if your innocent" story

Insanenoodlyguy

Not sure about that. I think Cordelia just became the First Prince.

Konstantin von Karstein

No, what made you think that? It wouldn't make sense for EE to make her a claimant for WotW then in her next chapter become First Prince.

saithorthepyro

The theory going around on the subreddit is that First Prince/Warden of the West are Villainous/Heroic mirrors of the same concept, so are linked in some ways but still distinct enough, I think someone put it the same name worn differently depending on who claims it. Or that they are close enough that claimants can at least sense the presence of another.

Zach

This doesn't make any sense. I don't think there's even any history of First Prince being a Name; it's just a political position in a firmly Good-aligned nation (or whatever you'd call the Principate).

Evgeny Permyakov

Actually, let's look.

East interludes – 2 chapters – Amadeus, Akua, Malicia, yet unsettled

North interludes – 3 chapters – Seems to be under Hakram

South interlude – 1 chapter – Seems firmly on the way to be under Basilia

West interludes – 2 chapters – Cordelia and Hanno, yet unsettled. Thought Abigail on the outskirts has potential as well.

Earl of Purple

There should be more South chapters to see how Basilia handles the news she's now the ruler of Tenerife, the Principality that was one of Theodosius the Unconquered's first conquests outside the Free Cities and has leant toward Helike every time Procer let it.

saithorthepyro

I'm personally betting she takes over, then conscripts everyone to go fight the Dead King anyway.

dadycool

lol, "Empress Basilia! Thank you for rescuing us from having to face the Dead King or contributing in any meaningful way to the war against him!" "Yeah, about that..."

hue hue

I bet the next one will be about the drown

Sykomantis

And from our of nowhere we get Interlude: Under I

ninegardens

So something that sticks out.
Like... REALLY sticks out.

Mr Hanno "I don't judge" White knight:
"Coredlia has failed to uphold her end of the bargain"
Also
"Dear titan, fuck you, get off your ass. You are worse than the elves".
Like.... That is some pretty sick judgement right there pal.

And... I can't help but think... against the Dead King... Hanno may have just made a very very bad mistake.

Yes, Krieos Riddlemaker is powerful. Great. Good.
He's also OLD. He's something that Nessie has had a *long time* to prepare for. He is not *new* Dead King *will* have contingencies for putting that guy down.

It only took two years to develop a counter to Sve-Nok, a Sve-Nok *IS* new.

If I were an immortal lich king, and there was a vaguely benevolent god on the opposite side of the continent, I would work on counters for that... you know, some time in my many thousands of years. Who was it that said that Usurption was the heart of sorcery?

Krieos is just not someone I want anywhere near the front lines. Keep him back. Use him as support, or logistics, or whatever, but putting him within Spellcasting range of Nessie is a *bad plan*.



Darkening

I mean, Hanno stopping his impartiality and choosing to Act is his whole character arc right now. He's judging Krieos for doing what he was doing before and being the Silent Man from the story he told earlier. As for coming up for a counter for sve nok in two years, he probably had seen Night in action before, given that the drow's first reaction to him being

mentioned was basically utter terror. There's a story there. I doubt he can counter Krieos completely, but this story *really* looks like it ends in Krieos burning up all his stored magic and life force for some final redemption equals death moment.

Linnus42

I mean I don't think DK has ever gotten close to Krieos. Whereas DK bordered the Drow and was even consulted by the Twilight Sages. He has had far more time to study Night, Sve Noc and the Drow than he ever has had to study the Twilight Sages.

Shveiran

Old Night, though. Post-Winter was a different beast, and not just because it was stronger. and Sve Noc didn't even exist pre-Winter (or rather, they were not a twin goddesses).

It was still a base to start from, I'll grant that. But then, I guess the DK did study the Gigantes at some point, if only through a crusader like Antigone.

mamm0nn

See, this is why you need some Named that can show up, say 'Hey rioters, you look like you've got plenty of energy and spunk left in ya! **You've hereby been conscripted to fight in the war in the north.**' Right now, Procer needs a reminder that their rights diminish in harsh times, especially when they're being idiots.

Reader in the Night

The problem is that half the time the Named forget that themselves. They put their own personal shit, or whatever credo they choose to live by, as above the continued survival of the continent.

Regular people and Named can both be idiots, but in very different ways. The nature of Names means that the ones that hold them are ridiculously stubborn motherfuckers, while normal people are flaky and prone to panicking and doing counterproductive shit.

saithorthe pyro

TBF, in the face of having to repeatedly send family members and food north to support a war effort, sustain a massive wave of refugees, constantly deal with economic and agricultural strain to try and deal with an invasion, and it's still not enough and the undead are leaking through and it looks like the

apocalypse has some, of course people are going to panic and try to find a way out that does not end with them and their families slaughtered and raised as undead monstrosities and their souls used to fuel Keter's experiments. They are already being conscripted, things are desperate, and when you are talking about medieval era peasantry rights isn't exactly something that exist to begin with.

AbraKadabra

That is a modern misconception. Medieval peasants had a good number of rights. And those rights were later stripped away after the middle ages started vaning and the New age begin where ironically they had less rights until the revolutions started up.

Oóher Than that I agree.

saithorthepyro

It kind of depends on where you were and what were considered rights, and yeah in practice they had more rights than on paper half the time because it was harder to centralize and....eh let's just settle on Procer's people weren't being treated lightly before they decided they were going to rise up. Losing wars tends to do that.

Frivolous

I'm just really glad that Otto Reitzenberg might be alive. It's only a hope, not a certainty, because the mention of Otto above is not defined in time and seems to contradict Interlude: West I, but a hope is better than nothing.

Also aww, a love ballad about Otto and Frederic. I love it.

Shveiran

I like it too, but is that canon?

I was under the impression that was just camaraderie.

Like Robber and Hakram, not like Juniper and Aisha.

Frivolous

Shveiran: Sorry, I don't know what you mean.

Are you asking if the love ballad represents an actual romance between Otto and Frederic? No idea. Could be wishful thinking on the composer's and singers's parts.

ohJohN

I'm pretty sure it's just camaraderie (despite preexisting in-universe rumors about their closeness). We've seen both Frederic's and Otto's perspectives in interludes, which

mostly established their deep respect for and friendship with each other without any obvious (to me, at least) romantic subtext. We've also only seen Frederic interested in women (Cordelia and Cat) which, though obviously not conclusive, gives some evidence for his preferences.

Funny you mentioned Robber, though – there's a not insignificant chance he's the source of those rumors in the first place. Here's a quote from the chapter when he arrives in Hainaut for the offensive:

Book 6, Chapter 49: Association (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/08/11/chapter-49-association/>)

ohJohN

For timing: "West I" took place right before the forces at the Morgentor retreated to Brus. In this chapter, we learn that after making it to Brus, Frederic rode back out to destroy a Crab and was subsequently rescued by Otto.

For the contradiction, if you're talking about this bit in "West I":

"They were a stern and unflinching lot, the Reitzenberg. The Prince of Bremen was called Otto Redcrown by men for the proof of that, the same stubborn charge that'd killed his father and two elder sisters before the crown passed to him and he carried it to its end."

I think it's just confusingly phrased. The intention could be that he carried *the charge that killed his predecessors* to its end (which he did!). Or that he *would* carry the crown to its end (but hasn't gotten there yet) because he's the last Reitzenberg – when he dies, there will be nobody left for him to pass it to.

Otto is almost definitely still alive, at least at the time when word was last sent to Hanno.

He led the retreat after rescuing Frederic, which prevented the latter's death, and I'd expect Hanno to ruminate on how morale on the northwestern front had plummeted if he knew either of the princes leading it had died.

Frivolous

ohJohN: Thank you for the analysis.

Unrecovered

That thing will blow up in everyone's face, won't it? Angel corpse made in a weapon of mass destruction.

[sengachi](#)

Every single person in the comments arguing whether Hanno is right or Cordelia is right? Here's the thing.

You're doing **exactly** what the opening quote talked about, and what Cordelia described happening among the fractious rulers in the beginning of the chapter. Blaming allies for failing to be perfect and perfectly fend off the Dead King.

The simple fact is that, to be blunt, both Hanno and Cordelia are doing pretty damn good jobs in a nightmare situation. They're doing imperfect jobs, making imperfect decisions based on imperfect data and imperfect judgement. But if you want perfect objective judgement with no flaws and flawless execution, go talk to Judgement, not mortals.

The reasons there's problems, the reason they're all stressed and pushed to the breaking point and making possibly disastrous choices is because of the **Dead King** and the **Intercessor**. Not Hanno or Cordelia, **those two**. They are in a situation where every action carries unconscionable risks, in which it's totally impossible to say beforehand which decision might lead to ruin, and in which mortal human judgement is being applied to problems beyond literally anyone's prior expertise or skillset.

We want there to be a way to thread the eye of the needle. We see a world and characters we've grown to love and we want everything going wrong to have an Answer, which if only executed right, would fix everything without losing even more. And when that Answer isn't delivered on, we find characters to blame and fight with each other over.

Just like the rulers splitting apart and blaming each other as Procer burns.

But there's no one to blame. There's just inhuman pressure being applied to humans, and the inevitable cracks that creates.

[sirfury](#)

Like a lot of commenters, I would agree Cordelia is not without faults and has made more than a few mistakes. But it also seems that some commenters are brushing aside the nature of the Principality and the First Prince position and simply calling it "politics, end of discussion", without giving it its due diligence and giving much thought on how it actually affects Cordelia's decision making process and dictates her actions. Comparisons between the Rulership of Catherine and Cordelia are not apt, as Callow and the Principality are different beasts. (Besides Catherine isn't doing too much of Ruling anyway). The latter is a vast land is basically a political landscape of many small kingdoms ruled by numerous corrupt Princes with the First Prince having in reality only a little power over them, as a lot of important decisions have to be made by Council vote.

Many of the unfortunate decisions she made were keeping in mind the likelihood of them being passed by the council vote, and a lot of the morally, objectively better decisions would simply be voted down and might even have caused her to be replaced as First Prince. And would that have been a better outcome than the present? Debatable.

More than the First Prince, the Principality is the issue. As it was centuries in the making, its unmaking would also take a long time without something more drastic than the present scenario. And would likely still claim more lives than now. Civil wars can be years in the making and total death tolls are nothing to scoff about.

All I'm saying is while it may be correct to call out Cordelia's failures, it also must be done taking in full account the actual power her political position grants her, and what she has to do to keep the Principality from disintegrating during the Dead Kings assault, when despite all its corruption and bureaucracy, it still has been producing (till now) manpower for the war. Is the Principality a good political system, especially at a time of crisis. No.

Can much be done about it in the short term. No.

It is what it is. After this event, if it survives in any capacity, it will likely change. But that is a topic of discussion for a later date.

nimelennar

I love that Abigail's "sharp instincts" entail a doom-and-gloom prediction. Even off-screen, she's in character.

[sengachi](#)

Abigail: "What could the Dead King do that would be utterly terrifying, beyond my ability to counter, and ruin all our days?"

Abigail: "..."

Abigail: "... alright I think I know that the Dead King is going to do next so write this down."

letouriste

welp, it's not ominous at all...

Xinci

Well, its interesting to see that those with Light and presumably those who are...less sinful, I suppose would be spared. I do wonder though if its just based on traits in this case then or if its another contingency by Above following the pattern of "from the ashes" they tend to work with. Given those who would survive would probably have potential to follow Good, anyway. Without Judgements clear vision can see some potential issues, and presumably such a contingency isnt the best option for em.

Anyway, one requires Light to properly observe the Angel which is interesting in implication. I would presume the spine to be linked to the Heavens where the living choir is given the "not of Creation" thing she says, the wings one can see the skein of causality through presumably, though they likely serve many more functions. The spikes I also presume to be causality related but am unsure on the exacts, maybe also related to that analogue of their vision being able to be refracted like light through glass.

Kreios's titles for people are quite nice. Its rather horribly nice to know that the Elves indeed plan to warp Spring into giving them young. Likely along with the forest home that cursed them...Perhaps it can be usurped or unwrit when knowledge of the magics used in the war burgeons further understanding. The Deoraithe will need to adapt for sure, when they learn the news. Regardless doing so is kind of a trap as well, as it now allows possible rebels against the institutions of the Elves, though given how old they may need to become to be strong, it is likely that only a few will turn against them at first.

Darkening

Apparently Triumphant trumped its Gaze and killed it instead, so it's not exactly an infallible weapon. Presumably she countered it with hordes of demons, since that was her thing, and the Dead King has demons too. Though she probably had a story on her side, whereas the story would decidedly be against the dead king in this case. I'm super interested what Cat would see if she looked at the angel. She has her whole story of defying angels going on and would probably stare straight at it until her eye started bleeding just out of spite.

Xinci

Ah also, I suppose Antigone is correct in that the choice to fight isn't about them. Its about his own willingness to give aid to such beings where he once wouldn't have. To be kind, when he was once cruel. Sure its a redemption story that will likely kill him and have various usurpers come for the corpse but perhaps that mental and emotional catharsis will be worth it. Does make me wonder if he will teach anything that could help the Gigantes come out of isolation later on, given they probably used people as ritual fodder its likely that some means could be artificed to aid them in their workings without human sacrifice at this point.

Frivolous

I wonder if Hanno is passing or failing his crisis of faith, as Tariq mentioned to Catherine in Dynamism.

All the political and war problems Hanno and Cordelia are dealing with could be seen as incidental to this issue, whether Hanno is

winning against the crisis or losing, because this is about Story, and Story rules all.

saithorthepyro

Honestly I think the answer that will be to if Hanno made the right choice will ultimately be...whichever one he chooses. Unless he actually transitions to a Villain name in his choice I doubt he'll have doubts about whichever action he takes. How that action is perceived by those around him, especially non-Heroes, will be the bone of contention.

Frivolous

saithorthepyro: There is also the possibility that Hanno is failing his crisis of faith, that he is not living up to his principles and his values, and that he will simply lose his Name of White Knight, not transition to any other Name like Warden of the West.

I think Hanno might be failing, actually. I think he and Cordelia might both be failing.

With Cordelia it is not so much of an issue, because she's not and has never been Bestowed. But for Hanno it's a big issue.

It would be nice if we could see Hanno using Light or one of his aspects, like Recall. That would help prove that he's still got it, that he's still White Knight.

beleester

This reminds me a lot of that debate over the Scorched Apostate and the Stalwart Apostle. Rely on faith that the heroes will win in the end, even when that seems impossible, or rely on the power of your own actions even when the only action you see is terrible? Cordelia is having a crisis of faith, and seems to be leaning towards the villainous side of the choice.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, she fell.

"Have it prepared for us," the First Prince repeated, and this time the ring of an order was unmistakeable.

The laurels burned against her palm, but Cordelia did not flinch.

Konstantin von Karstein

I don't think she did. Narratively speaking, it wouldn't make sense for EE to make her a claimant for WotW then in her next chapter make her into First Prince.

«The ring of an order » absolutely doesn't makes it look like she suddenly became Named. The laurels would probably do mire than a light lien if she had become a Villain.

MoreBeer

This wouldn't be the first time Cordelia has been offered two names though, one from above and one from below. When she turns down the first, the second is offered. And unlike last time, this time she's clearly accepting.

Konstantin von Karstein

She's not accepting anything.

Konstantin von Karstein

At least for now.

Reader in the Night

May I just say that Abigail's ruse of competence has become so pervasive, even Hanno believes it? And at some point, if everybody believes a certain lie, it becomes a truth. Dunno if Abigail is moving towards a Name, but she certainly is creating a reputation.

Insanenoodlyguy

She's a Ciaphus Cain at this point. She has a low opinion of her own competence, and she's certainly less courageous and ingenious as her reputation, but she's not actually bad at what she does. Notably good, in fact.

agumentic

Hanno believes it because it's not really a ruse. Abigail is very competent at her job, she just doesn't believe it herself.

Sykomantis

I am living for the fact that this chapter **in particular** is causing so much argument in the comments. This level of irony is a delicacy.

ohJohN

Is... is Kreios really supposed to be hundreds of millions of years old?

Fermi estimate: humans take about 20k breaths per day, Hanno is roughly 30 years old, so:
 $20,000 \times 365 \times 30 = 219 \text{ million}$

If we take Hanno literally here, that sure gives Kreios's talk about "dust of dust" some serious weight – even for the lone survivor of a long-dead race of practically-immortal lesser gods, that's a damn long time to have lived. For an IRL comparison, the distant ancestors of humanity started walking upright ~6m years ago, and homo sapiens evolved only ~300k years ago. I'd call Kreios a dinosaur, but he is conceivably *older than the dinosaurs* (which first appeared ~243-233m years ago).

Mental Mouse

I think you are being unnecessarily literal here. Especially since Hanno is not necessarily good at math.

Henry

Is he actually pretty well educated being a former scribe. I don't Magine him know quite a bit about math unless there something I'm forgetting

hakureireimu

Unless I have my geography mixed up, this should be West right?

Murska

It is interesting that generally in the real world when people are faced with a crisis, they hold together and sacrifice selflessly. But many Procerans seem to just lose their minds and scatter to the winds, even though it should be abundantly obvious to everyone that unless the armies in the North prevail, they will all perish.

I would more expect Cordelia to have to deal with too many volunteers for the military compared to those working on fields and people renouncing payment and giving up everything they have stored to help than people refusing to aid the struggle or seceding to die with some other state a few months later.

People aren't stupid in this particular way. They can see the writing on the wall.

An interesting counterpoint, perhaps the psychology of Calernia has been warped by Heroes saving the world when everything is at its darkest over and over again. It pays off to refuse to contribute to the common good at your own expense if the crisis is always resolved in the very end and your contributions don't actually matter.

Xinci

I would say specifically its because Procers subcultures seem to have been manipulated in various aspects by the Dead King over time to make it easier once he actually has to invade.

1) The lycoanese are kept in relatively few numbers by raids and their mages picked off so they cant develop too many force multipliers. They remain isolated from the southern groups and as such take the brunt of cultural pressure to properly adapt to fighting such a relentless enemy.

2) The Arselites and Alamans to the south have possibly had a fear of mages exacerbated over time even after the Mage guild was dismantled, making wide ranging responses that could use their large population to their advantage unlikely to develop.

3) The Arselites are least have a wide internal culture for dueling, which while useful for getting skilled at arms tends to not aid the making of soldiers that well and often aids continual internal disputes.

4) Their main ways of sorcery are based on prayers without the presumable safeguards/shaping of the scripture, which means that while it can do stuff it seems rather hard to narrow it down well enough to work.

5) The House of Lights influence has been waning for decades, meaning less priest are around in more vulnerable positions or less priest available in places that can easily be fortified against a possible invasion.

The Lycaonese's reaction fits that of a culture who has been shaped for conflict vs such a unflinching foe, however the rest of Procer is coddled and weak. They arent prepared, and as such, flight overpowers fight. They do not have a true sense of unity

[308924810a](#)

That's an interesting point.

Suppose that the political culture has been shaped by multiple incidents of some great villain arising to prominence over an area, crushing the local power bloc within that area, and in the process creating their own inevitable downfall by provoking and story-empowering the heroes that will rise against them for their actions.

Under such a circumstance it'd be rational for lesser powers to defect away from the power bloc that's being crushed by the villain, thus avoiding the devastation that a rising villain can bring by sheltering under another power bloc which the villain would be badly overextending to provoke, then waiting for the fated hero to defeat the villain, giving them the opportunity to take advantage of the power vacuum left by the fall of a villain in order to expand their own power.

The issue here is that this defection is uncommonly bold in some ways, because if the Grand Alliance wanted to send a Named assassin after any defectors they absolutely could.

[308924810a](#)

Poor communication kills.

The war effort can't really afford to lose either Cordelia or Hanno.

[DC](#)

"General Abigail believed that soon Keter would begin landing mages the same way to create disrupting forces by slaying and raising villages.

The Fox's instincts were sharp enough that Hanno was not inclined to doubt them."

It is something of a sign of the times that Abigail's endless pessimism and misfortune has made her a highly effective general in this war.

She also continues to remain the best character because behind this short reference is an entire imagined chapter of lament and resignation ending in that conclusion.

I am really looking forward to what becomes of her and her legacy in the epilogue. Calernia needs an entire family, tradition, maybe even a Name for people like her. :v

[benthelynx](#)

I was thinking The Reluctant General, but honestly there is more to it than that isn't there – it could be it's own line of names tbh

[308924810a](#)

Thinking about this whole situation again, I think this:

-Princess Francesca, her friend and ally of almost a decade, was dead. Her palace had been swarmed by a mob of rioters and disaffected soldiers, who'd dragged the sixty-four years old princess into the streets and splattered her head with a rock before displaying her on a pole. It had happened, Cordelia was told, because Francesca had refused to consider what her distant cousin and successor proclaimed within the hour: Tenerife was seceding from the Principate of Procer. –

Needs to be examined more carefully. It's too convenient for the Dead King.

I've been reading up on how failure cascades work in gaming and I've come to the realization that manipulating a principality

into seceding, immediately after a failure of the northern defenses, and following a period of sustained adversity, is a pretty decent way to trigger such a cascade.

If you can induce one principality to secede while the others are reeling from having found their past efforts and sacrifices insufficient to properly halt the threat, it becomes a coin flip as to whether the politically knowledgeable classes will react with a great outpouring of rage towards the defectors, or whether they will react in despair that their current efforts are not enough to keep them safe, and begin panicing and casting about for an alternative. And because it appears that neither newspapers nor, in this setting, scrying, are in position to create a unified national discourse, they should have to flip that coin repeatedly for each of the political discourses of specific regions within Procer.

Wasn't there some villain raising an undead army within the Brocellian? That sounds like a distraction the Dead King would have set up.

And he has Revenants and spies, he probably could have caused one or two of these defections.

Only issue is that, the withholding of resources for the war effort without instead pursuing an alternate path to safety still doesn't quite make sense. It'd only fit if there were local threats or shortages which give a ruler's retainers justifications to argue that focusing resources within one's own borders is necessary. Bandits, rebels, or rioters that have made the shift from being rioters to being rebels might do it, but I think it'd fit better if this practice of transporting airborne raiding forces had been introduced a while ago, and there was implication that a bunch of small raiding bands of undead had already both slipped through and somehow able to dodge easy interception once out of the range of the Dead King's scrying-disruption rituals.

Someperson

Well then. This has the shape of a conflict that will define heroism for the next Age. And it will be messy.

Cordelia and Hanno are clearly lined up to be at odds, with hinted at rival claims on the same Name, parallels between each of them reaching for some very big guns to resolve the conflict, and serious (and honestly well-founded) sentiments that the other hasn't kept up their end of the deal. Loosely speaking, Cordelia's authority and role is mainly that of a ruler where Hanno's is mainly that of a hero.

Catherine would probably sympathize quite a bit more with Cordelia's views, and the fact that she even (somewhat surprisingly) gave Cordelia her blessing to start testing the

Seraphim bomb makes this angle seem all the more likely. However, she also gave Tariq her word just before he sacrificed himself that she would reconcile herself with Hanno and not interfere overly much with him finding his own path with what it means to be a hero in the coming Age. There is no way that breaking such an oath could have anything short of disastrous consequences for her story, and it would be very difficult for Catherine to involve herself in this conflict in any way without really going against the spirit of the oath, and yet somehow I doubt she will manage to be completely hands-off about something so very important. Whatever role she takes in this will have substantial constraints to tiptoe around.

And then of course there is the heyday that the Wandering Bard will have with this extremely important showdown that will probably shape many future Names. Assuming this isn't what she was sowing the seeds for all along, and one of the outcomes that she intended from everything that happened at the Arsenal.

Someperson

The trouble is, it isn't really just a matter of one of them "winning" or "losing." The Liesse Accords is about drawing boundaries between Named and the affairs of normal people. But now, Hanno is a Named trying to also become a political leader, and Cordelia is a political leader trying to also become a Named. There is no good way for that conflict to be decided.

Unless the conflict is turned completely on its side, the Liesse Accords are sunk. Naturally I expect the classic Foundling fallback against the unwinnable, wherein one flips the board and then insists everyone else was mistaken about which game was being played all along.

Storm

yeesh, this comment section is horrible.

Interlude: East III

"Red runs the Tower's mortar."

– Praesi saying

Within an hour of entering Ater, Akua Sahelian was sought out for a conspiracy to overthrow the Empress. By the end of the day, no fewer than seventeen such offers had been made to her.

"It is all very tasteless," she mused. "A defeat against an invading enemy – Callowan, too, how classical – paired with a great gathering of nobles at the imperial court, everyone scheming to overthrow the Tower and a vague sense of doom looming over all these proceedings. One would be forgiven for thinking they'd stumbled into a tragedy written now by Adomako. Any moment now we will stumble into a scene of overdone symbolism."

The golden-eyed sorceress paused.

"A wounded gazelle being fought over by lions," Akua decided. "It's always lions, isn't it? There is an excessive fondness in our writing for the beasts, Kendi, given their general uselessness."

"You are mad," Kendi Akaze harshly replied. "And not even in the way fools honour. Do not think I will not sell you out to the Tower at the first opportunity."

Perhaps it was the presence of the Amaranth around her neck, the way the ancient artefact drowned out all the pettier emotions, but Akua had found herself growing fond of the man. He was remarkably straightforward in his hatred of her, and though he had not attempted to kill her since their mage duel in Kala she suspected it was only a matter of time until he tried again. She did not blame him for this, or feel particularly offended. She had led the man's sister and several of his kin to their death at the Folly they named after her, and that was a better reason for hatred than most.

"I expect several of the nobles who approached me for treachery did so on Malicia's behalf," Akua amusedly replied. "Not that my having committed to nothing will soothe her fear of me in the slightest."

"And why should she not fear you?" Kendi said. "All the world knows you seek her throne."

"Naturally," Akua agreed, draining the last of her cup.

She had lost the habit of pairing wine with antidote. The taste was no longer familiar to her, after drinking from other bottles. Her fondness of it had thinned. Her fondness of many things had thinned, the sorceress thought, and rose to her feet.

"Let us be off, Kendi," Akua said. "There is time to be wasted and I would waste it elsewhere."

Out in the City of Gates, not these luxurious apartments that felt like they were closing in on her from every direction. Like a noose slowly tightening. Kendi made an unpleasant comment about her intellect, charmer that he was, but he followed. He always followed.

How else, Akua thought, could he find the moment to stick the knife?

They went into the streets of the capital, followed by a horde of shadows. Spies belonging to three dozen different lords and the Eyes, soldiers, Sentinels and two – no, three assassins. Really, an illusionary veil? Akua had first made her reputation bleeding *fae*, this was insulting. She informed the man as much after melting off his limbs in a cloud of acid before turning to ask her other would-be assassins to try it again tomorrow, for she was not in the mood for sport today. Her shielding spells came up quicker than the arrow came down, so a few blood-curling screams later the last remaining assassin fled.

"Someone will succeed," Kendi told her. "Sooner or later, you will fail."

"I can always count on you for perspective," she replied, patting his arm fondly.

He looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, which put her in a good enough mood to make up for the sloppy assassination attempts. Even the Jacks would have done better, and they'd only been around for a few years on top of being led by a whiny heroine. Akua found, as she walked the streets, that Ater was a pot about to boil over. The capital had swelled with refugees not only from Nok and the outskirts of Thalassina but now also the swaths of the Wasteland that'd been ravaged by the civil war. It was said that the City of Gates held half a million people within its walls, but she knew that to be inaccurate – it was usually closer to three hundred thousand, only growing when famine struck other parts of Praes.

At the moment, though, she suspected that there truly might be five hundred thousand people in the city. A disastrous number to try to keep fed during a siege, no matter how full the Tower's granaries, and the city was poorly equipped to host them besides. Large swaths of the capital were abandoned, and though it was better than living in the streets making a home in those districts was barely livable. District mages would keep the sewers working, the wards in good state and keep an eye out for epidemics but wouldn't really go out of their way to help beyond that. There were only so many of them and the city was enormous.

It'd once been custom for wealthy nobles to patronize sections of the city, but Malicia had stamped out the habit to consolidate her control over the capital. Would she reconsider now? Unlikely,

Akua decided. The situation was too volatile for the empress to be willing to take on such a risk. Her wanderings through the half-ruined streets were noticed not only by spies and soldiers but also by the refugees themselves: someone must have recognized her, for a crowd began to gather. And, as crowds were wont to be, it grew angry. At first she wondered if she would have to retreat under shield spell as a mob tried to tear her apart, but then laughter choked up her throat as she made out what was being shouted.

"Down the Tower," the crowd shouted.

"Death to Malicia," the crowd insisted.

And, worst of all-

"Warlock, Lady Warlock," they shouted. "*Sahelian. Save us, Sahelian.*"

Save us, Sahelian, Akua dully repeated. Had anyone ever spoken more absurd a sentence? It would have been the work of a moment to whip these dirty, desperate people into a raging mob. The fear was thick here, the Black Queen's name on half the lips. The Queen of Callow would come and kill them all, they said, like she'd done to the refugees that'd tried to cross into the Fields of Streges. She was here to bury the Empire, bury them with it, and it was all Malicia's fault. *Five years ago you would have rioted at anyone trying to overthrow her*, Akua thought. How quickly gratitude faded in the City of Gates.

"They'll turn on you too," Kendi said from behind her. "Tear out your throat like animals. It won't last."

It would have been so easy, to whip them into a frenzy and send them rioting into the streets. To sow the seeds of a chaos only she could calm and through that, oh through that she would rise. Climb the Tower until there was nothing left above, no one worth bowing to. So Akua climbed a broken house, a sea of people gathered before her, and told them the truth.

"The Black Queen will not kill civilians," she said. "The Army of Callow quarrels only with the Tower. Stay indoors, stay out of the way, and you will be safe."

It was not what they'd wanted to hear, she thought, as a rippled went through the crowd. They'd wanted blood, wanted death, wanted something to sink their teeth into. It was easier than going back to their hovels, afraid and cold. So she gave them something more.

"I have nothing left but my magic to offer you," Akua said, "but that much I will give you. Bring your wounded, your sick. I will see to them."

Something more than fear and cold. The first few were children – broken limbs, coughs, lungrot – but by the time she was done with them already people had begun to act. To organize. A run-down mansion that was clean and dry was opened to her, beds dragged into the great hall and what clean linen there could be rustled up volunteered. Strangers did this who had not known each other for an hour, with a smoothness that surprised. *Jino-waza*. A few hedge mages came forward and she taught them a spell to boil water and conjure clean water before continuing with the work. They came in as a trickle, already a line running outside for half the district and kept in order by large men with makeshift cudgels, but the trickle never slowed.

Akua's magic did not tire. Fingers reattached, infections burned out, broken bones soldered. Cuts closed, parasites flushed out, nerves regrown. She had done this all many a time, after the Army of Callow saw battle. With Night instead of sorcery, but she was only better for the change. She was not sure how long she healed, the faces and people blending, but eventually she found she was drenched in sweat. The Amaranth kept getting caught in the red silk collar, so she set it down to the side and returned to the work. Immediately the heat washed over her, from the fire and the people and the Wasteland's pounding sun, but she mastered herself. A man was ushered in with his young daughter.

She had a fever, which Akua's finding spell told her was from an infection in the stomach. It would be more tedious than difficult to heal, which she informed them of. The man – a tall, heavy sort with soldier's scar – looked heartbreakingly relieved.

"I knew you'd come through, Lady Sahelian," he said as she began the spell. "You've always done right by us."

Curious, she spared the man a glance.

"I mean no rudeness," she began, and he snorted.

"I was only a soldier," he said. "But I served under you at First Liesse. Would have at the Second too, if my wife hadn't gotten pregnant with my youngest. The name's Kamau."

There was, to her dim horror, open pride in his voice at having served her. *How desperate must you be, that the memory of my follies is the raft you now cling to?*

"I was never disappointed by any of those I led into Liesse," Akua said, uneasy at the lie.

At feeling the need to tell it.

"It's been hard times since," Kamau admitted. "What with your lord cousin taking over in Wolof, some of us were sent away. We tried to head south, but it... didn't go well."

"The Green Stretch turned you back?" she asked.

"No, not them," the man said. "Callowans on the other side of the Wasaliti. Just farmers, at first, but then the Legions – the Army of Callow, I guess they call themselves out west – got bloody too."

He grimaced.

"We lost my wife fleeing back to the Blessed Isle," he admitted. "It's only this one and my son now. I have no words for how grateful I am you're helping her."

His eyes turned harsh.

"Would that you'd killed them all at the Doom, Lady Warlock," he said. "We'd be better off for it. Next time, yeah?"

Her throat tightened, the magic flowing from her palm into the girls' belly almost wavered. *I used you*, she almost told the man. *I used you all, until you were spent and dead and when you were I never looked back. Can you not see that? Can you not see that soldiers swung the swords but I own every death?*

"It was a bitter day for all who knew it," Akua croaked, lips gone dry.

"Been a lot of those since you started the wars – I hear the scholars call them the Uncivil Wars," Kamau said, but suddenly paled. "Not that I meant this was your fault at all, Lady Warlock, I-"

Could not possibly speak a sentence more damning than that one, Akua thought. But she painted a smile on her face, moved the lips and soothed his fear.

"Need not explain anything," Akua said, then withdrew her hand from the girl. "It is done, dear. Be careful to drink only water until tomorrow, and don't eat anything even if you get hungry. Your stomach is very sensitive, you'll spew it right back up and it would hurt you."

The little girl gravely nodded, and her father led her out after another round of apologies that she dismissed. Akua felt faint, as she next man was ushered in. How many of the people she had healed today were in the capital because of an action she had taken? Her folly had been used as the pretext for the Grand Alliance to go to war, for Ashur to ravage the coasts of the Empire, but there were faults closer to home. It was her banner raised that had begun the civil wars that were still raging across Praes, her schemes that had... Akua laid a hand against the wall, dizzy. She felt Kendi's eyes on her, considering.

Forcing herself not to move with unseemly haste, she put the Amaranth back on and let the ancient grief of the crystallized tear wipe away the knots in her stomach. She returned to the work, learning from men as she did that the High Lady of Kahtan had sent mages do imitate her and now dozens and dozens of highborn were doing the same. When finally she tired, her magic grown sluggish, she told the people as much. Some refugees wept as she went, but more cheered and even more bowed. It sickened her. She turned to the Taghreb woman who had first thought of using the mansion, had risen through the crisis as a leader of sorts.

"I am using you, you know," Akua said. "To raise my reputation."

It was true, she thought. It must be true. It was one thing to spare a man, a forgivable whim, but this... she had purpose, reason. She had taken an opportunity offered. The other woman shrugged.

"Maybe," she said. "But what does that matter, to the people you healed?"

Akua flinched away from her, from it all, but she was not to be allowed to retreat in peace.

"That was reckless," Kendi said. "She could have turned on you, told the crowd. You just came close to dying."

"I am always but a moment away from dying," Akua replied, forcing nonchalance.

The dark-skinned man rolled his eyes.

"Yes, *mile thaman Sahelian*, lovely," Kendi said, "but I don't mean philosophy-"

"Neither do I," Akua curtly interrupted. "Do you think my return to flesh came without a price? Somewhere in me lies a way for the Empress to kill me with a word. I do not speak in *metaphor*, Kendi, when I say I am only ever a moment away from death."

That silenced him, though she was not sure whether the quiet was thoughtful or surprised. No doubt he would soon begin to consider how the Empress might be incited to put her life to an end. Tired of it all, Akua moved towards the centre of the city. The Black Knight, at least, could be relied on for cold company. Marshal Nim was not the Legion headquarters of the capital but instead at her own manse, which Akua promptly headed to. That the servants allowed her and Kendi to enter was a surprise, but not so much of one as the fact that Nim was very obviously drunk. As mfuasa were trained to Kendi went to a corner just out of sight, where he could easily be forgotten, but his gaze missed nothing.

"Marshal," Akua greeted the ogre. "It appears you have me at something of a disadvantage, drink-wise. Will you not offer me your hospitality?"

Only the Black Knight did not stare her down coldly, call her a snake or sent her away. Instead, to Akua's dismay, the ogre twitched and then wordlessly gesture for her to sit. Most chairs here were built with ogres in mind, and the bottles on the table were closer to a barrel than what the sorceress would have meant by the term, but Akua found a carafe of terrible Aksum gold and a glass that was not larger than her head. She took a sip, then grimaced.

"This vintage is a war crime," Akua noted, "and I should know."

Marshal Nim stirred, as did the golden-eyed mage's hopes, but they were just as swiftly dashed.

"You were right," the Black Knight said.

"As is only natural," she replied, hiding her alarm.

"Malicia doesn't trust the Legions as far as she can throw them," the Black Knight said. "I am to share command of the defences with the High Lady of Kahtan."

Who commanded the largest of the highborn armies come to reinforce Ater as well as the largest coalition of nobles not under Malicia's thumb. In olden days that would have made High Lady Takisha the Chancellor, but nowadays it mostly meant that the Empress was scheming to kill and discredit her.

"I can't even blame her, after Kala," the Black Knight cursed. "They deserted, Sahelian. *Deserted!*"

A bottle of wine hit the wall, shattering with enough glass spraying everywhere that it would need wheelbarrow to clean up. Akua eyed the other woman clinically. Nim was drunk, obviously, but more than that she was despairing. Not only had she been decisively beaten by Marshal Juniper on the field – which must have stung, considering the Hellhound had not been all that highly thought of among the upper ranks of the Legions – but in the wake of that defeat almost a third of her army had deserted rather than fight. Now she had only her last loyalists and the skeleton legions that'd been left in the capital, a force weaker than the one Marshal Juniper had already beaten.

The Legions of Terror she had been fighting to preserve were effectively dead. The soldiers that'd walked off the field at Kala would not be returning to anyone's banner any time soon and the Tower would not forget or forgive that desertion – no matter how earned it had been. Even the legionaries who had stayed would be asking themselves why they were still fighting for the

madwoman in the Tower that'd turned two thirds of the continent against them. *Her Role was broken at Kala, Akua decided. She failed in the central conceit of it, which was 'the general of the Empire's armies'. She must either find a different Role or lose her Name.*

And Akua, who had tried to save her life and helped at every turn, was here in her moment of weakness. *I could promise you the Legions you want and mean it, Akua thought, and for that you'd follow me.* It was the right place, the right time, with the right history behind it. The Gods Below were offering a Black Knight of her own on a silver platter. All it would take was making promises that Akua genuinely believed would be in the interest of the Empire: the Legions had become one of the pillars of Praes since the Reforms, they were well-worth preserving and kept separate from politics exactly the way Marshal Nim wanted them to be.

All it would take was for Akua to speak sweet nothings with a silver tongue.

"You are a fool."

Oh dear, that'd been her speaking hadn't it? No matter, she could still salvage this.

"Are you truly so weak-willed, Black Knight?"

Not only was this distinctly not a sweet nothing, Akua thought, but it was arguably the opposite. An insulting something? She drank a bit more war crime to wash down the taste of whatever madness had seized her. Nim was shaken out of her daze by the insults, at least, which was a form of progress. Towards nothing pleasant, but progress anyhow.

"Even if I smash your head in for that, I'll still be dead before the month is out," the Black Knight said. "I know what a pattern of three is, Sahelian. I have won once and since suffered a draw. That boy will have my head soon enough."

"Then find a way to lose on your terms," Akua harshly replied. "Are you a Marshal of Praes or a maudlin child? Defeat need not mean death. Even Fate can be gamed. As for your precious Legions, what did you expect?"

"That they would stand behind their Black Knight," Nim roared.

"They did," Akua calmly replied. "You are not him."

That cut deep, she saw, but she was not done.

"Did you think this would be easy, Nim?" she mocked. "That you would earn a Name to pluck ripe peaches from the tree? *You are villain.*"

She threw her own glass against the wall. It shattered most satisfyingly.

"You are the Black Knight of Praes," Akua hissed. "Have some *fucking pride*. You lost and your ideal is in tatters, what of it? Do you think a hundred of your Name have not stood where you do, all ashes in their hands and blood in their mouth?"

"It can't be salvaged," the Black Knight replied, eyes wild. "We all saw-"

"Then raise it again from the ground up," Akua cut in harshly. "Or are you so enamoured with being the lesser of your predecessor that you can not do the same he did? This was never going to be *handed* to you, and it offends me that for even a breath you thought it might be. You are Named to struggle, to rise above what you were. If you cannot tolerate the way of the world, then *change it.*"

Marshal Nim rocked back.

"I – you," she stumbled. "What is this, Sahelian?"

"A disappointment," Akua scathingly said. "I thought better of you, Marshal. A petty idealist you might have been, but you did not lack for spine. The Hellhound did not take it from you on the field, so where was it mislaid?"

Nim looked as lost as she was drunk.

"I thought you would," she said, hesitated.

Make an offer, she did not say.

"What are you, that I should?" Akua said, rising to her feet. "Naught but a broken thing which knows not what it wants or what it seeks. You have no design, no fire, not even a plan. You call yourself Named but you are a dandelion, a victim of wind and whims."

She was panting, by the end of that. And wondering if it was the Black Knight she was castigating.

"Stand on your own feet, Black Knight," Akua Sahelian said. "What use could anyone have for you before you do?"

And so she rose to hers, dizzy. And looking at Nim's face she felt like cursing, like weeping, like screaming at the top of her lungs. Because when she had walked into this room the Black Knight had been a woman who might have made a deal with her, but

now she looked at Akua like someone who wanted to follow her. Like ragged Kauma in the ragged mansion, handed scraps of a fate and yet so odiously grateful. Did she need to set fire to the city, before someone at last screamed enough? Akua fled.

"She will know what you are in time," Kendi said. "And hate what she sees then."

"She should *already* hate me," Akua bit out.

By the time they got back to her manse it was dark, and so the highborn came out to play. The ones that had approached her during the day were fools and amateurs, but those who fully intended to see the Empress usurped now came crawling out of the gutters. The invitation she received was not signed, but that was the way of such conspiracies. She put on a cloak and returned to the streets, Kendi following dutifully, to see what the conspirators had to offer. One could not topple the Tower without the support of powerful backers. The heavily warded manse she was led to by a guide was dark, and she was brought to a room where twelve sat masked at a great table.

Amused, she stared down the woman at the head of the table.

"You are sitting in my seat," Akua said.

There was a ripple. Laughter, offence, some just surprised by her gall. Kendi disappeared into a dark corner, already forgotten by almost everyone in the room.

"That remains to be seen," an indistinct voice replied through the mask.

"Does it now?" Akua mused.

It had been hours since she used magic. She was still exhausted, but her disdain for this farce lent her strength. Power billowed out tearing through the anchored illusion forcing shadows and then, obeying her will, cutting cleanly. One after another, twelve masks dropped. Some were hastily caught, but not enough.

"High Lady Takisha," Akua noted, locking eyes with the woman at the head of the table. "How bold."

"I'll have to kill you for this," the High Lady of Kahtan coldly said.

She laughed, scornfully, in the woman's face.

"Ah yes, so that instead these fine conspirators might instead support *your* bid for the Tower," Akua said, running a finger across the table. "No doubt you gathered this little event because you were able to climb it on your own. You are known as a woman highly lacking in ambition."

A moment of silence.

"She has you there, Muraqib" a masked man carelessly said.

"Without my support and that of my vassals, you have no chance of success," High Lady Takisha evenly said. "This will have a price. First comes the restoration of the Name of –"

"No," Akua said.

Startled surprise. This was not, the sorceress knew, how this conversation was meant to go.

"Pardon?" High Lady Takisha said.

Akua was so very tired of this, she realized. Of the cloak and dagger plots, of the pit of hatred and betrayal that was the Tower. Of this empire of endless teeth, guzzling down its own people not to achieve anything but for the mere purpose of continuing to exist. And they were part of it, too, these masked fools before her. Teeth in the maw.

"You do not make demands of me," Akua said, and it felt *good*.

"You are mistaken if–"

"Who are you, Takisha Muraqib, that I should take heed of you?" Akua asked, honestly meaning the question. "All I see is the last rat standing. What have you won, what have you done, that your displeasure should give me pause?"

"Hard talk, coming from the Black Queen's concubine," a man bit out.

"I would have more power as Catherine Foundling's bedwarmer than you ever have or ever will wield," the golden-eyed aristocrat laughed in his face. "That's why you're here, all of you, in this room instead of halfway across the city plotting to back someone else."

She swept the room with her gaze.

"So let us dispose of the pretence that you are owed for this conversation, that this is a favour done onto me," Akua said. "You are vultures circling a wounded lion but too afraid to take the plunge. I need you?"

She moved her lips into a smile.

"You need me," Akua corrected, "and you, High Lady Takisha, are *still sitting in my seat*."

Silence stretched out, and something like relief welled up. At last, she thought, the end. They would balk and turn on her,

Malicia would end it and- and Takisha Muraqib, hatred in her eyes, rose to her feet. *No, Akua thought. No. How can you not seen that I have nothing to threaten you with, no one behind me? You are a High Lady of Praes, the sharpest of irons, so why are snatching defeat from the jaws of victory? Why, you misbegotten Hellgods, do I keep winning?* Appalled, Akua Sahelian took her seat at the head of a table where twelve of the most powerful lords and ladies of Praes sat.

"They measure your back for knives already," Kendi told her as they left. "You will not be forgiven for this."

"Then why," Akua sadly asked, "did they let me do it to them?"

She returned to the manse, sagged into a seat, and closed her eyes. Exhausted beyond words. Behind her she heard Kendi moved, but somehow she was still startled when pain bloomed on the side of her head.

—

Akua woke up. The Gods were laughing and Akua Sahelian woke up. Her back hurt, and fingers found a bloody scar on it, but she was breathing and when she rose in her bed she found Kendi Akaze seated across from her, eyes smiling. On a low table before him there were two objects. One was the Amaranth, smashed to pieces. The other looked like a strip of bone, carved with so many rows of small runes that it was hardly recognizable.

"Lodged in your spine," Kendi amiably said. "It was difficult to remove it without paralyzing you, but I managed."

"Why?" she croaked out.

"Because you are in pain," he said. "And I want you to drown in it without your necklace to save you."

"This is madness," Akua hissed.

"Is it?" Kendi said. "I followed you today. You have won the people, the Legions, the nobles. The Empire is in the palm of your hand, the Tower yours for the taking."

He leaned forward.

"And what do you think of that, Akua Sahelian?" he asked.

He was not lying, she realized with anguish. She'd known it too but shied away from looking the truth in the eye. After a lifetime of scheming and murdering, after struggling and betraying and burning every bridge there was to burn, the Empire was in the palm of her hand. She let it sink in, settle into her mind, until an answer came from the heart of her.

Akua threw up all over the marble floor.

"That's what I thought," Kendi said with cold, hard satisfaction.

—

Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.

The knowledge of that circled Malicia's thoughts like a vulture, never close but never far. Amadeus' little orphan, turned into a brutal warlord, was marching on Ater to kill Alaya of Satus. Malicia tried to set the thought aside, but all the news brought to her only made it stand out more starkly. Her impostor in Mercantis had been unmasked, the devil slain and now the Forty-Stole Court was maddened with rage. They had cut all ties with the Tower, placed the Empire under embargo and offered a fresh round of loans to the Grand Alliance at courteous terms. And, worst of all, they had sought the protection of *Empress* Basilia of Aenia.

A title the entire League of Free Cities had recognized after the fall of Penthes, along with the worrisome one of 'Protector of the League'. Not only had the entire League of Free Cities followed Mercantis in severing ties, but now all its ports were closed to Praesi ships and the city-states were mobilizing for war. To join the war against the Dead King, Ime believed, but she could not be sure. All Malicia could know was that there was only one large military force on Calernia uncommitted to warfare, and that it was her hard-bitten foe. That hatred would linger for decades, lead the south to oppose her for the rest of her reign. If she had one.

Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.

Ashur was still sundered in two, but it was no longer starving because Malicia no longer controlled the fleet meant to blockade it. The necromancers that'd usurped the fleet of Nicae through use of Still Waters no longer took her orders. They had taken to raiding the coasts of Ashur and the League for plunder and corpses. For now they traded with Stygian slaver ports for supplies, but that would be clamped down on by 'Empress' Basilia. They'd have to find other ports of call eventually, and Malicia feared that the Tideless Isles – scoured clean of corsairs by Ashur – would appeal. Her own masterstroke turned pirate might begin raiding the coasts of Praes.

Out west the Dominion had been stabilized by the First Prince's clever diplomacy after the Isbili were wiped out in some sort of blood magic ritual, but the Black Queen had won the higher prize by making the leading couple of Levant her pupils. Procer itself was finally collapsing even in the face of Hasenbach's inhuman efforts to keep it together – the first secession had happened six months later than Malicia's prediction, which was a

staggering delay. The First Prince had kept together her empire with little more than letters and diplomacy as it tumbled into utter ruin. Malicia was genuinely admired the feat, but Hasenbach had not lasted *long enough*. The collapse was happening too early, there was nobody left in the Grand Alliance in a position to contest Callow's influence.

And Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.

And all the ruinous reverses abroad were nothing to what trouble had now fallen on Praes. Wolof had been knocked out of the war, the alliance of Aksum and Nok subverted by a foreign power and now Okoro was cowering in its fortresses. The Clans had elected a leader, but Malicia was uncertain whether or not it had been Chieftain Troke Snaketooth. All the informants of the Eyes had gone silent overnight, and while the orc she'd made bargains with had been in the lead last she heard, there was no telling who had triumphed. Worse, the horde of greenskins was not only going nowhere Nok but it was very clearly marching on Ater, burning and pillaging everything in its path. Malicia was now facing the distinct possibility that even if the Grand Alliance retreated the Clans might still sack a weakened Ater.

Ater itself was slipping her fingers. She could feel in the way that Rule was weaking, the way fewer people truly saw her as the Dread Empress of Praes. Sentiment in the streets was turning against her, the Legions were a mutinous wreck riddled with desertions and the nobles come to attend the imperial court had plots the way stray dogs had fleas. She'd remained ahead of them, so far, but she was a dancer with a shrinking stage to dance on. Gods, even district mages were getting murdered out in the ruined districts. With a goblin steel blade, so it was likely some Legion deserter stirring up trouble. The only force Malicia could still truly trust in was the Sentinels, and the thought had rage frozen in her throat.

These were the same soldiers that had nailed her father to the floor of his own inn, *and Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.*

The brutal little bitch could not be bargained or reasoned with, she was out for blood and no matter what Malicia threw at her she seemed to come out on top. The battle in the Wasteland that should have broken her army had instead seen it *reinforced*, Marshal Juniper crowned the finest general to come out of the War College and Sepulchral bending the knee. It was even more ridiculous than Wolof, where even captured she'd somehow still claimed victory. Next she would be struck by lightning and somehow gain the power to call on storms, the absurd chit. There was no going around her, either. The First Prince no longer even bothered to read her letters and with Mercantis turning on her she no longer had an intermediary.

Only strength would make the Queen of Callow listen, and while the host gathered in Ater's shadow outnumbered the Army of Callow it was not Malicia's. It belonged to a hundred different nobles, too many of them traitors. And even if it gave battle, the empress was not certain it would win. The Army of Callow had humbled even the Legions, which had triumphed against the armies of the old Praes handily. Malicia still had the Tower's arsenal, and for the first time in her reign she was deploying the artefacts and horrors that a thousand tyrants had sealed in deep vaults, but she had... concerns. Even should these powers bring her victory, it might be the kind worse than a defeat. Yet what else was she to do?

Alaya did not want to die, and Catherine Foundling was coming to kill her.

It was a relief when Ime came to meet with her, a distraction from her thoughts and their downwards spiral. **Connect** told her that her spymistress' loyalty had weakened but not in a harmful way. The nuance was hard to read, but Malicia had learned. Ime must have thought of running, then. She had not, Malicia reminded herself. For now, that was what mattered.

"Akua Sahelian spent most of yesterday healing refugees," Ime said, moments after being seated. "She then met with Marshal Nim in her private manse. Late that evening, she disappeared into a warded location – my agents were slain trying to find out with who. There were no survivors."

"I will summon her to the Tower, then," Malicia said, cocking an eyebrow. "As was the intent from the start. With the alternative being death, she will give us the names and facilitate a purge of the most disloyal."

"I thought you might say that," Ime evenly said. "But she's too dangerous to be allowed to live, Malicia. She has too much support while yours wanes."

Malicia stilled.

"What did you do?" she harshly asked.

"I used the kill switch," Ime said.

The empress mastered her anger. Only she had been supposed to be able to give that order. Yet another way her authority was weakening.

"Now we have no match for the Hierophant," she said. "Which might well lose us the siege."

"It's much worse than that," Ime said. "I used the artefact, but she's still alive. It was removed, Your Majesty. We no longer have a leash on her."

Malicia's fingers clenched. The Warlock – or close enough – was now free to act against her without deterrent. And she could not simply order her killed, because even should such an attempt work and fail to trigger an uprising against her killing Akua Sahelian might well get her killed by virtue of there being no one able to stop Wekesa's son from mauling the defences of the capital. Her mind spun, looking for angles, but there were none. No answer, no clever trick.

From her silence, Ime must have come to the same conclusion.

"I advised against recruiting her," Ime quietly said. "She's always been a risk-"

"I *know* what you advised, Ime," Malicia barked out. "I assure you, there is no need to remind me. I deemed it necessary at the time."

She'd meant to kill the Sahelian or surrender her back to the Grand Alliance's custody the moment an arrangement was reached, either way ending her as a threat. Where had she found a mage trustworthy and skilled enough to find the artefact in her spine, much less remove it?

"We need to prepare to pull out of Ater," Ime advised. "Set our enemies on each other and approach again from a better position. It might be time to seriously consider wedding either Sargon Sahelian or Jaheem Niri. It keeps them committed and us in the game."

Jaheem Niri was already married, not that he wouldn't murder his wife in a heartbeat to become the imperial consort. The prospect of marrying either was repulsive enough that Alaya felt physically nauseous. She closed her eyes, looking for any other way. Ime stayed silent for a long time, then rose to her feet.

"I will prepare what I can, Alaya," the spymistress said. "Think on it, that is all I ask."

The empress stayed alone in the council room for a long time, with only silence and that ever-present thought for company. Eventually she rose to her feet, the sky outside turned to night. Sleep, she thought, sleep would put it all in perspective. But her quarters were not empty. On the table by the enchanted window, a woman was leaning back her seat, boots against the rim of table two hundred years old as she looked down at the city. Fair-haired and tanned, she had in her hand a crystal glass from Malicia's personal cabinet that she was refilling with wine from

a silver flask. In her lap lay a lute, old and worn but still beautiful.

"I am told you are particularly vulnerable to Speaking," Alaya said. "I wonder, would I even need to vocalize to make you kill yourself?"

The Wandering Bard turned to offer her an insolent blue-eyed grin and a sloshing toast that spilled wine on her leathers.

"Those who live by the sword tend to get killed with swords," the Bard shrugged. "You know how it is, I'm sure."

"You are on the Red List," Malicia said. "Kill on sight."

"And yet here I am," the Bard noted, "still breathing."

A moment of silence.

"So you are," Malicia conceded.

The other woman laughed throatily, by the sound of it already well on her way to drunk. The empress knew better than to believe it made her any less dangerous.

"Have a drink with me, Dread Empress," the Bard said. "I had... well, I wouldn't call it *luck* all things considered, but it was a fateful draw."

Best to humour her for now. Malicia stepped aside to take a cup from her personal cabinet, which as she'd suspected was wide open already, and took a glass match for the Bard's own. She set it down on the table, eyebrow cocked, and took a seat of her own. Casually, as if this were not the knife's edge. The Bard set down the lute on her lap to lean forward, pouring Malicia's glass uncouthly full from her flask. The empress politely took her cup, breathing in the scent, and froze. She took a tentative sip. It was truly horrid wine, somehow tasting of mud, but Alaya knew it well. She'd been drinking it for years with someone now lost to her. Her heart clenched.

"Fate's a bitch," the Wandering Bard confessed. "I should know, I've served as the closest thing Calernia has to one since before... well, written calendars really. Only the Riddle-Maker's older and his kind didn't really bother with that sort of thing."

Ice, let her be ice. Smooth and cold and polished enough this old monster would see only her own reflection.

"You will not distract me with interesting fragments of history," Malicia said. "You came here with a purpose."

"It's the only way I can go anywhere," the Bard snorted, then drank deep of her cup. "Gah, definitely not a *lucky* draw. But as

I was saying, my good – well, you know what I mean – empress, I feel like the time where we were enemies has passed. At least temporarily, yes?”

“You killed Sabah,” Alaya evenly said.

“You liked her,” the Bard noted. “So did I. Most people did, I imagine, when she wasn’t eating or killing them. But she needed to die so I could get my way. So she did.”

Ice, ice. She would not think of kind smiles or the children left behind, for where would that lead her? Only ice would see her live out the year. Malicia moved her lips into a smile, did not let it reach her eyes.

“And how many of my troubles can be laid at your feet, I wonder?” Malicia asked.

“The funny thing is,” the Bard said, “honestly not that much.”

She waved a hand dismissively, trailing wine all over the table.

“I work through Named,” the Bard said, revealing nothing the Eyes had not already told her, “and Named haven’t been your problem. Your empire has been going to shit because you Role doesn’t match your Name.”

“Is that so?” Malicia politely smiled.

“You’ve been ruling like a Chancellor,” the Bard said. “But the Chancellor’s not meant to be on top of things in these parts. A Dread Empress is meant to add, inspire, create. You’ve been dividing, lessening, binding. Chancellor’s work, and that’s why it’s all been going downhill: you no longer have other Named on your side to compensate for that.”

“I told you history would not distract me,” Malicia said. “Did you think *namelore* would?”

“I just like to talk,” the Bard artlessly confessed. “But let’s be all business, if you want. You have a problem: Catherine Foundling very badly wants you dead and there’s no one left in a position to stop her.”

“Ater still stands,” Malicia said.

“Said every Dread Empress who ever got murdered,” the Bard replied, rolling her eyes. “It’s not a *siege* that’s going to decide this. You’ve got an empire’s worth of stories come home to roost in Ater, Allie, and that’s what kills or saves you.”

“And here I had thought it would be a blade,” Malicia smiled.

The Bard snorted.

"Sure, if you want to be obtuse about it," she said. "The blade's just the natural consequence of the story turning against you. It doesn't drive the carriage, it's a destination. And you're in luck, my friend, because it happens that destination your-head-on-a-pike just isn't doing anything for me. It's a bit of pain in my ass, to be honest."

"What a fortunate happenstance," Malicia said. "I, too, would prefer to avoid my decapitation. You have thoughts on how this might be achieved?"

"I'm all about thoughts," the Bard agreed. "Just so many thoughts. So lemme share one with you: do you know when a Named is most vulnerable?"

"At the end of a pattern of three, presumably," Malicia said.

While those did not necessarily end in death for the villain involved, that did seem to be the prevalent trend.

"Nah," the Bard slurred, "it's just before they come into their Name. See, that's the spot where they're riding fate but they're not really *protected* yet."

The empress considered the other woman a moment, drinking shallowly from her cup.

"I am told," Malicia said, "that Catherine Foundling is coming into a Name."

"Defence isn't how you win this game," the Bard said. "So we're going on the offensive, you and I."

Malicia's eyes narrowed.

"How?"

"It's not set yet, what she's turning into," the Bard said. "So we nudge it so it becomes what we need. The east that is land and armies and politics, all the things that pass, instead of the *East* – the story, the idea. Old Evil and buried grudges, the other half of the world. She's only as dangerous as what she keeps, you see."

She was starting to.

"And when she transitions?"

"There's this joke I love," the blue-eyed Bard enthusiastically said. "It's from Ashur so, you know, it's not actually *funny*, but it's great anyways and it goes like this – and stop me if you've heard it before!"

She cleared her throat, which somehow had her spilling a third of her cup over her own lute and then cursing before wiping it off effectively with her sleeve.

"Right so there's this man who goes to a priest, a Speaker," the Bard said. "And he says that his daughter's taken up with some Praesi, proper smitten. So he's come for advice because he needs a time, a place and man to officiate."

The Bard began chortling, already taken with her own joke.

"So the Speaker gives them, only the man comes back the day after all riled up," she said. "Says it was a disaster. Why, the priest asks. Did the wedding not go well? And then the man erupts: wedding? I was asking about-"

"-a funeral," Malicia finished.

It was easy enough to infer from context. The Bard pouted.

"I don't know why people keep doing that to me," she whined. "No wonder you're a villain."

Malicia ignored her... ally's petty moaning, herself taking petty satisfaction in having caused it.

"A time, a place and a man to officiate," Dread Empress Malicia mused. "That is all?"

"That's the good thing about Catherine, Allie," the Intercessor grinned, all teeth and malice. "You can always count on her to bring the knife."

Curtopolis

Am I the only one that thinks the line about the bard being the closest thing on calernia to fate is a hint about cats name? It has been heavily implied she is becoming the bards successor/opposite.

NewXToa

The Bard already tried to shape Cat's name so it would form in relation to the Bard, and Cat specifically stopped that from happening, so that's not what Cat's name will be. I get the impression that she's going to be the Warden of the East – her counterpart is obviously Cordelia, who is the Warden of the West (in role, if not name). A few chapters ago Cat went on a rant to the praesi in Sepulchre's camp about how they needed a

warden to keep them in check. In addition, in this chapter the Bard is talking about shaping which kind of the East Cat gets dominion over. It all seems to be pointing to Warden of the East.

Jack

I think the "Warden of the East" type role as you've described it, that of Cordelia's counterpart, is what the Bard wants. That just leads to her being a powerful leader, good at diplomacy (in her own way) and warfare. Impactful but transitory.

But the Bard is scared that Cat will become something more. I don't really know what that looks like but I'd guess it's sort of like a longer lasting, more sustainable Triumphant. THE villain that can maneuver outside of fate and upend the big Gods' plans.

tynam

Warden of the East could be a longer lasting, more sustainable Triumphant. The Bard doesn't want Cat to take that Role; she already tried to trap Cat into a different one. But that failed, so like any good planner Bard is rolling with the punch and trying to make the role that Cat is taking into one Bard can cope with.

Frivolous

I found it interesting that all the informants the Eyes of the Empire had among the Clans went silent overnight, presumably after Hakram was acclaimed the Warlord.

I'm assuming all the informants were orcs. I wonder what was the reason for their falling silent.

This is the first time we've seen a real orc Warlord in play, so maybe orcs are just that obedient to their Warlord, regardless of personal and/or previous allegiances?

If that is the answer, then it means Hakram is unlikely to be assassinated anytime soon by Troke or some other ambitious orc.

Maybe Hakram already knew, through Scribe or his own use of Find, before he lost that aspect, who the spies and moles were, and had them silenced?

Or maybe Hakram can Speak. Again, this is the first time we've ever seen a Warlord, and it wouldn't be out of the question that a Warlord can Speak.

Frivolous

Addendum: From Interlude: Zwischenzug:

<<>>

Hakram was halfway to Speaking when he was just Adjutant. I think it would make a lot of sense if he could Speak now that he's Warlord.

Frivolous

Addendum to Addendum:

Argh, didn't quote correctly.

"Enough," Adjutant said.

The voice rang with power. Not quite Speaking, Vivienne thought, yet not too far from it.

Ciel Morgenstern

He told Troke Snaketooth he had a use for him, remember? Troke was THE primary contact of Malicia, presumably leading the Eyes' contacts in the Clans.

[308924810a](#)

So, thinking about this situation some more, I'm pretty sure that Amadeus' plan doesn't involve him becoming Dread Emperor, but instead he intends to make sure that Cat is the only viable option for Dread Emperor. Possibly by killing or ensuring the death of every other viable Claimant, including himself.

jamesc9

So, if she refuses, what does the lack of someone filling the Role do to the Name?

Under normal circumstances, it would attract an alternative claimant. How long does he have to stay around, killing claimants?

Ciel Morgenstern

My theory is he plans to bring down the Tower and all Lords/Ladies around it, too, in a big big bunch of nice green fire, maybe burning down the whole of Ater. Welcome to a new FORM of government altogether. He vowed to "kill the song" or some such, if it continued to bother him...

Meela

The Akua part of this chapter was hilarious. The Gods Below are throwing her softball after softball trying to get her to stick to the path of Stupid Evil and it's just deepening her existential crisis. I never really bought into her cynical redemption but watching her crack up is immensely entertaining.

skairunner

I absolutely love that she even found her own treacherous lieutenant

jamesc9

I wonder if I see Akua-uncontrolled approaching Malacia to negotiate terms of co-existence.

Imissedtheinterlude

Is "Kamau" a Kikuyu inspired character?

Zopilote 506

"I CANT KEEP GETTING AWAY WITH THIS"
Akua Sahelian probably

SpaceDorf

Yeah. Akua got pretty Catty in this chapter

kinghaart

Excellent chapter!

Yes, now Warden seems like more of a trap by Bard. I have a theory on the ideal name for Cat but not quite ready to share it yet...

Chapter 22: Advent

"Every crisis is an opportunity, Chancellor. Mostly an opportunity to die, but occasionally other things as well."

– Dread Empress Malevolent II

"I always forget how ridiculously huge Ater is," I said.

In the distance the tall ramparts of the City of Gates loomed, crowned with bastions atop the inner walls and the gargantuan silhouette of the Tower rising to touch the clouds. It was an impressive sight, the kind that gave you pause even if you knew – as I did – that it was rare for the Dread Empire to actually have enough military strength in the city to man the entire set of walls properly. The capital was so large that if it were not so terribly fortified it might actually be indefensible, though another school of thought back in the College had argued that the size was actually part of the defences. Tyrants in the Tower had never been shy about drawing their opponents into abandoned districts before setting them aflame.

“Surely Salia is even larger,” Arthur ventured. “It was raised in fertile lands near a river, not at the heart of the Wasteland.”

“In size Ater is larger,” I noted. “Entire sections of it are usually abandoned, though, and Salia definitely has more people in it.”

The Squire eyed the capital of the Dread Empire with a skeptical look on his face, which had me smothering a smile. Back when I’d first come to Ater I’d been too wrapped up into myself and what Amadeus was teaching me to really take it in properly, but arriving as part of an invading army was giving my fellow orphan a bit more perspective.

“I don’t see how they can feed that many people,” Arthur admitted. “Or even have enough drinking water. Is it an underground source like Hainaut?”

“Five different underground lakes,” I confirmed. “The Miezans built a bunch of enchanted funnels when they first took over the city that feed a system of fountains anyone can take from, but there’s been works since. Dread Emperor Vile made aqueducts and cisterns when the population got too large and Dread Emperor Tenebrous-”

“Isn’t that the one who turned into a giant spider?” the Squire asked, sounding amused.

“Allegedly,” I snorted. “No knows for sure, though there sure are a lot of them under the city nowadays. Anyhow, Tenebrous made an enormous reservoir to catch rain and freeze it, a reserve for when the city is in drought.”

It was a pleasant change to be able to tell when Scribe was approaching. Like a touch in the back of my mind, a star I could see shining in the black whenever I closed my eyes. One of many.

“Vile’s cisterns were dismantled under Dread Emperor Venal,” Eudokia said, standing right behind Arthur.

Who nearly jumped out of his skin, swallowing a curse. It was a nostalgic sight: she used to do the same to me back when I was the Squire.

"That's the one who thought Ater was a shithole and tried to build his own capital, right?" I asked.

"Indeed," Scribe agreed. "The cisterns were lined with silver for purity enchantments, he had them broken down to use the metal in coinage."

Well, the man had come by his regnal name honestly.

"They were never replaced?" Arthur asked.

"Much later," Scribe replied. "Maleficent the Second had the silver statues in Delos' great library melted down and used for replacements after the Secretariat tried to refuse her access to their histories."

She'd had a way with insults, Maleficent the Second, when she wanted to make a point. It was said she'd had the third of the Magisterium that'd refused to surrender to her enslaved and forced into the Spears of Stygia as an admonishment.

"So thirst isn't going to make them surrender," Arthur said. "What about food, though?"

I cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Do you want a lecture on how the imperial tax system works?" I drily asked.

"Is it murder?" the boy drily replied. "I'm guessing murder is involved."

"Ater has the largest granaries in the country," I told him. "They're massive, the size of palaces."

"Even with the field ritual gradient and rotations introduced under Nefarious, the fields around the city can only feed a little under half of Ater," Scribe said. "The remainder comes from taxes. High Seats are charged with collecting a tenth of the harvest in their lands and that of their vassals, which is then sent to Ater."

"Independent lords can have harsher or lighter burdens, depending on whether or not the Tower likes them," I added, "and the freeholders of the Green Stretch are bound to sell a third of their harvest to the Tower at a fixed price."

Less than it was worth, usually, but it was part of the terms they leased the land from the Tower at.

"Malicia improved the yields for Ater significantly during her reign," Eudokia admitted, "by changing the laws so that lords could pay part of their monetary taxes to the Tower in food instead. Poorer lords with good years leaped at the opportunity, and with Callowan grain pouring in all the while there is a truly prodigious amount of foodstuffs in the city at the moment."

"We're not going to starve them out," I summed up. "They've got six months in them, at least, and maybe as much as a year if they ration severely enough."

We did not have six months, I kept to myself. Cordelia believed that Procer would finally break in five, but we had to leave Praes before that: it'd take us at least a month and a half to return west and half a month to muster for the attack on Keter. We had three months here, to be generous, but that'd be a razor-thin margin. Two was more realistic, two and maybe the odd week tossed it on top of it. Which meant we would need to either force a surrender or take the city by force, storming the walls. I was very much trying to avoid the latter, because the last of the Legions would bleed us dry for it. The entire city was a fucking deathtrap of old artefacts and half-buried monstrosities. If we didn't get several demons tossed at us before this was over I'd eat my crown. I cast a look at Scribe.

"You needed me for something?"

She nodded.

"There is word from the High Lady of Kahtan," Eudokia said.

Takisha Muraqib was the leader of the largest chunk of enemy troops outside the city, so I'd made a point of trying to approach her for a settlement the moment I could. If she turned on Malicia a lot of nobles would follow her example, which might well take the city for us without an assault. Loyalty in Praes was a lot like horse racing: people loved a winner, but if the champion limped all bets were off.

"We'll talk later," I told Arthur. "Sit down with Apprentice and figure out tactics for fighting the Black Knight indoors or on a street, it's where you're most likely to run into her. If you come up with something solid, we'll try it out on Named."

I already had several particularly vicious exercises in mind. As far as I was concerned, you'd never really had to deal with a proper ambush until you tried grounds that the only son and pupil of Wekesa the Warlock had been given an hour to trap. Last time he'd temporarily ended gravity in a warded circle, which had been spectacularly amusing to watch on top of being very humiliating for the kids.

"I will, Your Majesty," the Squire swore. "We've been talking over ideas on the march."

"I'll look forward to it, then," I said.

The kid – young man, really, but it was hard to think of him that way – left promptly to get to it, which left me weathering Scribe's mild gaze. I raised an eyebrow at her. The one over the dead eye, I was trying to train myself into doing that. It drew attention to the eye cloth, made the faint-hearted uncomfortable.

"Mentorship is not without danger," Scribe said. "Especially mentorship of a hero."

"I don't teach him myself," I said. "Been careful about that. All I've done with him is talk, never so much as a spar."

"Given your own teacher, I would have thought you aware that the *talking* is the most important part," she replied.

"Named can learn from others without being pupils," I said. "It's not like every time you pick up a trick or a bit of tactics from someone you're wedded to them as mentor and apprentice. I've learned things from Malicia and Captain. Hells, I learned from the Pilgrim once or twice."

Not that he'd ever gone out of his way to teach me anything. Besides, I'd been careful to give neither tricks nor tactics to Arthur Foundling. If I ever ended up on the other side of the field from the kid, I wanted as much of my repertoire still up my sleeve as I could fit.

"It's a fine line," Scribe noted. "I do not seek to scold, to be clear. It is your choice to make, and you have drunk from deeper wells of namelore than I ever did."

"Always thought that was weird, to be honest," I admitted. "The Calamities were around for almost sixty years in one form or another, it seems strange most of you never picked up more. Malicia too, I guess, but her I can understand. It's not like any hero made it to the Tower in her lifetime."

"It was always Amadeus who saw to those tactics," she said, "so in a sense most of us never considered it any more necessary to acquire skill in this area than we would have thought to rival Wekesa or sorcery or Sabah in strength."

"You still survive decades and decades as Named," I said. "You had to have learned *some* things."

"I suppose in detail my experience outweighs yours," Eudokia mused. "Prior to the Truce and Terms being founded I'd encountered many more Named. But you've no doubt realized by now

that there is no truly reliable method to deal with Named opponents."

"Swords tend to work," I drily said, "but I catch your drift. The same story you can ride to kill someone will get you killed against another."

"I imagine I've read more stories and studied foreign myths than you have," Scribe said, "for the same is true of Amadeus, but I do not have the... knack. I can make a plan and execute it, but I find it difficult to improvise and adapt a victory the way you did against the Arcadian courts, for example, or at the Princes' Graveyard. It requires a mindset that I struggle with, as do most Named."

"A lot of us tend to specialize," I agreed.

"It narrows our understanding of the world and the way we seek victories," Scribe said. "In that sense you are anomalous, though not unique."

Yeah, I had no delusions there. My father's way of using stories was different than mine but no less dangerous, and there'd been several points in the Tenth Crusade where Tariq had come very close to either killing or shackling me. Kairos had been up there too, the mad bastard, using the methods of the Old Tyrants with prescient skill. I also figured that Ranger had to be good at reading stories, to have survived this long antagonizing the amount of Named she had. Nobody acting like that lived as long as she had without being able to tell when a story was going to get you killed.

And there was, of course, the patron goddess of namelore waiting above it all: the Wandering Bard, the Intercessor. Who had declared war on me in Wolof only to disappear into thin air. I would have liked to call it impotence on her part, but that was the kind of delusion that'd get me killed. If I hadn't seen her it'd been because she was moving her pieces into place, preparing her killing stroke. And since there was only one part left to this campaign, the fall of Ater, inside the City of Gates would be where she waited for me. I shook my head free of the thoughts.

"So what did High Lady Takisha reply?" I asked.

"She is willing to meet," Scribe said. "Yet I would temper your expectations: Princess Vivienne believes Takisha won't move unless we promise to back her for the Tower."

"Is there anybody in this fucking country who doesn't want me to back them for the fucking Tower?" I growled. "Any moment now some hell will spit out Traitorous so he can bloody well ask me too."

"It is unusual that you would be so sought, in my opinion," Scribe noted. "You have dealt with or rule over every major amalgamation of power east of the Whitecaps, an amount of influence that I some ways surpasses what Malicia wielded after the Conquest."

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. I'd made a claim, before raising High Lady Abreha from the grave. One of authority over others. Creation was moving to meet it. I was finding it easier to parse out what people wanted – my instincts already whispered that Vivienne was right, High Lady Takisha would not move without the Tower as a prize – but that was the lesser part of it. I could feel Named, now. When I closed my eyes, I could see them like stars shining the dark. Only it wasn't all of them. Most heroes I couldn't make out. Vivienne yes, and the Squire when he was close, but never the Silver Huntress. Authority, I thought. It was about authority.

And the clearest part of it was that Below smiled on me herding their own, a warden to villains.

"Influence doesn't always pay off," I finally said. "Let's go talk with Juniper, Scribe. See what our options are before meeting up with High Lady Takisha."

—

The Marshal of Callow wasn't one to mince words, so she came out with it bluntly.

"Depends if they're stupid about it or not," Juniper said.

Our maps of Ater were accurate, as there hadn't been any major works done in the capital since they'd been drawn, but they were unreliable in the sense that they'd didn't tell us what parts of the city were being inhabited at the moment. Malicia had taken in refugees by the thousands so a lot of the empty districts would have filled up, but which and by who was anybody's guess. Scribe and the Jacks had a few people in the city, but it was a drop in the bucket for a place that large. I doubted even the Tower had a full accounting to use, and for all her faults the empress had built up a prodigious bureaucracy in her seat of power.

"I'm not going to stand here and defend the stock of Praesi aristocracy," I said, "but let's assume they *won't* make the worst possible choices."

"Then we're in a tricky position," Juniper said. "When it comes down to it, Ater isn't really a city that can be sieged the traditional way. It's the incarnation of a logistical pit: to surround a city this large with any real strength, enough to keep away sorties, you need an army large enough it's impossible to feed in this region."

Which meant massive supply lines stretching over some of the most dangerous lands on Calernia, in constant danger in collapse before enemy soldiers even got involved. If you were a foreign army, anyway. The High Seats are much more manageable wars on their hands, which went some way in explaining why so few external enemies had been successful against Ater compared to internal ones.

"That much we're agreed on," I said. "We're not going to try, and by the looks they're well aware of that."

Our eyes moved the map between us. Ater had nine gates, massive things that had once needed specially bred monsters to be opened or closed until they were replaced by gear mechanisms a century or two back. Of those nine gates, three were currently still open. The Army of Callow was encamped to the west of the capital, near an abandoned town that had large and deep wells, but the three gates on the eastern side of the capital were wide open. Which only made sense, given that a gaggle of nobles from all over Praes had brought around thirty thousand men from various private armies and encamped there. They'd not entered the city, as it was against the laws of the Empire to bring troops inside the capital without permission and no one was yet ready to move against Malicia, but our scouts confirmed there was constant movement through the gates.

"High Lady Abreha is but a week behind us," Scribe noted. "Her army tips the balance of power in our favour."

"Eh," I hedged.

"We can likely beat the noble armies on the field," Juniper agreed. "They have no unified command structure or proper organization."

"And they've got a lot of household troops, but they've also got a large proportion Taghreb tribal levies," I said. "Good raiders and irregulars, not so great in a shield wall. In a stand-up fight on plains, we'll smash that army to pieces."

"It will not give us that fight, I take it," Eudokia ventured.

"They'll retreat into the capital," I said. "Use us as leverage for getting their troops inside without officially rebelling against Malicia. Given that her trustworthy forces are running thin, she'll likely have to bend."

"The remaining Legions are around eight thousand strong," Scribe noted, "but even my people never got a good read on the total number of Sentinels. Too many of them never leave the Tower."

"You gave us a floor of eight thousand so I'm assuming at least ten," I noted. "I'm skeptical how good they'll be in a fight,

considering their heads are supposed to be fucked to the Hells and back to make them perfectly loyal, but it shouldn't matter anyway considering most of them will be tied up keeping the city from falling apart. I'd be surprised if Malicia can shake loose more than two or three thousand to throw at us."

"Pickler believes she can breach the capital's walls, and if she does I believe we can take Ater after High Lady Abreha reinforces us," Juniper said. "But that holds only if the nobles stay out of it. Otherwise they'll bog us down in the outer districts and we'll be forced out by spellfire."

We were at a massive magical disadvantage here, even with Masego weighing heavily on the scales. The sheer amount of mage cadres we'd be facing if the enemy got to mobilize fully against us was pretty daunting. There were at least a few hundred mages capable of High Arcana in Praes, and almost all of them would be shooting at us. And that was without even getting into diabolism, which I saw as pretty much inevitable. It was a historical staple of Praesi getting cornered.

"Keeping the nobility divided and unable to coordinate defences seems a priority, then," Scribe said. "Should I begin arranging assassinations?"

"Not yet," I said, then bit my lip. "Assassin, could he get High Lady Takisha?"

If she got killed, her High Seat would tear itself up over succession and Kahtan would no longer be able to serve as the banner under which all the lesser Taghreb nobility gathered. And the Taghreb were where the manpower was at, right now. The Wasteland had bloodied itself with continued civil war, while the Hungering Sands hadn't really seen any action aside from raids since Foramen was seized by surprise. If we broke up the southerners into smaller squabbling blocs and then hit Ater before someone could step into the power vacuum, it was possible they'd stay out of the fight.

"Takisha is remarkably paranoid when it comes to her personal safety," Scribe admitted. "Three layers of amulets at all times and frequent body doubles. Even odds Assassin would get to her, being conservative."

"We're holding back on that, then," I said. "Look up targets that would destabilize the coalition behind her, but I'm not pulling the trigger on that yet."

If we took a swing and missed it'd make negotiating with her pretty awkward afterwards. Praesi didn't take this sort of thing as personally as most people would, but it certainly wouldn't win me any favours.

"None of that matters when we haven't addressed the dragon in the hut," Juniper said. "There's an army as large as all of ours combined marching on Ater as we speak."

"Three weeks away, at the current pace," Scribe said. "Matters could be resolved here before it arrives."

"I'm not sure that'd be an improvement," I admitted. "Until we know who the warlord leading the Clans is I'm not keen on punching a hole in the walls of Ater."

Juniper snorted.

"Let's not take the fucking city only to have to hold its busted walls against one hundred thousand orcs," she summed up. "The military wisdom of the College shines in us still, Catherine."

I grinned back at her.

"Wisest heads of the age, Hellhound, that's us," I replied.

Scribe let out a little choking sound but did not go as far as contradicting us.

"We've sent scouts their way and I know Hakram's still alive," I said. "I'm inclined not to think the worst."

I could feel his Name, see its star out in the black.

"If Dag Clawtoe had been elected, Hakram would have scried us by now," Juniper retorted. "I don't like it."

"If the Blackspears were in charge they'd be burning Nok by now, not approaching Ater," I pointed out. "I won't pretend I'm not concerned, Juniper, but Adjutant will bring this home. He always does."

"We should prepare for the eventuality that they are foes, at least," the Hellhound pressed.

I grimaced and thought it over. It'd split our focus, but to be honest at the moment there wasn't much for the Army of Callow to do. We were preparing an offensive for when Abreha – and High Lord Dakarai of Nok, who'd joined her with a small retinue – arrived with her troops, but it would be Pickler and her sappers handling the most of that. Charging into a breach wasn't the kind of fighting that required extensive preparations, just guts and steel.

"Do it," I finally said. "But make sure the general staff knows it's theoretical. I don't want half our camp convinced we're going to be fighting the Clans."

Fighting a warlord – maybe even just rumours we would – might actually cause desertions from the part of my armies that'd been the steadiest through several wars. As far as I knew, the loyalty of the Legions had never been tested in this manner and I suspected it was for good reason. A lot of orcs put loyalty to the Legions or the Army of Callow higher than allegiance to abstract things like the Tower or my crown, but I wasn't so sure that loyalty would win out if it was their own clans on the other side of the field.

"I'll keep it quiet," Juniper said.

"Which leaves only one force unaccounted for," I said. "Amadeus of the Green Stretch."

Scribe studied me.

"You're sure he's here?" she asked.

"I know Ranger's in the city," I said. "And they've stayed together until now."

I'd actually learned a little something courtesy of the Lady of the Lake, aside from her rough location: whatever it was that bound me to Named, it was possible to cut it. Temporarily, at least. The... tie began to reform after half a day had passed, more or less, and from what I could feel Ranger was becoming increasingly irritated at having to cut it off again and again. *I bet Sever would have done it permanently*, I thought with some amusement. I'd have to remember to tell her when we ran into each other, along with a pleasant question about how it felt to be inferior to inferior to the Saint even posthumously.

"He's a dangerous man, Catherine, but he doesn't have an army," Juniper said. "There's only so much he could do."

I winced at that, and so did Eudokia. There was a moment of silence, the two of us waiting for something brutally ironic to happen, but nothing showed up save an increasingly puzzled look on the Marshal of Callow's face.

"Don't repeat that," I finally said. "It might end up costing us."

She still looked skeptical, but in matters of namelore she knew better than to contradict me. I dragged myself to my feet, massaging my upper leg to press down on a cramp. Had I taken herbs today? I couldn't recall. I'd gotten too used to Hakram arranging these things for me. Might as well have another cup if I was going to be riding Zombie.

"A short detour and we'll get moving," I told Scribe. "Let's go find out what High Lady Takisha has to tell us."

—

Scribe despised riding horses even though she'd been doing it for decades, which I never ceased to find hilarious. Zombie disliked having to stay on the ground to keep up with the other Named and my escort of knights, but she perked up after I promised her meat when we returned to camp. She was unsettlingly fond of pig guts, which she ate very messily before grooming herself for hours. A truly vain creature, my mount. I approved. At this point I'd been through these little meetings often enough that I wasn't surprised when the Praesi came in dressed richly enough to pay for a bridge across the Hwaerte and I didn't bother to take it in the way I had with the Sahelians. No, this time it was a smaller detail I got stuck on.

I'd arranged a meeting only with High Lady Takisha, but there were *three* great aristocrats waiting for me.

The first was Takisha Muraqib, a handsome dark-haired woman in her fifties with a dignified air and enough gold on her it'd likely add up to several ingots if melted down. Arguably now the second most powerful in Praes, as the fall of Foramen to goblin hands had led all the Taghreb nobility to gather behind her. The second was High Lord Jaheem Niri of Okoro, a strikingly good-looking man with warm golden eyes and a roguish smile. He had to be what, in his mid-forties? He had a daughter a little younger than me, but she wasn't his oldest. The real surprise, though, was the third. High Lady Wither of Foramen, once Matron of the High Ridge Tribe. Pickler's mother.

Also the sworn enemy of High Lady Takisha, and according to my spies still very far away.

No wonder the Matrons of the Confederation of the Grey Eyries had sent word they were sending a delegation north to Ater to treat with me. It would be in part so they'd have a seat at the table after Ater fell, as I'd expected, but now a second reason was looking at me through pale yellow eyes. The High Lady of Kahtan might despise Wither and want to take Foramen from her, but that enmity was nothing compared to how much the Grey Eyries hated the traitor who'd turned on them in exchange for becoming recognized as High Lady by Malicia.

Still, this reception was a surprise and not a welcome one. It was taking me by surprise in multiple ways and suggesting there were undercurrents to imperial politics I'd not sniffed out. A dangerous thing, to treat carefully with. It was fortunate that I was such a dab hand at diplomacy these days.

"How long have the three of you stood so close?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. "One hour, two? And no one's dead. That has *got* to be some sort of record."

I hear the knight behind me choke down on a snort. The Praesi were less amused. Wither was impatient, Takisha sneered and High Lord Jaheem raised his eyebrows in a way that suggested rolling them without ever actually doing it. Impressive trick, that.

"We greet you, Black Queen," High Lady Takisha began, "and in-"

"Spare me the speech," I cut through, tone flat. "I arranged talks with you, not three High Seats. I might be considered justified to see this as a breach of our truce terms, so let's get to whatever point the three of you made yourselves to stand together to make."

"This is poor diplomacy," High Lord Jaheem said. "High Lord Sargon spoke better of you."

"Sargon was a stepping stone, not the last thing between me and the end of this irritating little war," I replied. "He got as much courtesy as I'll ever afford High Seat. You, though?"

I smiled toothily.

"Count yourselves lucky this doesn't begin and end with knives."

"You don't have enough knives to get this done, Black Queen," High Lady Wither said, voice startling reedy. "That is our point. If you come for Ater steel in hand, you will lose."

"That's arguable at best," I noted. "But I'll generously assume you came with *something* to offer, since only a fool would think I've come to Ater just to walk away."

"We are willing to support a negotiated settlement with the Tower," High Lady Takisha said, tone irritated. "So long as the sovereignty of the Dread Empire remains untouched, there is some room for compromise."

I cocked an eyebrow over my dead eye, unimpressed by the phrasing, and to my satisfaction I saw her glance at the cloth.

"I sacked Wolof without needing to break its walls, broke the Legions in Kala and now my army is camped beneath the very walls of the City of Gates," I said. "If some room for compromise is the best you have to offer, we'll be resuming this conversation after I've killed a few thousand more of you."

"You would refuse terms without hearing them?" High Lord Jaheem said.

"I'd refuse to humour posturing," I flatly replied. "You're here to do me a favour, I broke through your front door and set fire to your house. If you want me to stop torching everything in sight, *make it worth my while.*"

"We would be willing to support armies being sent to aid the Grand Alliance," High Lady Wither said. "It's an open secret you're badly in need of diabolists."

"That's a start," I noted.

"The Blessed Isle can be formally ceded back to the crown of Callow," High Lady Takisha said.

Huh, hadn't seen that one coming. On the surface it was a worthless piece of land, considering it was a blackened wasteland ruined by my father's use of massed goblinfire, but that was a surface perception only. It was a strategic stronghold, the best way to keep Praes penned on its side of the Wasaliti should it decide to get unruly.

"That's worth something," I agreed, "but it's not why I'm here. The Tower would need to sign the Liesse Accords."

They didn't look too pleased by that, but neither were they surprised.

"We might support such a thing, given the right incentives," High Lord Jaheem said. "The text as we've obtained has some... concerning inclusions."

That sounded like someone after diabolism exemptions, which wasn't happening, but I wasn't above throwing some minor concessions elsewhere if that was what it took.

"The final draft of the Accords has not been made," I said. "There is still time to negotiate."

"That is reassuring to hear, Your Majesty," High Lady Takisha smiled.

I just bet, I thought.

"And who would it be that negotiates the terms of the Accords for you?" I asked. "Who do you mean to replace Malicia?"

Akua, I guessed. Had to be. She was the only prominent person left in Praes with enough power to be considered and not enough enemies to be too badly opposed. And what a knife in the belly it would be for this lot, when turned away from them. Just in time for me to cram my father down their throats. Silence stretched on for a moment.

"We do not mean to replace the Dread Empress," High Lady Takisha said. "We are loyal subjects, Black Queen."

My eye moved between them, and appallingly enough they looked serious. Not about being loyal, that was just absurd, but about not supporting Malicia being deposed. At least not here and now.

"Dread Empress Malicia has made herself too much a foe of the Grand Alliance and an ally of the Dead King to be allowed to keep her power," I plainly said. "You might have believed this to be negotiable, but allow me to now disabuse you of that notion."

I leaned forward, cold-eyed.

"If I have to burn Ater to the ground around her to see her driven out of the Tower, *I will.*"

My gaze swept over all of them.

"If I must step over your mutilated corpses to get my way, do not believe for a moment I will hesitate. The Dread Empire has been nothing but thorn in our side as most of Calernia fights to hold back the annihilation of all life on this continent," I said. "There is not a speck of sympathy left for any of you west of the Wasaliti: I could raze every High Seat and even the fucking heroes would applaud."

I drew back, put on a friendly smile.

"Malicia is a stone around your necks," I said. "Put up someone else and then we can talk."

"Your threats are empty, Black Queen," High Lord Jaheem said. "You do not have long before you must return west with diabolists, else this campaign will have doomed your allies."

I met the man's golden eyes with a cold smile.

"I still have months," I said. "It's my patience that's in danger of running out, Jaheem Niri. Beware of that, while you still can."

Yet even as I spoke, I knew there were no grounds no win here. I'd made a mistake, I could feel it. Not in refusing to bend over the matter of Malicia or making it clear how far I was willing to go over the matter, but somewhere else. Focusing, I could almost feel it out. Neither Jaheem Niri nor Wither were surprised, they had expected this, so it was High Lady Takisha who'd wanted this conversation to happen. Why? What did she gain? *She wants to move them*, my instincts whispered, but I could not yet tell to which purpose. I almost could if I focused, but somehow I was sure that if I closed my eyes the stars in the darkness would distract me. But Takisha had gotten something she'd wanted from this, that much I was certain of.

Time to cut my losses before she got more.

"There is no point to this conversation," I stated. "I tell you only this: when we resume it, the terms will have grown starker."

I left them to that, casually tossing in the insult of not giving proper courtesies while leaving. Already I was frowning, lost in thought. I'd just taken a hit without knowing about it until it was too late, and I still didn't know what it'd been *for*. I did not have as clean a read on the forces at play in Praes as I'd thought I had, and if I kept it up it would cost me.

It was time to sharpen the same knives I'd wielded at the Graveyard.

Droughtbringer

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

par

I left them to that, casually tossing in the insult of not giving proper courtesies while leaving. Already I was frowning, lost in thought. I'd just taken a hit without knowing about it until it was too late, and I still didn't know what it'd been *for*. I did not have as clean a read on the forces at play in Praes as I'd thought I had, and if I kept it up it would cost me.

It was time to sharpen the same votes we'd wielded at the Graveyard.

Miles

Boo! Lazy! At least find a phrase where the grammar works.

Forgot_My_Name

I could feel votes, now. When I closed my eyes, I could see them like stars shining the dark.

Sir Nil

Ha! And it will be revealed that Amadeus was Dread Emperor Traitorous all along! Using his tried and true tactic of creating cabals to overthrow the emperor!

Big I

Just as planned

MagnaMalusLupus

Tzeench, eat your heart out.

[maginotswall](#)

not mere as planned, for it was a cunning plan...

edrey

stars in the sky.

name powers are back, Ranger should really be pissed now, haha also, the high lords want to use the people to attack Malicia, a magical record of cat wanting to kill malicia a any cost, and only malicia. itsnt a very original plan but it should work. a great chapter as always

gollyath

I appreciate your writing as always, EE!

ninegardens

I'm... suprised that Cat's "authority" expands over Ranger. Most villians yes, but Ranger in particular is *surprising*.

Ranger disabling the tracking every day or so is hilarious though. Also good story craft: it makes her threatening, but falliable, and means if she shows up out of no where later, is explained.

I wonder if Cat can sense Malicia at the moment?

Miles

Ranger respects strength. Iirc Cat fought her to a draw without having a Name at one point.

ninegardens

.... I'm 90% sure that never happened.

Pretty sure the only time the ever met was when Cat's entire band was getting *beaten* by the queen of summer, and Ranger showed up and said "This is out of your league, piss off, don't get in my way"

Nairne .01

This, in fact, is more or less what happened.

Shveiran

What? No, that never happened.

The only times they met was in Arcadia, and they didn't fight.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Cat's only been onscreen with Ranger once, and that was when Ranger fought the Summer Queen. Cat didn't fight her, and walked away with the impression that Ranger could have killed her without breaking a sweat.

Konstantin von Karstein

No. One a look from Ranger was enough to make Cat feel like her throat was being slit.

Frivolous

ninegardens: It means Ranger is a villain. I think the result is unequivocal.

Catherine's new ability, possibly her new aspect, wrecks all uncertainty about whether someone is hero or villain, answers to Above or Below, and all pretense of "neutrality".

I'm really glad one of her new aspects is a perception power. And she can even sense the emotions of Ranger at a great distance.

This makes Catherine a Thinker in Worm or Ward terms, and Thinkers rule.

This way we'll be able to find out whether Doddering Sage is a villain or not.

I wonder if Revenants and especially Scourges fall under her authority.

[Liliet](#)

OMG yeah it really does have potential to do that.

Of course, it remains to be seen if it can change its indications based on what a given person is currently doing (Ranger is certainly in a villainous Role meddling in Ater)

Nairne .01

Not to mention it could shift so much in the pivot due to Bard's machinations.

Shveiran

I don't think the Warden of teh East will have authority over Villains, but rather over the east. It's in the Name.

That includes any Named that is sworn or himself a power in the area. The Silver Huntress, like most heroes, is ultimately, is at the moment subject to the authority of the Representative of the Heroes, and is here kind of by mistake.

But Arthur is a squire of Callow, and Vivienne its Princess. And Ranger was until recently ruling a (small) piece of the East, and is also fucking about with the Crown of Praes.

What I find most interesting is that she can feel HAKRAM. For Hakram is, even if she doesn't know it, clearly not the Adjutant anymore (the orcs are marching) and that means a) Cat yet has an hard time figuring out what Name she is feeling, but she feels them because they are "Named on her turf" and b) that the Warlord – the Warlord – is under her authority. Holy shit.

hakureireimu

Did you not read this line? "warden to villains" Your theory is completely counter-textual.

Shveiran

Aside from the fact that Catherine herself is not really sure what she is becoming yet, it is not. This is the text:

"When I closed my eyes, I could see them like stars shining the dark. Only it wasn't all of them. Most heroes I couldn't make out. Vivienne yes, and the Squire when he was close, but never the Silver Huntress. Authority, I thought. It was about authority.

And the clearest part of it was that Below smiled on me herding their own, a warden to villains."

There is no Villain on the scene that isn't either an Eastern Villain or someone that signed onto the Truce and Terms and therefore ultimately answers to Cat as far as she is concerned: of course she feels all of them. The theory is perfectly coherent with the text because there are no Villains that she can feel that are outside the theoretical mantle of authority. There is no proof, but there also isn't any contrary evidence.

But it can't be "all Villains and some Heroes" or there is no balance with the Warden of the West. Which at best would get "most Heroes".

Therefore, it must be "most Villains and some Heroes". Just like most Villains actually do come from the East.

Reader in the Night

Catherine could Speak to Hanno and GP before her Name even properly formed. Clearly, her Authority is not limited to people of the geographical east.

Also, remember what Bard said. The Name is Warden of the East, the concept of "The East". It rules over ancient evils, old grudges, backstabbing, and diabolists. It's not (just) about the cardinal direction.

Linnus42

She spoke to GP, never done it to Hanno.

CGundlach

She did. Book Six, Chapter 71.

Cat enters a Pavillon with Prince Klaus Wulfenbach, Prince Arsene of Bayeux, White Knight and Grey Pilgrim at the table, and several mutinees in attendance. At some point she orders "Shut Up!", at which point both heroes looked surprised at her. She doesn't elaborate for WK, but notices that the Pilgrim is affected, despite Speaking usually only affecting people who are less powerful. (I also believe that WK is less powerful than GP)

A bit later she

"withdrew any strand of will lingering against the four men at the table, freeing them of struggle", implying that her Speaking affected not only the two Princes, but also WK and GP. We just don't know to which degree WK was affected.

Zach

I'm pretty sure Bard's plan is to force Catherine into getting the name Warden of the East with the "East" referring to "the geographical east." Remember, she talked about manipulating Catherine into a different Name.

stlldvs

" What I find most interesting is that she can feel HAKRAM."

But can she? The text says she felt Adjutant, and we know Hakram abandoned that Name when he became a claimant for Warlord. My guess is that when Hakram spared Snaketooth, saying that he had a use for him, that Snaketooth became a new Adjutant to serve his new Warlord.

Shveiran

Geez, I hope not. That's more a Chancellor than an Adjutant and no mistake.

I guess it makes sense for Hakram to catherine his way into an Adjutant, but using his freshly defeated former rival who doesn't share his goals and was formerly under

Malicia's thumb doesn't seem smart.
I guess he could be trying to tie together the factions
for good, but...

rouquincool

Pretty sure that makes her a Thinker/Trump by Worm standards.

[Hargabga](#)

It maybe that Cat's perception judges who is the villain. As
in, she believes Ranger to be Villain, not that she
necessarily is.

2xMachina

Villians are those who strive to change the world for
themselves, while Heroes serve above.

Ranger is the paragon of villians, doing whatever she likes
for her own sake

burlindw

Earlier, the Dead King specifically pulled a revenant out of
a fight with Cat to avoid giving her a "whetstone to sharpen
her Name on." I think the revenant was Callowan, so it seems
that revenants *may* fall under her authority, but might not
always.

nick012000

She probably can, but I get the feeling that being able to tell
that the Dread Empress is in the Tower is not exactly a
revelation that would shock anyone.

Reader in the Night

You know, this is about last chapter actually, but this one gave
us relatively little to sink our teeth into: Bard said Malicia
needed a time, a place, and somebody to officiate. There is close
to a single person in all of Calernia with the actual capacity to
officiate a meeting between Malicia and Catherine and not make it
a farce, and that's Amadeus of the Green Stretch.

Matthew

This would work except the Bard killed Captain and Black is not
going to forgive that.

Also, black is waiting to show up and fuck over the Bard.

kinghaart

Bard doesn't need him to know he's doing it for her.

[Sugar Roll](#)

And he's going to take Catherine's knife for Malicia.

Benjamin Huang

Crown of iron and blade of steel,
A war to win on eastern fields,
Crows of Night and steed most dread,
Thrice reborn returned from dead,
Squire once but ne'er Knight,
Legend born from the twist of a knife,
A queen in black, draped in woe,
Warden of all that lies Below,
Break the gameboard neath her feet,
To bring at last a lasting peace

dadycoool

Beautiful.

Nairne .01

Nice.

[sengachi](#)

Wow. That's gorgeous, and I can see it being a real poem in-story.

Portal

It was time to sharpen the same knives I'd wielded at the Graveyard.
Yesssssss, bard-vs.-cat all-out story-fu showdown!

caoimhinh

Everybody was Story-Fu fighting!

jamesc9

I'm not sure that these are the right knives. The serious story-fu with the Bard was in the Arsenal. The Graveyard involved defeating Skein again, taking the right to rule from princes; what else?

kinghaart

There was a fair bit of story stuff with the 7 princes and 1.

Juff

Typo Thread:

that I some > that in some
danger in collapse > danger of collapse
Seats are much > Seats had much
inferior to inferior to > inferior to
but thorn > but a thorn

Shveiran

Oh boy, here we go. One of my favorite moments in the story is getting a sequel.

The Black Queen speculating about the goals and plans of Amadeus of the Green Stretch, Dread Empress Malicia, the Wandering Bard and Akua Sahelian.

Twice as many opponents as the Graveyard, and though those were no slouches the opposition has stepped up... and knows her and her bag of tricks far better than the Pilgrim and the Tyrant ever did.

It's gonna be wild.

kinghaart

No Robber to help plan. 😞

And methinks the story knife she creates here might be the one Bard intends to turn on her.

[Liliet](#)

So, I have three immediate guesses about what is off:

1. The Matrons & Wither have decided to alter their strategy after Amadeus called them out.
2. It's about whatever Akua discussed with the conspiracy last chapter, and the change is because of her utter lack of desire to actually take the Tower.
3. Amadeus.

Shveiran

So, basically, "one of the things that were foreshadowed will be involved".

Nairne .01

I'm just waiting for the inevitable improvisation on Cat's part and the chaos that might ensue due to it. This feels a little like the Underdark and the arc with the drow with Cat being in

the dark (yea I know, not? well, half intended pun) about the plans of her enemies.

SpeckofStardust

I think if Cat made a mistake it was giving them the timetable of months, which drops the urgency of her whole thing. They have more time to jostle her before she steps up to burning everything down to the ground.

Anonscheme101

"He's a dangerous man, Catherine, but he doesn't have an army," Juniper said. "There's only so much he could do."

and

"If I have to burn Ater to the ground around her to see her driven out of the Tower, I will."

Meanwhile Ranger and Amadeus are sitting next to goblin fire stashes in Ater. Nobody is going to believe that Cat didn't start the fire.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Cat didn't start the Fire!

It was always burning, since Ater was turning...

Nope, doesn't scan...

Anonymous

Ah, doubling down on "no really, Cat's name is going to be Warden of the East" to try to make readers bite, I see.

[Burlyraven](#)

So Above acts as a firewall to Cat's tracking, and Heroes have to disable protections to be tracked, consciously or unconsciously, is how I'm reading that. Said protection does not seem to extend to the Names that occasionally move with the story, apparently (a canonical thing from a Hanno interlude, since I've seen a few people have forgotten that in these comments).

Earl of Purple

The first thing, I think Hakram will do upon arriving, will be invite Cat to his tent, without letting her know. He wants to tell her in person, which is why he hasn't scried yet. Also I think he's unable to scry her because that would be taking her side, or seen as such.

Shveiran

Does... Adjutant have mages?

The orc have few Gifted, and maybe bringing GA, non-orc mages with him to the summit may have been bad politics so he didn't?

Konstantin von Karstein

The traditionalist clan has several shamans with magic, and one of Heiress' spy in book 3 was an orc that could scry. There's not a lot of orc mages, but among 100k there's probably a few.

Shveiran

True enough.

On the other hand... do they know how to scry? I think scrying was made a lot easier by Wekesa, which is what allowed the Legions to militarize the ritual as a standard procedure. And I doubt the traditional clans have gone to learn that.

On the other hand, scrying was around before that, so maybe there are a few that can even if they are not using modern formulae.

I wonder what school of magic the Clans practice, though considering it was never mentioned before my guess is "not an effective one".

Konstantin von Karstein

I imagine that in 30 years, there's was a few orc Legion mages who were taught the scrying spell, then retired to the step. They would then have taught to shamans the spell.

Earl of Purple

I think Sigvin could manage it, if she knows how. It's a traditional Praesi technique, and orcs don't have many mages to learn it- if one even finds a Praesi mage willing to teach them.

[Sugar Roll](#)

That's what Hakram will tell Catherine but the real reason he hasn't scried yet is because he's too busy with Sigvin.

[Adrian V](#)

He also could have banned any form of communications as to cripple Malicia, like if absolutely no info is going out Malicia will be in the dark too.

If Malicia doesn't know that is, can't remember what she knew about the horde currently.

Earl of Purple

She knows that someone's in charge, she doesn't know who it is, her Eyes in the horde have gone silent. She also knows they're not doing what she wants them to be doing, i.e. putting pressure on Nok to keep him in line.

[Adrian V](#)

Exactly, she knows only things didn't go as planned, she doesn't know who is in charge or how he/she came to power or their agenda, as far as she knows she could have been betrayed too. That doubt is worse for her since it feeds on her paranoia.

[Cosmic Cnidarian](#)

I don't think Cat's goal is Warden of the East. She sounds apprehensive in her response to Scribes comment about her influence, and her internal monologue about authority. Maintaining a level of civility among the villains is certainly a goal of her's, but it is not her MAIN goal. Could she really enforce the Truce and Terms while only having authority over the villains? Warden of the East is the Name that Bard wants her to assume, I believe, rather than something like Arbitrator. In my mind, Bard is sick of an endless life of playing referee to a game between Gods, and sees the Dead King's win as an end to the game, and her part in it. Cat becoming Warden of the East means that she becomes something controllable, another piece on the game board.

Forgot_My_Name

Bard explicitly doesn't want her as Warden of the East.

[Cosmic Cnidarian](#)

Bard doesn't ever explicitly say that (not that she ever explicitly says anything). She tells Malicia that they should have Cat come into a Name that relates to the material East, rather than the philosophical/metaphysical East. It may also be that both are just different forms of Warden of the East. Our only points of reference are Cordelia's rejection of Warden of the West, and Hanno's implied claim to it. Cordelia was certainly more concerned with the material governing of Procer, and Hanno's interest is managing it's heroes. However, I think its more interesting to think that Cat's aim is something more encompassing than just lordship over a pit of villains, and EE's word choice this chapter is a red herring.

Shveiran

No, the Bard explicitly wants to shape what the “east” in her Name will mean: practicalities (as in borders, factions and armies) or something that matters.

The rather obvious implication is that “east” is in the Below-damned Name.

Reader in the Night

I don't think the Name will form if practicalities are all that are left. Names are about stories, not political arrangements.

It's the same way Cat has been the Black Queen for years, but the Name of the Black Queen is beyond her: the story didn't pan out.

Shveiran

Except for, say, Scribe? Or Chancellor? Or heck, Adjutant.

A Name IS about a story, but a story can easily be about dealing with practicalities. It's a supporting role, but it IS a Role.

Not every Name needs to be flashy.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Yeah, but Cat's gonna be the CEO of EVIL, Inc., the President of th United States of Evil, the Hegemonic Overlord of Evil.

There had better be flash.

Shveiran

Well, yeah, I don't think Bard and Malicia will ****succeed****. I'm jus saying that's what they are trying to do.

AbraKadabra

Could be Archheretic of the East. 😊

Cayle

It was mentioned that the more traditional tribes have Shamanic mages. Not sure how well they'd mesh with tresmegistan scrying or if they have their own.

Abnaxis

Does Cat actually have months at this point? Isn't Procer collapsing right now? I thought she had regular contact with Cordelia?

Maybe the mistake Cat made is letting Muraqib know she isn't aware of the happenings out West? Maybe that's the Bard's stroke of "I wouldn't really call it good" luck?

Shveiran

I assume she has regular contacts with Cordelia and that she is on point when she judges she has two months to break Ater.

Letouriste

So Hakram didn't scry cat then. Didn't expect that somehow despite the topic really deserving a face-to-face.

[Adrian V](#)

["He's a dangerous man, Catherine, but he doesn't have an army," Juniper said. "There's only so much he could do."]

Meanwhile with Amadeus

"I felt a perturbation in the force, and now i feel the urge to prove something!"

Daniel E

But who is going to serve as her hands this time? 😞 R.I.P.
Footrest

Shveiran

Let's hope it's not Arthur.

serdar314

And here we are. After 2 months of reading, the last chapter. Errticerratta, without doubt you are one of the best storytellers I had ever seen. Your different characters piling on each other, not stumbling, not confusing but as if they are stones coming together to make something greater than any of them. You have written 6 books and none of them short yet your stories have balance. Not too op, not too underpowered. Always a new villain, always a new way to continue. For all that thank you, thank you for this amazing story.

KiltedBastich

You know, at this point, I suspect that Amadeus is going meta on us. I just realized that as long as he doesn't have a name, the Wandering Bard can't really tell what he's doing. She can still

see Ranger, but Ranger doesn't care. Ranger leaves the namelore and meddling to Amadeus.

I strongly suspect that Amadeus is pulling a plot on the Bard as well as Malicia, using Cat as the distraction for both. He's using his namelessness as effectively the narrative equivalent of a cloak of invisibility.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

And this is why I read through the comments.

Gabe Meadow

It's also possible that he hasn't gotten in contact with Cat for that reason, so she can't leak anything to the Bard or Malicia's agents inadvertently, until the time comes for him to strike.

kinghaart

Best way to swing a story is to enter it unexpectedly.

Chapter 23: Sung; Singer

"To fear treachery is a mark of inferiority, for fundamentally it is a fear that espouses the lie of safety. Treachery is only despised because it comes from within, from behind the wall. Only a fool believes that there is such a thing as shelter from harm."

– Dread Emperor Perfidious

I'd not been to Spite Valley since the war games.

Its real name was Koso Valley, but no one who'd been through the War College actually called it that. The old fort that companies were assigned to hold or take during war games stood empty, Malicia's generals past trying to actually hold the approaches to the capital, but it wasn't there I was headed. I led Zombie downslope, past the lone watchtower and the woods until the slope began to rise again. Hills and a mess of rocky outcroppings awaited, small footpaths leading up until I found long abandoned fire pits. Rat Company had camped here, I remembered, on that first night I'd met people not yet become some of the most important in my life. Hakram. Robber. Nauk. Pickler. Ratface. Killian, once upon a time.

Nilin, too, who'd died before I found out he was a traitor.

In a way it was a little like coming home, a different one from the narrow streets of Laure but no less dear. In a lot of ways, I'd taken the first steps towards the woman I now was in this quiet valley. The shadows lengthened and night neared, and I left my escorts in the fort. I could make my own fire and Vivienne had brought cuts of meat to roast. We got to it with the practice efficiency of people who'd travelled together for sometimes months at a time, splitting up the tasks. Before long we had roasted pork and freshly picked berries for supper by an open fire as darkness crept over the horizon. In the distance I saw the campfires of my knights, but aside from that we were alone.

"Why here?" Vivienne asked. "You used the Mavian prayers near our camp before the Graveyard. Why travel hours away this time?"

"Worried?" I teased.

"I am," the Princess baldly admitted. "Half the Dread Empire wants you dead and assassins only need to get lucky once. I don't like that you're so far from our wards, much less alone."

"People would distract," I shrugged. "And we never actually told anyone where I was headed, so there's no secret for her spies to dig up."

"But why *here*?" Vivienne pressed.

I looked away, dragged my gaze across the jutting rocks around us. They looked like teeth, in the right light, as if we were sitting in some great beast's maw.

"It began here, my time with the Legions," I finally said. "And it will end in Ater."

"Symmetry-"

"Has its uses," I cut in. "Learn that. Creation *likes* patterns, Vivienne. Rules of three, seven and one, a hundred little ironic echoes. You either use that or fall victim to it."

"I'll not argue namelore with you, Cat," she replied, raising her palms in surrender. "It just seems out of the way, which is unlike you. You like being at the heart of the hive."

I sighed.

"I do, sometimes," I said. "For this the quiet will suit better."

The Princess frowned.

"You're worried about the Bard," she said.

"I'll be worried about the Bard even when I'm sure I've killed her for good," I said. "The Arsenal is the only time I've ever come close to pulling one on her, and I'm still not sure she didn't get what she wanted out of that mess."

It'd come close to costing me Hakram, and the more I heard about what was happening out west the more I wondered if I'd really been the focus of what she was after. Tensions between the First Prince and the White Knight were continuing to rise, to my worry, and I'd not forgotten it was the events at the Arsenal that'd started the enmity between those two.

"She's not a god," Vivienne said.

"She's the patron goddess of stories, or close enough," I snorted. "I actually think it's like a domain for her, you know? The Augur insisted she could 'see all stories' and there's not a lot of things for Named that give you that much power over a concept s broad."

"Kairos Theodosian beat her," the Princess said. "So can we."

Ah, I thought, *but did he?* She'd definitely not anticipated Anaxares the Hierarch being such trouble for her, I thought, but Kairos' scheme against Judgement? That, I was not so sure. It seemed too much of a coincidence, Cordelia fishing out an ealamal that was once a Seraphim just after the Tyrant plotted a way to shut the door on Judgement's fingers. The Dead King had put us on the path of finding out a terrifying truth about the Intercessor, that she could influence angels and so that using the ealamal was as good as giving her power of life and death over most of Calernia, but we'd found it out after Kairos had 'saved' us from that peril.

And in the depths of Liesse thrice-ruined, Kairos Theodosian had been spared execution at my hand because the Intercessor had given him a way out.

I'd never learned why. He'd traded for that, I knew, but what did he have to offer? I did not think that the Intercessor was behind any of these... movements, but that wasn't the nature of her power. She could see it all and stand where she wanted, when she wanted to be there. The Intercessor threaded the needle, that was her terrible trick, and all she ever needed to do was to follow the... objects in motion. I'd been fighting her for years, often bitterly, and to this day the only thing I was pretty sure of was that she'd tried to make me replace her at the Arsenal. Trap me into taking up her mantle as either a rival or a successor. I found it pretty telling she'd since decided to go about killing me seriously.

Almost like I was of no further use.

"After is the first place where it's decided whether or not we lose the war against the Dead King," I finally said. "If it goes badly, Vivienne, it could fuck up everything. There's no room for mistakes."

She hummed.

"And so you disappear into the night," she said. "So you can scheme in peace."

"I'm preparing," I piously corrected. "And speaking of, did you get the sheets done?"

"I did," Vivienne agreed, reaching for her saddlebag.

She handed me a neat sheath of scrolls. I wiggled one out, unrolling it, and found a rather good depiction of Dread Empress Malicia looking back at me from the top of the parchment sheet.

"They all this good?" I asked.

"They are," she said. "Got an officer from the Thirteenth with some talent to draw them."

I paused.

"Thanks," I said.

She eyed me skeptically.

"You hate it," Vivienne stated.

"I didn't say that," I protested.

"Oh Gods," the Princess said, sounding appalled, "you actually think they're *too* good, don't you?"

It just wasn't the same if the drawings weren't unspeakably shitty. Last time it was Robber who'd drawn them, and I still had those parchments tucked away in a chest somewhere along with other mementos. Tolerantly amused, Vivienne took out a writing set from her knapsack and stole the scrolls away from me to half-hearted protests. She took out Malicia's scroll first, slapped it against a stone, and whet the quill. A stick figure with a crown atop it and three strands of hair was made to represent Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Aren't nobles supposed to get drawing lessons?" I jeered. "She's supposed to be the most beautiful woman alive."

"Right you are," Vivienne amiably agreed.

She wet the quill again and drew two circles over the stick figure's chest.

"There we are," the Princess said. "Like looking at a painting of her."

I snorted.

"All right, hit me with the other ones," I said.

Amadeus of the Green Stretch got to have a sword and a beard, the Wandering Bard got to hold an attempt in the direction of a lute. Akua Sahelian was drawn on fire, which I suspected to more of a wish on the artist's part than an accurate representation. They each got their stone, though unlike the Mavii raised stones the outcroppings here were low. I could see the horizon over them, the deep night sky beyond.

"I still think you should have a sheet for the nobles," Vivienne said. "Sepulchral's out of the running now that she's undead, but soon every remaining High Lord and Lady will be in Ater. At least *some* of them will be plotting to climb the Tower."

"I'm not planning to control who climbs the Tower," I said.

She glanced at me skeptically and I grimaced.

"I am," I conceded, "but only because it's accessory to what I'm actually after."

"Which is?"

"Who's going to dictate what Praes is, going forward," I said. "I'm not blind, Vivi. I know that my father might not actually want to take the throne. But that doesn't mean his philosophies can't rule."

She drew back, standing by the fire and taking a look at the parchments.

"Malicia has to die," the Princess said. "She's done too much to be left alive."

"I won't pursue if she crosses the Tyrian Sea," I agreed. "Anything else gets her a shallow grave."

"And Akua is not acceptable as Dread Empress," Vivienne said, a hint of warning in her voice.

I shrugged.

"Which is irrelevant, because she will not accept," I said.

I wasn't sure how deep the temptation would run, even now. I had my suspicions – she'd always seemed to think more in terms of legacy than titles, which was telling – but I couldn't *know*. Maybe the lure of power would make her blood sing, the idea that

she might rule from the Tower at last. But I believed, bone deep, that when the moment came she would turn away. Recognize it as a cage made of everything she had grown to despise. And I was not wrong in this. *But if I'm wrong?* My fingers clenched. Assassin could not get to Malicia, protected by the Tower as she was, but Akua did not share in that safety. *But I'm not wrong.*

"Meanwhile the Carrion Lord is nowhere to be found and the Wandering Bard unlikely to be taken as a candidate for ruling the Tower," Vivienne said. "Why those four, then?"

"Malicia, Akua, Amadeus," I said. "They're the stories that Praes can embrace going forward."

Stasis, reclamation, reform. And each of them had enough sentiment behind them that they were genuine possibilities – Malicia's cause was plunging downwards at the moment, but that was not because her philosophies were disliked. It was because of chaos and mismanagement. Should she win in Ater and restore order, her reign might well continue for decades yet.

"I don't care if Sargon Sahelian himself becomes Dread Emperor," I said, "so long as he's following a mould I'm comfortable with. Hells, I'd take Marshal Nim if she made a move."

"You'd prefer the Carrion Lord, though," Vivienne said.

"Sure, I'd prefer the one man I can trust not to start a stupid war and to butcher anyone threatening the new peace," I drily said. "But he's playing his own game, so I'll not count on it."

Vivienne grimaced.

"It's too abstract a cause for soldiers to get behind," she said.

"Which is why I've been taking about deposing Malicia a lot and a little about helping up my father," I replied. "Easier to grasp."

She glanced at the last of the four sheets.

"And the Bard?"

"Didn't have that one, back in Iserre," I said. "She's the enemy, Vivienne. There's not a part of anything I plan that can go without an answer to 'what if the Intercessor intervenes?'"

"But what is it that she's after?" Vivienne asked.

"My corpse, for one," I said. "She's stated as much and I believe her."

My heiress looked startled.

"She outright said so?"

"I got a proper declaration of war from her," I said. "We're in this to the knife."

The dark-haired princess stepped away from the light, knelt before the sheet and wrote: kill Catherine Foundling.

"Beyond that I'm less certain," I said. "But I think she's here in Praes because she doesn't want me to get the east in order. She wants Hasenbach desperate, Hanno forced to the forefront."

"What would she gain from that?" Vivienne asked.

"Right now everyone's a closed door for her," I said. "She burned too many bridges, she's an enemy under the Truce and Terms and no one has an interest in letting her back in. If it everything goes to shit, though?"

"People are forced to consider whether she should not be bargained with again, should the alternative be death by Keter," the Princess mused. "Yet that won't work with everyone."

"Procer's collapsing," I said. "A lot of people are going to be willing to do some very stupid things when the defence lines finally break and it sinks in we're looking at the massacre of half the continent. She'll get enough tools to make it worth her while. Besides, compared to how she's a pariah now what does she have to lose?"

Vivienne conceded the point with a nod. Under 'kill Catherine Foundling' went 'prevent alliance'.

"And that's all?" she asked. "It does not seem so much."

"Which is why there's a third line," I said. "We're going to call it the hidden knife."

It went up, neatly written, and she glanced at me in a way that invited elaboration.

"She's after something else," I said. "It's too small a game for her otherwise. Killing me, screwing the Grand Alliance, it's big but not big enough. She doesn't work with plots that don't echo, she's never only about the immediate win."

"So the hidden knife," Vivienne said.

I nodded. She moved to the closest sheet, the one where a terrible drawing of Akua stood aflame.

"And what does *she* want?" the Princess asked.

I leaned back, going through my saddlebags to bring out a bottle of aragh. I ripped out the cork with my teeth, then spat it to the side.

"Try it," I invited, then took a drink.

The dark-haired princess stood with her back lit by the flames, milkmaid's braid crowned with a small circlet of silver. I watched her watch the parchment, glare at it as if it would surrender answers.

"She wants to take it back," Vivienne finally said. "Or close enough. I figure she'd settle for people just forgetting about it, if it were on the table."

"Redemption," I said. "That's the word you're looking for."

Vivienne turned a hard look to me.

"Cat, I know you're... whatever the Hells you two have been doing, but don't kid yourself," the Princess said. "You can't teach her to be a good person."

I couldn't even teach myself that, most the time, so that was hardly unexpected.

"You're thinking in House terms," I said instead. "Good and Evil, good people and bad people."

"If you're about to tell me there's no such thing as good and evil, you're going to need to get me drunker first," Vivienne said. "I still won't buy it, but at least I'll be drunk."

I snorted.

"Look, we're not really better than Praesi," I said. "When it comes down to it, Callowans are not less selfish or wiser or inherently better. That's probably the most important thing my father ever taught me: most people do shitty things because they're in shitty situations."

"In an absolute sense you're probably right," Vivienne said. "And I think a lot of what's wrong with the Dread Empire can be traced back to hunger just as much as the nobility, but that's not really an excuse. Not for Akua Sahelian."

"You're still falling in the trap," I said, "of thinking about it as opposing ideologies. That's the thing, though: there's not really a philosophy of Evil the way the House of Light says there is. Jino-waza's probably the closest thing in Praes and it's not inherently bad. It just becomes that when it's paired with, you know, desperation and a taught disregard for others."

"Except Akua *has* been philosophically Evil," Vivienne objected. "The word is something Wasteland highborn embrace and the damage she did was under that banner. Crushing her rivals, taking the Tower, conquering the world."

"The Queen of Blades went conquering in all directions and we didn't call her Evil," I said. "And when Hasenbach made her rivals drink poison after the Great War, did the House condemn her? Let's not even talk about the amount of people I killed to become Queen of Callow. We shouldn't be hypocrites about this. It's the means that make it something different, Vivienne."

"And she used those means," the Princess bluntly replied.

"She did," I agreed. "There's no excusing or forgiving that. What I'm saying is that she's done evil and Evil things, but I don't believe she's fundamentally either because there's no such thing as someone who is."

Even the Dead King had made choices, known crossroads.

"And what would that change?"

"That she can be taught to understand that people are... people," I said. "Not just in the abstract but close-up. That's what it taught her, our campfires and the Army of Callow. That the sum of people existing in the world weren't Named and those with golden eyes."

"That's supposed to make a difference?" Vivienne scorned.

"Imagine you've been breaking statuettes of clay all your life," I said. "Going through them like a spendthrift to get your way. Imagine, one day, waking up to see they were made of *flesh and blood*."

Vivienne's face blanked. It was probably the cruellest thing I'd ever done to anyone, setting Akua on that path. She had begun with a ledger so filled she might drown in the ink.

"Redemption," I repeated. "That is the word."

This time Vivienne put it down without argument. She glanced back, silently asking for the rest.

"Reclamation," I said. "That is where her path led her. She hasn't renounced nobility, that's not who she is. She's grown disgusted with the worst parts of it, the scrapped iron she threw in Kairos' face. She wants to take the talents of the highborn and put them to better purposes, not to undo their rule."

It was a difference in the way we'd been raised, I thought. Akua had been brought up to see the aristocracy as the best of Praes, its foundation and virtue. I'd grown up thinking of them as parasites best gotten rid of. Unlike me, she did not consider a world stripped clean of nobles as having been *improved*.

"And the last?" Vivienne asked.

I smiled.

"Why do you ask?" I said. "It could be only these two."

She frowned.

"Is it?"

"No," I agreeably said. "But why are you so sure of that?"

She hesitated.

"It just... felt like there should be three," she admitted.

"Good," I said. "Your instincts are sharpening."

If she was to found a dynasty fated to end up Named as often as the Fairfaxes had, I'd be professionally offended should it not be better than most at namelore. She seemed as irritated as she was pleased by the compliment.

"So, the last?"

"Freedom," I said.

Vivienne looked at me in surprise, blue-grey eyes blinking.

"She *just* got loose after years with us," she said.

"Did she really?" I asked. "First she was bound, and when she was freed she found herself bound still."

I smiled harshly.

"Now she finds herself poised to take the Tower, and she realizes that the throne would be just another set of chains," I said. "And these most contemptible of all she has worn."

She'd be putting those on by herself, after all.

"Akua will be wanting a way out," I said. "Craving it."

And how fortunate for her that I already had one to offer. Freedom went up on the parchment, Vivienne applying herself so the letters would come out neat even though the stone beneath was uneven. She rose to her feet afterwards with an expectant look. Instead of answering it, though, I pointed a finger upwards. Vivienne looked up and went still in surprise. The moon was fully out, meaning we'd been at this for a while.

"You need to get moving soon if you want to be back to camp at a decent hour," I said.

She hesitated.

"This is important," Vivienne said.

"It is," I acknowledged. "But is it important to you?"

She looked a little offended at that.

"Of course it is," she replied. "I wouldn't let you-"

"That can't be the way you do things anymore, Viv," I quietly interrupted. "You know that. There are other things you have to put first."

Silence.

"I'm the Princess, you know," Vivienne Dartwick said. "Not the Queen. It doesn't need to change."

"You are the Princess," I replied, smiling, "until you are the Queen. So it's already changed."

She had duties now in a way she'd not had them before. Not even when she'd been my regent. A Name was a responsibility that could not be denied, not unless you wanted it to hurt you: Vivienne must act the princess now, else it would turn on her. And that meant not blowing off her duties so she could help with my own, much as the both of us would have liked her to. It was a lonely feeling, but I pushed it down. How long was I going to keep all my friends on a string, never more than a tug away? I might not like the feeling in my stomach, but I liked even less how accustomed I'd become to the people I loved taking everything on my terms. Vivienne sighed.

"We're getting old, aren't we?" she asked.

"I guess we are," I admitted. "We can't be nineteen and on the road forever. We wanted to change the world, Vivienne. It's why we fought so hard to climb."

"Only it's different when you're on top," she said.

A pause.

"I wonder if it was like them for them too."

I followed her gaze, the way it came to rest on the two sheets left untouched. Alaya of Satus and Amadeus of the Green Stretch. The two people who'd reformed Praes into what it now was, led it to its greatest heights since the days of Maleficent the Second before it fell into the pit where it was now stuck. I shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the coolness of the night. Neither of us had an answer, and so after sharing a drink with me Vivienne picked up her bags and saddled her horse. She rode away into the dark, leaving me with a mostly full bottle and more ghosts than I cared to entertain.

It would have been easier if Hakram were here, he would have stayed by my side. There wasn't really anyone else left, was there? Indrani cared little for this sort of thing, and I'd sent her out on a mission besides. Masego was allergic to scheming or near enough, and neither Juniper nor Pickler were really... fit for this sort of thing. Aisha might have done decently enough, but I wasn't going to abduct my own marshals' right hand because I didn't want to feel as lonely. I wasn't *that* pathetic. Even Ivah would have been appreciated if it weren't up north trying to keep Serolen from further collapsing.

Gods, I realized with startlement, but I even missed John Farrier. How long had it been since I'd thought about the man who had commanded the Gallowborne? The real one, not the one I'd cut up into small companies and spent across a dozen foreign fields. I drank of the bottle again, sitting by the fire, and idly reached for my staff. Without even turning to look I slapped it down, landing on the back of the creature that'd been creeping towards me. It was... a scorpion? No, not just that. It had black fur over the shell and a catlike head. It tried to wriggle away until I flared Night, at which point it dropped 'dead'.

"How very believable," I said, amused, and then turned. "Were you going to warn me?"

I glimpsed a blade being tucked back into Scribe's sleeve as she kept silent. I snorted. Was she pissy because I'd not let her make an entrance by nailing the critter with a knife? I glanced at the cat-scorpion, which had been looking at me warily. It dropped 'dead' again the moment it saw me looking.

"I take it there's news," I said.

"Sargon Sahelian has arrived," Scribe said.

I cocked my head to the side and waited. That wouldn't have been enough for her to come.

"There was a riot in the streets of Ater," she said. "Citizens clamouring for Malicia to be deposed. It was put down by the Sentinels."

I let out a low whistle. That was a euphemism if I'd ever heard one.

"My people in the city don't believe it was a natural occurrence," Scribe continued. "Someone incited it."

And there were only so many people with agents in the right place for that. Unfortunately most of them had an interest in seeing Malicia thrown out of the Tower, so that didn't exactly narrow down the list. I made myself look past the implied massacre to what it would mean.

"It weakens her position," I said. "In front of all the nobles she's brought to her gates."

Scribe nodded, adding nothing. She stayed there as my eyes drifted back to the parchments. I felt Eudokia hesitate, then carefully speak up.

"Survival," Scribe said.

I glanced at her.

"For Malicia's list," she elaborated. "More than anything else, Alaya of Satus wants to survive."

I hummed.

"So why is she still here instead of on a boat to Tyre?" I asked. "She could take enough priceless things and run that the fortune would last her for five lifetimes and I'd be near impossible to stop her."

"Because she still believes she can win," Scribe said. "And it's personal to her now, a matter of pride."

I studied her.

"Amadeus?"

"Not only him," Eudokia said. "All of us. The Calamities helped put her on the throne, so she never entirely felt like it was truly hers. Now she stands with all of them dead or turned against her. If she does not win here, she proves her every doubt right: she never was meant to rule, and it was only the kindness of strangers that saw her climb the Tower."

I stayed silent for a long moment, considering.

"Write it down," I finally said.

She did not immediately move, asking a question with her eyes.

"Survival and Pride," I said. "And you better have brought a cup, Vivienne left with them."

"I'll see what I can do," Scribe drily said.

Her handwriting was beautiful, I thought, and impossibly perfect given the angle of her hand and the rough stone the parchment was hung on. A side effect of her aspect?

"The first?" she asked, having left the space empty.

"Stasis," I said.

Scribe cocked her head thoughtfully.

"That is an interesting interpretation of her reign," she said.

"You don't agree?"

"Regardless of our personal enmities, Malicia has been an able ruler and an effective reformist," Eudokia said. "Not all of her changes were of the Reforms – most weren't, in fact. The reason you have been able to trample over the High Seats with an army of fewer than twenty thousand is that she has spent decades bleeding them out. There was a time where Kahtan alone would have been able to field a host twice that size."

"I don't mean that she's trying to stop reforms," I said. "I'm sure she'd be constantly tinkering with the Empire, on the contrary. It's what at the core of her philosophy that's in stasis: her."

"Arguably, her philosophy as a ruler has been centralizing in Praes while using diplomatic means abroad," Scribe noted. "It was only when Hasenbach edged her out in Ashur even after decades of work that she began resorting to... traditional imperial foreign policy."

Doomsday fortresses and assassinations, she meant.

"You still misunderstand me," I said. "Sure she has strategies and policies and ideas. That's not the point. The point is that Malicia does not have a vision of Praes where she's not in charge of it."

I drank of the bottle, let the aragh burn down my throat.

"And I don't mean for a few decades," I said. "I mean forever. Malicia's not making an empire where the power rests with the Tower, she's making an empire where the power rests with *her*. She doesn't ever intend to give up that throne."

Scribe considered that.

"It would not be so unpopular a vision with most of Praes," she said. "The empire's peaks, the moments where it was wealthiest and most powerful, have generally come when an able tyrant held the Tower and concentrated power in their hands."

"If it were unpopular, it wouldn't be dangerous," I said. "And it's not like the vision is only hers now. High Seats noticed what she was doing, the way she was shaping the empire to make it easier for the Tower to stay in control. Gods Below, Scribe, she had an open rebellion in her heartlands for two years right on the heels of pretty much losing a war and she was still able to collect taxes from most of Praes. Everyone who's noticed is

licking their chops and wondering what *they* might be able to achieve if they take over her machinery."

Stasis went up on the sheet. As if gathering courage, Eudokia abandoned the rocks long enough to pour herself a large shot of aragh in what I was pretty sure was an empty inkwell. She drank it down in a single breath, then squared her shoulders.

"Amadeus, then," she said.

"First one's easy," I said.

"Reclamation and stasis," Scribe mused. "For him, then, reformation?"

I smiled, nodding. We were both familiar with what my father's story for Praes would be. The High Seats humbled or destroyed, Ater unchallenged and the Legions of Terror the backbone of the empire. The only schools for mages under the Tower's aegis, local nobility broken and replaced by appointed governors, peace with Callow and assimilation of the forces on the fringes: the Clans and the Tribes. He'd cut out every part of Praesi culture he disliked and replace it with something he preferred. It was a stable and prosperous Praes he promised, but at the price of what was likely a decade of civil war after large swaths of the empire rebelled against his policies.

"Only that's the story, the ideology," I said. "In the here and now, he's up to something as well."

"Destruction," Scribe said.

The confidence in her voice caught my attention. I raised the bottle, inviting her to elaborate.

"He's never been particularly eager to rule," Eudokia said. "So long as he has free hand to push his reforms, in truth he prefers not to. It's why Malicia was able to trust him for so long. Even now he does not position himself for the Tower. Which means he is trying to achieve the same ends through different means."

I grimaced.

"You think he's going to swing an executioner's axe at everything he can't tolerate about Praes," I said. "Sweep the board clean."

"He will seek to destroy everything he believes a hindrance to a function Dread Empire," Scribe said. "That is my belief."

And she'd sold me on it. It made sense, with the only part tripping me up being that I still had a hard time believing he'd be willing to let the Tower fall into the hands of the people most likely to end up climbing it. Yet he'd made no claim of his

own, gathered no armies to his banner. He was no closer to ruling Praes than when I'd last seen him, drunk and maudlin in Salia.

"There's more," I said. "Has to be. The methods he's been using are too odd otherwise. He's been back in the Wasteland for years while we fought out west, Scribe, he has to have been doing *something* all that time."

"He has been unusual in his approach," Eudokia admitted.

"And that means there's something else," I said. "An objective we haven't figured out yet, the reason he's been so strange."

Scribe looked at the parchments in the firelight, falling silent. I looked at her. I still had to fight it, **Fade**, but it was getting easier. And the more it fought me the more I could feel it. Her Name itself, but also the three candles within it. They felt close enough I could almost reach out. Not, not exactly that. It would be... harsher if I did it. Like an order. A scream, followed by silence. I only shook myself out of the daze when Scribe went still. She was looking at Malicia's sheet.

"Figured something out?" I asked.

She turned to me without missing a beat, tanned face pleasantly smiling.

"No," the Scribe lied.

Ah, I thought. And there we are. The first conflict between old loyalties and where you now stand. The victor was not unexpected.

"We leave it empty then," I said. "For now."

She rose to her feet, writing 'destruction' before withdrawing.

"What follows?" she asked.

"We figure out," I said, "where we give and where we fight."

"The Intercessor gives no grounds for compromise," Scribe noted.

"Which is why we're fighting her through the other three just as much as we're fighting them," I said. "Frankly speaking, my father's way forward is what I'd prefer but it'd be hard for most of Praes to swallow and he's still keeping cards close to his chest. We can aim for him, but we can't start there."

She eyed me strangely, holding back on a comment, then nodded.

"Akua Sahelian, then," she said. "Malicia is not acceptable to you."

"We're going to have to use Akua to topple Malicia," I agreed. "Which means getting her noble backing, since the Legions are unlikely to back her."

Scribe considered that.

"Assassinating some of the High Seats could create such an opportunity for her," she said.

"It's also risky," I said. "So we leave that aside from now. We know we want to use Akua against Malicia, but that doesn't mean Amadeus is going to stand aside and look. He's going after something, someone. We need to figure out what's that before we move."

"Given that nearly every prominent noble in Praes and most the middling ones are either in Ater or journeying to it, they seem the most likely target," Scribe said. "It would destroy much of what he disliked of the empire in a single stroke."

It might. It wasn't like killing the nobles would end their families, there'd be replacements, but the sheer number of dead nobles would throw their influence into chaos. With the High Seats dead and unable to keep their vassals in line, all the violence held back would flow and in that mess someone with a solid professional army – like, say, the Legions – would be able to decisively break the aristocracy's power if they moved quickly enough the nobles weren't able to get their affairs in order. Without gold and land and fortresses, Praesi highborn lost much of their danger.

"So we figure out how he'll do it," I said. "He doesn't have soldiers, just him and Ranger, so it limits the opportunities he can make use of. We find out what those are and we'll finally catch his tail."

"I'll see what I can do," Scribe said.

"We'll need people in the city when it comes to that," I noted. "Otherwise we can't act on the information. When Indrani comes back tomorrow we'll see about our options."

Callowans would stand out like sore thumbs trying to enter Ater discreetly, but I had Praesi officers in my ranks. Maybe not enough to make a strike force of killers, but there was another option to consider. How many people would be able to tell apart a Taghreb and a Levantine if the Levantine kept their mouth shut?

"That is a start," Scribe said. "But it does not explain how we are to ensure Akua Sahelian has overwhelming support among the nobility."

I cocked my head to the side. Sometimes it wasn't about winning, I thought.

"I know how," I said.

Eudokia turned a questioning gaze to me and I grinned.

"I'm going to lose a battle," I cheerfully told her, "and get betrayed."

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Insanenoodlyguy

"You are the voting," I replied, smiling, "until you are the voted. So it's already changed."

[Paul](#)

Wow, that sounded so stupid. Nice job... not.

[sengachi](#)

There is no need to be a jerk about this stuff. Just don't like it and move on, if it bothers you.

therealgridlock

I, for one, think it is a clever use of the contextualization in time of the word "vote" to mean you are currently voting, and then you will have voted. Startlingly simple and clear.

The act of voting does indeed mean no matter what you will have voted, because you can choose not to vote, but then you aren't currently voting. To imply that one is currently voting is to imply one will have finished voting, therefore, the wordplay is excellent.

Miles



Except that "to be the voted" implies the action was done to you against your will or best interests. So in order to be "the voted", you achieved that status because of something someone else did.



therealgridlock

Yes, that is one way of interpreting the statement.

Another way of interpreting it is “the voted” are a group of people who have already voted and “the voting” are a group of people who are currently voting.

If we examine it from that context, “you are the voting until you are the voted” would mean “the” would be plural or group, not just individual, for the group of people who have voted. The already having voted.

It is a bit of a vague sentence but that’s why I found it interesting, the wordplay was good, and it made the reader think about it.

Gydd

technically speaking, that’d make you the voter, not the voted, no?

The Fighting – the people actively in combat.
The Fighters – The people who fight, now OR in the past.
The Fought – The target of the combat, no real commentary on your ability to fight or retaliate.

The Have-Voted would be the way to make it work as a concept, but it’s a messy solution.

Steven Silver

“I’m going to lose a battle,” I cheerfully told her, “and get boosted.”

Miles

“That is a Boost,” Scribe said. “But it does not explain how we are to ensure A Practical Guide To Evil has overwhelming support among the top 5.”

pigcow

first

Burnsy

Amadeus’s third motive is to save Malicia somehow isn’t it? He just can’t apply that cold rationality to people he genuinely loves.

ninegardens

Yeah, I'm seconding this.

Potentially just "Save the people who I love"- which may ALSO include Cat... but currently Malicia's in the most danger.

... I'm surprised Cat doesn't see it. Or perhaps she does, and just didn't record it, in order to keep up the rouse with Scribe.

"Reformation, destruction and Love" ... yup, that's our Maddie.

Frivolous

I'm not sure I can agree that saving Alaya's life is a probable goal for Amadeus.

My reason is goblinfire. Lots and lots and lots of goblinfire. That isn't a weapon that lends itself to sparing lives.

Unless Malicia has a way of jumping from the top of the Tower(ing Inferno) and surviving? That might work if so.

ninegardens

Or he removes her from the city first. Or he has an evac plan. Or its just a threat.

There is just no version of Maddie that I can picture willingly allowing Alaya to die.

Frivolous

If he really plans to spare and save Alaya, acquiring that much goblinfire doesn't make a lot of sense.

No one really controls or could control that much goblinfire. It introduces a huge, and to me, unacceptable, chaos factor into the scenario.

Also, remember that the Tower has demons in it, and demons can't be harmed by other demons. Which I think means goblinfire can't be used to harm demons, since goblinfire is made from demons.

What do we suppose will happen when the goblinfire consumes the Tower? Demons get loose.

What possible plan could Amadeus have to spare and save Alaya from loosed demons?

Salt

I think you're looking at it from the wrong angle. That's the mundane strategic analysis. Physics, technical details, and mundane probabilities. Stuff that's only of secondary importance in the guideverse.

The guideverse is a setting where heroes getting tossed off cliffs will always miraculously survive despite a "million to one odds". It's one where a plan with a 99.999% chance of success will end up failing without question because the planner simply considered their Victory Assured and that Nothing Could Possibly Go Wrong.

What matters is whether he has the right story wind in his sails. Whether the narrative is one where him successfully saving Alaya would be a fitting end to their story. If he gets that narrative, he will thread the needle blindfolded from a mile away every single time, because reality will quite literally warp itself through impossible coincidences to make it happen.

Meaning the question to ask isn't "how strategically difficult would it be, for a man of his approximate physical ability and physical tools, to save Alaya while destroying the tower". The question is "is there a story setting where the tower being destroyed and Alaya being saved is the strongest narrative, and how does he push events along to make that particular narrative as strong as possible"

Frivolous

Amadeus isn't Named. I'm not sure namelore applies very much to him right now, which is one of the reasons why his presumed plans against the Intercessor might actually work.

Do we really agree that Story applies to any great extent to Amadeus right now? Because I really don't think so.

Example: Kairos's death scene. He was able to give his final lines because of Story, but he was Named.

Amadeus isn't.

ninegardens

Huh- interesting take. I always just took it as a "story groves apply to *everyone*... its just that Names are a particularly deep grove with more obvious power".

Also, even if Amadeus ISN'T named at the moment, if all the people he is interacting with **are** named, Namelore will still apply with them in full force. Hence, Malicia and Cat are well under the influence of Namelore. Maddie is Cat's long lost father/mentor figure, and can ride that groove EASILY wether or not he himself has a Name. Similarly, he is Malicia's final morality teather/ loyal loved one (if he chooses to be), and **that** also is a story he can lean on.

...

...

Both of these stories don't sound like the type that end with him surviving though, so I'm a little confused, as I **do** fully expect him to survive, succeed, and flourish.

He isn't on screen ever, but I fully belive that Maddy is the hero of this book, not Cat, who is currently more of a great big powerful story hammer, which Maddie is lining up with some weird goal.

milieu

Cat isn't Named too. She's referred to as the "Black Queen" or "First Under Night" by others, but those aren't Names. They don't grant her aspects. But Namelore definitely applies to her; it's the point of the entire exercise in this chapter. She's been wielding Namelore like a dungeon master since she consumed those stories in Arcadia.

Being a significant figure in a world with Names means Namelore applies to you, by virtue of interacting with others Named.

Frivolous

milieu and ninegardens: With regards to Amadeus's motives and susceptibility to namelore, we'll see.

You seem to think being Named is an advantage. For me it's the opposite.

I think being Nameless and set apart from Story are significant advantages for Amadeus right now, since he's probably fighting the Intercessor. Intercessor might not even be aware of the goblinfire, precisely because Amadeus is Nameless and she cannot see him.

As for Catherine, she's a special case, maybe unique. We could see the years after losing the Name of Squire, becoming Sovereign of Moonless Nights, then becoming First Under the Night as a period of Namelessness, yes.

But Story and the Named don't seem to agree. Tariq and Laurence certainly treated her as a villain, and Tariq tried to set a pattern of three against her, which really shouldn't work for a Nameless.

If regular people were susceptible to patterns of three, Marshal Nim should have found out about them much earlier, long before she became Black Knight.

[onedollargum](#)

Names seem fine, I think it's the story roles that people have to be careful of.

Shveiran

Cat **IS** Named, or close enough: being a claimant makes you susceptible to namelore, and even those still convinced she won't become the Warden of the East have to admit she is close to becoming SOMETHING.

It has been straight-out said in text since the end of the 5th book, after all.

kinghaart

She's susceptible to stories for sure but per Bard, who should know, she is 100% not yet Named.

Salt

Not having a Name doesn't mean you're immune to story tropes. They apply to everyone and everything, just some more than others. There's a reason why Cat was got a little frightened just a few chapters ago when Juniper started talking along the lines of how they couldn't lose, even though Juniper isn't even close to having a Name.

That also isn't the point anyway, Catherine herself has spent the last several entire books proving that even without a Name, stories and Namelore can still be used just the same. We also know that one of Amadeus' major distinguishing characteristics is his penchant for using stories as a metaphysical club, and with more success than almost anyone else on the continent to boot.

If it's an Amadeus plan, success or failure is going to be hinged upon how well he shapes the story, and clever mundane machinations are mainly going to be the vehicle he uses to shape said story; not the central focus of his plans, nor the main reason his plan succeeds or fails.

shikkarasu

I agree that Amadeus loves Alaya like a Calamity, and we've seen how much the loss of a Calamity pains him, but remember when he was in the Free Cities, shortly before Sabah died? He told Scribe that he thought he was dying and she promised him that, if Cat was involved, either Scribe or Ranger would kill her. Said it with the suicidal conviction of a Right-Hand.

When she did, he thought to himself "how many of my loved ones will I need to kill?" It's not that he loves Catherine more than anyone else, he's threatened to kill her, too. Catherine represents his legacy. She is the inheritor of his ideals. That is what Amadeus is willing to kill Alaya for. He's willing to kill Scribe and even Ranger (and he thinks he can?!?). Amadeus has been around for near 80 years and he has his priorities set with 'fixing Evil' at the top.

kinghaart

Agree. He wants to rewrite the stories. He would kill Cat too if that's what it took.

Of course, that's just another story too. Maybe rather than rewriting stories the goal should be to eliminate their power altogether. I think that might actually be Neshamah's goal too.

kinghaart

What does he think Bard's mistake is? Maybe killing her will matter more to him. I'm not sure what mistake he thinks she made that she wouldn't be able to see through.

mindsword2

There is one thing on Malicia's list that Amadeus of the Green Stretch would want on his. Survival for Malicia. He still hopes to reconcile with his best friend, I think.

Salt

I think that's close but a little off. He wants survival for Alaya, not Malicia. That makes an absolute world of difference.

It fits with reformation and destruction as well since all three are accomplished by the same method – destroying the

tower outright. He doesn't care about who rules the tower because he doesn't intend for there to BE a tower by the time he's done.

What he wants with "reformation" is to change Praes into one whose success relies on institutions that survive independently of the people in power. What he wants with "destruction" is cutting out everything he hates about Praes – the self-consuming nature of it that bleeds itself and prevents itself from ever progressing – which Malicia has now become a part of. What he wants with "survival" is saving Alaya, who he still cares for, not Malicia, who he's too practical to allow the continued survival of.

All three things are achieved in one fell swoop if he breaks the tower itself and the nobility gathered in Ater. No tower and no nobles means the power vacuum can be filled by institutions. No tower and nobles means one of the primary reasons Praes mutilates itself so much (nobles competing to climb the tower) no longer exists. No Tower means no Dread Empress, which ends Dread Empress Malicia without killing Alaya.

ninegardens

And I can't help but think... if Maddie manages to break and destroy the tower thoroughly enough to **break** the name... to destroy it, along with Malicia's power base utterly... I think Cat might be persuaded into permitting Alaya's survival, especially if Ammadeus makes it clear that that mercy is a condition of his continued support.

... I'm **not** sure where Ranger falls in all of this; she never really liked Alaya, and the fact that she is still supporting Amadeus somewhat implies that he's doing something she would approve of and find "worthy of her time". Alaya **isn't** that.

Shveiran

Not really, no.

Catherine has already said that in this Book that allowing Malicia to survive after all she has done sets a precedent no one can live with.

And the rest of the continent won't really let this "Malicia is not Alaya" argument fly.

She uses the phrase "if she crosses the Tyrian sea I won't pursue", and to me that means "if somehow she manages to escape beyond pursuit I won't make it my life mission to hunt her down". Maybe even "I'll argue against investing resources to that end with my allies".

That's really not the same as letting her go.

CGundlach

More important than the Tower falling is that the throne is destroyed.

The Tower has fallen several times already, but the throne of the Dread Empress has miraculously survived every time (or at least that's the Story behind it) and Tower was always rebuilt.

Notice also the mention of only the DE being allowed to sit on a throne In the Wolof arc (book 6, chapter 10: "It was against the laws of Praes for any but the Tyrant in the Tower to sit a throne"). That puts an even stronger Story focus on thrones, imho.

I think the only reliable way to destroy the Name would be to melt down the throne – and I don't think just setting the Tower on green fire would suffice to defeat its "miraculously survive the Tower" Story. Amadeus needs to make sure the throne is destroyed, so I believe the huge amount of goblinfire is just a distraction for the smaller amount that is needed to set green fire to the throne.

It could even be counterproductive to topple the Tower, as it being rebuilt is a familiar Story in Praes, as long as the throne survives. Destroying the throne *and* toppling the Tower might give opportunity to some people to restore the throne in the ruins and claim that it was never destroyed (IIRC there was one time where even Amadeus mentioned that he doubts that this is actually the same throne the first DE sat on), so he needs to make sure the Tower stands when the throne breaks, to break out of the Story of the Tower's revival.

Shveiran

Leaving the Tower standing would be giving up a powerful symbol. The stage is Ater, and the ending has to be monumental. Visible.

Planting goblinfire also on the throne to ensure it is destroyed is reasonable.

Planting it just on the throne is not.

Miles

It makes sense but i don't think it would go on the list because it's already on another list.

Cat is trying to trade tactical victories for a strategic defeat. But story wise for it to work she needs to give everyone a set of 3 (except the bard, who's getting 1 subverted – no hidden knife for thou)

kinghaart

Bard's hidden knife is that Cat will come riding in with a story designed to break her – to outplay fate itself. There is a very strong story around how such attempts end up for the one running against fate. You can stay ahead of fate a long time if you play it right, but if you play outright AGAINST it – fate ALWAYS gets its way.

Cicero

Ah yes, the old Emperor Tratorious tactic... Praesi never seem to be fully immune to it.

Salt

That's a very true point. It would also add weight to the story he's pushing. Like Cat mentioned in the chapter, symmetry matters, and the tower-based stories beginning and ending with the throne would be very strong symmetry.

Salt

I replied to the wrong post...

[Liliet](#)

sdfsakdfjahskjdfhf why change what works right

[Liliet](#)

so, Stasis, Survival, Pride

and Reformation, Destruction... hmm. My first worry was "death" but Destruction already fills that slot thank fuck. He wants something that mirrors Malicia's pride.

...maybe he just wants her, though.

Forgot_My_Name

Maybe "Humbling"? To Alaya, to remind her of where she came from, knock her out of her pride-fueled insanity; or even to Cat, as a sort of last lesson?

I think humbling sounds a bit cruel for Amadeus, but it's not like Amadeus isn't a master of the cruel kindness. He did it to Cat, he did it to Scribe, he might be trying to do that to Malicia.

KageLupus

No, I think it would be something more along the lines of "Closure" or maybe even "Sentiment". Remember, Amadeus was

never happy about how things turned out between him and Alaya. He spent so long supporting her that even now I can't imagine he would want her dead or even humbled. But I do think that he wants to resolve their differences one way or another. That could mean killing her himself, but it feels more likely to me to be him kicking her out of Praes and ensuring that she survives but is no longer Empress.

Whatever his ultimate plan ends up being, I think the third thing driving Amadeus has to be his personal relationship with Malicia and everything that has happened between them.

kinghaart

I think Compassion is more likely. Compassion for Alaya and the people of Praes, and the Villains caught in the cycle of going crazy trying to improve their lot.

Miles

Maybe he wants to go back to the world he Isrkai'd from.

therealgridlock

Unless he seeks his own death? It depends on whether it's death for others, death for everyone, or death for himself.

Or death of an idea, that's possible too.

shikkarasu

Call me sentimental, but "Legacy"? Amadeus' biggest fears have always been about other people in power, people he can not or will not eradicate, doing something stupid and undoing all of his work. Gnomes send a red letter? He takes off to see how much murder it takes to fix. Malicia makes a **Doomsday** device? He Destroys it without even considering whether he will survive.

The main reason that he loved Catherine so much (before he dropped the pretence and started calling her 'daughter') is because she is the perfect inheritor of his influence and ideals. He doesn't mind dying, so long as Evil remains in a better place once he's gone. Cat doesn't see it because she has difficulty admitting that she is worth being loved. Scribe doesn't say it because she hates the idea, and would gleefully kill Catherine to save him.

This is also why WB is doomed to fail in making Cat the Warden of the east instead of East. Amadeus was always grooming her to shepherd Evil, not Praes. This is a lesser treachery she peddles.

shikkarasu

Yep, bolded Doomsday in stead of Destroy. This is what I get for posting before coffee happens.

[Stefan](#)

What about the scorpion cat? It is still alive. A was fully expecting Cat to start petting it mid sentence!

dadycoool

It's even smart enough to play dead when she clearly made what was intended to be a killing blow.

[Stefan](#)

First time the cat lost (hit by the staff), second time it was a draw (play dead and get overlooked), what will happen next when it wins?

Miles

Headpats and scratches!

therealgridlock

Agreed, I'm sensing a theme 😊

hoser2

I'm hoping for zombie scorpion cat spy after tonight.

Reader in The Night

I wonder what Catherine's own sheet would look like? If I had to take a guess (I don't, but I obviously want to, read the mood)...

– Death; to Malicia and to everything she represents. Death to the self-defeating Praesi philosophy of iron sharpening iron, death to the Old Empire of Praes.

– Accord; Cat needs those diabolists, but more than that she wants a Dread Empire that can be part of the Liesse Accords. So she needs to have someone in the Tower who would actually sign them and mean it;

– A Story; the last one sounds weird, but she wants to defeat the Bard, she wants to form her Name, she wants to permanently change the story of Praes. She wants not just the immediate victory, but the win that echoes and shapes the narratives going forwards from this moment. She's very much like the Bard in thi regard.

[milieu](#)

Happy someone brainstormed this and brought it up.

I don't know if Cat necessarily wants to gain a new Name given how flexible she can be right now, but she definitely wants the final Story to encompass hers.

Cat wants...

- No Dead King extinction event, and fulfilling her commitment to provide a new Drow home
- Callow to never be at risk of invasion from Praes again
- Callow to never be at risk of damage from Named shenanigans
- No death from or plan failures caused by the Wandering Bard

So she plots to...

- Win against the Dead King by bringing support from the East
- Be a check on the East's power, by forcing them to "get their house in order" (vague)
- Garner as many signatories of the Liesse Accords as possible
- ? TBD at least maintain Wandering Bard's status as a pariah, via fixing the East

So far what will happen looks like...

0. Scribe immediately sets out to become the opportunity Amadeus needs to break nobility
1. Cat battles Ater, encounters Akua, has titillating dialogue, loses to Sahelian magic
2. Akua battle success consolidates noble support for Tower
3. Warlord Hakram arrives, has sad reunion with Cat (probably not in this order)
4. Some Scribe shenanigans happen in Ater or elsewhere; nobles power bases damaged / Ater breached
5. Akua's consolidated support panics Malicia, causing her to ... leave the throne room
6. The Wandering Bard shows up somewhere in Ater, something happens, maybe more than once
7. Akua in the throne room maxes out on disgust, realizes there is no redemption, goes to Cat and asks to be destroyed
8. Amadeus / Scribe / Warlord help Cat get the troops she needs to head back West to the Dead King
9. Maybe Warlord razes or settles Ater
10. Where is Masego when you need him to send the Tower into Arcadia or something, maybe a pocket dimension, to archive all those devils. This may be the instrument of Akua's destruction
11. Maybe Sepulchral ends up being the interim Praes ruler, administratively.
12. Cat meets Ranger; Cat talks to Amadeus again; Cat has to have had some Wandering Bard confrontation at some point; maybe Indrani talks to Ranger; maybe Ranger talks to Alaya; will be surprised if not one Named dies during the Ater arc
13. This list is too long Erraticerrata has amazing pattern management for running a simulation with this many actors and history.

hoser2

Very nice. One minor detail: needs more goblinfire.

Steven Silver

Scribe, you old horn dog!

I'm gonna pull out the 'ol "I think we all know where this is going." If you can't get with the father, go for the daughter, amiright? 🤔

If it rhymes, it must be true. That's canon name lore, right there. XD

Miles

Checks out.

Doesn't make a lick of sense but people keep repeating it because it's catchy.

Like iron sharpens iron. Anyone who's got 2 knives can tell you you'll only ruin both edges trying to sharpen them like that. Use a proper whetstone ffs.

therealgridlock

Yes, one piece has to be harder for it to be able to break the other, if they're both annealed, you just get a long rolled over edge, if they're both hard, they skitter across one another, until something breaks from enough force and becomes jagged.

You can technically sharpen iron (to a point. No pun intended.) With a file, which is just shaped hardened steel, but you're correct, sand of smaller and smaller pieces, or zirconium or zinc or carbon (diamonds) are the only way to get iron sharper to an actual sharp edge. Finer and finer grits until it's even and smooth.

Tumbling iron pieces in a rock tumbler would also work. But doing it with other iron pieces just gets you small iron rocks of random size and shapes. And lots of rusty flakes.

Miles

Incidentally, this makes "Iron ruins iron" a much more accurate phrase which is basically what the Praesi are doing to themselves.

jackbobbemail2211

Aduro95

Redemption. The preferred term of a woman who is absolutely not going to admit that she's taking a leaf out of the Choir of Contrition's book.

Miles

Because she does horrible things and sends Heroes to Hell?

Salt

It really does fit to a T. Contrition by definition is the feeling of remorse or guilt, which is quite literally what she inflicted on Akua by making her see average people as People. Contrition as a choir is all about, in their own words to William, "repent, you will NOT be forgiven" – which is pretty much exactly what Catherine's attitude toward Akua is.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As I've noted before, Catherine has been marked by each of the Choirs she's faced.

therealgridlock

The difference is, contrition makes you feel perpetually guilty, and gives you no possible penance, whereas this redemption doesn't have you doing psuedo evil acts in the name of an all powerful authority just for the will of the gods.

Cat didn't just tell her she was wrong and make her feel that way forever. She made her understand **why** she was wrong. She figured out how to feel bad for it on her own. And there may be no forgiveness for her war crimes (which aren't yet invented) but she can in fact be led to do universal good acts by her conscience. Not just "Good" acts.

Shveiran

Look, I'm...

...like, really uncomfortable defending what has come to be known as the mind-rape angels.

And I'm not, not really.

It's just...

... we only saw William. I'm not defending the mind-rape thing, I'm just saying that there is not that much difference between what they did to William and what Cat tried to do to Akua, when you factor in that one was done through mortal means and the other through the mind-shattering visions that seem to be the signature move of Choir considering Hanno and Tariq went through something similar).

Akua and William were showed that they did something awful and that there was really no evening those scales; once you

step low enough, it doesn't really matter what else you do when it comes to being "absolved".

Even if people can easily agree that your birth has been an objective improvement on the world because you solved world hunger, that doesn't excuse whatever else you did because that's not how morality works, how good works.

If you save ten orphans, you are not excused for having killed one, because this is not about the sum total of orphans in the world but rather about having crossed a line that can't really be uncrossed. You are still a child murderer, you just became a saviour too.

Repent, you won't be forgiven.

What I think the Choir teaches, whatever fuck-ed up thing William ended up doing with their blessing, is that redemption is not about balancing the scales or erasing the slate. It's just about doing as much good as you can forever because you have done bad before and you are disgusted by what you did. And that can drive a fire under you, make it so that you can't ever really rest underneath the great oak saying "yes, I've done enough".

Not because something forces you, but because you feel it needs to be done.

And... I really don't see much difference in teachings, between what was taught to Akua and what was taught to William.

kinghaart

Actually in some ways William was more into Redemption than Akua – he thought a crusade would redeem him (that was probably a lie from the Choirs, but he believed it). Akua doesn't think there's any path out of where she is, at least not yet.

edrey

a scorpioncat who fient dead, i would call her catherine.
Viv and Eudokia, two spymistress come to play and both are sad stories.

and that old and trusted tactic, never fail to surprise. treason

i predict that Akua will end as a teacher of cardinal and Cat would call the Hierarch to blast the tower with the seraphin. like the trick of the bard in the arsenal, the empress, the tower and judgment. a very good pattern to end the bard

kinghaart

Agreed on the first half but Angel's explicitly won't work on Bard, she can influence them.

I think she wants to use the Ealamel to kill Cat specifically, and maybe not even anyone else.

letouriste

I like that scorpioncat. A lot.

This chapter was surprisingly sweet, i was grinning while most of it.

I'm willing to bet cat will be betrayed three times (one being from Hakram, one she is expecting RN and one being the Bard knife)

ninegardens

I think she'll also be thwarted by Maddie.

Not sure if counts as betrayal, since he never promised loyalty and he **will not** allow his best friend to be killed... but he will oppose her.

Poisson

Gosh those sheets really calling for some fanart. Chested stickfigure Malicia and Akua on fire in particular.

Also I love how, in retrospect, Hakram took a leaf from his former warlord's book – the way he dealt with the Clans by figuring out the underlying stories, that was so Cat-like.

ninegardens

Okay, so here's a wild one:

What if they put Scribe as Dread Empress.

Taking that role would be the **ultimate** service to Amadeus (watching over the reformations he desires). She'd actually be pretty good at it (okay, she is MORE chancellor, but still), and... she's an evil enough person to be effective, while not being so destructive.

Of all the people they have available, Scribe is actually the MOST qualified to act as caretaker of the tower.
Dread Empress Anonymous.

Daltos

I actually really like this theory a lot. And she's already a crazy good administrator, just scale up an intelligence network with a nation, considering what praes is that's basically all the important bits covered

jamesc9

So it's going to be a panoptic hell-hole, but that's probably better than being magically murderous and intermittently panoptic.

dadycoool

"Hi, my name's Eukodia, and I'm a Dread Empress."

[sengachi](#)

I mean I still think Amadeus is going to burn the Tower to the ground. But I can easily see Scribe managing Praes afterward. Or at the very least, standing in the shadow of whoever is ostensibly in charge pulling the strings.

billstewartmt

I've been wondering what Scribe was hiding. Could be that, or somebody else's suggestion that Scribe is helping Maddie's plans to destroy the Tower, or, what?

ninegardens

Current interpretation is that Scribe figured out Maddie's goal (to save Alaya), and decided not to tell Cat, as that would bring Cat and Amadeus directly into conflict.

The thing that I'm unsure of here is whether or not Cat already knows. Like... if she knows Amadeus at all, she should realize he will protect his family... there's never a thought in her head that indicates either knowledge or ignorance of this fact though, which... honestly feels like a bit of evasion on EE's part: clearly Black's reaction to Cat's attempts to kill his last friend are something she SHOULD be thinking about.

Abrakadabra

I like that, but in reality it is always the most inept who gets the power.

kinghaart

I think the Name has to change.

Dread Administrator Eudokia, First of her Ledger.

Reader in The Night

Completely out of left field, but I was in the quotes section of the TV Tropes page, and I came across this:

"Who reigns up high?
A dead man's sigh

What sleeps below?
A crown of woe
That is the Tower:
Learn and cower."

—Extract from 'And So I Dreamt I Was Awake', Sherehazad the Seer

A crown of woe sleeping below the Tower, written by Sherehazad the Seer? Is that foreshadowing for when the Tower comes down, maybe?

kinghaart

Dead King takes the crown offered by the Woe and is trapped "asleep" below the Tower? Akua ends up as Dread Empress and Amadeus dies (her rule is his reason for sighing)?

Isaac Martinez

I'll like to take my time to admire how we arrived at this point. Catherine learning that losing is the best option in the Everdark. When she decided who was her successor. When she chose to keep Scribe alive.

Linnus42

I think Black wanting to save Malicia is kinda obvious. Love is the greatest power kinda expect it from a story master. Though it does seem the Woe are all kinda going they are separate ways. I think EE said we see all them together once more when the story started but Ater might just be there last ride as any sort of group really.

Funny enough I think Cat is misreading Akua massively again. She is right in that Akua doesn't want to be dread empress though she probably take it if she had to after all some sacrifice goes with redemption or we could get a new Name title. But I don't think reforms and reclamation are mutually exclusive in the way she is making it out. I don't think you have to kill all the nobles to be a reformer. Certainly Cat doesn't seem to apply that logic to other regions nor does anyone else...u don't see Hakram killing all the Rival Clan leaders to reform the Orcs quite the opposite really. Basilia is also not trying that in the Free Cities so I think that it Cat anti-noble bias coming through (I can relate in the real world) but I don't think it applies to this story. Killing the Nobles or Not should not be the sole defining factor between reform and not. We very much see Akua wants to plot a better path and beyond that I argue gutting the traditional leadership tends not to be good during Wars and for Cultures. Beyond that the funny part is Akua doesn't need Cat's help to have high Noble or Legion support she has already done it herself.

ninegardens

I think its more... Maddie's form of "Reform" starts with destruction (according to Cat). Reform can be done without it, but the particular Reform she expects from Amadeus is incompatible with Akua's world view (and potentially incompatible with "Akua survives")

Shveiran

It's not about murder.

Akua is about trying to change the High Seats, which is where historically the power in Praes has been, and making of them something that takes charge of their responsibilities and actually makes Praes better.

Amadeus wants to destroy the High Seats and every other institution in Praes that he sees as beyond saving, and see something new, centralized and capable to work put in their place.

She is about trying to fix the old mould, he is about getting rid of it and buying a new one.

Juff

Typo Thread:

practice efficiency > practiced efficiency
concept s broad > concept as broad
suspected to more > suspected to be more
the east > the East (when used as a name, it has to be capitalised)
If it everything > If everything
so had to climb > so hard to climb
like them for them > like that for them
here, he > here; he
marshals' > marshal's
I'd be near > it'd be near
function Dread Empire > functional Dread Empire
aside from now > aside for now

[Sugar Roll](#)

Catherine's blind spot for his father is on full display on this chapter. Scribe sees it but didn't tell her. Amadeus wants Dread Empress Victorious on the throne. It's funny how she fails to see it given the fact it's her who gave him the idea with their talk with Tariq.

As it happens, each measure Catherine takes to make it viable for Amadeus to sit on the throne also makes it viable for her to sit on it herself.

Looks like Amadeus will go on a noble killing spree—probably by goblinfire. It would leave the army of Callow (and the clans) virtually unopposed to take control of the rest empire.

ninegardens

My bet is that Maddie wants to destroy the tower itself, not just the Noble's.

The Nobles he hates, looks down on etc.

... The Tower *took his friend from him*. The Name of dread Empress is his enemy, and in order to get back his friend, he will snuff it out.

And the only way to do that, is for the tower to not only fall, but be annihilated. The Throne destroyed. The Vault's cleansed. The Tower took Alaya from him to the Serilago, and even after she was "freed", she was still prisoner to the Name.

The Name must be destroyed.

CGundlach

I'd even argue it is most important that the Throne is (verifiably) destroyed. The Tower has been toppled several times, but as the Story goes the Throne survived every time (although IIRC in one of the Black Knight & Alaya interludes Amadeus doubts that it is actually true, but Story trumps over truth). Thus destroying the Throne seems more important than destroying the Tower.

Even setting the Tower on fire might conflict the Story of goblinfire's ability to destroy everything versus the Throne's Story of always surviving the Tower, and I think the Throne would win that one, either by actually being spared or by someone restoring it in time and claiming it was spared. Specifically setting fire to the Throne could counter that; would probably also burn down the Tower, but then the Story changes from "burnt down the Tower" to "melted the Throne, then the Tower fell".

Shveiran

But you don't destroy a Name with goblinfire. You destroy a Name by putting a more alluring story in its place.

And Maddie knows it, so I'm rather curious to see what he is cooking up.

[308924810a](#)

"The real one, not the one I'd cut up into small companies and spent across a dozen foreign fields."

Huh, we finally get some mention of what the heck happened to the Praesi soldiers from second Liesse who were reformed into the

second Gallowborne. I was worried that the author had forgotten about them.

Shveiran

I think it was mentioned a few times before, it's just that it was never really relevant to the chapter and therefore easy to miss.

Chapter 24: Bequeathal

"And so, her tribe burned around her, Matron Creaker stood in the ashes and spoke thus: 'Do you now think me cowed, Nihilis? I would have burned them myself, to be rid of you.'"

– Extract from Volume VI of the Official Imperial Chronicles

I had goblin troubles.

A third of them I saw coming, in that the Confederation of Grey Eyries had been bound to come scratching at my door so I might win them some concessions at the peace table after Ater fell. They had good reason to think I'd back them when it came down to it. Callow had played a role in the creation of the Confederation from the start: the Matrons had begun sounding me out for support as soon as it came out in the open that Malicia were at odds, even if it'd not come to anything for years. It had been under Vivienne's regency and with Hakram's backing that Callow had funnelled the Tribes coin and steel so they might arm themselves for a successful rebellion, then promptly recognize the newly founded nation. I'd maintained the policy since.

We'd not done it for free, of course. After the Night of Knives, weakening Malica without outright starting a war had been one of the leading goals of the Kingdom of Callow and accomplishing it like this had probably been the greatest diplomatic coup of my reign. The more immediate payoff, though, had been stocks of goods that only the Tribes could provide: goblin steel and munitions. The latter, in particular, had been necessary since the Army of Callow was still largely patterned on the Legions of Terror and their doctrine employed goblin munitions. The coin and steel we'd sent them had not been gifts, they'd been loans: the crown of Callow was to be repaid in goods.

It'd worked out more than decently, at first. The rebellion had taken the Tower by surprise and seized Foramen, taking control

the imperial forges there and massacring the Banu – the noble line that'd ruled the High Seat. But then Malicia had gotten her affairs in order and sent Marshal Nim south with several legions, penning in the goblins choking out the convoys of goods they'd been sending us. We'd felt the lack of those starkly during the campaigns out west. Though in a decent position and dug-in, the Confederation had then been betrayed from the inside: Matron Wither of the High Ridge tribe, Pickler's own mother, had allied with other tribes to take the city from the Confederation.

She'd done this so she could return to Malicia's banner as the High Lady of Foramen, not only the first goblin nobility recognized by the Tower but the first High Seat in the history of the empire not to be human.

The situation down south had been a rough stalemate since. High Lady Wither was dug in behind her heavily warded walls and her initial trouble of riots in the streets had tapered off – due in part to the grain I'd traded her in exchange for goblin munitions at Scribe's suggestion – but she couldn't really venture far outside the city. The Confederation outnumbered her ten to one and the Grey Eyries were a hell to assault even for goblins, on top of another High Seat now eyeing up Foramen. High Lady Takisha had been considering reclaiming the city, it was said, to install a cadet branch of the Muraqib at its head. The Confederation was no better off, though.

The Tribes just didn't have the kind of army that'd be needed to take a High Seat in any way except the brutal surprise strike they'd first taken Foramen through. So instead they'd gone raiding into the hinterlands of Foramen until those were turned into a barren wasteland where no one lived, then settled into a sullen stalemate with High Lady Wither. There were frequent skirmishes over convoys and caravans headed to the city, but neither side was really in a position to score a decisive blow on the other and it'd shown.

Given that the Confederation of the Grey Eyries had been perhaps not an ally but certainly a partner to Callow since its founding, it was a given that they'd reach out to me now that matters were coming to a head in Ater. It wasn't like the *Praesi* were going to offer them a seat at the table, and the Matrons were canny old witches besides: from where they stood, the political considerations that'd led Vivienne to back their rebellion had not changed. It was still in Callow's interests to weaken Praes and I still needed their goods for my armies, so when I received the Confederations' delegation their leader spoke boldly after I got her into my tent.

"We would like for Foramen to be returned to the Confederation in the final settlement," Matron Braider said. "Preferably along with Wither's head in a box."

Braider was young, my matron standards, which meant she was mostly wrinkled instead of entirely. Her eyes were a sharp orange and unblinking, her needle-like teeth tinted blue from the strange paste she kept chewing. Vivienne, seated by me, looked unimpressed.

"The Confederation has not contributed to this war," she said, "save through irregular trade. You ask a high price for goods already paid for."

"We don't expect you to do it for free," Matron Braider said. "I've been empowered by the Council of Matrons to offer terms. I believe you'll find supporting us worthwhile."

The terms she outlined afterwards were, to be honest, pretty tempting. Treaty obligation to provide a certain amount of munitions and goblin steel at a set price every year, right of recruitment in the Eyries for the Army of Callow, a mutual defence pact against Praes and a fixed take of the Confederation's tax income pledged to building Cardinal until the city was deemed finished by a committee of Grand Alliance members. Vivienne wasn't anywhere as tempted, but it was pretty obvious that it'd wasn't her they'd tailored that offer for. Braider stayed long enough to answer questions and specify details before taking her leave, leaving me alone with my successor.

"The mutual defence pact isn't a real concession," Vivienne immediately said. "If they get Foramen they need one with us else they risk losing the city to Praes the moment it's no longer riven by civil war."

"So we milk them for something else," I shrugged. "Force them to never sell more munitions to Praes than they sell us, maybe, or exempt Callowan merchants from some tariffs."

After the wars, if the goblins held Foramen it would become the gateway to the Grey Eyries and all the ores in the mountains. Callow did not usually need to import steel or silver, but we did have a chronic lack of gold mines on top of a few other useful metals we had to get through Mercantis. Foramen would have great need of grain, given its poor lands and newfound hostility with most of Praes, so my subjects stood to make great profits there. Vivienne eyed me with some surprise.

"You're really willing to make this bargain?" she asked.

"I'm willing to entertain it," I corrected. "I'm not going to risk the peace I'm after for the fucking *Matrons*, Vivienne, but they're good terms. If I have an opportunity I might as well take it."

"I imagine whoever takes the Tower will have some issues with losing one of the empire's largest cities," the Princess pointed out.

"That'll depend on the strength of their bargaining position, I imagine," I said. "I'm not going to cram this deal down your throat, Viv – the defence pact would stay your problem long after I abdicate, for one – but we should at least seriously consider it."

The second third of my goblin problems, though, I expected a great deal less. Within hours of Matron Braider being settled in a corner of our camp, one of the phalanges interrupted me halfway through supper. Our scouts had caught someone claiming to be an envoy and brought them into the camp quietly, but they refused to talk to anyone save me. I went with a chicken leg still in hand, gnawing at the meat even as I sat down across from a young goblin. Thirteen, fourteen at most. A woman, but that was only to be expected if she was an envoy. Couldn't think of a lot of Matrons that'd entrust anything of importance to a mere male.

I glanced at the legionary behind her and nodded. The cloth over her head was ripped off, leaving a slightly dazed goblin of pale green skin with a frame large enough there was no doubt she was of a Matron line. I let her dark yellow eyes come back into a focus as I tore off all little more chicken. It was unpatriotic of me to admit it, but Praesi poultry was better than my own people's. Probably because of some terrible blood magic a few hundred years ago, but you couldn't argue with that tender flesh.

"So who would you be?" I asked.

"Trudger," she replied. "And you're the Black Queen."

"That I am," I replied, taking another bite. "What brings you to my camp, Trudger?"

"I have been sent as an envoy by my mother, High Lady Wither," she said.

I blinked in surprise. Wait, this was Pickler's sister? I didn't even know – no, of course she had sisters. Most Matrons had a dozen children, so that the weak seeds might be weeded out. It didn't really mean the same thing for them it would for humans. Few of them would have the same father, not that fatherhood was concept goblins put any stock in. Most of their kind would have found it obscene for a male to have a role in the raising of children, even if he'd sired the child in question.

"Pickler's never mentioned you," I noted.

"She wouldn't, the bitch," Trudger flatly said. "Why Mother is so fond of her when she took the first opportunity to flee is beyond

me, but we're not here to speak of thin blood. You were approached by the Council of Matrons, yes?"

Not much meat left on the leg, but I bit it off and swallowed.

"I'm always talking the Confederation," I said. "We're friendly enough."

"They'll have come begging for you to give them Foramen," Trudger smiled. "I am here to deliver the better offer."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Had a little talk with your mother not two days ago," I said. "She didn't seem so eager to bargain then. What's changed?"

"Malicia's cause is dying," Trudger frankly said. "The Warlock has been popular with the refugees for some time, but since the riots were drowned in blood many Aterans balk at supporting the empress. If she loses the capital, she has nothing left."

"Which has me curious why you're talking to me instead of Akua Sahelian," I said.

Trudger smiled thinly.

"I imagine you think very little of us," she said. "My mother and the Matrons. That we're all the same to you, Wasteland highborn made small and green."

"That's a leap on your part," I said.

But the first part, at least, was true. How could I think much of a pack of old women who spent a thousand Robbers like coppers at a fair every year? I couldn't fix everything in the world, I'd learned my limits, but there had been a time... I had not forgotten who I was clasping hands with, the nature of my 'friends'.

"We're hard, Black Queen, because the Eyries are a hard place," Trudger said. "Because the Dread Empire is a harder place still. But that doesn't mean we're *blind*."

Something burned in those yellow eyes that had me believing, for this moment at least, that she spoke from the heart.

"We know the difference between someone like the Carrion Lord and Abreha Mirembe," Trudger said. "You have known tyrants, Black Queen, but how often have your people been subject to them? We have, and that history is a thousand years of blood-curling screams. You want to know why we'd rather not deal with Akua Sahelian?"

Trudger bared pale, sharp teeth.

"You have proved you keep your word," the envoy said. "You proved, in Wolof, that you know restraint. And if we had half a chance, Black Queen, *we'd kill every single Akua Sahelian in this fucking empire.*"

I hummed, dropping the chicken bones into a stretch of shadow. Zombie liked to break them. I leaned back into my seat, then nodded.

"All right," I said. "Let's say you have me convinced you're dealing in good faith. What does your mother want, and what does she offer?"

"We want to keep Foramen," Trudger said, "and we want peace."

It was a little more complicated than that, in practice. High Lady Wither intended on staying part of the Dread Empire of Praes and sitting on her High Seat, she just wanted me to make her problems go away. To broker a peace between her and the Confederation and to extract guarantees from the Tower she wouldn't be put down the moment the Dread Empire was no longer preoccupied with civil war. I was on the fence as to whether these was harder to get done than what the Matrons had asked me: ceding territory was one thing, but Wither was asking me to end a goblin blood feud and meddle in the Tower's authority over its own affairs. I pointed out the latter, but Trudger pointed out in reply that I'd already promised Abreha Mirembe to guarantee her title until the war on Keter was over so evidently I was willing to meddle. Which, much as I disliked admitting it, was a fair point.

"All right," I said. "I know what you want. What makes it worth my while?"

If the Confederations' offer had been tailored for me, then this one was tailored for Vivienne. Oh, Wither threw me a sop early on in the form of guaranteeing her High Seat would never interrupt the sale of munitions to Callow and would itself sell us goblin steel from the forges, but the rest was very much up her alley. A treaty guaranteeing Foramen would never send provide troops to make war on Callow so long as Wither's line ruled it, goblin and Taghreb blacksmiths provided to help setting up royal forges in Callow and a secret treaty supporting Jacks operations in the Hungering Sands. The deal was arguably less risky than backing the annexation of a major Praesi city, too, which would appeal to Vivienne.

The last thing she wanted after the last decade was for Callow to be dragged into more wars.

I didn't give Trudger an answer, nor did she expect me to. Neither did I release her back to her mother, instead stashing her away in my camp as far away as the delegation from the

Confederation as I could. I asked Masego to set up wards to keep everyone out of her tent and tripled the guard around her, too, which was bound to be noticed by spies in my camp but couldn't be helped. The last thing I needed was for Matron Braider or her cohorts to find out Wither's daughter was my 'guest'. I stopped by the stables to toss Zombie a few bones, which she crunched with relish, but when I returned to my tent to take care of my correspondence and read through reports I found someone waiting for me.

The last third of my goblin troubles I would not have seen coming in a hundred years, because Pickler had never before shown so much as an iota of interest in the fate of her people.

"Should I even ask how you know?" I said, limping open to my liquor cabinet and taking out a bottle of pear brandy.

I didn't like the taste much, too sweet, but now and then I enjoyed having a drink of it. It was a way to remember a man I'd respected and detested but who'd died the same way he'd lived: trying to save others.

"I got it out of Masego," Pickler said. "It was only a guess, but Mother was certain to send someone after the Matrons did."

I gestured towards the brandy, and to my surprise she nodded. I poured her a cup as well before dropping down in my favourite seat. My Sapper-General drank of her brandy, letting out a happy noise at the taste.

"Better than what you usually drink," she said.

"An acquired taste," I said, speaking as much of the man as the liquor.

Pickler didn't bother to ply me with small talk, which I appreciated. It would have been horrifying unlike her, and honestly made me lose some respect for her character.

"What did they want?" Pickler asked.

"The Matrons want Foramen back," I said. "Your mother wants to keep Foramen. The rest is gilding."

She laughed, but it was a barren sound. Without mirth.

"Of course it's about Foramen," she said. "Why would they care about anything but the prize?"

I sipped at my drink, swallowing quick to the sweetness would not linger.

"She sent your sister Trudger," I said.

"Our youngest," Pickler said, sounding surprised. "She must have killed either Salter or Folder to be trusted with this."

A pause.

"Didn't think she had it in her."

"She didn't think much of you either," I noted. "Not exactly close, I take it?"

"I spared Salter when I had her on the ropes," she replied. "She took that personally since the two are enemies – they were raised by matron-attendants that hate each other."

"You never told me how you left the Eyries," I said.

She drank deep, then set down the empty cup with a sigh. She cocked her head at me and I gallantly filled it up again.

"In age, I was the fourth out of nine," Pickler said, then grimaced. "It's not that age matters, Catherine – we don't pick leaders for it – but it lets you make allies for longer. It's an advantage. I was one of those raised by my mother, since two of my elder sisters had already been given to matron-attendants. She was..."

A moment of hesitation.

"She was proud that I was good at things," she said. "Saw I had a talent with forces and maths, got three retired sappers to teach me. But she also wanted me to be other things, things I couldn't be."

"So you left," I said.

"The College was a way out," Pickler said. "They all wanted me to go, my sisters, because I'd have no allies even if I returned. Mother thought differently, said that there was worth in learning there and the allies that could be made. But I wasn't one of the greenskin slots for the College, Catherine. My tribe paid so I wouldn't be sworn to service. I was supposed to *come back* afterwards."

"I'm glad you didn't," I said.

"So am I," she snorted. "Gobbler, leaving the Legions to go back? Madness. Mother figured out I wouldn't during my second year, when I stopped answering her letters, but she couldn't stop paying without losing face. She tried to get people to pressure me, but that's how I got to know Nauk. He thought I was getting picked on by other companies so he brawled through three of them and the mages they'd bribed to help."

They'd been in the same company for two years at that point, I thought, but I wasn't surprised they hadn't known each other well. There were a hundred people in every company and it was common practice for fresher recruits to be spread out so no tenth would ever be too green.

"He was a romantic," I smiled. "As much as an orc can be."

"He was good," Pickler quietly said, "in a way that few of us are. I still grieve that. I'm glad you spoke for him at Sarcella, Catherine. I just wish we'd let him rest years earlier instead of dragging him back as that... thing."

I grimaced but did not disagree. Wekesa the Warlock had done what he could, but Summer flame wielded by one of its great nobles was no petty thing. There had not been much left of him to salvage.

"I thought it could be fixed," I said. "I thought a lot of things could be fixed, back in those days."

"Some still can be."

I leaned back into my seat, sipping at the last of my drink.

"I can't answer unless you ask, Pickler," I said.

She shook with something that might have been laughter, had there been amusement in it.

"I don't have anything to offer you, Catherine," she said. "I am not a High Lady or the Council of Matrons. The gold I have you have paid me, and my allies are your allies. I couldn't threaten to leave if refused even if I wanted to – where I would I go? The Army of Callow is my home."

"It doesn't always have to be hard coin and favours, Pickler," I quietly told her. "We can talk."

"Talk doesn't move the needle with you," Pickler said, and before I could reply raised her hand. "It's not scorn I speak. You are a queen, Catherine. You cannot act like other women."

"And yet," I said, "I'd like to hear you out anyway."

She drank of her cup, squared her shoulders.

"They're plagues," Pickler of the High Ride tribe said. "Both of them. The Matrons just want a hidden kingdom in the mountains with Foramen as a trade city and no imperial leash. The shit they'll get up to in the Eyries, Catherine, would make a devil shiver."

"The way I hear it, it's already no handful of roses," I said.

"You don't get let in on the real secrets unless you're a Matron," Pickler said, "but I... know things. The Tribes hold back on projects out of fear the Empire will notice and intervene. Wipe them out, even. Even now there's a lot of Matrons who think munitions should never have been revealed. And the Council is made up of monsters, but my mother's worse."

"She likes knives and backs," I conceded.

"She's a Matron," Pickler shrugged, as if that settled it. "But she thinks differently, Catherine. She wants to be the queen of our kind or ensure one of her daughters will be. It's why she wants Foramen: it's the lifeline of the Tribes. The ways my people are rich, ore and goods, they're not worth anything if they can't be sold to someone. So long as she has Foramen, she has them in the palm of her hand. And to get her way she wouldn't mind starving half our people to death from behind the walls of her city."

"I deal with terrible people all the time," I admitted. "I even backed Helike to prominence in the Free Cities because it'd put down Malicia's allies."

"They are tyrants, Catherine," Pickler said. "Leeches who drink the lifeblood of goblinkind to maintain their power and influence. And I know it is not like me to speak of them, of all they do, but I..."

She swallowed.

"I owe it," she said. "To him. Because he was right, when you spoke to us in Marchford. When I balked at your banner rising against the Tower."

Pickler met my eyes, the pale yellow unblinking.

"They kill us for sport."

She bared her teeth.

"Robber spoke true when he said they've gotten soft," Pickler said. "Look at them, darkening your doorsteps with deals they would have once sneered at. They've spent so many of us they can't even get their own dirty work done anymore. They ate each other's tails until there was nothing left but open maws and anger."

"I can't topple them, Pickler," I said. "Not without a war I can't afford to fight."

"You don't need to," my Sapper-General said. "They did it to themselves. Do you think my people are *happy* they're being used

like this? The Matrons, my mother, they only own us so long as there's nowhere else to go. And that's something you can change."

I blinked at her in surprise.

"You allowed the Snake Eater tribe into Callow," Pickler said. "Let more in. Let us build without Matrons to hollow us out, without Preservers to open our throats the moment we reveal of ourselves. And they will come, I promise you that. Already the Legions and the Army are a home to flee to, but if you open Callow? Entire tribes will leave their tyrant behind."

"If I grant lands to tribes, I'll have a rebellion on my hand," I frankly told her.

"*Don't*," Pickler fervently said. "Don't let us forge another closed kingdom within the kingdom. Let us into your cities, your countryside, your wilderness. Let us be part of something that *does not want to eat us*."

I flinched away from the intensity of her gaze.

"They'll hate you for it, the Matrons," she said. "For showing them they don't own what it means to be a goblin, that just buried every other way and called it guidance. And I know it's not what you want, not what Vivienne wants, that you have to think in kingdoms and favours and hard coin."

She finished her drink, set it down.

"But we've stood behind you, Catherine," Pickler said. "Not them, *us*. From the start, we've been with you. Sappers and soldiers and scouts, we've bled for you. And I won't say it's owed, because my people don't believe in debt, but I need you to understand that I loved Robber – more than I thought, more than I knew – but there are fifty thousand like him the Eyries that never managed to flee. That are stuck and lost and will never see the light of day, know what the sun and the stars look like or even feel the wind on their face. Not unless you offer your hand to them."

She left her chair, stood before me.

"I don't have anything to offer you," she said. "Nothing to bargain with. All I can say is *please*-"

I pushed back my chair, half-risen even as my leg ached, but I was not quick enough to stop her getting on her knees.

"- help us," Pickler said. "Save us from ourselves, from each other."

"I-" I choked out, at a loss for words.

"I think you might just be the only powerful person in the world who cares, Catherine," she quietly said. "And I know you're a queen, that you can't afford to bend, but still I ask."

She smiled, heartbreakingly.

"Please," Pickler asked. "If not you, then who?"

I closed my eyes, almost short of breath. The stars were there, out in the black, but they felt... distant. Fading.

I had goblin troubles.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Isaac Martinez

For each live that has been lost in this war, there is a not crying and probably ugly goblin that needs a hug. With your help, everytime you VOTE, a goblin gains a barrel of goblin fire.

Think about goblins.

[Liliet](#)

ok this one is fantastic

Yunamed

You have to admit, some are good.

Víctor

Really nice this one. Apadrina un goblin del tercer regimiento

Ajay

I think her Name is going to be something like lord of names or something which is anti bard. If bard deals with names, catherine rules over them. This is proved by hakram getting a name so on

Miles

I thought that too at first, but then I realized the people closest to her would all agree her most likely name is "Brawling Tavern Wench"

Miles

Idrani would be the one to say it, or maybe Vivian if she was in a mischievous mood, and the rest would go along with it.

Dsylexic Wofl

It cant be anti bard. Catherine throwed away that chance back at the Twilight Ways. Her names seems to be going ti be Warden of the East or something close to it, but now that she is considering Pickler's offer, doubting her way, the role is working against her

kinghaart

I think Warden is a trap.

The reality is that deep down Cat wants peace and freedom for the average sentient being, so if anything it's times like this which remind her that she isn't really just about earboxing diplomacy but actually about standing up for others.

[Liliet](#)

Holy shit.

Best payoff OR best payoff?

Sinead

Pickler is the best sapper. She may have just launched the stone that breaks the Eyries.

Using the Amadeus proven tactic of throw a pissed off Cat at the problem.

At this point, with Cat having fingers in all the sparks of cultural revolution (which probably actually what breaks/starts an Age in narrative terms), she just sends Keagan a letter saying 'Just leave if you want.'

[runifyoucan94](#)

Fading stars... what does that means? She losing her name or what?

aurikdomi

But possibly losing the name or changing the name the WB was setting her up for, to become something else.

DC

A Warden keeps things out or keeps them in. What Pickler is proposing is very much the exact opposite of that.

Miles

It means she spent the whole night awake & didn't get a wink of sleep.

I don't think there's anything more symbolic than that other than maybe the fact it's a name power Hakram used to use to help her and now she has to do it herself.

WuseMajor

I think this was Bard somehow. This and Cat's other recent diplomatic mistake. Somehow, this was triggered to get Cat focused on the government and lands, instead of the Named and the Story of the Land, so her name is changing.

Very clever trick if so, but likely to bite someone in the ass eventually, since I don't think Cat can say no to Pickler about this and freeing all the people from Goblin North Korea is going to change things significantly.

Of course, I guess Bard doesn't think it's going to matter, given that she's going to see this continent wiped clean and broken soon.

DC

I kinda feel the opposite; the long-concealed sentiment of a single non-Named person doesn't sound much like what the Bard traditionally works with. To me it has more the feel of an angle that her modus operandi specifically makes her blind to.

tentativeidler

This is how I feel as well. I'm waiting for the Bard to try to change Cat's Name, and Cat goes "What Name?"

wowowiwa

I would argue that the "stars" are part of Wandering Bards Name for Cat. WB also probably sees Named as something (maybe stars) and can Wander to them based on that. Pluss I don't see how agreeing to Pickler's dream can possibly play into Wandering Bard's hands. The stars fading is jelly good even if Cat doesn't know that

therealgridlock

I've been assuming that the stars are names, and that this is on purpose as part of her new name, other commenters have brought up malfeasance as to whether or not this is WB interference one way or the other,

But I think it signifies something different.

Cat was almost on the cusp of her name, almost done with all the governments she had to topple to gather a final army to shatter the final enemy.

Being given an absolute heart wrenching plot hook and realizing there's an entire other people to save too?

The stars fading means she's moving away from her name, because she just now realized she has more concerns to deal with before it can happen. The name got pushed further back by the pressing realities of freeing an entire enslaved people.

I don't think it's a good or bad thing, I think it's just a pragmatic thing, they'll still be there after cat engages in this very personal struggle to save a nation of misspent youths.

Someperson

Catherine coming into a Name other than Squire has been very long overdue, and I do not think her Name has taken nearly a rigid enough shape yet that it could easily be lost by failing to meet the expectations of a particular Role.

Not lost, but changed. This has all of the markings of a pivot, one that will very likely shape the focus of the Name that Catherine comes in to. Before now it seemed heavily foreshadowed that her Name would be Warden of the East. Time will tell if that is still the Name she is headed towards.

Certainly, if there were going to be an aspect of the pivot that Bard was unable to predict, it would probably be Pickler. Fingers crossed, yeah?

Sinead

And so...

Will the call of the wind soon resound through the depth of the Eyrie?

Pete Kay

Am I the only that ugly cries Everytime I remember Robber hearing the wind?

M0och123

No. No you are not.

Cpt. Obvious

Why did you have to say that?

What? Why are you looking at me like that?

No, I'm not crying. It's just onions. I chopped onions and...

I'm NOT crying, OK?

Sir Nil

Given what we know about the 'Goblin Rebellion', there is in the end, only two deals. The one that benefits the Matrons or the one Pickler is asking for.

Sir Nil

I feel like this is setting up for an 'out' of Bard's hidden knife to turn Cat into a certain type of Name. We know Bard works through Names, and without confirmation of Goblin Names we could assume that the goblin troubles are acting completely out of Bard's control. At the very least, Pickler's option would not be Bard influenced. So Cat has the option of doing something completely out of the Bard's control or even expectation.

I also don't believe in the 'Warden of the East' thing, Cat is moving towards a role with authority over Names, and while she is the protector of Callow and plenty in that realm, along with having future ambitions for the region, her actual proto-name powers are moving towards authority and knowledge over named, which I don't believe would overlap well or completely with being a Name similar to what Hasenbach was going to get. So I don't think Bard really wants to nudge Cat into the Warden of the East, I feel like that's a lie because Cat is already riding the wave of becoming a Named with authority over other names. Bard wouldn't stop the arrow already in flight, she would nudge the target so that it would hit something adjacent but not as dangerous.

LInnus42

Yeah i think Bard is trying to tie Cat down with a more local name with a lesser portfolio. Cat was well on her way to being Warden of the East from what we can see with power over

Name. Bard is trying to shift Cat towards having Power in Praes and/or Callow alone thereby weakening her power.

As for the Goblins I don't really see them as uniquely evil in this storyline. As Cat noted with Helike they were mass sacrificing civilians to float towers.

Shveiran

Well, hold on a minute. Let's not mistake the thumb for the fingers.

KAIROS was sacrificing civilians to make floating towers. Now, sure: he was the Tyrant of Helike and all those soldiers were happily going along with it. I don't think Pallas or Basilia or many of the others saw it as a problem. But sacrificing people wasn't and isn't a staple of Helikean culture; Helike is also the place from which the squeaky clean Dorian came from, and Dorian had a HUGE following. And the Royal Conjuror described shadow wars and devils in his years at court but nothing like a culling of the other branches or mass sacrifices. Those large scale, capital-e Evils are things that periodically happen in Helike, but Helike only rarely gets a Tyrant (remember the "gods spin a coin, you get a Tyrant when it lands on the edge" thing?).

Meanwhile, for goblins?

For the goblins this is business as usual. It's not a bout of madness, is that this is how the Matrons have always handled things.

Don't get me wrong, Kairos was a fucking monster. But one is a constant state of being, the other an occasional occurrence.

Miles

None of her abilities ever pointed to warden of the east. She never kept anyone prisoner in any story/role capacity, her idea of protecting anything is by attacking something else which is all kinds of the opposite of "warding", and besides all that she has no ties whatsoever to the east besides Amadeus, and he's trying to tear it all down.

Link Ness Monster

It's easy to make that argument if you limit your definition of "warden."

Look up the Warden of the Marches. Historically, they were responsible for securing the border between England and

Scotland and upholding the terms of the truce between those countries.

How does that not seem like Cat?

Miles

Huh. This might actually make sense for the “warden” half of it. It’s an interesting perspective.

We still have the issue that Cat has no obligation to protect or raid on behalf of the east (Praes).

Another issue is that none of those wardens could have told the king/queen to shut up without losing their heads for it, much less expecting to be obeyed. This sort of Warden sounds more like unsupervised middle management than Cat.

Link Ness Monster

I think it’s meant to be role where she protects everyone else FROM the crazy stuff that comes out of the East. Tamping down on the worst instincts of Evil is what she’s all about, what the terms are all about.

kinghaart

Problem is, as Bard said, a Name like that helps for a generation but doesn’t change the pattern itself.

Shveiran

Did Hanno or Cordelia ever went around rattling chains?

Xi Cree

I feel like the ‘Warden of the East’ Name is actually the trap that the Bard is trying to force her into.

The Name that Cat is forging likely goes deeper and doesn’t have the baggage the Warden name would.

But it travels a similar groove in fate... and thus the Warden makes for an easy pivot point to send Cat down if she isn’t careful.

Sir Nil

Interesting, though your theory does come with the assumption that the proto name Cat has right now isn’t already the result of bard meddling.

Shaerick 68

Warden in the East has always been far too narrow of a name for what Cat is.

Mental Mouse

Possibly taking on the Goblins weakens the Name because they're not Named... so that's mission drift.

Isaac Martinez

Meh, the stars were just a bother anyway. Didn't let her close her eyes in peace. The Power and Name is not that important, the Role is what counts.

Stormblessed

Unless they're outside and I missed it, if the stars are fading does that mean Catherine's proto name is fading slightly? Is this somehow the part of the Intercessor's plan?

Catherine's name seems to be about large scale settlements between high powers with a certain level of detachment from the situation (see: how situation with Procer developed over time). If she puts her finger to the scale for the goblins in this very personal way, could this help make her vulnerable enough for some Hidden Knife of the Intercessor's later?

amit27592

No, the stars are fading is a callback to Pilgrim's star from earlier in the chapter. I think for once, there is no Bard's game here as she works through Names and Matrons & Wither are not Named. This is just plain mundane Goblin troubles.

Sinead

Pretty sure the 'stars' are the various Names under her authority that she can see in her mind's eye. The stars fading is akin to how Malicia's Rule has faded.

Miles

Stars fade when it's dawn.

spencer

I'd been thinking her Name involved authority over other Named. But why would that fade just because she wants to help goblins? Maybe you're right that there's something about personal vs detached motives. I don't think we fully understand her burgeoning Name yet.

RoflCat

To my understanding, it's because that Name with the stars sight? That's the one Bard was secretly nudging her to, the Warden of the 'east'.

But with Pickler's plea, it's pushing her Name into a new direction.

Instead of just being a jailer punishing/keeping criminals in check, she's now being given the option to SAVE people from their doomed existence.

shikkarasu

It's the difference between East(Evil, Villains) and east(Praes, greenskins). In genuinely considering social upheaval and restructuring the east she is losing her connection to the East.

Killing/deposing Malicia counts for either, since she's a Villain(East) and also major player in Praes(east). Cat has also been very firm on "I'm not putting Dad on the throne, I'm taking Malicia off of it." She has not cared about the ruling of Praes(east), as long as it stops ruining the War on Keter and making her job as head of Villains(East) difficult.

Now that she is about to start breaking apart Goblin culture? She's meddling in the east, and not for objective, Practical ends. The other two offers were just part of the Campaign. Letting the Goblins leave Praes? That weakens Evil, since they will have the chance to develop Good in their culture, and it influences the balance of power in Praes for reasons other than her current goals.

It's not focused on the East(Evil, Villains), it's focused on the east(Praes, greenskins).

[onedollargum](#)

I figured it was more that she was getting tunnel vision from a panic attack.

SpeckofStardust

Is Pickler a possible Named or is cat possibly going to feel Goblin Named?

KageLupus

Goblins having Named is still unconfirmed, and even if they did Pickler hasn't really done any of the things you would expect from a Name. She is a damn fine sapper and engineer, and has a special love for creating new weapons of war, but that is hardly the stuff a Role is made out of.

Ironically, if any goblin was going to have a Name come out of their actions it should have been Robber. He threw himself into every crazy, dangerous plan he could for years and was known throughout the Army of Callow. If that was not enough to generate a Name then I can't imagine Pickler has done anything to deserve one.

Konstantin von Karstein

Names are tied to a culture. If a culture values secrecy above everything, its Names will reflect it. I think Robber was too « visible » for a goblin Name.

Brian

Would that be true for Hakram, though?

It seems being true to his culture required *losing* his name (albeit leading it instead of supporting a leader, but, his Name still seemed poorly aligned with what we see of the culture); and if he earned it based on his 'adopted' culture (the legions), why not Robber?

edrey

cat's name is in a crossroad, the warden of the east or the East, the people or the story, and hell Pickler just shot a good one there, at this point i want other Name. lets say just the warden, simple, because this is way too big of a problem. in practical terms, the goblins could help building cardinal too, a good start.

dadycool

Such interesting goblin troubles. I can't wait for it to all come to a head so all can be revealed and have the puzzle pieces and hints make sense.

Tenthyr

I... Very hope Pickler wasn't used by Bard to weaken Catherine's name.

ruduen

I do wonder if it's that or if it's the opposite. The bard is trying to make it, "The east that is land and armies and politics, all the things that pass..." And both the Matrons and Wither are offering things that are important from a political standpoint, policies that support the Kingdom. Pickler's offer is more abstract and less mired in what benefits can be obtained – it's the one that speaks about the people. It comes closer to ignoring the politics to do what's 'right', for lack of a better term.

Making a choice between the two main offers is likely falling into the Bard's plans. The third option is... Well, the third option in terms of the story. But, the Bard would know that better than anybody, so it's even if it's the best choice, it's hard to say that it's going to be the correct choice. It's going to be necessary to dig deeper than that.

Sinead

Considering where Cat started, Pickler's probably a solid reminder of 'where she's come from'. The Callowans would back here whatever way she (reasonably) goes here, and Indrani and Maseago do not care enough to serve as a means to give her that sort of a reminder (they would not see the need to).

Pickler (as one of the last few of Rat Company) would be one of the only people that can get through to Cat this way.

kinghaart

Yep just her for the Goblins and Hakram for the Orcs.

I wonder if Archer would plead for Ranger if somehow Cat bested and was going to kill her.

Anduriel

This is beautiful. Fuck

shikkarasu

I think Wither was contacted to make a counteroffer on the Empress' orders, which in turn were at the Bard's suggestion. Having to decide the fate of the Goblins is a trap, because Cat loves her gobbos like any other part of her army. They are family. Bard may not have known that Pickler would make this perfect request, but she knew that the Story of Catherine's Name would ensure that the temptation to meddle would present itself.

If only one faction had made an offer? Cat would milk them for all they are worth and then support them, since they are a counter against Malicia. It would never have become *personal*. I'm not even sure that Pickler would have made a move if she hadn't caught wind of a 2nd option.

Benjamin Huang

the intercessor is a crafty bastard. arbiters are impartial, are they not? 😊

kinghaart

When in this story has Cat EVER been impartial?

She does arbitrate at times, but she's definitely full of biases that overtly show.

[Adrian V](#)

And here i thought Robber was going to be the last Goblin to make me wanna cry, damn the feels Pickler showed were great.

Huh if Cat follows Pickler path i think she will avoid whatever fate Bard wants since it appears to run contrary to her current role/path, wich Bard is already scheming against. Could be sweet if her heart is what saves the day.

She is an agent of change and Pickler's request is 1 of the few we as readers know represent real change, the other 2 are the matron trying to play the game as always (remember what Black figured out and used to blackmail Wither with). She is at a crossroads and honestly she may actually gain a name that doesn't fit into good or bad. Like it will be good from a moral (or meta/reader) point but still have evil aspects or parts.

qfeys

"If not you, then who?"

I feel like this is a theme of the end of this story. First it was Hakram. Then, during Akua's chapter, I got the impression that she would also have to step up, not because she wants to, but because there is no one else who would be good enough. And now Catherin is asked.

I think that there will be more characters that have to step up before this is over. Not because they want to, but because "if not them, then who?"

Anonymous

Honestly, Vivienne should be fine. Catherine can just delegate this whole situation to her.

Linnus42

I mean its most outright stated in Hanno's Chapter lol.

That does seem to be the theme characters having to do stuff they don't want to do because someone has to. Though I don't think per se you need Cat to reform the Goblins, Cat could in theory punt that to Viv and whoever rules Praes probably Akua.

kinghaart

Yep strong Buberism here. Lots of Roles at play...

[Hargabga](#)

And then she turns herself into a Pickler, funniest shit I've ever seen.

ninegardens

Goblins are AMAZING at crafting tempting diplomatic deals. God, its surprising they didn't get Praes wrapped around their shrivled fingers centuries ago.

Pickler is great.

Also... this may be stupid but... can Cat just accept all the deals?

By which I mean, accept all the deals, figure out if Wither or the Confederations deal is easy to swing by the new Emperor/ess later... and then once that deal is signed, say "Oh, by the way, Goblins are welcome in Callow."

There's nothing in the confederations deal that STOPS her opening her doors.

[sengachi](#)

That's certainly a thought, but Catherine would need a way to ensure the Matrons don't turn on her. Words on paper mean nothing to them unless they benefit, after all. They're not going to meekly let Catherine take their people out from under them without fighting back with everything they have.

Sinead

I wonder if another potential avenue is The Crows.

Like the Gobbler says that Goblins live short and brutal lives fighting over scraps. Isn't that similar to the issue that the Sisters have transcended in the completion of their godhood? At least based on what has been presented between golin culture and the Tenants, there isn't a whole lot of direct conflicts.

Imagine the Crows becoming an emerging icon for the Goblins. Especially since the Sisters have sacrificed for their people (See the Ruination). Which is more than the Matrons could have done.

I wonder if the Sisters gained additional adherents if that would change anything about their perspectives as well, since they would have this emerging new culture of the liberated goblins?

Darkening

It's been mentioned the goblins in the army took pretty well to worshipping the Crows already, I could see that expanding. Goblins with Night blessings would go a long way to balancing

their issues with being too weak to stand up to other races in a stand up fight.

Shveiran

One of the Sisters was even in favor, IIRC.

But that was before the Ruination. There is a lot less Night to go around now.

Sinead

There is less Night now.

However, new worshippers could in time increase the Night. And they already know that the collaboration improves the Night (see the 'Striding' ritual from the raids on Lozon's Hollow)

I would think that in time, the investment would pay off. Especially if the first bit of faith is just in the First Under Night extending a hand.

To clarify, the reason I see the Tenants and Goblin philosophy as similar is because they both reflect the 'dog eat dog' mentality, with the Drow now having a perspective of 'We can make it better.'

ninegardens

Okay, NEW plan. The Queen of Callow can take the Matron's deal... MEANWHILE, first under the night can make an offer the Sve Noc's new adherancts, to join the drow in the ruins of Keter.

Daltos

I think it still does. What Pickler wants from Catherine would be an existential threat to the matrons. It's like how North Korea can't even allow basic trade with the south or they'll bleed people trying to get away. Or how China is angry at any country opening their doors to people wanting leave Hong Kong. It's a strike at the foundation of their closed systems. One I doubt the matrons will allow without reaction. We've seen them only think in the long term and survival, for their rule that is. They see Catherine pull this and I'm sure they'll plot some way around it.

Shveiran

From a diplomatic perspective, there isn't MUCH that stops her from doing so. Right now, no one in the Eyres or Foramen or the rank and file expects her to take Pickler's deal. Not even Pickler.

So there is no real backlash to expect. And then? Well, the Eyres aren't really powerful enough to fuck with Callow in a world where the War on Keter was successful (which is the only world that matters since the other is an undead wasteland). The worse the Matrons could do is take back the goodies they offered, but that's not, like, crippling nor anything. She would still get the Matrons to play ball now, which is kind of useful.

But from a story perspective, Creation likes clarity.

A choice needs to be made, here, about who the Black Queen stands up for.

Especially because, as we were reminded this chapter, Catherine's story is also the tale of someone who keeps her word ("I'm a woman of my word, however terrible that word might be.")

This will define her; this will resonate; this will shape her Name.

Making it a trick would cheapen it, because this won't be a trickster Name.

Oh, she can play a nasty trick; but that is not her story, just one of her tools.

Henry

Also she runs the risk of falling into a story about becoming a necessary evil but then forgetting the necessary part. And that's not good those stories usually only end in death or redemption equals death.

Shveiran

That would be dangerous, though I don't really see that getting tractions unless she sabotages the war effort by mistake.

Nearly ANYTHING can be made to look unimportant and thus unnecessary before the apocalypse.

[sengachi](#)

I love the idea of the Wandering Bard and Malicia having this involved plan to redirect Catherine's Name away from this powerful Named-ruling role ... only to find they already got beaten to the punch by some liberator Name because the politics of a bunch of Nameless goblins they were both unaware of mattered to Catherine.

Sinead

There's a Gandalf quote about the Eye in the Tower being blind to the works of the small and unimportant bringing about it's own doom.

And Goblins are basically Evil Hobbits, yes?

5colouredwalker

Thanks, I really needed that.
Now I'm laughing at the weird as fuck ideas of a PGtE Goblin version of LotR.

Insanenoodlyguy

"What's taters precious?"
"Right that's it, I'm stabbing yo-ow! He's stabbing me Mr Frodo! All I did was stab him!"
"What's that ring? Stab them both? I'm on it! Sorry Sam, a ring told me too!"

[marillius](#)

This makes me want it so bad. For Pickler's request to be the one she chooses, because it represents everything Cat wanted for Callow, only for a 50,000 Robbers out there who don't know better. Pickler doesn't think Cat can say yes. I don't think Cat can say no. And for this decision to change that name she's been building, to deepen it, to save her from the fate the Bard and the Empress Stubborn Idiot Like All the Rest... That would be satisfying.

bellacohl

I want it so bad too. Let us have hope, I really really hope that the comment about the stars fading means that Cat has already made her decision, deep down.

Letouriste

It feels more like doubt. Give it a few more days

Miles

Even if cat was just thinking with her wallet, Pickler's option is the only one. The other two were tailored to drive a wedge between Cat and Viv

kinghaart

Oh good take. Especially given that we know that they are colluding in some fashion (even if the stabby kind).

Juff

Typo Thread:

burned around her > burning around her
Malicia were > Malicia and I were
promptly recognize > promptly recognized
taking control the > taking control of the
goblins choking > goblins and choking
my matron > by matron
I expected > I'd expected
all little > a little
was concept > was a concept
talking the > talking to the
send provide > provide
far away as > far away from
limping open to > limping to open
horrifying unlike > horrifyingly unlike
honestly made > honestly make
swallowing quick to > swallowing quick so
food at things > good at things
where I would I > where would I
that just buried > that they just buried
like him the > like him in the

Sinead

Also, a few mentions of Cat still having two eyes.

Finn ...

"Food at things" made me cackle so much

Letouriste

Gobbler bless typos

Reader in the Night

Yup. And thus, whatever Cat's Name was going to be gets quietly shanked in a badly-lit alley by the ghost of Robber. Because a Warden's Name must be an absolute, it must be a Name that sacrifices whatever it takes for the Greater Good (or the Greater Evil, as the case may be). And Pickler just took the most devastating siege engine in all of Calernia to that concept: Catherine's devastating love for the ones that followed her through thick and thin.

The name of Robber of the House of Lesser Footrest is not a name invoked before Catherine Foundling lightly, and if Pickler had done it out of any form of political machination at all, Catherine would most certainly have set her on fire.

But she invoked it out of pure love for everyone's favorite little psychopath, and that's something that cuts straight

through the Warden or the Black Queen, and gets you to the fact that Catherine Foundling takes care of her own. Now all she has to do is find a way to make doing the right thing profitable (which she will), and whatever her Name is going to be is going to have to adapt to that aspect of her personality as well.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

And it will be gloriously devious.

Letouriste

Maybe gloriously goblin then?

kinghaart

I think the profitability is fairly clear – diversity. No longer being reliant on an external entity for ore and munitions because you can get that yourselves. Being on the right side not just of history but of the personal history of 150,000 Robbers.

The challenges are there too of course but Callowan has already resettled one tribe, so I think the big one will be putting down the Matrons rather than cultural assimilation which the Legions already proved out.

Wasn't it the Goblins that caused the latest Red Letter? Could Cat somehow negotiate with the Gnomes too off just the Goblins leadership rather than the whole of Calernia?

Frivolous

EE: I am not completely certain, but 'move the needle' sounds like a technological idiom to me. As in, it should not exist in Calernia. No seismographs or anything else that has a moving needle.

Please feel free to correct me if I'm wrong, anyone.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Scales in ye olden days had a needle that swung left or right depending on which cup was heavier. And I am certain there are scales in Calernia.

Frivolous

I believe the metaphor you are referring to is 'tip the balance'.

A short thing that points to left or right is a stick, not a needle. Because sticks are cheap.

Anyway, I've been Googling it and all the references are to instruments that are not ye old scales.

The most primitive instrument for a needle that could move is a magnetic compass. Maybe that's what Pickler meant?

Except none of the people involved are sailors.

Henry

I mean magnetic compasses aren't just used by sailors they were very good way of figuring out what is which Way on a map and for general scouting.

Frivolous

Yes. But compasses originated as nautical technology in real life, and the only compasses I can find so far in Practical Guide to Evil are figurative ones: Vivienne being Catherine's moral compass.

So we know that magnetic compasses exist in Calernia. But we haven't seen anyone actually use one yet.

aurikdomi

Pickler did just admit to the goblins having technology that they haven't shared with anyone yet.

Frivolous

Yes. So Pickler could have a graduated weight-measuring scale like we do, and it might not even be technological enough to offend the gnomes.

But Catherine couldn't understand the metaphor. So she just pretended to understand?

I know and agree this is plausible. I've been in conversations where people used idioms I didn't understand, and I didn't immediately ask for clarification.

Miles

Cat has had a near-orgasm from looking at a map at one point iirc. Her love of good maps is well established. Calernia's technology is advanced enough that they use maps on land too.

Miles

Also, the fact that Cat called Viv her moral compass implies she knows what a compass is

Cold Cyberia

It looks like long term Pickler's plan has better prospects. Think of the impact Robber or Pickler had on the Army of Callow and how much they helped Cat overall. Now imagine having many, many more of them; not just in the army but also as spies, architects, miners and craftsman. Having goblins who are dedicated to her nation would strengthen Callow in a way no amount of trade deals would.

There are considerable short term risks in alienating the Matrons but if what Pickler says is true, in reality Cat doesn't need to do much but to open the doors. I do hope she bets on the mud, as it were.

jamesc9

That seems very like Cat. I'm fairly sure that she's already told us, at least once, that the mud's where the real work gets done.

sidehammer056302

I... did not expect Pickler to choke me up...

daniel

This is the march of the dispossessed.
Next in line are the Duni?

Letouriste

Well, Killian is owed a talk i think. There's too much unsaid in their relationship ending.
Plus now there's less an less old timer, her been there gain a lot of weight, right?

Shveiran

Pfff. Come on, she is the teen romance Catherine hasn't talked to in what, five years?

If she ends up speaking up for the treatment of Dunis like Pickler did for the goblins, sure, I guess, but it's not like that relationship needs any more screentime. It is not relevant.

chris S

that introductory quote is PERFECT for this chapter and the crux of Pickler's plea. It perfectly shows how goblins don't matter to the Matrons, the tribes they rule are just tools to solidify their power. Without Cat accepting Pickler's request, the future

of goblind -to paraphrase a quote- is a boot stamping on a goblin's face, forever.

Shveiran

I have no idea why so many commenters seem to think a Name like Warden of the East would be at odds with her wanting to SAFEGUARD the goblins that are part of the EAST.

Warden. East.

It's... it's literally in the godsdamn Name, for crying out loud.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The closing text strongly indicates that EE thinks Pickler's offer is a threat to the developing Name.

Shveiran

Why a threat and not a different direction: the stars fade and appear more distant because Cat has "goblin problems" and they are more RELEVANT.

The East and not the East.

She is not losing her nascent Name. She is making a choice about what kind of Name it's going to be.

Which is pretty much what we have been told the Bard is trying to sneak on her. This (or more likely, this sentiment) will likely be the resolution to the Bard's trap in Ater.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, she's probably going to get a name, but it may not be the one that lets her see her people as stars (currently presumed to be Warden Of The East). Whether WotE or this new, even-more-inchoate Name, is Bard's plan remains to be seen. At this point, Cat is arguably the Bard's peer, but they're both playing deep and complex games – at some point, she needs to quit wondering "did she know that I know that she knows...", and play her hand.

sidehammer056302

Wow, I don't know how long it's been (I think YEARS..) since I've seen a word that I had 0% idea what it meant. "Inchoate," Now for a chance to use it in a sentence.. Thanks!

Miles

It really doesn't. All it means is it's morning.

Cat has never had stars tied to her Name strength before so this having such a meaning would be ridiculously out of left field.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The stars are clearly presented as being tied to her (possibly) upcoming Name, and when a Name weakens, its associated powers also weaken (as seen with Amadeus and Hanno).

kinghaart

and Hakram just a few chapters ago.

If it were mid-chapter I'd give less weight to it but at the end it's either obvious or a very good red herring.

scottcahoon14

Cat commenting on the lights growing dim. But, as others have stated, could just be her panicking.

Tyckspoon

There was a duality developing before, one of those hero-villain reflections that stories love (and possibly part of Bard's intended trap, because it would be just sooo easy to fall into and all it needs is for Cat to continue doing what she's already doing...)

Warden of the West is developing. It's going to be either Cordelia or Hanno, and I suspect the only reason Cordelia doesn't already have it is that Hanno made himself a claimant when he moved into a more active role in the war. That Warden role is clearly a protective one – the Role of somebody organizing the West in defence against external threats.

Cat's prospective Warden name was shaping to be more of a jailer or overseer, on the other hand – the one who sets rules and limitations on their charges in order to stop them doing harm to themselves and others. A task that is more villain-slanted, for somebody who will often have to make and hew to choices between two evils because the people you're responsible for permit no good (and certainly not Good!) options.

Pickler's request offers a pivot in two ways. One, it is purely a request for aid. It isn't about minimizing harm or figuring out which lunatic Villain will release the fewest Demons. It's a lead to the more protective aspect of Warden, or possibly a way away from the whole 'Warden' thing entirely.

Two, its for common people. Cat as Black Queen, as the villain representative for the Terms, as the main proponent for the

Accords to come, and even in her developing Name so far... She deals with the great powers of the land. Named and rulers and powerful nobles. She does claim to care about the welfare of the commons, but even when she tries to do something for them she does it in a top-down way, by trying to change the rulers or the laws governing them. Pickler is asking her to do something directly for people with no power. Not as a treaty, not a bargain between Named or in terms during negotiation between states – it represents a major shift in focus for Cat and if she goes for it will also be reflected in what her Name becomes.

(Incidentally, I think her Name declares itself when she makes a firm commitment to her plans for Praes. When she stops trying to juggle potential plans and contingencies and says with conviction “Black rules the Tower, the Orcs are an independent nation, and goblins are welcome to live as Callowan citizens” .. Or whatever set of options she throws in with.. That’s when she can wield her Name. It won’t happen as long as she’s still also thinking “but what if I have to deal with Akua, and maybe its better for the War if the Matrons want to have a good relationship?”)

Shveiran

I see it quite differently personally.

You (and you are not alone in this!) say that the WotW is a protector and a rallying point for the west while the WotE would be like a jailor. And... yeah, that’s possible, sure, but there is no reason why it has to eb that way or why it should be like that.

Duality and symmetry work better when they are actually symmetrical, after all. Why wouldn’t both Names have the same two duties, one external and one internal?

The external is to Ward their charge; to protect them from harm, to shelter them from the storm.

The internal is to keep their house in order; making it so that it doesn’t eat itself alive, or become a problem for the rest of the world.

And there is nothing that goes against that in seeking a better future for the goblins, or really just stopping the abusive Matrons from keeping in power and enabling the goblins to look for something better. After all, they are in her charge.

I also disagree that this was in any way different from what Catherine has done so far.

Her treaties, her deals, everything has always been to protect the weak from the mighty or from themselves. This has never changed, the only difference is how she defined “weak”, “mighty”, or “protect”.

This is also still very much “top-down”: she is a powerful figure unrooting a bunch of rulers, she is not feeding orphans with her hands.

letouriste

...well, now i'm getting sure cat will not be Warden of anything. I'm thinking something more along “Guide” 😊

Beautiful speech by pickler there, made me drop a tear.

kinghaart

I think Amadeus fits the Role of Practical Guide more, though with Cat's not-mentoring of other Named it coups maybe go either way.

BargleNawdleZouss

I gotta ask: who is expecting Triumphant and/or Treacherous to make a grand return to Creation?

Just as planned, naturally. 😊

aurikdomi

There is that gem the dead king owns that only ever lit up when triumphant was moving, and though it seemed like it was lighting up when cat really started, I bet it was just a distraction because it really is Triumphant moving again mwahaha.

Sinead

Pretty sure that gem was a line of communication between the Tower and Keter. So it is Malicia not Cat who triggered the contact.

aurikdomi

Was that what it was? it triggered at least a book apart from when we know Malicia was talking to him but I guess you gotta start with small talk before sending diplomatic envoys.

Sinead

End of Book 3 after the talk between Amadeus and Malicia post Doom of Liesse. Cat has also jsut been crowned Queen of Callow.

If it was an ‘Immortal detector’, it would have triggered during teh Doom of Liesse when Cat fully ascended.

sidehammer056302

I don't remember which, but I want the Oddly Successful to return, or at least get his own booklet of collected and expanded quotes, XD

superkeaton

Oh my.

masterofbones

From the perspective of story/name lore, Cat can't turn Pickler down.

From the perspective of knowing what the matrons are, giving them any increase in power is a bad idea, even if it wasn't a trap, which it is. So Cat can't turn Pickler down.

Cat loves her allies and realizes just how much she can save if she frees the gobbos. Cat can't turn a begging Pickler down.

Miles

Cat doesn't want to have a third falling out with Vivian which is why she can't turn Pickler down.

Sykomantis

You know what? There's a Name I would expect to exist somewhere in this world that to my knowledge hasn't ever been mentioned, but, in thinking about it, if it actually existed, would have to be the most powerful name of them all: giving power to other Names, defining Roles, marking where the influence of Providence is more or less likely to occur, and judging whether and when actions should be attributed to luck versus skill.

The Storyteller.

The Storyteller would be able to **Narrate** the actions of others, would **Know** all current Names and Namelore, or could **Learn** new stories, rules, roles, names, settings, languages, topics, relationships, subjects, and methods of delivering stories to the masses. She could **Archive** or **Restore** old stories, **Find** lost stories, or **Seek** out new ones. She might **Take** the stories of others, **Edit** them to fit a lesson, mood, or theme, or **Redact** details that aren't important. She might even **Impart**, **Bequeath**, or **Bestow** the stories when needed, or **Imbue** stories with touches of style or idiosyncrasies for dramatic effect, or **Embellish** or even **Exaggerate** the powers, skills, and abilities of characters. She could possibly use stories as tools to **Persuade**, **Discourage**, **Divide**, **Unite**, **Inform**, **Teach**, **Slander**, **Dispel**, **Disenchant**, **Delay**, **Motivate**, or simply to **Entertain**, **Set** a tone, or make people **Think**.

Stories can make people *Pretend* to be something they aren't, *Adventure* to far away places, *Horrify*, *Terrify*, *Thrill*, and let them *Imagine* other worlds. And the one thing all stories must eventually do, is *End*.

Just a little something I've been thinking about. The Storyteller is always the start and finish of every tale, so who better to start the new Age, and how better than to start it with a brand new Story?

Sykomantis

I don't know how to make words bold so just imagine the asterisks mean bold like aspects

Miles

That is literally what a Bard is.

Miles

Come to think of it, you know what has power and authority over everyone in a story and is basically the opposite of a Bard because rather than telling stories it ends them? The Deus Ex Machina

Sykomantis

Don't bards do it through song though?

Shveiran

Only in D&D.

Not all bard-adjacent roles were about music, but since writing was so very expensive before printing was invented, they knew their work by memory... and therefore, most stories were made as "songs" because rhymes and metric make it easier to remember things. Stories were mostly "poetry".

That's what bards are supposed to be about: stories and lore.

Not godsdamned lutes and dancing, whatever D&D says.

kinghaart

No, it'd be either "Author", "Editor" or "Publisher".

TheReaperOfU

So, I'm new to the series as a whole, and started reading about a month ago. I just caught up. I am in absolute love with this

series, thank you EE.

And of course, I catch up, and it's on a stupid cliffhanger.

[lowebro](#)

I think the stars fading is, ultimately, going to be a sign that Cat is stepping back from the realm of the named to something more mundane.

Throughout the whole story, whilst named have been important, there's been a HUGE emphasis on how many normal flesh and blood, average people have bled and fought for Cat. They were always her backbone, the nameless. From individuals like Ratface, Robber, Nauk and Pickler here to the soldiers in her legions. Her final stage of character development tying into that, having her possibly not having any name as she closes out her last fights, seems right to me. More than an ending where a new Name comes along and sorts all the problems out.

kinghaart

I think she might still get a Name of a sort but agreed that this would be satisfying too

kinghaart

I wonder if things might be better for Procer though if Cordelia had taken a Name.

Carry is practical and would probably accept a leash if it came with the power to fix enough things. Or maybe she's learned from 2nd Llesse?

hoser2

Wondering what Matrons are.

Could it be a blood ritual enacted on the female children of Matrons at birth?

Maybe a blood ritual, for more power?

The Matrons seem so different and so indifferent to other goblins. It feels like more than intraspecies genetic variation.

kinghaart

Hmm, maybe something like that charm Akua had which used grief to sharpen focus?

Chapter 25: Fool

"And so Dread Emperor Irritant addressed his Chancellor thus: 'You have moved me through argument, so I crown you in my stead. May you rule wisely.' The day after the royal banner of Callow was seen, and soon Ater was under siege."

– Extract from Volume IX of the official Imperial Chronicles

The first dart came from my left and I caught its glint in the morning light.

I clawed Night across the air, making a shield, but the one thrown a heartbeat later from my right I didn't see at all until a phalange moved in the way with her shield raised. It didn't help. Night shattered the first dart, but the second punched through steel like it was paper and then went on halfway through the orc's skull before stopping. And it wasn't even, I realized a moment later, the real attempt on my life. I was warned by shouts and the sound of crossbows being fired. *Behind me*, I thought, and turned to see a small creature leaping towards at my back. Hairy and clawed, like a toad gone wrong, but my staff was in movement and it was not quicker than me.

The side of the length of dead yew caught the creature in its distended belly, but it let out a high-pitched screech and spat out a yellow tongue that looked like a muscle. I saw something like bone at the end of the absurd length and threw myself to the side, but a legionary had come too close and he was in the way. Heavier than me. It was luck that got a fold of the Mantle of the Woe just close enough I was able to pull it closer to my body, covering my side in time for the bonelike stinger to slide off the enchanted cloth. I snarled, as much about the legionary who'd almost just gotten me killed trying to protect me as in anger. Night cascaded down the length of my staff in strings that crisscrossed the creature's entire body in the span of a heartbeat before turning *sharp*.

Chunks of flesh and gore splattered the grass and I breathed out, eyes scanning for other threats.

The assassins that'd thrown darts at me had been tackled down but there seemed to be no more of the creature, which – shit, the corpse was dissolving into the ground. Ichor. That thing had been a devil. What the fuck was going on with our wards? I spared a look for the phalange that'd take a dart for me, grimacing as a hand over her mouth told me she was dead.

"Take them alive," I shouted.

It was no good, though, I saw moments later. The assassins – garbed in regular's armour – had stopped moving because they were dead. Poison, most likely. I'd be getting no answers out of them save through necromancy, and maybe not even that. There were alchemies that made corpses near-impossible to raise, and though they were expensive I somehow doubted that whoever had arranged this was lacking in funds. I rose back to my feet, closing the orc's eyes. She'd taken that dart for me without hesitation, and if she hadn't I would most likely be dead. *Fuck*, I thought breathing out. This wasn't the first attempt on my life, but it'd been a while one had come so close to succeeding. If that tongue stinger hadn't been meant to deliver a particularly nasty poison, I'd eat my shoes.

I got my people moving to cover the security breaches, because there was no way a devil should have been able to cross our wards. Before the hour was out the phalanges had caught most of our traitors alive, two trying to pull a runner towards Ater before being shot in the back. Enough confessed without need for... firm interrogation that I got a picture of what had happened. A few of my soldiers had been turned either by threats to their families or petty bribery, which had allowed a pair of mfuasa mage infiltrators in through our defences. They'd used illusions and murder to let in a summoned devil through the wards and make their attempt before being put down.

"They went for enlisted, not officers," Vivienne said. "Not all of them Praesi, either. Two of the flipped soldiers were from Summerholm."

I grimaced.

"This one wasn't a warning shot," I said. "They meant business."

"It won't be the last either," the Princess said. "You've provoked the High Lords enough a single failure won't put them off."

"You don't think this is Malicia?" I asked.

"It could be the Eyes," she conceded, "but I have my doubts. They don't usually use either devils or mfuasa."

Which might be the point, putting us off the trail, but I wouldn't argue the point. I'd certainly angered enough of the Wasteland's aristocracy that they were as likely of an author for this nasty little surprise. I clenched my fingers. Time to make a point of my own, then. I'd need to speak with Scribe, and Archer as soon as she got back. She was a day late, at this point, but I wasn't worried: I could still feel her star and the way it was moving towards us. She'd be there by noon.

"We'll retaliate," I said. "

"I expected as much," Vivienne said. "And our traitors?"

"We have a punishment for aiding the enemy in our regulations," I said.

My successor made a face but she did not disagree. It might have been a Legion regulation, originally, but Callowans were not much softer on treachery.

They'd be stoned.

—

Archer dragged her carcass back into camp an hour past Noon Bell, immediately heading for my tent when she did. She stank of dust and sweat but I still poured her a glass of lemon water when she dropped into a seat with a sigh, sending one of the phalanges to get her warm food. Indrani drank greedily, emptying the whole cup before letting out a sigh.

"Gods, the things you send me to do," she said.

I dropped into a seat across from her own, lowering myself slowly so my leg wouldn't ache too much.

"Thought you were all about travelling," I said.

"Ater was damned interesting," Indrani admitted. "Wouldn't have minded staying a little longer to see the sights. There were... complications, though."

"Ominous," I praised. "You've been working on your pauses, I see."

She preened.

"I have," Indrani said. "I keep using them in random sentences, it drives Zeze crazy."

I swallowed a grin. Amusing as that sounded, I had sent her out on an important errand.

"Report," I ordered.

She leaned back into her seat, grinning in a way that did not bode well for whatever poor bastard I'd make transcribe this later, and only stashed that insolence away long enough to thank the young man that brought her a plate of greens and stew with slices of rye bread on the side. Archer wasted no time dipping her bread and scarfing down an entire slice, almost choking as she slapped her chest twice.

"Right," she gasped. "So report. Got into their noble camps no trouble, their security is *horrendously* bad. The outer parts,

anyway. They ward to the Hells and back little sections where the important people sleep, couldn't get in those. Stayed long enough to learn that our buddy Sargon is here now, with a small escort."

"Good to know," I grunted. "We'd figured as much, but it's good to have it confirmed."

"It shouldn't be too hard to get a strike force in Ater the same way I went in," Archer continued. "Lots of servants and peddlers go back and forth through the gates every day, the Legions don't actually watch them all that closely. The problems start in the city."

"Heard through sources that Malicia's pretty much lost grip," I said.

"Yeah, she's not real popular at the moments," Indrani snorted. "The Sentinels followed up massacring rioters by being just as hard with a few attempts by people to get at imperial granaries, which didn't win her any admirers."

Unfortunate timing for her, that. I didn't disagree with taking a hard line over food reserves with a siege possibly looming, but it was becoming clear that the Sentinels weren't the kind of tool that could be used for delicate work.

"So who's rising?" I asked.

"Akua," Indrani frankly said. "She's the city's darling at the moment. They're convinced she's the only person that can beat you and she's been making all the right moves – she'd been healing people, setting up hospitals and shelters and organizing the refugees. Even the *gangs* like her, Cat, it's ridiculous. They started patrolling the districts the city guard won't go in anymore after she asked them."

I let out a low whistle.

"So she's making a play for the Tower," I said.

"Maybe," Archer said, wiggling her hand. "She hasn't actually gone there since coming to the city, way I hear it. She's got this mansion that's become like a second imperial court. There's already a song about the 'empress in the tower and the empress in the city'. Whatever she's up to, though, she hasn't actually made any moves to depose Malicia. Most people figure she's either still working on getting the Legions on board or there's some sort of clever plan afoot."

"I don't see the Black Knight flipping her way even if Malicia's star is waning," I said. "They get on terribly, by all reports, and Nim's a Legion loyalist. Without the army on her side, Akua

will need major noble support before she can make a move. Won't have enough troops otherwise."

Support that I intended to deliver right into her hands, but was still in the making. It'd have to wait until Abreha and Jaheem Niri arrived.

"Could be," Indrani shrugged. "Went to have a look at the defences like you asked, and it's exactly like Juniper figured. They have a skeleton garrison on the walls facing us and the rest of the troops are at barracks in the nearby districts."

It was the only sensible way to defend a city the size of Ater with forces as small as the Black Knight's. She couldn't really afford to man the entire set of walls facing us, not with solid numbers, so she'd post just enough up there and keep her real numbers near streets that could be used to quickly mobilize. That was she could be sure her soldiers were where the fighting was actually happening when we attacked. Against a less seasoned commander the trick would have been drawing those troops out by an attack on the wall and then sending a smaller force to climb an unprotected stretch while the defenders were busy, but that wouldn't work on Marshal Nim. She'd keep companies in reserve.

No, like Juniper had said the only real way for us to take the city by force was speed. We needed overwhelm the walls before the Legions could fully mobilize, smash them while they were still separated and take up solid defensive positions before the highborn armies could intervene.

"Good," I said. "Did you get anywhere close to the Tower?"

"Nah, they've locked up those districts *tight*," Indrani said. "The Sentinels have been moving wagons around, though, so I'd bet Malicia's opened up the vaults for a few things. Couldn't get into the Tower itself, though, not even through Scribe's underground routes. They're either closed or swarming with guards."

"Ime knows her trade," I sighed. "And my father?"

"That," Indrani grinned, "is where it gets... complicated."

"Now you're just overusing it," I chided.

"Fuck... you, Your Royalty," Indrani eloquently replied. "So, I went around looking for ye ol' Carrion Lord like my boss – terrible woman, you know, couldn't recognize a good dramatic pause even if it bit her in the ass – asked. I was prowling rooftops and alleys like a majestic panther, but then I got shot in the shoulder."

"You *what* now?" I replied, alarm.

"Don't worry about it, shallow wound, all in good fun," Archer dismissed. "So since the Lady had said hello, I set fire to the house she was standing on to say hi back and we had a good laugh about it. Only that, uh, drew some invited guests."

"Sentinels?"

"Please," Indrani snorted, "like I'd worry about *those*. No, I was asking her why there was some gray in her hair now like an old granny – there wasn't, always pisses her off when I ask anyway – but then suddenly there was just this guy there."

"This guy," I repeated, skeptical.

"Yeah, just standing there," Indrani agreed. "So I was all like 'what gives, did you maybe not notice that building is still on fire, you jackass' and then he turns to me saying 'Black Queen vassal. You are spared. The debt is paid. Leave.' You know, like an asshole."

"Indrani," I patiently said, "did you pick a fight with the fucking Emerald Swords?"

She blinked at me, surprise.

"No, of course not," Archer assured me. "Though that was obvious from the context."

I narrowed my eyes at her.

"I picked a fight with the Emerald Swords *and* the Lady," she proudly told me.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, feeling the headache coming. I wasn't even in pain yet, I could just sense its looming person like a fucking storm on the horizon.

"He'd told me to leave, see, so I did the only rational thing a woman can do in that position," Indrani began. "I-"

"-shot him in the eye," I finished.

"I did," she said, pleased, then leaned forward. "Twice. And I'll level with you here, Catherine, he did *not* enjoy that."

"Go figure," I said. "Ranger?"

"Kicked him into the fire when he was distracted and pulled down the house on him," Indrani said. "Shot her in the shoulder but she caught it and threw it back – almost took my eye out – but then the rest of the Emerald Swords arrived and it got messy."

"It *got* messy?" I drily said.

"Right, 'cause we drew a bit of attention so the Tower dropped a demon on us," Archer said. "Beast of Hierarchy, I think. Anyways the air started burning like oil and it spread fucking everywhere – no smoke, though, pretty weird right? – so I stabbed this elf in the back, 'cuz he was basically asking for it, and I maneuvered backwards from the situation."

She smiled proudly at me, the horrid wrench.

"You know, like a strategist," Indrani said. "Which I am."

"Tell me we don't have a demon-tainted Emerald Sword to deal with now," I said.

"Nah, everyone made it out," Indrani said. "Except for the diabolists Ranger shot, I guess, but if I learned anything in our years together it's that diabolists don't really count."

Yeah, and there it was. The goddamned headache.

"Anything else?" I asked, against my better judgement.

She considered that for a moment.

"I'm hungry," Indrani shared.

I sighed.

"About your... adventure, I mean," I said.

"Hey," Archer complained. "If *I* can't do the pauses, then you can't either. And what happened to us, Catherine? You never ask how my day went anymore."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"How did your day go, Indrani?"

"I don't wanna talk about it," she smugly grinned, shovelling a large spoonful of stew and greens into her mouth.

"How is that that I've met people who've literally eaten the souls of the innocent and somehow you're still the worst person I know?" I asked, reluctantly impressed.

"Natural talent," she told me through half-chewed greens.

There was nothing like spending time with my closest friends in the world to make me reconsider my position on people not being born terrible. I hid a smile, though, and drummed my fingers against the sculpted tabletop.

"It's a good thing that you're back," I said. "You can rest now."

"Sleeping in a bed will be nice," she agreed.

"You'll have to do it now, though," I idly said.

She stopped eating, staring at me.

"I've got a job for you," I pleasantly smiled. "You're going back into Ater."

"I was just *in* Ater," she whined.

"Yeah, but last time was too easy," I said. "So this time I'm sending you back with about forty handpicked Dominion warriors."

She wouldn't stay with them once they were in the city – anything a Named was involved in the Intercessor would know about – but that was all right, I had a different task in mind for her. Ater was no Wolof, after all, for all its formidable defences. It had fallen more times than I could count through the many centuries of imperial history.

Most of the time, from the inside.

—

It was another six days before High Lady Abreha Mirembé of Aksum – formerly empress-claimant Sepulchral – and High Lord Dakarai Sahel of Nok joined their forces to my own army. Most of their sizeable combine force had marched our way, a solid fourteen thousand. Abreha's reins on it were nowhere as tight as before though, since the Nok soldiery now had their own liege lord along instead of simple kinsman in command. Within moments of getting them in my tent I saw the tensions between the two of them. High Lord Dakarai, a gracefully aged older man with silvery hair and the most golden eyes I had seen of any Praesi noble, now resented the woman he'd backed for the Tower.

I even knew why. One of the foundations of their alliance had been the marriage between Abreha's then-heir Isoba and Dakarai's daughter Hawulti, but from the High Lord of Nok's perspective he had mismarried his favourite daughter: Isoba's position as heir to Aksum was now up in the air. Mind you, Dakarai was here instead of talking with High Lady Takisha and the others for a good reason: it was too late for him to move to Malicia's camp. Even if she accepted his allegiance he'd get nothing out of the switch and he was more than a little likely to get assassinated as an example down the line. Malicia couldn't accept his return, anyway, not as things stood.

Too many of her 'loyal' lords had spent years waging war against Nok in her name, they wouldn't accept a peaceful return to the Tower's cause. If the High Seat returned to Malicia, it would be

over Dakarai Sahel's dead body and for obvious reasons that would not be terms acceptable to him.

"Your hospitality remains pleasing, Black Queen, but you asked us here for a reason," Abreha eventually said.

"The wards against eavesdropping were something of a hint, I imagine," I snorted. "Fair enough. I want something of you."

High Lord Dakarai studied me calmly.

"Should you want Nok's forces to take the vanguard in breaching Ater, there will be a price for it," he plainly stated.

"Nothing so uncouth," I said. "On the contrary, I think you'll actually like this one."

I explained exactly what I wanted out of them, and they listened with faces like masks.

Afterwards, Dakarai Sahel left my tent in a rage and Abreha Mirembelingered a little longer before following him out of the camp. I let them go, instead calling my war council together.

We had a battle to prepare for.

—

I pressed down against Zombie's back, squinting under the heavy glare of the afternoon sun.

The enemy was moving slower than I'd thought they would, though that was of my own making. Between Assassin, Archer and the Silver Huntress about twenty high-ranking nobles had been killed this morning. Among those we'd even caught two Muraqib and a Niri, the prize of the lot being High Lady Takisha's husband. Just after that anthill got kicked the Army of Callow had begun marching at a brisk pace, circling Ater to the north and advancing on the camp of the noble private armies. Much as we'd expected it would, though our advance had been almost immediately seen and reported it'd still taken them long to organize. I suspected they'd prepared a makeshift command system in case we did attack them, but the wave of assassinations had upended that arrangement before it could be used. So while the nobles fought over who would lead and who would take the frontlines, the Army of Callow had marched effectively unchallenged.

Juniper didn't like the plan, but I'd sold her on the necessity of it so she'd put her talents to work making the best of the inevitable risks. While the Army of Callow and the Akusm contingent was moving to the north of the city, about five thousand — all Nok forces — under High Lord Dakarai were circling the city's belly to the south instead. The route was slightly

longer, and I could see from above that the Black Knight had taken the bait. Seeing a smaller force split from our main host, Marshal Nim had ordered one of the southern gates open and sortied against it. The temptation to try to defeat us in detail had been too strong.

Without knowing it, the Black Knight had been courting disaster. The Nok wavemen, the famous archers I'd yet to see prove their worth on the battlefield, were served up exactly the kind of fight they shined most in: flat open fields against slow-moving infantry. Those enchanted bows proved to be brutally effective tools of war at a range at least one time and a half of standard-issue crossbows, arrows touched with magic coming down in a rain that tore through even the testudo formation of the enemy legionaries. Still, there were only a thousand of those elite archers and Nim soon had field scorpions brought out so the slaughter didn't last forever.

It still cost the Legions a few hundred soldiers for little gain and blunted their sortie. The Nok forces kept moving east towards the nobles with only paltry losses and the Legions did not attempt pursuit. No doubt the Black Knight was wary of getting another mouthful of volleys before Dakarai retreated again and the game began anew.

Up north, the shape of a battle began to fall into place. The enemy commanders were thinking along the same lines as the Black Knight, they too preferring to fight our army split. It'd made them take a gamble: instead of staying in their camp, a decent enough defensive position, the lumbering host of thirty thousand was marching *towards* the Army of Callow and its auxiliaries. The general facing Juniper had decided to bet that the battle against our main army would be won or lost before High Lord Dakarai finished circling the capital and fell on their backs. From up here I could see another trap, too, this one more subtly laid: at the speed they were advancing, the noble armies would be meeting my own about at the height of one of the northern gates of Ater.

Cheeky, that. They were hoping that Marshal Nim might see an opportunity when the battle had begun to flank us from there. And more than that, I eventually decided. If the Black Knight opened the gates, the nobles could then retreat through it and into the city afterwards. Neither me nor the nobles were interested in fighting to the death while Malicia was watching us from atop the Tower like a waiting vulture. It'd be more sensible to allow whoever got the worst of the fighting to retreat, be it us or they. *Even with an army marching towards you*, I thought amusedly, *you're more concerned with the Tower than the steel*. A shame for them it wouldn't pan out this way.

An hour before Afternoon Bell the skirmishes began north of the city and I got involved. I made a few passes on Zombie and left

trails of blackflame behind, leaving our Levantine skirmishers with a decisive advantage. An hour after that, the skirmishers retreated and battle lines formed. To the south of the city, though, High Lord Dakarai had slowed. It might be taken for resting his men, who had been marching for hours in the sun with enemies nipping at their heels, but it wasn't. To a practised eye, he was making sure he wouldn't be there for the battle to the north.

It didn't matter to the rank and files on both sides, who advanced with shields raised as sorcery and arrows began to fly. Hierophant ripped through enemy rituals – Akua didn't seem to be out there waiting to match him – so the volleys weren't *too* badly against us, and we closed the distance with only slight casualties. *That* turned into a massacre almost immediately. The nobles had put their levies in front and my legionaries chewed through them like a knife through butter. I was pretty sure the immediacy of that took even the enemy by surprise, because they answered by hammering at where their own lines met mine with rituals and that was hardly standard tactics even for the most wasteful of Wasteland lords.

It was a mistake, anyway. Getting columns of flame and clouds of poisonous smoke tossed at them by their own lords without the protections that my priests afforded the Army of Callow was enough to turn the fear of the levies into terror, which resulted in a small and then general rout. The household troops behind them were made of sterner stuff and tried to keep them in place, but that was like trying to ride a panicked horse: they got kicked for it, and hard. To my dismay, it looked like we were actually going to win this battle. Fuck. I'd badly overestimated the morale of the levies, and so had our enemies. My eyes flicked to the northern gates, waiting for them to open, but while Marshal Nim had reinforced the walls she kept them closed. Malicia's orders? I could only guess.

It was Abreha Mirembe who salvaged it. She'd been half-heartedly serving on the flank of the Army of Callow, fighting off the Kahtan tribal troops with a suspicious lack of rituals being thrown by both sides, when she saw the rout and ordered a general retreat of the Aksum army. I could see the dismay and fury flicker through the ranks of my men at the sight, High Lady Abreha's order creating a massive gap that the enemy lines plunged into without hesitation. It was a strange sight, from above: the enemy centre and left were collapsing before the Army of Callow, but my own left had walked off the battlefield just on the eve of victory and so the enemy right was coming hard towards a formation unprepared for it.

I swooped down to stem the tide, carving a wall of blackflame through the Kahtan tribal levies that stopped them cold in their advance. It bought the time for Juniper to do as we'd planned and

call a retreat, just as at last the northern gates of Ater began to open. Nim was, unfortunately, too late to the party. The Army of Callow began to pull back, its enemies too far or in no state to pursue, and as Zombie rose back into the sky I breathed out in relief. It might have worked out even better than I'd intended, in the end. Abreha Mirembe had not just turned on me, she'd betrayed me just as I was about to win the battle: it would win her a great deal of esteem. Good. It'd make her betrayal and High Lord Dakarai's that much more believable.

Neither of them were in a position to go over to Malicia's side, after all, but it was not to the empress' banner they had flocked today. Why, they had just announced their support for the cause of Akua Sahelian by saving the entire goddamned capital.

And with that, the fall of Ater could begin.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Reader in the Night

Why, they had just announced their support for the cause of PGTE by boosting the entire goddamned capital.

And with that, the fall of Worm could begin.

Reader in the Night

Why, they had just announced their support for the cause of PGTE by boosting the entire goddamned capital.

And with that, the fall of Worm could begin.

SpeckofStardust

So this is the second betrayal against Cat that she planned for and caused.

Is thier going to be a third?

samshadar

In the best tradition of a certain Dread Emperor, it pays to be part of the plots to ones downfall. 😊

Someperson

I think it will be Scribe.

[Liliet](#)

skfjdhakdfjhasdfajfsk well I called it wrong

this was A LOT less subtle than what I had in mind

[Hargabga](#)

To be fair, Cat is not really famous for... subtlety.

shikkarasu

I don't know. Barely anything will still be on fire come Evening Bell, and she didn't alert the Fae to her skirmish by ... borrowing any of their lakes.
Practically invisible by Catherine's standards.

Cicero

When your plan involves you losing, only to discover your opponent is even more incompetent than you thought.

Isaac Martinez

It must have been a pain to Emperor Traitorus and Irritant. The pain of being so perfect...

[Adrian_V](#)

I know somewhere I read something similar only both sides wanted to lose so they were really exasperated xD

[Burlyraven](#)

Anybody else notice that Cat's being a lot more careless and occasionally even resentful of the soldiers under her command? She's not setting up meat grinders or anything, and she still shows she cares, but not too long ago she was known for her almost motherly (albiet dysfunctional) care for her soldiers and laughing with them on the battlefield. Now she's setting up dangerous plans and getting frustrated with ones just trying to protect her.

hakureireimu

I think a bit of anger is justified when they almost got her killed.

[Burlyraven](#)

Oh, absolutely, but I can't help but think back to the Boot when she fought beside the two Heavies. It was an even more dire circumstance, and it just came across as more congenial.

Hargabga

Yeah, that one was... troubling. I wonder if it's a... natural development.

Daltos

I think it also has to do with the soldiers becoming increasingly.. foreign to her. As alluded to before the current army of callow has less and less personal ties to her and more a product of logistics. Most of the original legionnaires who joined her are dead or even defected, the gallowborne annihilated, the original army of callow she raised, mostly spent or with Abigail, the officer corp from her college days and the ones that came with her, assassinated or otherwise. Replaced with dominion men, defections or recruits like the legions like the 13th, fresh faces from their own camps in callow. People who weren't there at the start when she was small enough to know them and then her, who only know her as the black queen and everything else as her legend. It'd be life if most of your immediate family died and you and your one surviving sibling moved in with cousins you've never met before. They're family, but not family (imagine that in italics), a technical sense rather than one with feeling.

Adrian V

Is still there, is called anger born of love, also at herself, remember not even a few weeks back when they started the attack on wolof by taking over the aqueduct fortress she was talking with a praesi soldier.

Soronel Haetir

Poor little Akua, just can't catch a knife in the ribs.

Hargabga

Because everyone knows that a proper Wasteland... tradition, is to catch a knife with your... back.

Agent J

10/10 use of dramatic pauses.

Anomandris

"She leaned back into her seat, grinning in a way that did not bode well for whatever poor bastard I'd make transcribe this later...."

Didn't know you were from Calernia, EE....how's the weather over there?

Reader in the Night

Yup. Cat's plan is utterly fucked by her own inability to understand just how thoroughly she got through to Akua. Cat's plan relies on Akua plotting something, and she really isn't.

Though credit where credit is due, Akua might not be this far along down her path of self-actualization if she hadn't picked up her newest traitorous minion. He was the one who helped her realize just how much she hates this entire thing, and is gleefully watching her torture herself.

shikkarasu

Akua has gone full Abigail. All of Creation is working to put her in charge and she just wants to not so badly.

KageLupus

I am not sure Cat thinks Akua is making a play for the Tower. Based just on what Archer told her, and knowing the path that she set Akua on, I think Cat could at least guess that her overall plan is working. If Akua really wanted to make a play for Empress she could be doing so right now. Instead she is helping the commoners and keeping order in the streets. To most people that is going to look like building a base for her next move, but Cat has insider info.

Cat's plan here doesn't require Akua to actually be aiming for the Tower, she just needs to keep making it look like Akua is working against Malicia. If Malicia's position looks weak enough more of her nobles will switch sides and the prophecy is self-fulfilled. To me this feels like Cat is still banking on Akua being turned off of the idea of being Empress, especially if a lot push to do so comes from external sources. The more people who expect Akua to become Empress, the more she is going to see it as another prison.

RoflCat

It's sorta both working and not working I think.

Catherine think Akua will make a claim for the throne, but then realized she hate everything about it and desperately want out to the point of accepting becoming an eternal lid to Evil in a Jar that is Dead King.

Whereas Akua right now is just...doing it because 'why not?'... and hating how it's working out extremely well despite her intention otherwise.

Like, one of the thing Cat already misread was Nim. She thought Nim would be solidly for Malicia due to the ideal of

the Legions, but the person herself is already broken to the point Akua could've turned her. But instead Akua went off on Nim for being such so weak that one critical failure broke her like this which will most likely get Nim on her side with far deeper loyalty than Akua expected or wanted.

It's definitely leading up to Cat getting what she wanted (Akua being offered the crown and loathing it), but not the way she wanted it (Akua isn't having the revelation after getting the crown, she's been suffering through it so her decision at that moment would likely differ to Cat's expectation) because Praes.

ninegardens

Hearing Archer and Cat discussing Akua and just... completely misreading the situation ("There's NO WAY Nim would join her...") is.... utterly hilarious.

Insanenoodlyguy

The unexpected windfall today might be the stroke of misfortune tomorrow: Supporting Akua will go better then expected.

Gods, Akua isn't even going to try to climb the tower at this rate. I thought she'd still do it, in a "somebody must, and if not her, who?" reflection like we've seen in the North and the West, but now it's looking like Akua is very intentionally not going to do that... so she'll be as surprised as cat when somebody (or possibly a citywide riot of somebodies) comes to her second court with a bloody crown in hand and says "We've done what had to be done. What is your first command Empress?" Possibly followed by a frantic Akua going "No! No! I am not your Dread Empress now or ever!" and somebody says something like "Of course you aren't, you are the People's Empress." or something else lighter sounding and suddenly she's got a Name (it won't be Dread Empress whatever it is, she'd have heard the song) and it's entirely the wrong one for Cat's plans. I'm thinking it might actually be a hero name, making her completely useless as an eternal guardian.

Long term everybody remembers Akua as the greatest hero who heralded in the new age by killing the Dead King. There's a big giant statue of her in Cardinal with the epigraph "What the fuck is wrong with you people?! Stop praising me!" Scholars have had an ongoing debate on if the Unbeatable Queen Abigail was intentionally quoting her as an expression of her own humility when she ended up with the exact same epigraph on her statue, or if there was something more between them that this made a subtle reference to.

I actually do ship this now. Abigail and Akua both find the same corner to hide in at some celebratory banquet after the war, look at each other's faces, ask at the same time "Are you a piece of shit and nobody else can see it to ?" and collapsing in each other's arms, crying. The subsequent relationship is very soothing to the soul and horrendously taxing on the two women's livers.

Raved Thrad

Akuagail FTW! And for the lulz!

Unless something horrible happens (nuu, not Vivs!) I doubt Abigail is going to end up Queen anywhere, so my bet is that she ends up Castellan and consort (or maybe just Consort) to People's Empress Akua I.

Razorfloss

This is way to appropriate right now <https://youtu.be/oRozBAIbaG4>

jamesc9

Seems like flashman, from the novels written in the corner of john brown's schooldays.

Cheetah724

MOOD KINDRED!!

Insanenoodlyguy

That was the inspiration, absolutely.

Agent J

I mean, I don't think Abigail is a piece of shit. Just chronically averse to anything resembling responsibility. And, hey, mood.

Zach

Cat is doomed to get owned because she's revealing *way* too much about her plans to the reader. I'm sure she'll come out ahead in the end (because otherwise the story wouldn't be able to continue), but her plans are definitely not going to work out as expected.

Miles

I think the likelihood of an "* Ex Machina" name is increasing.

Akua gets this great story of a former villain fully turned around and redeemed, going good for her local town, and at the very end a Diablos Ex Machina shows up to stab her in the large intestines, because redeemed villains have to die at the end of their story.

[Hargabga](#)

Despite what everyone seems to think about redemptions, it is wildly... impractical to have the redeemed die after turning coat. There is so much good they can do after... switching sides, it seems almost... wasteful.

Linnus42

Yeah Redemption Equals Death Occurs. But that is normally when someone gets redeemed during a Fight or right before a Major Fight. Not out of combat situations. So could Akua die fighting against DK sure maybe, do I think she is randomly going to die right after being put in charge of Praes unlikely.

Flameburst

Die, or be eternally punished. Maybe cat's plan is going to work despite us knowing about it.

[Hargabga](#)

So interesting, how Cat's plan gonna go after she gives noble support to... Aqua? Like, she fully believes Ubua won't actually... climb the Tower, but what then is the plan? What, does she think our Fleishy Ghost will just... surrender to her?

Linnus42

Yeah Cat has no idea how much Akua has changed. She has Nim lol onside.

Forgot_My_Name

It's amusing because right now Akua is essentially a spanner in the works. She keeps blindsiding both Malicia and Catherine by basically doing nothing at all. And at least part of that is her minion rescuing her just to fuck with her.

How droll that Cat's over-elaborate Callowan revenge scheme got co-opted for someone less-so-but-still-overelaborate callowan-style revenge plot.

Juff

Typo Thread:

towards at my back > towards my back
take a dart > taken a dart
thought breathing > thought, breathing
been a while one > been a while since one
retaliate," I said. " > retaliate," I said.
all a reports > all reports
That was she could > That was so she could
needed overwhelm > needed to overwhelm
looming person > looming presence
combine force > combined force
two Muraqib > two Muraqibs
Akusm > Aksum

Dave

Also
Eyes > eye

ohJohN

goddamned > godsdamned (x2)

Shveiran

I realize this is a bit ranty, but I gotta say that these developments leave me really queasy.
I... really don't like where Akua's plotline seems to be going.

I'm not one of the, shall we say, Long Price crowd. I'm not disappointed it seems unlikely she won't be tickled for a thousand years by tapir poets or whatever. It's just that I don't want her actions to be glossed over.

It's not really about her being in pain; if nothing else, she already is. It's the... framing of it that leaves me constantly disappointed.

I see her exhausting herself to heal sick and wounded and think: a month ago, she was murdering allies. What changed?

I see her saving Nim from the Pattern of Three and think: a month ago, she was betraying allies to the pro-apocalypse faction. What changed?

I see her counseling the Black Knight and the nobles and think: you have no idea what you are doing, or why. What is this building toward?

And it's not just that the crowd cheers, the crowd is scared and lost. And it's not just how Cat thinks about it.

It's ... well, it's the text. The Akua interludes, which seems pointed a making her feel sympathetic. And they... feel kind of insulting, really.

Because they dissonate too much with all that went on with Saint, and all that happened since. Because allowing people to be redeemed is IMPORTANT. It is not just elves and warlocks, it's a very important debate in the western world's justice system, and

this is starting to look like just what its detractors accuse it of being: a slap on the wrist of murderers that will kill again, a chance taken on people that don't deserve it. A risk to everyone else who did nothing wrong and deserves better. No matter what she does now, I feel like everyone that thinks redemption is too risky can just point to the bodies Akua left in the desert and say "tell those guys, that we shouldn't lock criminals up and forget about them." It doesn't matter, that she could have killed twice as many. What matters is that she still chose to kill them.

And this is not addressed.

She sits there, healing orphans, and all I can see are the bodies drying in the desert, or the undead tide growing ever closer to eating the world. And she looks, at best, like a damned Proceran Prince, which would be bad enough after all of this, and more likely worse because at least the Idiots In Cleves were not stupid enough to betray their allies before the war was over.

And Akua is tied into everything else, the plans with the Bard, and Malicia, and Amadeus, and it just spoils everything.

For me, that is.

I realize, reading the comments, that this is likely just me. Probably because this theme is very important to me and I've got a lot of hang-ups about it.

But I just wanted to get it off my chest.

ninegardens

Clearly and reasonably worded... or at least as clearly as something this... tangly(?) can be worded. Nicely done.

No real agree or disagree, or feedback.

I think...

This is dumb, but I don't come to PGtE for the themes. There's too much approval of the "Hard men making Hard Choices" doctrine for me to really buy into the story as a thematic work. And... I don't think it's trying to be that? It's trying to be a story, a myth, a hilarious fun time. We are running on Rule of Cool and Rule of Funny here- not on "rule of themes", and definitely not "rule of morality".

None of this disagrees with or is meant to invalidate your quesyness here, I'm just... mostly ranting about something completely unrelated that your post got me thinking about.

Linnus42

I mean I think part of this is Akua is in Praes and interacting with Praesi. They don't care she killed a bunch of Callowans. They care what she can do for them now for the most part.

As for redemption arcs tricky to write especially in gray storylines.

Shveiran

True, but as I said I don't really mind the part where the Praesi crowd adores her.

It's more the general tone of it. Like she is becoming some sort of martyr. And I was on board with that before she committed mass murder and betrayed everyone that could be betrayed like, 5 minutes ago.

hue hue

That's kinda of the point? Those who know akua never forgiven her, she herself knows that her actions are meaningless, that no matter much are saved the dead still pile like a mountain.

Shveiran

I'm not sure I understand your statement.
What exactly is "kind of the point?" That the story portrays her as someone I should feel bad about even as she lapses back into betrayal, madness and casual murder?

Everyton Nothington

I can see where you're coming from, and while I don't entirely agree in this case, also dislike the trend of redeeming irredeemable characters.

In Akua's case I agree that she should not get a happy ending. But I think it is an interesting choice to make her sympathetic. She still isn't a good person, what she does is still for selfish reasons, it just happens to have positive effects this time. But it lets me imagine some of the hopelessness she would feel, if she weren't I wouldn't care much about her story. Usually in books, sympathetic villains get a happy ending. I don't think it will happen this time, which I think is an interesting subversion.

Rant about politics in fantasy in general below, beware.

There is a trend in fantasy novels of glorifying authoritarianism. Not intentionally necessarily, but as a consequence of using a medieval-like settings and not examining the message certain plot lines send.

This book falls into this trap as well, although to a lesser degree than some. I was happily surprised when the soldiers deserted as an example. In most fantasy stories the general public is shown to be either useless or a hindrance due to incompetence. Either not being able to take care of themselves,

or rioting because they panic or are tricked into panicking. This is not supported by fact, in general during times of strife, people come together (except those in power who panic and make bad decisions as they are the ones with the most to lose). This can be seen in cities where large scale terror bombings happen, or where natural disasters like hurricane Katrina occurs.

This is the standard of large scale fantasy stories.

"It's not that having an autocrat is a bad idea, it's that we have the wrong autocrat that is causing the problem" paraphrasing a 'bit', but that's usually the message. It can also be seen as "it's not a systemic problem, it's an individual problem". And while I don't think authors are obligated to have a nuanced take on real world politics, I think the most interesting stories have allegories to real world issues.

I won't go into specifics as I don't want to spoil the story, but there is a popular fantasy series where it is revealed in a flashback, one of the main characters committed genocide, and the consequence is that he feels bad about it afterward mostly because someone they care about was also killed accidentally, and changes as a person to someone who thinks killing people for no reason is... bad.

And sure, the character comes from a culture where warfare and bloodthirst is encouraged, but the author still had a choice in creating the culture, and the character. They could have made the same kind of character where they had done something less unjustifiable.

I still enjoy reading fantasy, but the prevalence of unexamined authoritarianism in fantasy gets harder to ignore when the messaging aligns with some alarming real world political trends.

AbraKadabra

I call bullshit on that. Projecting democratic ideas into a medieval environment is just a useless thought exercise. Why? Because those people had NO IDEA that those ideas even exist or will exist in the future.

Everyton Nothington

I'm not saying that fantasy series needs to portray democratic societies. But I think it could be interesting to see a wider spectrum of systems of governance explored. As an example, fantasy often involves magic, but usually only examines how the power divide would be widened. Not that the system needs to be based on the settings magic either, but magic could also even the power imbalance depending on how and when it can be gained.

But thats not realy what I am complaining about, my main issue is whith how commonly I see having a single powerful individual in charge portraied as good and preferable whitout any critical examination. And how often larger structures of descision making, like councils are always portraied as indecisive and slow while never examining why you might want those things.

Its not realy a single work of fiction that I have a problem with, its that there is almost no alternate type of setting or worldview portraid in fantasy that I dislike.

Hargabga

I think you are... partially right. But do keep in mind that it may be just your hang ups worsening the plotline. Remember, if you are uncomfortable with how it is going now, it maybe a good idea to... take a break for a month, and return when Akua ark is finished or at least given a definitive direction.

I however, want to ask: what do you want to be done with Aqua, tone/plotwise?

KiltedBastich

There is, in the real world and in the story, a huge difference between killing enemy soldiers during a tactical engagement and massacring civilians. I mean, by that logic, do the Praesi soldiers that Cat is killing not count against Cat, too? We don't try generals for mass murder, we give them medals for a successful campaign.

The problematic part was Akua turning her coat in the first place, and we know from Cat's viewpoint this is according to plan. Akua was reacting mostly on emotion and instinct, not reason, and that was also according to plan.

From the perspective of those new loyalties, the Callowan army is the enemy, it's war, and you kill enemy soldiers during a war. That's why war is terrible. That Akua's minimizing casualties rather than engaging in slaughter for its own sake is a telling development. That she is killing soldiers that are the enemies of the faction she just joined is not. She was going to be killing people during a war either way.

This is a Contrition story. Akua is a monster who has committed unforgivable sins, who is trying to come to terms with the realization of the consequences of those sins. She will never be forgiven, and she will suffer eternally for it, but because of her new perspective, she's going to do what she can to make things a little better with the time she has left anyhow, because anything less only makes it worse for her. Her choices are suffer more by going back to what she was but with her eyes

open, or suffer a little less by engaging in inadequate but not completely futile attempts at restitution. It is a tragedy that is entirely of her own making.

jamesc9

> It is a tragedy that is entirely of her own making.

The smashing of the clay figurines was her action. Her mother taught her that they were clay figurines and not people.

Zach

I don't really understand the point you're making here. It's possible for Akua to change as a person while still having committed unforgivable crimes, and it's not particularly strange that she has. Seeing the people in Ater made things hit home more than anything else because 1. they were the direct results of her own pointless actions and (probably most importantly) 2. they were her own people.

Her recent military actions against the Army of Callow are also not remotely the same as the things she did in the past for several reasons. They were essentially fair acts of war done against a military, and they were done in a very "remote" way where she didn't have to see the results up close (and even then, she still felt bad about it). Still bad, but not really beyond the sort of thing Catherine or other members of the Woe have done countless times.

Her having this sort of change is not that unreasonable or strange. She was raised to not care about other people, and had her perspective change through spending years with Catherine, etc. Unfortunately for her, she did some unforgivably bad stuff before having the opportunity to change. The whole point of Catherine's "punishment" is that, simply by making Akua grow a conscience, she has damned her, because no one with a conscience could ever be happy knowing they've done the sort of things Akua has.

Reader in the Night

I empathize with a lot of what you're saying here, but I think your primary mistake was comparing Akua's situation to anything resembling a modern judicial system. A large part of attempting to rehabilitate individuals is actually giving them the hope that if they do the time and play by the rules, they can actually earn forgiveness (if not from the victim, then from society at large). Akua gets none of that, Cat ran a years-long Gaslighting campaign designed to ultimately convince her that she isn't worthy of redemption and never will be.

So Akua does the only thing she knows how to do, betray her and go back to the only people who will tell her she's not an un-person. Only, she can't be happy there either, because Cat is still in her head.

Ultimately, in any sane judicial system, Akua would have earned either death or multiple million consecutive life sentences, and that would still have been kinder than what Cat did. Akua's punishment has no resemblance to any modern system of punishment, it most closely resembles A Clockwork Orange: A genuinely horrible person brainwashed into finding violence abhorrent, and then released back into that same evil environment, only this time to suffer and be tormented.

ohJohN

As for what changed, I think it comes down to Cat's plans for her: the betrayal was expected, as was that it would be like ash in Akua's mouth. The whole point is that she would defect, go back to old habits, and find that it was no longer bearable with her newly-grown conscience.

So she had **already** changed internally, and the difference now is she gained proof that – even without hope of ever returning to Cat's campfire – she can no longer stomach her old ways. That's why she decided to try healing people instead of backstabbing them, because she just learned that backstabbing feels like shit regardless.

It still seems a bit odd to me to get hung up on her marginally affecting casualties in battles between professional soldiers that would have been fought regardless; I'd be more convinced by "well, she's healing the sick, but it'll never balance out 100k civilian souls" than "well, she's healing the sick, but wasn't she recently fighting the army we care more about as gently as possible?"

Wonder

With all the rumors going around about Akua and Cat sharing a bed, It wouldn't take a long time for rumors of Cat fighting Malicia for Akua's Throne claiming to circulate. Or have they?

What name would Dread Empress Akua have after successfully being made Empress by her liver The Black Queen?

Agent J

Akua: You are my heart.

Cat: No, I'm your liver. **stab**

axusgrad

I'm glad we can make fun of dramatic pauses now.

nimelennar

Dread Shoemaker Irritant remains the best Dread Shoemaker.

Someperson

Considering Akua has lately been angered by the fact that everyone is supporting her when they really shouldn't be, I have to imagine her reaction to Abreha and co suddenly flocking to her cause will be... something.

Interlude: A Tower No One Could Claim

"You ask me why I never sought to claim the Tower. I ask you in turn: what great sin have I wrought, that I would deserve such a punishment as to hold it?"

– Kayode Owusu, Warlock under Dread Emperors Vindictive
I and Nihilis

Akua's shielding spell snapped in place just in time for the stone to bounce off it, rolling on the street as behind her the wall finished collapsing ahead of her. The horses had been spooked by the noise, but she was a skilled enough rider to keep her mount from acting out – some others were not, a few youths even being thrown off. A second look told her that no one seemed to have died, which made this one of the least lethal assassination attempts she'd ever been subjected to. That made it all the more ironic this had been the closest anyone had gotten since she'd come to Ater. The golden-eyed sorceress set aside the thought, shifting in her saddle to welcome the presence of the man riding up to her side.

"That seems a little *too* unfortunate an accident," High Lord Jaheem idly said.

"It was no such thing," Akua replied.

He shot her a considering look.

"You reined in your horse before the wall broke," he noted.

"For the same reason I know it was not an accident," Akua said. "I caught the scent of demolition charges."

And she knew the scent well. There had been a time where Special Tribune Robber had delighted in rubbing just enough powder in parts of her tent that the smell would stick and her subconscious mind wouldn't allow her to untense. If she'd actually needed to sleep as a shade, it would have driven her to a breakdown in a matter of months. The goblin had been an artist in matters of malignance, for all his generally unpleasant demeanour. High Lord Jaheem was impressed, though he should not have been or at least have hidden it better.

"Her Dread Majesty or Wither herself, then," Jaheem Niri mused. "A heady compliment."

Akua smiled, more at his reference to the famous line from 'Maleficent the Great' – *if a woman is to be known by the quality of her enemies, is it not a heady compliment to be at war with all the world?* – than the flattery. The High Lord of Okoro was known as a well-read man, fond of theatre and the classics. He'd continued to attend public theatre even after enemies tried to kill him at such performances twice.

"Wither. This isn't Malicia's sort of knife."

High Lady Takisha Muraqib of Kahtan had cut into the conversation with what some might consider rudeness, but though High Lord Jaheem dislike her he let the affront pass without comment. It was not the first time and he was not the first to do so. Takisha's face had grown hard and her temper foul since the Assassin had slain her husband. She'd been fond of the man, overly so by the standards of proper nobility.

"It seems the more likely of the two," Akua conceded.

Sappers had done this, or at least people with sapper training. Trying to kill her with a collapsing wall required delicate timing and knowledge of goblin munitions that few who had not been in the Legions possessed.

"You always see goblin hands behind everything," High Lord Jaheem scorned. "And no wonder why. If you had your way we'd break our armies in the Hungering Sands so your thirdborn can rule Foramen under you."

"Matron Wither was part of the rebels that seized the city and exterminated the Banu," High Lord Takisha flatly replied. "Of course she needs to be deposed, it was a mark of Malicia's decline that it was ever otherwise. And as for rule, well, who has the blood for such a title now save the Muraqib?"

Akua understood well the nature of this conversation and the hundred others like it she had heard over the last two weeks. Malicia's fall had been considered set in stone – ah, foolishness – even before two High Seats had defected from Catherine's cause

to Akua's – highly dubious – so instead of scheming to seize the Tower the highest of the highborn were now fighting over another prize. Namely, who was to be Akua's own Chancellor when she became Dread Empress. It was considered natural and self-evident that a Sahelian of the old blood would end the *absurd* decree making it high treason to hold or claim such a Name, regardless of Akua never having made such a promise.

So now the vultures showed off their plumage with little displays like this conversation, pecking at each other's heads so that one might emerge as the natural candidate to be Akua's treacherous right hand.

"High Lady Wither can wait," Akua said, tone a tad short. "We came here for a reason."

She spurred her horse forward, keeping her irritation away from her face. Such politicking did not make her kind better or worse than any other highborn of Calernia. She knew this. It still stuck in her throat that the High Seats would continue these games without batting an eye when a battle had very nearly been lost to the Army of Callow the day before, thousands of levies been mercilessly mowed down. Some of the lords and ladies on the field had been embarrassed by the way their conscripts had broken, but it was not the farmers and traders in shoddy armour that Akua was embarrassed of.

What worth, what pride was there in dying on a field for someone who would not bat an eye at continuing to scheme before your body had finished cooling?

Yesterday's wounded had been allowed into the city against the Empress' orders, though not the rest of the private armies, and considering how undermanned the capital's defences were it had seemed sensible to both Akua and the Black Knight that empty barracks be turned into makeshift hospitals. She'd had to fight tooth and nail with the same nobles who claimed to support her to organize a rotation of mage healers that would see to everyone instead of simply each lord's own wounded – if even that – and it was only after Marshal Nim shamed the entire nobility of the Wasteland by sending Legion healers first that finally they gave in.

It would have been a public embarrassment otherwise, and once again Akua's reputation rose with the nobility for having had the 'foresight to try to spare them such a thing'. She'd bit her lip in frustration until she could feel blood against her tongue. Every time she thought she had finally found the thread she could pull at to undo the knot, she found instead that she was tightening the noose. How long would it take, before she felt the rope around her neck and there was no choice left save the drop? Her fingers closed around the reins at the prospect. They wanted to make her empress. Dread Empress Magnificent, Akua had once

fancied she might be called. She'd had plans, dreams. Now it was all within hand's reach and she felt only fear for what she might have once acclaimed a triumph.

Her ever-present shadow led his horse to her side, leaning close.

"They would burn this entire city and all in it for power over each other," Kendi whispered. "It is only a matter of time until instead they burn *you*."

Akua looked up at the stormy skies, the clouds roiling high above around the Tower. They were never far. The honest words of a man who hated her, who wanted the worst for her, had become oddly soothing. She could count on Kendi Akaze to be exactly what he claimed to be, and that was a startlingly precious thing of late. Their party made good time to the northern districts, where a token force of legionaries kept an eye on the barracks now filled with the wounded and the dying. Akua had already spent hours there this morning, but it was not for the living she had now come. Instead she rode further still to the great plaza where oil-drenched wood rose in great piles.

Above those waited corpses, thousands of them.

High Lord Dakarai Sahel, who along with Abreha Mirembe had already been there, sought her company.

"It was cleverly done, arranging for the bodies to be brought here," the High Lord of Nok said. "There are not many occasions aside from court where we would all gather, but who could afford to miss this?"

"It might have been for the best if you did, Dakarai," High Lady Takisha cut in.

Akua's brow rose ever so slightly. Others would make allowances for grief, but Takisha was being unusually bold today. Interrupting not one but two conversations with peer nobles? Akua herself might find offence in that, not just the High Lady's rivals. *You have something afoot*, the sorceress thought. *You are willing to risk my irritation now because you believe your boldness will pay off elsewhere soon and my memory of irritation will be transmuted to appreciation in retrospect.*

"Takisha," the High Lord of Nok gently said. "My condolences."

The other woman's face slacked with surprise.

"It must be galling, owing your life to Abreha and I," he continued.

Surprise turned to fury and mentally Akua tallied a strike on Dakarai's side of the board. It'd been an elegant bit of cruelty,

turning implied condolences for her husband's death to an open slap in the face. Takisha replied with a weaker barb about the Ashuran sack of Nok before beating a retreat, not because she was cowed but because she was having difficulty controlling her anger. Golden eyes turned to the High Lord of Nok, who was smiling pleasantly.

"I have a question, my lord, if you will," Akua idly said.

"I have sworn to see you climb the Tower, my lady," Dakarai replied. "I would deny you nothing, much less a question."

"That is pleasantly to hear," she smiled. "You will not mind, then, telling me what Catherine planned when she ordered you to betray her."

He looked at her with convincing surprise.

"Caution is only to be expected," High Lord Dakarai regretfully said, "but I will convince you of my sincerity in time. I had hoped that saving your cause on the field yesterday would win me some trust, but perhaps that is premature."

Akua eyed him for a moment, then let out a few rich chuckles.

"My lord of Nok," she said, "I once saw her order an unconditional surrender of her armies in the middle of a battle just so that she could *win in the exact way she wanted*. And Abreha's claim to have found mages that could free her of the Night is patently absurd, given that I am fairly certain to lesser goddesses intervened directly in her raising as undead."

She patted his arm fondly.

"Of course she sent you," Akua said. "Mostly likely ordered you to support me as well. So what is it she's after – opening gates to her armies or switching sides halfway through the battle?"

Seeing she would not be convinced, the High Lord of Nok changed his angle of approach.

"Even if there had been such a scheme," Dakarai Sahel said, "would I be bound to it when out of her sight?"

He glanced at the pyres and the gathering crowd around them.

"You would rule well, I think," the High Lord said. "Better than most. And we will need such a tyrant in the years to come. The world is... not what it used to be. It is larger, and much less patient of our foibles."

Akua considered the older man, still handsome for all his grey hair.

"I had thought, once, to rise from the fields of Liesse an empress of empresses," she said. "Triumphant come anew, magnificent in my wrath."

"Nothing is writ until the book is closed," Dakarai said. "I have spent over half my life failing, Lady Akua. Failing to shake off Thalassina's yoke, to become more than a second-rater among the Truebloods, to keep the Ashurans from sacking my city."

He half-smiled.

"But the book is not yet closed," he said. "The Doom did not bury you. Why give it power it did not earn?"

Because it did bury me, Akua thought. I thought even failing would be a magnificent act, that my pride would shake the Heavens for an hour and it would be enough, but our stories all end when the tyrant dies. On the last defiant, maddened cry of rage. Instead she had been made to live through her folly. To sift through the ashes of a thousand dead, to see the horror of her doom ripple across the world. She'd been made to look soldiers in the eye, to see under the helmets. And now, returned to her cradle, she could not unsee it. Death was an end, for her and them. But she'd walked the hospitals now, the crying and weeping and the pain. Glimpsed the colossal number of lives, of families, she had ruined for... what?

What would the Heavens hear, a million screams or a single vainglorious shout? It'd been empty from the start. All she had left was the enormity of what she had done, and she was drowning in it.

"I give the Doom nothing," Akua Sahelian quietly replied.

That had been the lesson of the years that followed it. Even if she saved a hundred thousand lives, it would not even the balance. What she had done to Liesse was not something that could be bought off, bargained over with angels as she had once bargained with devils. Akua gave the Doom nothing because there was nothing she *could* give. It was not an act that could be redeemed. And in the bleakness of that realization she had come home, for where else could she go, but she hadn't. Not really. Home was not what she remembered it to be. She had been gone too long, now, forgot the ways of the Wasteland. They were no longer sweet against her tongue.

Now it would be a prison to be Dread Empress. A lifetime of clawing at the walls around her, bloodying her fingers trying to change the nature of stone. Back in the dark, in the cloak, only there would be *no way out*.

"We will speak again," she told the High Lord, voice gone hoarse.

She was meant to speak to the assembled nobles and soldiers, to start the pyre personally. It was a good enough excuse to leave. Kendi watched her in silence, eyes smiling. He only kept silent when he knew she had already spoken worse to herself, smelling it out like a bloodhound. Like a petty thief headed for the noose, Akua walked forward. Unthinking, outside herself, as if someone else was moving her body. As if someone else was winning the Tower for her. Already she could be said to have control of all Ater save the Tower and the district around it, the run of the city, and only caution over the Tower's ancient arsenal had prevented an attempt to seize it by force.

Speaking here today would be the first step of her climb. Her backers were pushing for a formal session of the imperial court, which they wanted to use to force down Malicia and coronate Akua Sahelian as Dread Empress of Praes. All she needed to do was whip these nobles and soldiers into a frenzy, to get them screaming the empress to give answer to her empire. Akua climbed the dais raised for that very purpose, standing tall and hollow, but at her feet there was a scuffle. High Lady Takisha Muraqib's retinue was pushing aside everyone else, clearing a space for the ruler of Kahtan at Akua's feet. The Taghreb noble had a hard, blazing look in her eyes as came to stand below the dark-skinned sorceress.

Takisha's scheme had borne fruit, Akua thought. It was now ready to be revealed.

"My lady Sahelian, I apologize for the disorder but I have news for you that cannot be delayed," the High Lady called out, voice resounding.

Bespelled so that it could be heard even from the back, Akua noted.

"Speak, then," she idly ordered.

"As of a half hour ago, my agents seized the weather-controlling artefacts of the Tower in your name," Takisha said. "Soon the rest of the Tower will follow, and we can-"

Thunder rolled. The clouds around the Tower had turned black and were spreading out, crackling with red lightning. A heartbeat of stillness. A flash of red struck a tall house in the middle of capital, blowing it up in a flash of red flames. The winds began to howl, growing in strength. Hail like black and hardened rocks began to fall in sheets, covering swaths of the city, and in the chaos Akua looked up at the roiling darkness.

"It can be hard, Malicia, can it not?" she murmured. "To tell the difference between a knot and a noose."

"Answer me," she Spoke.

A year ago, Malicia would not have needed to make a sound. Her power had weakened, grown shallower. *Or perhaps I never grasped how strongly I relied on Rule when Speaking*, she thought. Unfortunate as it was that she had not been able to map out the weaknesses of her aspect properly, it was not something that could truly be tested. The young Soninke lord before her choked for a moment, but then his tense shoulders loosened and he began to talk.

"She sneaks out to drink with her foster sister every few days," he said. "They've been doing it for years. The guards let it happen so long as they don't leave the boundary wards."

Malicia flicked a glance at Ime, whose ageing face was furrowed in thought.

"We'll have to burn a sleeper to get to her there," the spymistress finally said. "Dakarai has been very careful with his camp's defences since changing sides."

The empress did not even hesitate. Now was not the time to balk at burning assets.

"Arrange it," Malicia ordered. "You know whom to implicate."

"That will be much easier," Ime snorted. "Even after Abreha's purges her camp remains a leaking sieve."

It had made Sepulchral a manageable threat, in those days where the High Lady of Aksum – illegally now, given her state of undeath – had been an empress-claimant. Malicia would not have risked allowing or stretching out a rebellion against if she had not been certain that she could not kill her would-be usurper whenever she desired. Sanaa Mirembé's failed coup at Kala had been a stinging blow, given that it might have swung the victory there the other way, but her aunt's culling of the young girl's supporters when she returned from the grave had not caught all of the empress' agents.

Even now, only the very highest secrecy in the Aksum camp remained beyond to Malicia's eyes and ears.

"I'll see if I can ease your way a tad more," Malicia smiled, crouching before the bound man.

Her aspect pulse in her, slowly gaining in power as it fully unfolded. It felt like sliding on gloves, though to Alaya's anger it was a tighter fit than it'd once been. Yet her **Rule** had not been toppled, and it was enough. The young lord's mind felt like clay under her ghostly fingers, but she must be careful. Carelessness would just shatter his mind. Instead Malicia shaped

her will, her order, and slid it into his mind like the slenderest of needles. Never to be noticed until it was pressed against. When the Dread Empress opened her eyes, which she did not recall closing, she rose from her crouch slightly out of breath.

"He will signal one of the Eyes the moment he's aware of the girl sneaking out," Malicia said. "Focus on preparing the assets."

Ime nodded, looking pleased, but as **Connect** flickered to life Malicia saw that this was not entirely true. Her spymistress truly was pleased, but it was a small thing compared to her worry.

"You have concerns," the Dread Empress said.

Ime did not quite manage to smother the surprise out of her eyes.

"I do, though not about this particular plot," the spymistress said. "May I speak freely?"

Malicia glanced at the young lord, whose eyes were already focused anew. He would need either full turning or a memory scramble before he was released back to the Okoro camp, but either way it was a needless risk to keep speaking in front of him.

"Outside," the empress said. "Our friend here still needs attending to."

Ime nodded, the two of them leaving the comfortable cell in the middle levels of the Tower. The spymistress disappeared long enough to pass to her subordinates the necessary orders before returning to Malicia's side, the two of them briskly heading to one of the sky rooms. Dread Empress Sanguinia had not indulged in the sort of grandiose building projects that many of her contemporaries had, but she had liked to eat her meal with views of Ater splayed out below her. Only two of sky rooms she'd built for that purpose had survived the fall of the Tower after the First Crusade and they were no longer used for that purpose but the very skilled wardwork keeping them protected *had* remained largely intact.

It was a good place to speak, even if the view was... temporarily indisposed.

Baiting Takisha to make a play for the Cloud Engines had taken longer than Malicia would have liked, but it had turned out exactly as planned. The High Lady of Kahtan had spent most of her hidden pieces in the Tower and badly failed at achieving her objective. Even worse, the empress had ensured that the few survivors who'd managed to flee would report that it was Takisha's men who had damaged the Engines during the fighting and

so unleashed the brutal storm still ravaging Ater and its surroundings. It had been days since the failed coup, and still the gales and lightning struck with wrath. There had been snow, hail, acidic rains and winds so scorching they burned the skin. Hundreds if not thousands had died in Ater, the entire capital grinding down to a halt.

High Lady Takisha was probably the most despised woman in the city at the moment, and that was just the beginning of her troubles. When Malicia had ordered her mages to ensure the Cloud Engines were unleashed under the pretext of some cosmetic damage, she'd ensured that the red lightning would strike a particular target: the tent of the eldest son of High Lord Jaheem Niri, the man's wife and their two children. None had survived, and so dearest Akua had spent most of the last few days trying to ensure that two of her most prominent supporters did not begin a war of their own. Had she begun to feel the weight, Malicia wondered? Had it begun to sink in that once you had the support of the High Seats, you then had to *keep the High Seats happy*?

The dark sky with crackling red light was only the beginning of it all, Malicia thought as she looked through the great enchanted windows.

"I feel like some of the plans we're going forward with are overly risky," Ime said the moment the door closed and the wards hummed.

"We can handle the High Seats," Malicia replied, frowning. "That they have all essentially abandoned our cause frees us to act without many of our old restraints."

It had been difficult to arrange such a wholesale desertion, but it had worked. Alaya had found it hard to bear to send out the Sentinels to brutally put down the riot she'd set up, but the results spoke for themselves: with most of the city turning against her, the High Seats had followed suit. Amends could be made to Ater after this all came to an end, she told herself. If she was to live to see a new moon, she needed Akua Sahelian put forward as Dread Empress at just the right time.

"Our operations to break relations between the High Seats are calculated risks," Ime stated. "Some of them are riskier than others – Sargon could react like a cornered rat if he figures out our involvement – but I can live with the risks. It's the other plan I have issues with."

"Working with the Intercessor," Malicia said.

"Devils make contracts," Ime shrugged. "That is the way of things. We make the bargains we must. Yet what you two have been doing is dangerous to your reign."

"Delaying until the orcs arrive is necessary," the empress said. "The Bard insists it must be threefold motif and near every scrap of namelore I have found indicates she is not inventing the requirement. We have already thrown the goblins at her and soon the separatists will make contact. We need the Clans to close the loop."

"I'm not happy about the separatists either, to be frank," the spymistress said. "There's always been sentiment in the Green Stretch, but it's never been this well organized. Too many deserters settled down there, Malicia. They have former officers and fighting men now, not just farmers. If the Black Queen takes does decide to sponsor the Green Stretch seceding, I'm uncomfortable at the idea that it might *stick*."

"The sponsorship of a corpse means nothing," Malicia said. "And we both know Vivienne Dartwick will not go to war over the Green Stretch."

"The lack of long-term consequences relies on the assumption of our success," Ime insisted. "Let's say both you and the Black Queen live. She backs the secession, and it happens in the months after we've thoroughly destroyed relations between most High Seats."

Malicia's brow creased.

"You worry there is a risk that more secessions could follow, given that my authority will be weak for the first few years following this," she finally said.

"It's a possibility we can't just dismiss," Ime said.

And she was right, in the sense that the risk existed, but that did not matter. To avoid taking the lesser long-term risk, a larger short-term risk had to be taken instead. And given that in the first instance trouble would be for the Empire and in the second it was Alaya's life on the line, the choice made itself.

"Lost provinces can be taken back," Malicia finally said. "Such setback would not be permanent."

"We still don't know where the orcs will fall in all this," Ime quietly said. "They have a Warlord and we know it's not Troke, so they're difficult to predict. We are looking at a very volatile situation that could potentially result in permanent losses for the Dread Empire, Your Majesty. All this to follow the nebulous plan of an entity we cannot trust and have no real leverage over. I urge you to reconsider."

And Malicia did, for a moment, but the reasons why she had made the decision had not changed. The Intercessor was a snake, but she was a snake who wanted Catherine Foundling dead – and the

main thrust of that method of killing was to bury the Black Queen in regional disputes so that it would become the shape of her Role. A shape that could then be exploited to kill her in the moments that followed, though Malicia suspected around then would be when the Bard betrayed her. She had prepared accordingly. Until then, the disputes had to be put forward to the Black Queen and that meant following through regardless of the risks.

To hesitate here meant death.

"I understand your concerns," Malicia said, "but I stand by the decision."

Ime slowly nodded, face unreadable. The Dread Empress slid her will into **Connect**, but the aspect only flickered weakly. All she glimpsed was a vague sense of disappointment, with no real idea of the depth of it. Malicia would have to try this again later to be sure her spymistress' loyalty remained firm.

"So long as you are aware of my concerns," Ime said, bowing. "I'll take my leave, Your Majesty. There is much work to do."

Malicia nodded her goodbye, remaining before the window as the other woman left the room. The storms still raged under her calm gaze, and it would continue to do so until almost two weeks had passed. So her mages had promised. Once the Clans were close enough it would pass and the last dance could begin. Two weeks would be all that Dread Empress Malicia would need to gore the 'alliance' behind Akua Sahelian. Already Kahtan and Okoro were at odds, but that was only a start. High Lord Dakarai would turn on Abreha when his favourite daughter – Isoba Mirembe's wife – was assassinated seemingly at Sanaa Mirembe's order, as it was certain the High Lady of Aksum would not punish her favoured heir for something she had not done.

Then Sargon Sahelian would catch goblin infiltrators selling the ward schematics of his personal sleeping tent to agents of High Lord Jaheem Niri, burning two bridges at once with the spectre of Wither and Jaheem clasping hands to assassinate him. High Lord Dakarai had already begun to try buying the support of some of Kahtan's more powerful vassals in his quest to become Chancellor, it would be child's play to have him caught by some of Takisha's agents – and it would play on the High Lady's worst fear, that the grand Taghreb coalition behind her was already falling apart.

Meanwhile of them were going to have incidents with the Legions, which would be much easier to arrange now that Akua had gone 'against Malicia's will' to bring private soldiers into the city and into Legion barracks. The Black Knight was wavering, but soon enough the Legions would be reminded of why they had steered clear of the High Seats for so long. And while everyone bit and everyone bled, Dread Empress Malicia would stoke the hunger with the prize she'd put on the table by making her cause seem

finished: the position of Chancellor. It was in the nature of Praesi to begin squabbling over the spoils the moment victory was in sight.

So she'd dragged it into sight.

"It will work," Alaya whispered to the storm. "Hour by hour I will pull at the knots keeping me bound, you will only know I have won when you feel the noose around your neck."

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Insanenoodlyguy

"The Primal Hunter was part of the opposition that seized the topwebficition board and exterminated the Practical Guide to Evil's top slot," High Lord Takisha flatly replied. "Of course it needs to be deposed, it was a mark of voters's decline that it was ever otherwise."

Sanepastafellow

Really? Ontop of the controversial (I find it annoying among many others) practice of reframing some text into a clunky urge to vote, you're also trashing on another story (one I personally like)? That's just...lame on so many levels

Sanepastafellow

It's just not cool to be trashing on another authors work even if it's a 'rival's in the ratings. Lift each other up dude, not be annoying and while also trying to drag people down

Shveiran

This sounds like trashing to you? Good grief, man, take a joke.

I wasn't even aware Primal Hunter was a thing, and now I am going to check it out.

Miles

Primal Hunter was not a story I was aware of. Good reminder that it's been long enough for other stories to be on there.

And apparently it's good enough to maybe beat pgte for a moment too. Sweet!

matesbe

Burying her in regional disputes might not work if Catherine pulls the rug out from under them by backing her friend over the larger goblin factions. Wouldn't it be interesting if that's what undoes the Intercessor's trap?

Tenthyr

I'm not sure. The moment Catherine considered her friend, that's when the stars behind her eyes weakened. I'm fairly sure the entire plan of the Intercessor was to cause that conversation.

[amit27592](#)

Uhh...no, I don't think so. The stars were a reference to the Pilgrim's Star. That's the only reason the Pilgrim was referenced beforehand in the previous Chapter. Also, Intercessor can Influence Wither's goblins through Malicia, but she cannot interfere with non-named individuals (or rather, individuals not having a Role) so the Pickler angle for Intercessor seems improbable (Still possible, just far fetched)

Also, I'm not sure how much Pickler's suggestion will work. Goblin's are shown to have an entirely different Culture (with lots of Stabbing). It's basically extinguishing or taming/civilising that culture, which is the opposite of what we're doing with Orcs. Either way, both motives are at odds and one of them is going to be disappointed.

Onos

You realise how prevalent the stars motif is throughout the entire Guide? There are passages foreshadowing "Stars in the Sky", Cordy and Cat's "staring up at the same stars", and plenty of other references to stars as far back as Book 1.

Given how there have been several direct statements about the stars Cat's Name is currently connected to being various Named under her authority, you really ought to be less **absolutely certain** you have the right answer. Especially since virtually no one in the comments has ever successfully predicted the Guide.

shikkarasu

I maintain that Intercessor *didn't* know about Pickler in particular. She knows stories, and she knew that if Cat had

to make a decision around the goblins that Fate would ensure it got personal for Catherine.

When you think about it, Intercessor can barely affect anyone at all. It only makes sense if she has gotten really good at indirect moves like that. 2-3 degrees of separation from her actual target. She probably had an Aspect for it back when she was a mere Named.

imagesbe

A fair number of people seem to have been assuming that the stars represented Cat's new budding Name.

Why? No seriously, what gave you any indication that's what the stars referred to?

Forgot_My_Name

Because she quite clearly stated that the stars in the dark when she closed her eyes were Names under the purview of her forming Name.

The stars weakening represented her authority/Name weakening.

jamesc9

One of the stars was Ranger. She could cut it off, but it only lasted three days.

Miles

No reason. People in this site's comment section jump to random conclusions all the time and then hang on to that trainwreck for dear life. I also heard something about a podcast at one point that spawned some of the more ridiculous ones.

The stars fading was a colorful way to say the night is over.

kinghaart

She was in a tent, so I'm pretty sure that it wasn't about the time of day. It could be about stress and worry clouding her vision or about her Name wavering.

Funny to me now how Cat and Akua are basically both being put through similar scenarios of having to keep a lot of people with competing concerns happy. Maybe by the end it will be Akua who ends up in the Role Bard had planned for Cat. Being a glorified mediator of snakes like the High Lords for many decades isn't enough justice for Akua but

probably beats out being the Dead King's warden in sheer tedium.

Liliet

Ah, but that was the moment she asked the question if she SHOULD listen to Pickler. She considered her in the context of regional politics, and it was the possibility that she might prioritize those over the story Pickler brought her that weakened her claim

(that's my reading at least and I believe it's coherent and fits well)

Zach

This makes sense to me, and I think it will both make sense and be "thematically meaningful" if the actions of non-Named like Pickler (or Named not acting according to their role and suddenly getting a new Name, like Hakram – it's very possible Bard's plan was made under the assumption that Hakram was Adjutant) end up saving Catherine from the Bard's plot.

kinghaart

Maybe, but Hakram's decision could still hurt Cat and Bard should know about it by now. So I expect her to try for that play at least.

It will come down to whether Cat chooses to take it as betrayal/abandonment vs as a statement of how successful her relationship with Hakram has been. I could see the abandonment angle on particular – one thing we've basically NEVER seen her deal on an emotional level is her lack of family growing up, and I have always read that as hey repressing it, but it does tend to show up in the way she clings to the people close to her and has such starkly in/out relationships with them (e.g. Amadeus and their stabby history).

Insanenoodlyguy

Could be for all of them. A very similar setup is primed to go when she discovers just who her Warlord is. I'm just hoping they can admit their love for each other out loud during it, but I can't imagine it ends with her bossing the orcs around. Not sure where the out for the secessionists is though. Though more interesting is, with Malicia obviously tightening the noose she wants to avoid around her neck, How is Akua, certain of her doom, going to end up untangling hers?

RoflCat

"Crabs in a bucket."

She has the realization, the next thing she need is to act on it.

Not in the half-hearted way she has been doing where people mistook her intention, but an active rebellion against the way of Praes.

...although if she timed it poorly people will turn it into her basically revealing Malicia's plots to cause fractures and accidentally unite them all behind her...

Abrakadabra

What I see is that Bard will probably succeed in altering Cats name, but it will be probably an unexpected one.

And then as the Bard gloats about her success, Cat Just retorts that it never was about names. But about shaping the future.

Because even with a crippled name she is the Black Queen, and she will win.

RoflCat

Honestly, that certainly fits with the "This is Praes, you get what you want but not the way you want it"

Bard can play the Story, but she can't change the essence of them.

Also ironically being disadvantaged and still win IS part of Catherine's story at this point.

kinghaart

Yeah the big risk I see for Bard is that despite the plotting she is a hero, and she is now making a play in the heartland of Below – which means that in the context of Praesi stories, she is the Villain.

She will lose, but I *am* worried about who she might take down with her...

caoimhinh

Another thing is, it seems like the one who's dealing with the regional disputes is Akua, that might save Catherine the trouble.

[Liliet](#)

Well, Akua is quite demonstratively not dealing with them last we checked.

caoimhinh

Not making an effort in that direction willingly, no.
But it is still being done, hence the whole "Why am I
succeeding in this if I'm not trying and don't want it?"
that Akua has going on for her.

[Liliet](#)

It's almost like they can deal with it themselves if they
really want to!

ruduen

The Dread Empress is in the tower, talking to herself about how
her plan will definitely work. Well, it was nice knowing you.

At the moment, one of the relationships that's mostly gone
unspoken that I'm curious about is Ime and Amadeus. Fairly early
in the series, it was stated that Ime owes Amadeus a debt. While
I don't think that's nearly enough for her to betray Malicia on
its own, I do think the other conversations and hints we've
gotten regarding Ime's current actions now lead to one potential
avenue for it.

I think Ime would be willing to betray Malicia's plans if it
looks like that was the best way to save Alaya's life. And with
how things are shaking out, it's a possibility.

Lox

Trust is the wager that takes your life. -The song.

kinghaart

In Malicia's case, it's the wager itself and the constant
guarding against any possible betrayal that might cost her
everything.

Another read of it is that the cost of building trust is
willingness to lay down your life.

Insanenoodlyguy

With Betrayl being an undercurrent of this book, I'm wondering
if Ime won't die before she can do this because Scribe realized
a little while ago how keeping Malicia alive will be one of
Amadeus' goals, so Ime's gotta go because she's the best chance
of that. Scribe has made clear she didn't really learn anything
from her whole "Betray them for their own good" stunt except
"Don't get caught this time."

[Liliet](#)

Hakram on the other hand is sure she won't do it again.

Insanenoodlyguy

She wouldn't be. She won't betray her current employer, Cat. Cat wants Malicia to die. Scribe is helping. And will honestly believe she's helping Amadeus, for all he will hate her for it.

shikkarasu

Not *another* hand! He's already lost two!

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

You beat me to the pun. I gotta hand it to you

Miles

Rule of 3 BaBY

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I'm seeing Ime knocking Malicia out, smuggling her out of the Tower and dumping her in Amadeus's waiting embrace too.

shikkarasu

That would be great symmetry with the way Amadeus' Black Knight died. (Killed by a random conscript holding a pointy stick because said Knight thought he was invincible against non-Named.) It would really drive home how little Alaya really understands the way Maddie thinks, and more importantly why he thinks that way.

Shveiran

With Malicia's paranoia about anyone betraying her, I deem more likely that Ime will try and Malicia will tragically kill her.

[Liliet](#)

Alaya's paranoia doubles with / is founded on a near-complete lack of hard power. Speaking was one, but as she is losing soft power her Name is losing strength, and overall her strength was always in being able to direct how other people act.

As Amadeus at Second Liesse demonstrated, Alaya is *very* vulnerable to someone close to her just suddenly behaving in a manner she didn't expect.

And she *has* to lean on Ime right now. There's a reason she keeps checking her loyalty with Connect – and the scenario I'm thinking of is one where Ime's loyalty is *unwavering* and she's doing this all for Alaya's own good.

Shveiran

Gotta say, I'm not a huge fan of the whole "sabotaging you for your own good" thing, especially when it involves one's life work.

But that may be just me.

Still; I don't really think there is an Alaya that exists beyond Malicia, by this point.

shikkarasu

I agree, but it is a very solid motivation: selfish, yet motivated by love. Very human. Much tragic. So hubris.

Shveiran

Oh, sure. It's mainly the framing that usually comes with the trope that irks me, where the saved is grudgingly thankful.

That really rubs me the wrong way, because if you were ready to give up on your life to do something, having that choice taken from you is at the very least a breach of faith. No?

[Liliet](#)

There is a point where you're dragging the person screaming and kicking from their attempt to pour gasoline over themselves and set themselves on fire, insisting that it will heal their injuries by making them no longer exist.

I don't think "Alaya that exists beyond Malicia" is a meaningful delineation or one that matters. Alaya is a person who also goes by Malicia and who I hope survives, much like everyone else involved (save for Neshamah, fuck that guy)

shikkarasu

I think this was more of a Catherine Foundling vs the Black Queen situation. Cat struggles with how to pursue the needs and wants of both women. Often one needs to suffer for the other.

Malicia doesn't seem to care what Alaya wants/needs. She let that wither and die to keep the Dread Empress untouchable. She betrayed her oldest friend multiple

times, was purposefully distant with the Calamities that didn't already despise her, keeps no Chancellor and has no alliances. She uses **Rule** to keep her officers in line and **Connect** to make sure her spymistress/lover "remains loyal".

Malicia seems like where Winter!Cat was going, but without anyone to stop her from going too far.

Liliet

TBF she still kept refusing to try assassinating Amadeus, and concerns about Ranger making it impossible were NOT primary in her mind there. And she only appointed the next Black Knight after getting invaded, too.

Overall actually I would argue that Malicia is a mask created out of a subset of Alaya's desires. Specifically the self-preservation subset, so the one that's actually kind of *supposed* to override the others – and so it is. Both literal physical self-preservation, not getting killed or physically violated again, and more metaphorical "self"-preservation – keepign her image of herself together, keeping her ability to control herself together, being a shield against her trauma.

The problem is that trauma's going around the edges these days – the problem of trusting Sentinels, of siccing them on people – and so Alaya wraps herself in Malicia ever tighter, trading off a margin of control for blocking the exits.

TigerQuoll

So I've recently stumbled onto wiktionary (yes, this does relate to the Guide), which is a sort of multi-language wiki/dictionary thing, and theres a frick ton of inter-language references in our esteemed story. So just dumping the one's I've found here.

TigerQuoll

Keter: first one I found entirely by accident while, incidentally, brainstorming names for other purposes. In Hebrew, kéter (or z 3X) means crown, hinting at both its name "the Crown of the Dead" and the association of the Dead King with crowns overall.

'Procer' in latin is a term meaning nobles, princes or chiefs. Self explanatory.

TigerQuoll

Ater: (this one's a doozy, so with a deep breath).

In both Portuguese and Galician it means "to conform or comply", but also comes from the latin *attinere*, meaning "to attain". These reflect both the tyrannical nature of the Dread Empire's power, and also the perennial ambition and desire to seize that power.

But the term 'āter' also has its own meanings in latin. It can describe a) dull black, b) gloomy, dismal or unlucky, c) malevolent and d) obscure, but the last is likely not relevant. The Latin 'āter' interestingly also comes from the Proto-Indo-European term meaning fire, linking it to both passion (the fire, to obtain) and that fire dying out (as the dull black descriptor would have likely referred to dull ashes/charcoal).

TigerQuoll

Within Praes, Wolof is a native senegalese language, Aksum is an ancient Ethiopian Kingdom and Thalassina is a genus of lobsters but more likely is just a reference to 'Thalassic' for anything sea-related (hence Thalassocracy as a word for seaborne empires). Nok is the name given to an ancient culture in modern-day Nigeria while Okoro is a common Igbo last name wikipedia says means greatness (other sites give many various meanings).

Foramen is the only one that seems a little confusing, meaning an aperture or cavity in bones. Possibly a reference to it being taken over through the use of tunnels, or simply alluding to its having tunnels. The Sahelian Kingdoms were a series of empires that controlled trade routes through the sahara desert.

TigerQuoll

'Lycaonese' is clearly a reference to Lycaon, a mythical werewolf punished by the Greek Gods, yet interestingly so is the name of Antigone's wolf. 'Lykaia' is the name of a ceremony celebrating the Lycaon/Zeus myth said to involve ritual cannibalism and the transformation of the cannibal into a wolf. Just a fun word, or is there a possibility she was actually once a cursed person?

'Kairos' is an concept in oration that a good argument needs to be made with the right timing. Interpret that as you will.

[sengachi](#)

Dang. You really put the work in, thank you.

TigerQuoll

Never underestimate the power of google.

(Thanks)

Hargabga

Good work. I personally wonder more about Callow and it's cities. Seems like they're all English/French inspired, but almost totally made up.

Proceran principalities are either northern HRE, northern France or northern Spain regions. Levant is basically Spanish real and mythical cities, with a name of predominantly Muslim Eastern Mediterranean region, so the combination of the two (and Levantines being basically Arab similar to Maghrebi/Taghrebi) points to Al-Andalus (as does the fact that nearby Proceran principalities are also from Spain). League is Greek, with Helike being the name of ancient capital of what was later Sparta, Bellerophon just some guy who had a lot of hubris, Nicae also a greek city mostly known for being a place for the first christian gatherings that established the common founding principles of Christianity (and more importantly for the foreshadowing, a capital of the successor of Byzantines after the Fourth Crusade that continued their legacy while Constantinople was under Latin Empire), Atalanta also some hunter girl, you get the point.

And oh yeah, Aksum is also a prominent city where the legendary Ark of the Covenant supposed to be, Soninke are also a West African ethnicity, just like Taghreb are a play on Maghreb – a name for North-West African region that was also known as Barbary Coast, and Sahel (from which the last name of both Wolofian and Nok High Lord comes) is a long stretch south of Sahara desert (both Wolof and Soninke people at part lived there). Daoine is Irish for people, with Deoraithe being Gael for exiles, but the people themselves are apparently Iroques inspired as per WoG.

The Drow are Slavs, although which exactly is hard to pin.

hue hue

always thought, callow- > gallows

Miles

Callow is an obscure English word. It means “almost grown up” or “Adult in age but not personality” or something along those lines.

Liliet

Drow are southern/balkan slavic specifically, though at least one name (Bogdan) is iconic Ukrainian

Hargabga

That... would be a fairly accurate portrayal of Balcans to be honest.

caoimhinh

If I'm correct, Callow comes from the heroic archetype that represented that nation's relationship with Praes. "A callow youth that becomes a hero and rises to fight evil and tyranny"

Catherine even mentions a bit of it in the early chapters. Reinforced by how in the historical wars between Callow and Praes, Heroes were mostly teenagers.

amit27592

I recommend posting this on the subreddit as well. People there are sure to get a kick out of this. I knew a few of these but not all. Also, check out EE's AMA for some more stuff to add to this.

Onos

Yup, EE is on record as saying virtually every name in the Guide is a reference to a language, culture or old story. He even mentions Ater being a pun in multiple languages back in Book 1 or 2.

Breagach, Trismegistus, Aine, Niri, Kairos, Masego, Tyr (as in Tyrian Empire), Tariq, and Ivah all give you a solid idea of the person/place's role in the story. Plus a bunch of other lesser references like the Brocelian, Aisne and Levant.

Liliet

Breagach was deliberate in-universe, tbf
also wait what does Ivah's name say?

Sinead

I'd presume 'Archer' given other European languages.

....And it did invent 'sidling' which Archer perfected....

Onos

Here's a thought – rather than "presume" when someone asks a question, try actually looking for the answer first.

One

So, so many interludes lately.

Sinead

I am sorry that I did not feel like searching for the etymology at the time, so I just presented what I had understood the naming convention to be (the word 'Iver/Ivar' is connected to archery and thought that they shared etymology).

"Ivar as a boys' name is of French derivation, and the name Ivar means "yew, bow army". Ivar is an alternate form of Ivo (French). Ivar is also a variation of Ivor (Scandinavian, Old Norse). Ivar is also used as a derivative of Yves (French)."

Onos

Breagach is also real world Irish for "false" (not *quite* the same as in-universe, but close).

Ivah is a double; it's a (female) Hebrew name for "overturning" (pretty fitting since Cat was trying to overturn the regime) and it's also the name of a city conquered by the Assyrian empire.

EE is a frickin' genius.

[Liliet](#)

Nice!

My own association was with the Russian word "willow" (which fits if you read "i" as "ee" and "h" as silent) but that wasn't particularly meaningful

[Hargabga](#)

That's a great point. Kinda ashamed that as a native russian speaker i didn't pick that up.

[Liliet](#)

can't get them all lol
this occured to me FAR from immediately, i just hang out on discord where linguistic discussions come up far more often

SonOfLilit

I speak fluent Hebrew and am fairly confident that's not a thing.

Could be confused with Eiva which means something like enmity, but was never used as a name.

Dredcor

Malicia is soooo dead.

SpeckofStardust

So I'm reminded of nation/civilization quests on forms and well, Alaya is making the sort of sense I see right before the biggest meltdowns in said quests.

Robert Allaband

This right here shows Malicia's downfall, she thinks she is working with the Bard. No one works with the Bard, they are only tools for her to use and she has a habit of breaking those tools especially when she uses them on Cat (See the Lone Swordsman and Saint).

CGundlach

Don't forget the Shining Prince, whom she pretty much sent to get executed by Cat.

pagesbe

You mean Exiled Prince.

Shveiran

Did she now? I mean, she gave him a pretty solid advice; death came as a result of Dorian following it stupidly. You could argue that the Bard foresaw it all, of course, but my read was simply that she wasn't too invested in the outcome yet. I mean, back then, Cat's story wasn't really anything special. The Bard is incredibly skilled, so it's not ludicrous to say that she saw it all coming, but...I find it unlikely, personally. It stretches my suspension of disbelief, right now.

[Liliet](#)

Her advice couldn't work because Catherine was in a pattern of three and thus functionally invincible to anyone except William (and demons).

Shveiran

Oh, damn, you are right. I never noticed that.

Yeah, no, consider my comment retracted. Totally murder. Carry on.

Stormblessed

Ah the threefold nature is Praes and the Tower, the fledgling goblins' something, the the nascent Orc kingdom.

Perhaps Cat ends up winning over the Intercessor by the power of friendship!

Stormblessed

Because Cat has friends in every corner! Akua for Praes, Pikler for Goblins, Hallam for Orcs, and if the hidden knife is Callow then she's still got Vivienne there.

Of course the danger could secretly be testing friendships because that could actually be the plot all along.

dadycoool

She always did consider the Greenskins more friend to her than a significant amount of her own kind, and now she's poised to extend that hand to all of them. Orcs as rancher serfs, maybe?

Insanenoodlyguy

That's exactly what she shouldn't do. That's the meddling that lets bard win. The best solutions, it would seem, are "Hey there's some stuff I can offer here, but end of the day, you all gotta do what you gotta do." The goblins don't get a mutually beneficial alliance but they get a chance to try a new way. The orcs will not be under cat, though she might be able to convince Hakram to take her word as his path, it'd be a mistake for both, a Warlord does not serve at another's side. It should be more like a certain moonlit night (very well could be one of those cause stories), where she will ask him what he wants and he will tell her they will see what each can do with that in their new places. I'm not sure what the separatists are going to do but I do believe whatever it is, Cat won't do the thinking for them.

I realized typing this out. Cat's name. So obvious. Warden is a trap. Arbiter is a trap. Cat will provide some overall course correction if somebody's going the wrong way, but her primary focus is making situations where people can help themselves, can grow. Her father raised her this way because he honestly had no idea of any better way, but Cat is using his lessons and those of Grey Pilgrim to make a better way. Cat is learning how to be significant, even authoritative, but she's shaping the paths and marking the forbidden and dangerous areas, maybe even directly preventing entrance to such places, but otherwise not deciding the destinations for others, just helping them get there. Squire has been a practice run on how Cardinal will work, but back in Book 5 (chapter 46, Vestiblue) I think is where this path really started. Named don't need a queen or a ruler, any attempt to

do so will inevitably end in ruination, and fail to make a true alliance, but especially for a villain. Becoming the opposite of the Bard as the active authority over names would almost certainly complete the inverse by giving her a very, very short lifespan. But Cat promotes autonomy but also shows how some things can be adhered to for the better of all, something villains have long lacked.

Catherine will be an excellent Practical Guide (to Evil)

dadycoool

I think I was more talking about letting it be an option, like with the goblins. Which I realize is basically what you're saying. "Hey, if you orcs are willing to abide by our laws, we have land for your herds, if you want to work it. Hey, if you goblins are willing to abide by our laws, there are cities all over Callow that would appreciate your skills."

Also, that name really is obvious, at least once it occurs to us. It is a story of a Practical Guide (to Evil) that follows Cat's path, after all.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think that'll work well. Land is valuable, Cat can't just give it for free for foreigners to use. The idea with goblins was to let them into established settlements, not to grant them land.

dadycoool

I was referring to serfdom like how it was IRL, where the land belongs to the Noble and the peasants pay a tax for the right to make the land useful. Also, I was saying that the goblins would be allowed to settle down in and contribute to Callowan cities.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Callow also happens to have a great deal of land that's been depopulated and/or magically devastated...

Shveiran

Yes, depopulated right now. If you give a good slice of it to, say, the Clans, suddenly Callow as a Kingdom is and will stay less powerful.

The difference is between opening your borders to greenskin refugees and granting land to a foreign power in your own homeland.

Clmineith

This one has been told before. Not with nearly as many explanations, but predicting Cat to become the Practical Guide To Evil was done... many chapters (many arcs?) before. Probably as a joke, but still.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh I'm not thinking I'm the genius who figured it out. Just a guy who pivoted and realized it's not a joke after all.

Miles

Warden was never going to be her Name. Even if you claim an alternate definition for a warden such as warden of the marches you still end up downgrading from "Conqueror Queen +" to "Backwater Duke".

Her Name is going to be along the lines of an Empress, High Queen, Queen of Kings or the like, unless she goes even higher and becomes something with implied godhood like Deus Ex Machina

Sinead

'Implied godhood' is not too far of a stretch when she has already crossed that threshold.

The fact that she reacted so strongly to Gigantes Spellsgiving (to me) means that she has enough of a basis to reascend those sorts of heights.

kinghaart

I don't see it being a ruler name though. More of a checks and balances thing.

Ultimately the hardest choice might be between peace and love. The deal with the Matrons grant peace but no love. The deal with Pickler grants live but almost certainly leads to war.

[Burlyraven](#)

Malicia: Mwahaha, I will turn Akua's supporters on her and each other. That will surely hinder her.

Akua: It's actually kind of charming to have so many people that are good at hating me around. Now if only they would stop worshipping me against my wishes.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yep, Akua's going to just lose it, not try to keep them cohesive at all, instead just give them a speech that goes something like "OH MY GODS WE ARE HERE, THE BLACK QUEEN IS COMING TO FUCK US IN ALL THE WAYS I DON'T WANT, AMADEUS IS COMING TO SHANK AND/OR BURN US, THE ORCS ARE COMING TO STOP US FUCKING THEM, THE DEAD KING IS COMING TO FUCK EVERYTHING, AND ALL OF YOU ARE STILL JUST FUCKING AROUND ON THIS PETTY SHIT WHICH IS MOSTLY MALICIA WHICH YOU ALL WOULD FIGURE OUT QUICKLY AS YOU ARE CAPABLE OF BEING SMART BUT YOU LIKE THE EXCUSE TO GO AT EACH OTHER. WELL LETS GO DOWN THE LINE. YOU SUCK. YOU SUCK, YOU DEFINITELY SUCK, YOU SUCK A BIT HARDER, DON'T THINK I DON'T SEE YOU HIDING OVER THERE, BECAUSE YOU SUCK AT HIDING ON TOP OF THE OTHER WAYS YOU SUCK. EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU SUCKS HARD. I DON'T WANT YOU ON MY SIDE, BECAUSE WHO THE HELL WOULD EVER WANT TO CONQUER ANYTHING IF THE REQUIREMENT IS HERDING OVERGROWN SHITTY CHILDREN. SO YEAH, LETS END THIS HERE YES? KILL ME SO WHOEVER'S ASS YOU SUCK NEXT WILL PRESENT THEIR BUTTHOLE, END THIS ALLIANCE, AND SPEND YOUR MISERABLE EXISTENCE TEARING EACH OTHER APART BETTER THEN ANY OF THOSE OTHER PEOPLE HEADING TOWARDS US COULD. I WOULD ACTUALLY PREFER IT THEN KEEP THIS GOING AND WIN. DO IT. C'MON I WANT YOU TO. "

Of course, then they all bow before her and she realizes to her horror that for the first time, they legitimately are doing it as a gesture of loyalty and respect.

P

Poor Akua. Doomed to get what she wanted

Yunamed

Cursed with success

Reader in the Night

It's hilarious seeing Cat and Malicia each trying to out-manuever and out-guess Akua, while Akua isn't even trying to win.

And as long as Akua doesn't want to win, she can't possibly lose. So you have the comical situation of two of the most cunning schemers in Calernia effectively beating themselves/ each other in the game thinking they're fighting Akua, while Akua is basically sitting there as a prop.

Clmineith

Actually, Cat knows that Akua's will eventually NOT want the Tower. She's not bad at predicting Akua, her timing is just a bit off.

Linnus42

In theory sure Akua currently doesn't want the job and sees it as a gilded cage. Though I don't think Akua would want Cat's current solution of sitting on a throne to seal DK into Hell for centuries lol.

The issue is I don't think Akua is going to go against the overall theme of the book so far. Which is people stepping up to do jobs only they can do because they have to not because they want to. Hakram would prefer to stay beside Cat's side and not be Warlord but he realize he has to do it to steer the Orcs to a good future. To win this war, Hanno realize he has to play politics, give orders to troops as a commander, and give advice to other relevant war front figures be they Named like Frederic or Red Knight or even no Named like Abigail and regular troops.

The theme is "If not Now then When. If not Me then Who." so I expect Akua to fall in line behind Hanno and Hakram and complete her redemption arc by taking job running Praes even if she doesn't want it. And thus usher in a new age lol.

Insanenoodlyguy

But not as dread empresss. I suspect cat will show up and realize to her horror the plan is fucked because Akua is a Hero now.

Xi Cree

An Angel of Contrition is going to come down from on high flanked with an angel of mercy and both of them are going to crown Akua the first Hero Empress...

All while the poor dear screams in denial and the whole world looks on in utter confusion.

shikkarasu

I want memoirs co-authored by Akua and Abigail. A sort of spiritual successor to *On Rule* which frequently devolves into complaining about their job and, specifically, Catherine Foundling for making them do it.

caoimhinh

"Why the fuck do I keep succeeding?"
by A&A

shikkarasu

@caoimhinh

They need a support group. AaAA: Abigails and Akuas Anonymous

MoreBeer

All hail the Undread Empress Magnificent!

[Liliet](#)

oh my god this is a masterpiece

my fav part is 'you suck at hiding on top of other ways you suck'

Miles

I love how everyone involved is so wrong about everyone else's plans this time around.

Some Smartass

Oh, Empress... if fate had let you hear Akua's words, would you have reconsidered?

As for Akua, the Choir of Contrition vibe is real. I can just hear them screaming YOU WILL NOT BE FORGIVEN, REPENT.

[boballab](#)

Yeah I was looking at all the Akua PoV's and it is looking more and more like she is heading towards being a candidate for the Choir of Contrition.

[Liliet](#)

Cat never really did get over her brief experience with them, did she?

shikkarasu

I was reflecting a Chapter or two ago how she has become the 'otherworldly creature meddling with the minds of others.' It's an impressive parallel to her penultimate confrontation with TLS where he was the one saying "It's not mind control; they just make you see the truth."

Now she's done the same to Akua.

Some Smartass

She's at least not pretending that this is anything but torture. 😊

[Liliet](#)

TBF she's a lot more... targeted, than Contrition as led by William.

dadycoool

It's so weird seeing Above's favor from the inside, with Malicia scheming to try and tighten a noose around Akua's neck when she's already feeling like she's just waiting to drop, for a completely different reason: Contrition. Malicia thinks she's playing The Game with Akua, but the young Hero has already lost faith in it, waiting for the right time to put away the pieces.

kinghaart

Everyone trying to play each other so hard that they will end up just playing themselves.

Amadeus is the only one smart enough to stay largely offscreen :p

edrey

Akua speaking about the Heavens, and Malicia is making the world hate her (more) .

well, we all know how this end.

i am just curious how much goblin fire amadeus had? this cant end without fireworks.

ninegardens

Notice how Akua and Malicia both talk about knots and nooses? Despite never meeting or talking to one another... this **could** be ideas leaking between different characters via EE... but also feels like it might be weird namelore bullshit going on. Interesting.

Also: Kendi for chancellor. A+ treacherous lieutenant, would place trust in again.

And Akua being like "Lol, so Cat sent you to join me, what's up with that?"

[Mental Mouse](#)

The knot/noose thing could plausibly be a Praesi proverb or stock phrase.

caoimhinh

Kendi really weirds me out.

He feels more like a Fae than a human. He speaks like a character in a fable rather than a normal person or even the rest of the characters in this novel. The way Kendi talks to Akua giving a brief warning/mockery about how someone will turn

on Akua every single time she talks to someone, it's like a character in some sort of myth or folklore tale that is told around a bonfire.

He is taking the role of being the devil on the shoulder a bit too literally.

kinghaart

Part of me wonders if Akua actually did kill him and he's just her subconscious flaggelating itself.

Reader in the Night

Huh. I wonder what the fuck the Bard is actually plotting. She's trying to invoke a threefold pattern of Catherine's involvement in Praes, ostensibly to make her forming Name more geographical instead of ideological.

But that makes no sense. Of the three rebellious parts of the Empire asking for Catherine's blessing, she is leaning the way of friendship on the goblins; she is almost physically incapable of denying Hakram his thing; and I don't know who's going to show up for the Green Stretch yet but I'm betting Amadeus or Killian, to which she will most likely cave if only to finish the pattern. And none of this would be hidden from the Bard, because stories are her domain.

So she's actually trying to force Catherine down the path of The Power of Friendship, but to what end? Is she trying to force Catherine to choose friendship over politics to set up a betrayal? Or is it just so she loses the Name of Warden and gets something else?

Lox

Like, guardian or caretaker?
The babysitter of the east!

Insanenoodlyguy

No see, Bard WANTS Warden. Warden spends her time keeping all this shit in line, a predictable role that even if Malicia can't kill is no longer a real metathreat. The big bad the other bads have to listen to. Cat will be lucky to last a decade with that story, and it keeps her contained till then.

What she fears is the woman who can show others a better path, finishing what Tyrant started and completely ending her age of wonders. The Cat who's the best aspects of her Father and Grey Pilgrim smashed together, who, as she's always done, asks you what you want and then shows you a way to do that without the usual bullshit.

"This would not disappear all their troubles, but it would give them the tools to solve them by their own hands. And all it would require of them was to follow the Black Queen's rules, to heed her Accords so that they might all reap the benefits of her peace." – Interlude: Reprobates.

I joked about the idea before, but now I really think she's becoming the Practical Guide. The title has always been about the Named Character, A Practical Guide to Evil.

Shveiran

Look, I like a name drop as much as the next guy, but if I had to point at just one reason why this seems unlikely, it would be that Practical Guide To Evil sounds absolutely awful as the name of a person.
It just doesn't work.

Have you ever heard someone say something like this?
"Hey you know Fred? Yeah, the ranger. That guy is just so clear-sighted and efficient. And he is so very good at showing people around Yellowstone. I guess he's really a practical guide! Yes, that's what Fred is, a Practical Guide to Yellowstone!"

Does that sound natural, does that sound like something a person would say?
Yuck. Just no.

[Liliet](#)

This this this this.

[boballab](#)

Also it doesn't fit with the aspects Cat had been feeling and starting to use. She was able to silence Malicia and everything has been pointing to a Name that deals with being in charge of something, hence why she stated at one point it seemed as if the Bard was trying to turn her into her replacement. Cat has been working towards becoming, unintentionally IMO, the ruler of all the Named with her Liesse Accords and the Terms right now.

Insanenoodlyguy

And when Pickler came to her it weakened. Much like Akua is about to deny Dread Empress at the pivot of her getting it, Cat will deny this name because, as she said a long time ago, she wants what she's building to outlive her. If she's in charge of all the villains there will be people who go against her rules the second they think they can out of spite, because villains need to be made to see how

it's in THEIR best interest to follow along, and not just because Big Bad Arbiter or whatever she's heading towards can make you play nice.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not Practical Guide to Evil. Just Practical Guide.

Shveiran

And what guiding has she done, that it can define her to the core? This Name is years in the making, and I just don't see it.

Shveiran

Not to mention, if you drop the "To Evil" that sounds like a better fit for a ranger. It doesn't even sound like the name of a guru or sage, just a Ranger or maybe a teacher, and even that is stretching.

It's just not a natural way to use those words, even if you can squint and argue for a certain interpretation of them; it comes out as awkward and forced, and we are talking about the big payday of an author who does, quite clearly, like to play with words.

Look, I'm not saying it's impossible nor anything, but doesn't it at least sound very, very unlikely?

who says the name has to be Catherine

Who's to say Ranger is not the Practically Guide to Evil? She isn't hellgod-aligned but her philosophy is hella Below, and (minor spoiler to Patreon extra chapters but heavily indicated in main chapters) she really is a pragmatist who cares about her pupils learning. Cat hasn't really been a mentor to anyone, by choice for storyfu reasons, but Ranger has five wisened apprentices.

Shveiran

Considering Ranger has been on screen for maybe three chapters over seven books, I'm going out on a limb and say this series is not named after her.

aurikdomi

Yeah I always thought it was Black who was Catherine's practical guide to evil

magesbe

Guide anything does not fit. Her Name is about overseeing or commanding, as indicated by her already absurdly strong Speaking ability; there is nothing "Guide" worthy about her ability to order people. She has never been about Guiding. If anything, she's about dragging the continent, kicking and screaming, into some measure of order.

Eli

I think I like the idea of the name just being something like Guide.

Not a teacher or direct mentor or ruler, not someone who forges the path for you, just someone who shows you the way you can walk and lets you make the choices yourself.

It'd be a sufficiently broad and thus versatile name and great enough role that the Bard would have to worry about it.

...This is at least partially because I really like the characters in stories, particularly fairy tales, who are magical and mystical and just show up in the narrative, say something along the lines of "hey, you could do this thing. ~vague warning~ And also ~says something wise sounding~" and then just disappears and lets the main character get on with it.

Insanenoodlyguy

I do like "Guide" now that you put that out there.

[ChillyPepper](#)

I think it's something like "win goblins, draw with nobles, lose with orcs" kinda thing, personally. Or whatever fits the pattern more in such case.

Sinead

Patterns of Three in this case are very specific things that do not necessarily come into play here. By which I mean, you may still have a win draw loss pattern, but it's because of the three separate conflicts, not because of the Pattern of Three, which is rival specific.

Zach

Why do you think Bard is involved in Hakram or Pickler? She probably wouldn't have influence over Pickler (but she'd have influence with Wither through Malicia) and IIRC she hatched her plan when Hakram had a different Name and Role (and thus expected Catherine's involvement with the orcs to just be in the form of backing some orc faction, with Hakram acting as her eyes and hands like always – instead of being an independent actor himself, as he's become).

Someone else (I think correctly) commented that Pickler/Hakram represent choices that avoid Bard's plan. Leaving the orcs to Hakram and just giving the goblins an opportunity (as opposed to directly meddling in their politics within Praes through helping give them Foramen or something) directly goes against what Bard/Malicia are aiming for.

Insanenoodlyguy

My guess is the bond with Hakram runs so deep it's still there. It's why Cat doesn't know, it's still there. And because it's so deep, at some point she'll realize her authority over him is still there. That when he wants something she doesn't want she still has the pull to make him her extension, at least long enough for what matters. And she's going to say fuck that and wish Hakram the best and that's how she'll win.

Joan Lung

Oh, Malicia. You have been lead into a dead end, where your role fades and your plans do not even benefit yourself.

Juff

Typo Thread:

behind her the wall finished collapsing ahead of her (something went wrong here)

dislike her > disliked her

levies been > levies having been

pleasantly to > pleasant to

to lesser goddesses > two lesser goddesses

screaming the empress > screaming for the empress

as came > as she came

flash of red (appears twice in the sentence)

rebellion against > rebellion against herself

beyond to Malicia's > beyond Malicia's

aspect pulse > aspect pulsed

she must be > she had to be

two of sky > two of the sky

Black Queen takes does > Black Queen does

Such setback would > Such a setback would

Meanwhile of > Meanwhile all of

superkeaton

Something tells me that everyone's failing to truly account for the Clans with Hakram at their head, including the Bard and Cat.

dadycool

Well, the Role of the Woe is to shake up what has stood since essentially the dawn of time. Heroes joining Villainous Five Man Bands? A Surface Dweller going into the depths and making deals with Dwarves and Drow? The utter destruction of the Summer/Winter cycle, complete with Yoinking the very sun from the sky? None of these were precedented, and this is a very small list of the weird things they've done.

Forgot_My_Name

The Bard is definitely not failing to account for the Clans. Cat and Malicia don't actually know what's going on with the orcs, but with the narrative strenght of the first Warlord in centuries, there is no way the Bard doesn't know. And that's how Bard prefers to play: when she's the only one holding a full deck.

kinghaart

Yes – but while she thinks she knows Cat, she doesn't for sure know how she'll react to Hakram. We'll see.

letouriste

A Pratical Guide to Pawn Status

[onedollargum](#)

I'm not sure what to take away from this. Is Malicia really not able to model Akua here? Akua doesn't even seem to be trying to predict the empress.

beleester

Malicia can't model Akua's change of heart because she can't believe that Akua has basically blundered her way into this. Also, Malicia thought she had Akua on a leash until recently, so her plans are probably hastier than usual.

Akua, meanwhile, has basically resigned herself to her fate, and since she thinks she's fated to win the tower she's not making any real effort to upset Malicia's plans. Instead, she's spending her time doing nice things for the citizens and being disappointed in the quality of her allies, which ironically is pushing her allies to do a pretty good job of raising her up.

[Liliet](#)

...and any hint that Akua might *not* be fated to win the Tower is embraced with the fervency of a woman dying of thirst in the desert...

[Liliet](#)

I think Akua has successfully modeled Alaya and her move of unleashing the storm lmao (and she wasn't even trying!)

but yeah no-one models Akua right except Kendi, and that's just by virtue of excessive exposure

Ross

I like the irony of Alaya saying she's going to be putting the noose around Akua's neck, since Akua directly compared being made Empress to being hanged.

Abrakadabra

Hah, good point!

serdar314

Akura thinks that she sees Cats plan while playing exactly according to Cats plan. To jail a immortal necromancer being is there anything better than an already raised Shade? Also thank you for the chapter.

[Liliet](#)

A-who?

Black Spiral Dancer

She is not a shade anymore for a while already...

Insanenoodlyguy

Somebody who can live a while. Akua is going to become a hero and they don't get that l.

Shveiran

I mean, we already got the Red Axe and the Exalted Poet, so I guess even sabotaging the war effort against the undead apocalypse doesn't count against being a Hero in the setting.

Shveiran

****SIGH****

Abnaxis

"All she glimpsed was a vague sense of disappointment, with no real idea of the depth of it. "

Oh yes, an aspect Alaya has become WAY too reliant on to the detriment of her ability to read people without it, just happens to fall on her most trusted advisor and spymaster? I'm sure that will end WONDERFULLY for the Dead Empress. The setup is so

typical of a Tyrant's, it's like it came from a Praesi tragedy, and yet Alaya is still too far gone to realize it.

"And given that in the first instance trouble would be for the Empire and in the second it was Alaya's life on the line, the choice made itself."

I'm guessing this is what flips Ime in the end. I don't think she signed up out of loyalty to Malicia, I think she signed up out of indebtedness to Amadeus and dedication to the causes he and Alaya used to champion. The fact that Malicia won't hesitate to put an axe to the Empire if it helps her self-preservation is why I think Ime is disappointed. She's almost sunk as low as Nefariois at this point.

sengachi

It also says something that Alaya is using Connect to read the emotions of subordinates rather than, you know, Connecting her people together and to her. She's totally neglecting the primary utility of what ought to be a pretty powerful ruler Aspect, because she just does not believe in connections being meaningful tools of rule.

kinghaart

Ime is actually not really associated with Amadeus, and is Malicia's lover. I think she was disappointed that Malicia wasn't seeing the most obvious and safe way to live would be to just take some money/artifacts and flee. Ime would have come with her. But Malicia values control and pride more than even her life, without even knowing it.

Daniel E

I always figured that Cat's memoirs would be titled 'A Practical Guide To Evil'. No clue about her Name.

Frivolous

Took some thinking before I could come up with something to say, or even decide that i had something to say.

First, the Intercessor's stated plan for shaping Catherine's impending Name doesn't make sense to me.

It is very clear to me that Catherine is focused on defeating Neshamah. She's got her eye on the prize. Because of that, she will not and cannot be bogged down in regional disputes. It goes against her personality. She's not an administrator. She's not into fixing small things. She's into fixing huge things.

I think any attempt to make Catherine focus on small things will result in her drawing her sword and cutting the knot or knots

until the dispute goes away. She is not above murdering her problems.

In this way, knot imagery is very appropriate for this chapter. Knot here = Gordian knot.

In the book 5, chapter 68: Apropos, the Intercessor tried to draw Catherine into 3 different stories. Three is an important number to her, so I think she will also try to draw Catherine into 3 different alternative Names, ones she finds acceptable.

=== Quote: I'd been sold yet another story, on the sly, and come so very close to embracing it wholeheartedly. I'd not bit the bait when she'd approached me as a smiling offeror of advice and bargains, so she'd changed the story. The immortals warring over the world I'd again refused, silently as I had, and in doing so tumbled down the most dangerous of the three stories she'd woven. Believing it was my own notion every step of the way. ===

The first alternative Name was mentioned in Interlude: Knock Them Down. Intercessor tried to make Catherine's Name one in opposition to her own. Catherine recognized it and thus defeated it.

I think the second alternative Name is the one being discussed here: regional disputes wrangler, warden of the political East.

I don't know what the third alternative Name will be. I just know it will be hidden.

=====

In other news: Malicia continues to strike me as someone who thinks only inside the box. She doesn't innovate.

The rulebook she uses is very big and full of political manoeuvres, but it is finite and thus limited. Boring.

Also, I wonder if Masego could recover his sorcery the way Akua did. Transfer his soul into a new body, one with the Gift.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Masego moving to a new body would probably leave his Aspects behind. In any case, he'd probably see sorcery as a distraction at this point.

Abrakadabra

I just realized that Alayas greatest motivation is fear. Her very aspects are centered around ensuring loyalty to her.

Miles

I wonder if the Bard is actually aware of Akua in any capacity. She spends most of her time around Named who Bard doesn't seem to appear much around.

SonOfLilit

Keter does mean crown, but here the reference is to Kaballah, like everything around Neshamah (who's name means "soul" in the sense of "immortal soul"), Keter being one of the ten Sephiroth.

[plantsbeans](#)

"What would the Heavens hear, a million screams or a single vainglorious shout? It'd been empty from the start. All she had left was the enormity of what she had done, and she was drowning in it."

Tearing up here. What is the meaning of redemption? Damn, damn, damn. Now I need to find a friend who can read fast enough to catch up here.

Interlude: Burn Away What You Once Were

"Power isn't gold or faith or oaths. Power is the moment the tip of the knife punches through. Everything else flows from that source."

– Dread Empress Massacre

Arthur adjusted his helmet for what had to be the hundredth time, trying to keep dawn's light out of his eyes. He hated to admit it, as it felt like he was being childish, but he was bored out of his mind. Normally he would have sought sympathy and conversation from Apprentice, but this morning she was... otherwise occupied. Sapan was looking at the new war engine hungrily as its wheels creaked against the stone and it was dragged forward by oxen. The Ashuran had no interest in the military applications of the great machine, he knew: the draw was that it was, in effect if not in principle, a massive magical artefact.

"If that thing were a woman, you would have gotten slapped by now," Arthur drily said.

Sapan turned somewhat amused brown eyes on him.

"And what would *you* know about staring at women?" Sapan teased.

Arthur politely coughed. Fair enough.

"I don't understand what's so fascinating about it," the Squire admitted. "It's a drill, Sapan. A large, fat drill on wheels."

She rolled her eyes at him, brushing back wild strands of wavy hair that no earthly amount of hairclips seemed able to tame.

"And how do drills work, Arthur?" she challenged.

He cocked an eyebrow.

"Someone moves about with their arms until there's a hole in something," he summed up.

She glared at him, very much aware he was actively trying to piss her off. Arthur hid his grin behind the thoughtful, pious expression that he'd honed against brothers and sisters of the House.

"Fine," Sapan growled. "Who's going to *move about* the handle to that fat drill, Squire?"

"There isn't one," he noted. "Which does seem like something of a design flaw, but I suspect the sappers might have taken ill to my pointing that out."

No one made it through more than a few months in the Army of Callow without learning that getting on the wrong side of the sappers was a costly mistake. Not even the Order picked that fight without good reason.

"That's the magical part," Apprentice said. "At the end of the drill, that large section in bronze, it's enchanted."

"It's also polished," Arthur helpfully contributed.

"I think that's purely decorative," Sapan admitted. "But never mind that. Lord Hierophant and the Callowan mage cadres enchanted the insides thoroughly, it took them days."

"Enchanted to do what?" Squire asked, honestly curious.

"It's directed kinetic force," she excitedly said. "But *entirely* self-contained. The excess that the Due should release is instead used in a secondary array that ensures centrifugal force won't destroy the artefact from the inside."

"So it makes the drill turn," Arthur hazarded.

The dark-haired Ashuran eyed him like he was the lowliest sort of cockroach.

"Yes, Arthur," she disdainfully said, "*it makes the drill turn*. It's not at all a staggering triumph of runic and mundane engineering that was believed physically impossible by most scholars until a few years ago."

She raised her nose.

"You ignorant... horse-rider fuck," Sapan tried.

Apprentice's magical talents had been found very early, she'd told him – five years old – and she'd spent her entire life either in mage schools or under the private tutelage of scholarly old mages. That sheltered upbringing had left her with no real experience insulting people, something a few years around soldiers had miraculously failed to change. It really was quite impressive how terrible she was at it.

"You're also riding a horse," Arthur mildly pointed out.

She huffed in distaste, looking away, and the Squire smiled. He was slightly less bored now, though it would be hours yet before he saw fighting. Neither of them would be in the first wave into the breach in the eastern walls of Ater, which would be preceded by an escalate to tie up enemy mages and engines anyway. They'd be going in with the second wave, with precise objectives. The Hellhound's plan was to break through enemy defences quickly and rush to seize defensible grounds deeper in the city before the Praesi could mount a proper counterattack. Grandmaster Talbot had approved of the plan when he'd briefed the Order, much as he tended to approve of Marshal Juniper herself.

Some among the knights had often resented that of the man, especially those of old nobles lines who still resented such a young greenskin holding such high command, but even the worst of the naysayers had been watching their words since Kala. Besides, it'd never been a popular sentiment with the army. The known faces from the early Fifteenth – the Hellhound and the Princekiller, Robber and Pickler, Ratface and Aisha Bishara – were almost as famous as the Woe and nearly as cherished. There was a certain cachet to having served under the Black Queen since the start, the kind that got people buying you drinks and asking for stories even if you'd only been a legionary.

Arthur had raged against his age, in Laure, listening to those stories and feeling like he was letting the era pass him buy. Now he'd caught up to the days, he stood in the thick of it, and it was so very little like he'd thought it would be.

"Look up," Sapan suddenly said. "It's starting."

The Squire's eyes sought the horizon. Apprentice was right. Atop the walls of Ater in the distance, in the light of rising sun, steel glittered as legionaries manned the walls. Ballistae were

dragged into position, mage cabals began gathering power and as the vanguard of the Army of Callow crossed some invisible line all the Hells were unleashed. Rays of light and scores of fireballs, hails of bolts from the engines. Before the storm could hit the regulars in front, the House Insurgent made its presence known through great panels of yellow light that stopped the enemy fire cold.

Great iron ladders were rushed to the front, and the Battle of Ater began.

—

"They're being reckless," the Black Knight frowned. "Priests or not, the walls of Ater are not so easily taken."

The Army of Callow was abandoning traditional Legion doctrine for this fight, which made Marshal Nim Mardottir uncomfortable. She'd already been had by the Hellhound once and she had no intention of suffering a second reverse when the stakes were so high. The enemy were still at least half an hour away from landing their first ladders on the outer walls, the first of the set encircling the capital, so the Black Knight was taking the time to properly observe their formation. Which was a mess. The enemy legionaries were breaking ranks to move faster, which meant every time something passed through the shields the Callowan mages and priests had put up it was guaranteed a casualty.

"They know the longer it takes them to breakthrough the more force we'll be able to concentrate here," Akua Sahelian replied, golden eyes calm. "We've barely a third of the Legions on the wall here, their best shot at getting into the city without massive casualties is overwhelming us early."

There were two women that the city called 'empress' in whispers, Nim thought, but there was only one of them here on the wall. It was more complicated than that in truth, she knew, since Malicia would likely lose her life if she strayed too far from the Tower. And yet there was something primal and easy to understand in one being here and the other not. There was a simplicity to that, a clarity. And the Marshal had seen in the eyes of the legionaries here that it was a clarity they embraced. Amadeus had won the love of the Legions as much by fighting in the ranks with them as by the rest, and the Black Queen was no different. It was a simple thing, the Black Knight thought, but not a small one.

"It won't work," Nim said. "They'll make footholds, they've got the belly for that, but we'll take them back as soon as we're reinforced. Marshal Juniper is no fool, Sahelian. There's something else afoot."

"I have eyes on the forces of Aksum and Nok," Lady Akua replied. "If the expected treachery manifests, it won't be a knockout

blow. Yet they've made no preparations for battle or sent troops into the capital as far as I can tell."

"Might be there will be a strike force of Named," the Black Knight mused. "I'm surprised the Archer and the Huntress haven't already begun returning fire against the ballistae."

It was fucking absurd that the two women could serve as a countermeasure against siege engines by virtue of being able to shoot the crews at similar engagement ranges, but Nim had considered how to compensate for that since her defeat at Kala. Now she had wooden panels to defend and replacement sappers waiting. She wouldn't be caught unprepared again.

"Catherine won't depend on Named for such a critical part of the plan," Lady Akua said, tone firm. "There's an enemy on the field that could make her pay for such a thing dearly."

"Then we're still in the dark about their plans," Marshal Nim said.

"I imagine that massive drill will have a role to play," the golden-eyed noble noted. "If Hierophant didn't enchant that I'll leap down this wall. Best to assume it will go through the walls like a knife through butter."

The Black Knight blinked.

"These are the walls of Ater," she slowly said. "There's so many wards and enchantments in these walls we can't even list them all anymore."

"And he is the Hierophant," Lady Akua lightly replied. "Miracles are his trade, Marshal. Gods know he's vivisected enough of them."

Nim had learned it did not pay to argue with the sorceress when it came to the talents of the Woe, so she kept her skepticism stowed away.

"Best hurry up the evacuation of the districts then," the Black Knight said. "We don't want citizens caught in the middle of whatever they'll unleash."

"I expect she'll go out of her way to limit civilian casualties," Lady Akua said, "but I agree it is better safe than sorry. I'll send word to High Lady Muraqib that a loan of mages capable of scrying would be appreciated, it should make it easier to coordinate the movements."

And the fucking idiot would be glad of any way to salvage her reputation, as she ought to be after having botched a coup attempt on the Tower so badly it'd wracked the capital with

storms for twelve days. If the 'empress in the city' hadn't stepped in to organize emergency shelter and food convoys moved under mage shields it might have been tens of thousands that died instead of almost three. Meanwhile, to Nim's disgust, the High Seats had squabbled with each other like children and kicked up dust in the Legions' eyes while they were at it. That lot wouldn't be able to lead sailors to a whorehouse even with the fucking Wizard of the West guiding the way.

The Black knight's general staff agreed that the only reason the Army of Callow hadn't crushed them while they were busy was that it would have been charging into the storm itself and Catherine Foundling hadn't wanted to take the risk.

Nim had only barely gotten her orders out when Captain Laughable took her aside, murmuring that there was a situation. A suspicious person had been caught and made prisoner. The Black Knight took a short detour to pick up Lady Akua, who was informing the High Lady of Kahtan with a smile that surely risking her mages was worth the love of the people, and they headed out to the supply depot below the bastion where Laughable was keeping the man. Among the crates, a poorly-shaved Taghreb was bound and sporting a purpling black eye.

"Caught him sniffing about the bastion, ma'am," Captain Laughable said. "Said he was just waiting for a friend, but we think he might have been counting troops."

"I take it he resisted arrest?" Nim asked.

"You could say that," Laughable coldly said. "He knifed Sergeant Kilzi right in the throat and tried to make a run for it. We broke both legs so he'd know better than to try that again."

Nim's hand clenched, the steel of her armour creaking.

"Who do you work for?" the Black Knight asked in Taghrebi.

The man only laughed. Lady Akua approached, which had him tensing, but though she took his face in hand it was not to inflict a curse. Instead she studied the side of his head, picking at the sideburns, and snorted before releasing him.

"There is no point in speaking that tongue to him, Lady Black," Akua Sahelian said. "He is not Taghreb. That man is *Levantine*. It's why there are still traces of face paint in the roots of his hair, near the skin."

"Infiltrators," Nim growled.

"He won't be alone," Lady Akua said. "We should immediately-"

"Too late," the man grinned with bloodied teeth, speaking accented Lower Miezani. "You found us too late. It'll be over by now."

The Black Knight seized his torso and dragged him up, anger roiling.

"What?" she demanded. "*What* did you do?"

The man only laughed louder, and then in the distance there was a great grinding sound. Old gears pushing against each other, moving a great weight.

"The gates," Akua Sahelian calmly said. "They opened one of the gates."

The same enchanted gates that took about half an hour to fully open, that could not be stopped when they began without wrecking the machinery.

The Army of Callow's vanguard was a quarter hour away from setting foot in the city.

—

"They're retreating," Alexis said, sounding impressed. "Like Marshal Juniper said they would."

"Our Hellhound's got a good read on the opposition," Archer said. "It's what she's here for."

Indrani hadn't actually paid all that much attention when the plan had been explained to her and Masego had been reading under the table the whole time — he'd cunningly glued a book under with the pages hanging down and he turned the pages with a spell so he wouldn't be caught — so she had only limited idea of what was happening. She figured the Legions had decided it was a losing fight to try to hold the walls with the gates open and two thirds of their number still on the way, so they were bailing backwards to a defensive position. Made sense, kind of? Not really her problem anyway. The three of them were after a different kind of prey.

"I'm still now sure what I'm here for," Cocky complained. "In case you hadn't notice, this is *inside* Ater."

"No shit?" Archer mused. "I was wondering why the walls were facing the wrong way."

Alexis actually looked like she was suppressing a smile. That or she was twitching in anger. Knowing the Silver Huntress, it might actually be the two.

"We could at least get off the rooftops," the Concocter tiredly said. "It's only a matter of time until someone looks up."

That was actually untrue, Indrani thought. Most humans only rarely looked up, when something prompted them to. In her experience, skulking atop rooftops in a city was a pretty decent way to get around unseen if you put a minimum of effort into remaining unseen. She had no intention of actually telling Cocky that, though.

"Yeah, but then I wouldn't be able to stand on the ledge and let the wind do that neat flappy thing with my cloak," Archer sagely replied. "And that would be a net loss for Creation."

Alexis cleared her throat.

"Patrol's gone," she said. "We should get a move on."

Archer straightened her back.

"Let's go then," she said. "Found an old tower-shrine to Nihilis last time I came that'll be the prefect perch."

Cocky grumbled under her breath, but they set out. Neither of them had lost a step since Refuge when it came to sneaking about – the classic game of better-not-let-that-manticore-see-you truly was the finest of teachers – and they were better equipped now than they'd ever been before. Cat was always good for that, shelling out the coin for what her people needed. They were already past the Legion lines, but that wasn't what their target anyway. Juniper was confident she could take Nim in a slugfest in the streets, and Archer figured the Hellhound had it right.

It was the noble armies that Cat and the Hellhound wanted kept out of this mess as long as possible, and that was why the three of them were out here. The imperial shrine was pretty easy to find, a tower of black stone three stories high that was covered with reliefs of Dread Emperor Nihilis' victories and filled with little alcoves where people could leave offerings. It wasn't as common a practice as it'd been in older timers, making those, but Indrani saw a few fresh copper coins and fresh flowers that hadn't been there last time she came. Aterans said it was good for luck.

The alcoves made it easier to climb, at least, and when they all got up on the flat top – covered in bird shit, but they'd all crawled through worse – the sight was worth a whistle. It was easy to see far out into the city, until you hit the taller buildings of the central districts, and that meant Indrani got a good look at the soldiers and banners moving through the streets. Like Juniper had said she would, the Black Knight had called for noble reinforcements.

"Kahtan," Alexis said, frowning. "Okoro and Nok. Hundreds of smaller lords"

Ol' Abreha wasn't taking the field then. Shame. Dakarai of Nok wasn't as deep in their camp, he might actually intend to fight to defend the city.

"We've got our targets, then," Indrani said. "We kill the bigwigs and the generals, it'll keep them confused enough they'll be late to the fight."

"Archer."

"I kind of want High Lady Muraqib," Indrani mused. "You can have High Lord Jaheem, Lexy, unless you-"

"*Indrani*," Cocky hissed. "Look."

Archer followed the pointed finger to a rooftop to their west. Someone was standing there on a ledge, looking down into the streets. Her cloak was doing the neat flappy thing in the wind, which Indrani mentally applauded. The Ranger turned, met their stares and winked.

A moment later she leapt down into the streets.

"You wanted to know why Cat sent you with us, Cocky?" Indrani said. "You were just looking at the reason."

A cleaner story, Catherine had called it, and who was Archer to argue with her? Cat might have died a bunch of times but it'd yet to stick, and that was the kind of crazy she was proud to embrace.

"We don't know what she's up to," the Concocter hesitated.

Alexis' fingers tightened into fists.

"Does it matter?" the Silver Huntress asked. "She's our enemy."

Archer shook her head.

"It matters," Indrani said. "We do this all three of us or we don't do it at all."

The Huntress glanced at her in surprise, then slowly nodded.

"I have permission, if we want to pursue," Indrani told Cocky.

The other woman hesitated still.

"She won't hold back," Cocky said.

"Neither will we," Indrani said.

Surprise, once more.

"You *want* to fight her?" Cocky asked.

It was her turn to hesitate.

"I want to know where I stand," Archer finally said.

The Concocter quietly laughed.

"I don't care where I stand," she said, "as long as it's far from her. But that's something we'll have to earn, isn't it? The right to put her behind us."

Cocky breathed out, rose to her feet.

"I'm in," the Concocter said.

A silence passed between them, not quite comfortable but not unpleasant. Determined, Indrani thought, determined might be the right word.

And so the last three students of the Lady of Lake began to hunt her.

—

A torrent of flame howled down the street, forcing the enemy to huddle behind houses, and even as the roar of the fire drowned out the clamour of the fighting the Black Knight raised her voice higher still.

"Collapse the *fucking* walls," Marshal Nim screamed. "We need to slow them down."

Lady Akua's spell ended moments later, the fires blinking out, but the reprieve she'd bought them was well-spent: sappers collapsed two houses and a temple with demolition charges, barring the avenue with the falling stones. It wouldn't keep the Callowans away for long, but it would slow them down enough that the Fourth and Fifth Companies would be able to retreat to the fortifications in the plaza down the street. Legionaries streaming around them, the Black Knight and the Lady Warlock retreated away from the frontline. In the time they'd spent to put out the crisis here, another would have emerged somewhere else.

"How long until the drill starts working again?" the Black Knight asked.

"Half an hour at most," Lady Akua grimaced. "It's devilish piece of work."

The way the sorceress had explained it, the drill actually drained the power of enchantments it touched to harden itself and make some kind of array in its back move faster. Nim had almost doubted her eyes when the fucking thing had taken a mere ninety heartbeats to pierce through some of the finest walls on all of Calernia, stopping only because it had overheated and was at risk of melting. Worse yet was the realization that the Hellhound had never intended the thrust of her attack to be on Legion positions. While Nim had repositioned her forces to contain the disaster spilling out of the open gate, the drill had punched through the wall by another gate and the second wave of the Army had bypassed her defensive set-up entirely.

She'd lost a third of her force in an hour trying to contain that attack, which had forced her to call on reinforcements from the nobility against Malicia's standing orders. They'd hurried enough that the fighting in the abandoned districts of the southeast had erupted before the Callowans could take the Licosian Gates, one of the chokepoint of the city the Hellhound had clearly been aiming for. It was bloody enough fighting that the Black Queen was there and slinging around Night in amount that wiped out entire companies, but the nobles were still holding. The fear right now was that the Army of Callow would just use the damned drill again to open another breach behind the defensive position of the High Lady of Kahtan to flank it.

Some of the Black Knight's scouts up on the walls had signaled there were troop movements outside the city, so Nim suspected that unless that fucking drill was broken for good Ater would fall before Noon Bell rang.

"Then we need to hit it," the Black Knight said. "You and I, leading a company. It's the only way we can contain them long enough."

And if they were contained, if they were kept bottled up in a few districts and mage fire could be brought to bear? They would be routed out of the city. Already the enemy's priests were flagging in strength, and when they were out for the count the magical advantage would fall overwhelmingly in the favour of the defenders.

"Agreed," Lady Akua said. "Do you, by any chance, happen to have a disreputable company of golden-hearted rogues with a chequered past who have something to prove under your command?"

"A what," the Black Knight replied.

"It would *significantly* increase our chances of success," Lady Akua insisted.

The reply on the tip of Nim's tongue was set aside when a flare of red light caught her attention. Signals going up in the sky.

An attack from behind the Licosian Gates. But the drill had not yet been moved! *How?* Another flare went up, and another, and another. All in a straight line.

"Gods," Marshal Nim Mardottir gasped, "what is this?"

—

Arthur fell down to his knees, panting and out of breath.

"You all right, sir?"

The Squire limply gestured at the sergeant to make it clear he was in no danger. Just exhausted. Running out of that house before it collapsed after the ogres knocked down the walls would have been hard even if he *weren't* wearing plate armour. After a few moments to catch his breath, he dragged himself back up. Sergeant Hart slapped his back in a friendly manner.

"Back into the melee, then," the older man cheerfully said. "For queen and country and combat pay."

"The Black Knight wasn't with the ogres," Arthur said. "We need to find a scrying mage to ask for sightings again."

Running around blindly was unlikely to let him find the Black Knight, especially if she was actively avoiding him as he believed she was. That the Doom of Liesse had been seen with her only made the prospect of facing down his rival all the more daunting. Hopefully Sapan would be able to – wait, where was Sapan?

"Sergeant, where is the Apprentice?" he asked.

"We lost her when we hit that blaze three blocks back, I think," Sergeant Hart said. "She could be anywhere by now."

"Then we start by finding her," the Squire said. "We need to find an officer."

"That one looks like a lieutenant," Sergeant Hart said, pointing upwards. "Light armour, so probably in the scouts."

Arthur looked up and found a lieutenant standing atop a rooftop, looking into the distance. It was a start, the young man decided, and he asked his companion to stay behind as he climbed up the side of wall. The other man glanced at him before returning to his study of the city.

"Good morning, lieutenant," Arthur tried.

"Is it?" the officer replied, sounding amused. "You have been in the Army of Callow for too long."

"Might be," the Squire politely smiled.

He approached, enough to see that it was an older man he was speaking to: salt-and-pepper beard, greying hair. Likely a veteran. The goblin steel blade at his hip spoke to that.

"I am looking for a companion," Arthur said.

"The Apprentice, yes," the man replied. "She was headed west last I saw. I believe there's a scrying relay there three streets back, it seems her likeliest destination."

Well, that'd been faster than anticipated.

"Thank you, lieutenant," the Squire said.

"It was my pleasure," the officer replied, once more sounding amused.

Arthur began to walk away, but something was itching away his instincts. He paused.

"You never gave me your name," the Squire said.

"How forgetful of me," the man said, but did not elaborate.

Arthur's eyes narrowed.

"What is it you're looking for, lieutenant?"

"The flares," the officer replied, pointing to the southeast.

The lights were still in air, though fading. Signals warning of attacks where the Squire knew there should be no troops.

"A bluff," he said.

"Dismissing the unexpected is a bad habit, Squire," the man chided.

Arthur's hand went for his sword.

"You're not a lieutenant," he said.

"Did I ever claim to be?" the man replied, smiling.

He made no move to unsheathe his blade, which had Arthur reluctant to bare his own. The stranger had not yet been proved an enemy.

"What is it you're doing here?" the Squire pressed. "Answer me."

"Waiting," he said. "For a little while longer. You can keep me company if you'd like."

Arthur's eyes narrowed.

"Why?"

"We are relations of a sort," the man chuckled. "Besides, what else is there for you to hurry to? You won't be finding Marshal Nim."

His sword was in his hand before he even realized he'd bared it.

"Who are you?" the Squire demanded.

The stranger looked away, into the distance, and suddenly let out a quiet laugh.

"Ah, fateful timing," he said. "It has been some time since I've last been on the right side of it."

There was a ripping sound in the distance, then a furious screech. Arthur stepped back.

"What was *that*?" Arthur asked.

"So many questions," the man teased, "but this one I'll give you for free."

He turned fully for the first time since they'd been talking, and Arthur Foundling met a pale of eerie green eyes over a bladelike smile.

"That," the Carrion Lord said, "was several hundred years' worth of giant spiders joining this battle."

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Steven Silver

"Do you, by any chance, happen to have a disreputable company of golden-hearted rogues with a chequered past who have something to prove under your command?"

"A what," the Black Knight replied.

"It would significantly increase our votes," Lady Akua insisted.

Bernardo

The spiders!!!!!! Yes!!!!!! Years of waiting for this moment :,)

Stormblessed

SPIDERS SPIDERS SPIDERS!

AMADEUS HAS TRULY EMBRACED HIS DAUGHTER'S WAYS!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, bringing a nearly-forgotten race forth from underground...
like daughter, like father.

Raved Thrad

Drow + spiders == driders!

Anon

It's a book of reversals. Continuing these, Amadeus is the reckless adding fire to the fire while Cat is busy laying groundwork and cunning plans.

jamesc9

This was covered several chapters ago.

The more you have to defend, the less chaos serves you. Amadeus has come into his second teenager-hood.

Anomandris

Daddy's home!!

Oh man, Arthur is gonna get some helluva experience from this encounter...

Cicero

Squire, meet your grandpa.

Don't try to kill him, that always goes badly for the kid who meets the retired legend. Or actually, go ahead, because after the miserable losing you usually get a power up. Unless he just kills you. Hard to tell which story your in.

KageLupus

Amadeus is very explicitly not going to be Arthur's grandpa. Cat has made it a point to keep the Squire at arm's length and to not act as his mentor in a way that has narrative weight. Arthur listens to her because she is the Queen of Callow, a leader in the Grand Alliance, and in general is known to be very experienced in fighting other Named.

Arthur is never going to get the kind of close, personal relationship with Cat that she had with Black. Which is kind of sad, but necessary to stop him from becoming a narrative dagger to her heart. His only relationship to Amadeus is going to be what any good Callow boy feels about the Carrion Lord.

aisard

Cat has made it a point, sure. Though how successful she is with it is still up for grabs, given that the Carrion Lord is smirking at her efforts what with the “we are relations of a sort” comment.

Shveiran

I hear you. Although, to be fair, Arthur is also the Squire after the Squire that was the Squire after Amadeus. It might be “you are my Squire’s Squire” and not “you are my protege’s protege”, which is... kind of different in my opinion. Catherine has grown beyond the story of Squires and Knights that was her origin, by a long shot. It’s why her shadow “made for comfortable cowering” when Amadeus was down on his luck.

But she never grew beyond the relationship with her father-figure, so that story still binds her.

The point is moot, anyway: Catherine is not a mother-figure to Arthur, precisely because she kept her distance so far. And so there is very few parallelism to draw on to make that story work.

[Liliet](#)

Arthur is not *Catherine’s Squire* though. She’s not a knight he’s apprenticing under. He’s just a Squire working for her.

The ‘relations of a sort’ thing is absolutely referencing his ducklilng status under her, and how all the denial in the world won’t make him not Cathierne’s protege.

Ciel Morgenstern

In my book, the point does still stand that all three of them started out as Squires (while Arthur still is that and the other two just grew beyond it).

[Liliet](#)

Doesn't really make them "relations" as best I can tell from Named etiquette/culture. That specifically refers to the grand-duckling point.

Earl of Purple

It would make them relations in Levant, where Bestowal is tracked as well as Blood. Neither of them are Levantine, however, and I don't think a Squire's Blood would even be a thing, as it's a transitional Name.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, it's a transitional Name and Arthur sure as fuck aint getting Black Knight. No, this is about Catherine 😊

Raved Thrad

Is it a bad thing that I now want to see Arthur call Amadeus "grandsquire?"

[Liliet](#)

Who call who?

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, he can still Grey Pilgrim this, in a horribly ironic way. But Cat already started that, so the echo makes it work. Another villain showing a hero a thing or two.

Someperson

That isn't *quite* his only relation to Amadeus of the Green Stretch.

Remember that he was also once the Squire. Regardless of the relationship between Arthur and Catherine, or between Catherine and Amadeus for that matter, Arthur now bears a mantle that was passed down from Amadeus.

Cpt. Obvious

Wait! Did you have chocolate milk this morning?

dadycool

Achievement Unlocked: The Old Master

Meet and learn from the man who trained your own mentor figure. Gain three (3) levels. Learn New Skill: Discernment (+3 to Perception, seemingly irrelevant information is kept, not discarded. Just in case.)

shikkarasu

[Squire Level 17!]

[Skill – Discernment obtained!]

[Skill – Providential Timing obtained!]

Test test test

Don't cross the fantasy streams

Trebar

I am so close to the last chapter written of that and it makes me really sad that I'm going to have to start waiting for chapters.

Sykomantis

There are so many stories with systems these days. Which one does this refer to?

Miles

Looks kinda like "the wandering inn"'s style

naturalnuke

System notification looks like A Wandering Inn to me

Ciel Morgenstern

Or, seemingly, just any "LitRPG" subtype. All I found so far reference games / are set in a game world at least partially (that often has influence on the "real" world of the setting or even becomes the "real" world).

shikkarasu

Fair point, but Miles and Nuke got it in one.

Sir Nil

And so, Amadeus for a brief moment simulated the conditions of the mythical continent of Australia.

[sengachi](#)

You know, Calernia is a small island continent. It's not too late for it pull an Australia, if it just believes hard enough!

jamesc9

I'm not sure that there's a high enough proportion of desert and biting creatures.

Sykomantis

It's not the quantity it's the quality, and the Wasteland has enough

ruduen

... Huh. So, I know there's a law against undead holding nobility, but does being turned into a giant spider and living in the sewers of Ater for centuries prevent someone from having a claim on the tower?

Sir Nil

We know that sentient creatures cannot lay claim to the Tower due to the Trial of Unexpected Teeth, if the former Dread Emperor is indeed alive as a spider I suspect the claim will be determined in court by whether or not they are still human or just a smart spider.

ruduen

Man-eating tapirs were ruled to lack sentience, which meant they were not valid claimants. However, that means that if someone was turned into a spider but retained sentience, that argument wouldn't apply.

(For reference, Book 4, Chapter 2: Alarm – <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/04/16/chapter-2-alarm/>)

dadycool

My favorite part about Praes has to be the fact that they've got actual rules and bureaucratic processes for things like undead or animals being eligible to hold titles. "She's undead. She can't claim nobility now." "Is he really still part human, or is he just a spider? Because that actually makes a difference."

shikkarasu

I actually fleshed out an entire setting with a friend of mine following one of us asking the other "Suppose the Heir Designate was accused of being soulboxed..."

jack

I think these rules only matter after the fact. If an undead or a giant spider has the strength to take the tower, it will do so, and people will just fall in line.

Who's going to tell the Dread Lord that he's an illegitimate emperor?
He'll just have you horribly killed and then go on with his day.

Liliet

I mean, "having the strength to take the Tower" generally refers to having people actually following you.
(Triumphant with her devils was special and no-one has replicated it since, even Akua the Diabolist II relied heavily on material resources provided or allowed by other people)

So agreeing "we will all not support this person" kind of does actually cut them out of competition.

Downzor

Actually, lack of sentience was given as the reason why the tapirs *couldn't* claim the Tower:

"In conclusion, the court recognizes the desertion of the sentient tiger army raised by Dread Emperor Sorcerous as sufficient precedent to rule that tapirs can, in fact, commit treason but that lack of sentience bars them from laying claim to the Tower by right of usurpation."

...which seems to imply that sentient beasts would have a legitimate right to claim the Tower

Jack

I believe the argument against the tapir for Dread Emperor was its lack of sentience

Shveiran

People are discussing the precedents, but they got it backward: in Ater, you don't hold the Tower because of a law. You make the law because you hold the Tower.

All those rules? The ban on undeads holding the title, or the trial of Unexpected Teeth? All those happened after Dread Emperor Revenant and the Tapirs had lost hold of the Tower. Not before.

Now, sure. Defy conventions and maybe you'll invite enmity from the High Seats, but doesn't Malicia's ban on the Chancellor Name prove that whatever the Emperor says is law so long as he is the Emperor?

If Dread Emperor Sorcerous can actually manage to storm the Tower with its brethren, all hail Dread Emperor Eightlegged.

KageLupus

Sorcerous would never be able to hold the Tower as a spider-monster, if only because the Scribe would have to off him.

There can be only one Webweaver in Praes.

Shequi

It's Dread Emperor Tenebrous that became the Giant Spider, Dread Emperor Sorcerous was the one that raised the Sentient Tiger Army.

aurikdomi

and bound his soul to the moon right?

Alex Baker

That format of levelling belongs to the fantastic (but very very long) Wandering Inn. 😊

billstewartmt

I, for one, welcome our new arachnid overlords...

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Time for Arthur to get some bonding time in with grand-dad.

megaprr

Dread Emperor Tenebrous hype is REAL

edrey

oh chaos, the mark of father and daughter
Amadeus is joining the dance, good. i wasn't expecting the spiders from him, but from cat using one of the aspects of beastmaster, still, its nice

Frivolous

Quote: The excess that the Due should release is instead used in a secondary array that ensures centrifugal force won't destroy the artefact from the inside.

My comment: Derived from Akua's accomplishments in making use of Keter's Due?

Quote: "Catherine won't depend on Named for such a critical part of the plan," Lady Akua said, tone firm. "There's an enemy on the field that could make her pay for such a thing dearly."

My comment: Probably the Intercessor.

Quote: That lot wouldn't be able to lead sailors to a whorehouse even with the fucking Wizard of the West guiding the way.

My comment: I laughed and laughed, though I don't know why Nim mentioned the Wizard of the West, given that is a Callowan Name. Maybe because he's the Gandalf expy?

Quote: That man is Levantine. It's why there are still traces of face paint in the roots of his hair, near the skin."

My comment: Unmasked (pun intended) because he failed to properly take off his MAKEUP. Talk about embarrassing.

Quote: "The gates," Akua Sahelian calmly said. "They opened one of the gates."

The same enchanted gates that took about half an hour to fully open, that could not be stopped when they began without wrecking the machinery.

My comment: When I read this, I thought the drill was just a very expensive decoy.

It turns out that opening the gates was the feint. Truly a masterpiece of military subterfuge.

Quote: Masego had been reading under the table the whole time – he'd cunningly glued a book under with the pages hanging down and he turned the pages with a spell so he wouldn't be caught

My comment: I've done this so many many times in class, only not so craftily. Well done, Masego.

Quote: A cleaner story, Catherine had called it, and who was Archer to argue with her? Cat might have died a bunch of times but it'd yet to stick, and that was the kind of crazy she was proud to embrace.

My comment: Embrace in more than one way, Indrani.

Quote: "Half an hour at most," Lady Akua grimaced. "It's devilish piece of work."

My comment: A huge compliment coming from the woman who was once Named Diabolist.

Frivolous

Addendum:

Quote: Before the storm could hit the regulars in front, the House Insurgent made its presence known through great panels of yellow light that stopped the enemy fire cold.

My comment: I believe these are copies of the Heavenly Fences used by by priests of the Tenth Crusade, first seen in Arabesques, and then named as such by Rozala Malanza in Interlude: Kaleidoscope I.

Which means that the House of Light of Callow has duplicated a Proceran technique. Very interesting.

[sengachi](#)

There's been so many military advances in the recent spate of wars it's making WWI stand up and take notice.

M0och123

I agree. Not quite there yet to WW2 levels of innovation.

However with the angel bomb, we may just get there!

Frivolous

sengachi: I wonder if Catherine simply asked for the formula to be taught to her priests, and Cordelia ordered it so.

If Cordelia did, she has to be aware that the Army of Callow would be able to use the Heavenly Fences to defend against any future Crusade. On the other hand, she is heavily indebted to Catherine.

Or maybe Vivienne's Jacks or the drow stole the formula. Or the Callowan House of Light reverse engineered it.

It feels so strange to talk about priests reverse engineering a prayer, though.

John Pratt

Holy barriers of protection aren't a new thing, Rozala's use of them in the field wasn't an advance in technology, but in doctrine. Cat doesn't need to send spies or negotiate with Procer, she just needs to have enough priests in the military.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah this is a big part of the reason I used WWI as my real-world war analogy. The big military advances which are occurring aren't *really* technological leaps. Sure those are there, but they're mostly just tweaking individual battles right now and their full potential won't be realized for another generation. The real innovations are all doctrinal, taking existing magics, munitions, tech, etc, and melding them together into a

fast, well-communicating, and powerful combined arms force.

shikkarasu

Please, Noc, let it be Masego who saw the barriers used one time and then condescendingly explained how they work to House Insurgent.

thecorinthianman

I never considered it because Ranger would have to die, but now that fight looks like it might be a plot point here. Is Indrani going to take the name of Ranger???

Raved Thrad

On any other day I'd say that they were SOL, but it's entirely possible at this point that Alexis and Indrani are *claimants*. Maybe even Cocky, depending on whether or not she gets the killing shot in and the Guideverse supports the You Keep What You Kill principle.

KageLupus

Nah, this is not an Namd-evolution story, this is a personal growth story. Indrani and the girls are not going to kill Ranger or usurp her Name, they are going to prove that while working together they are stronger than working apart.

Ranger's whole philosophy was one of self-sufficiency. You have to be strong enough to survive on your own, you can be an asshole if no one is strong enough to stop you, altruism and love are just fancy words for weakness. All of Ranger's students were brought up surrounded by that thinking and they all turned out emotionally stunted and with tons of baggage. They are good at what they do, but the cost was a twisted worldview.

Now they have all seen that there is a different way and this fight against Ranger is their chance to prove to themselves that that different way is valid. Alone none of them would have a chance against Ranger, but if they work together they might. I doubt they will be able to really beat her, let alone kill her, but they can at least prove that friendship and support makes you stronger instead of being a sign of weakness.

Even if they lose it doesn't really matter though. Ultimately this story isn't about whether they can beat Ranger in a fight, it is about whether they grow past the emotional trauma they suffered under her for years. Punching her in the face would be a cathartic bonus though.

Liliet

I think they will *beat* Ranger but not *kill* her, for multiple reasons.

1. She's not really a or the enemy here. She's with Amadeus, and Amadeus is having a civilized chat with Squire. She's not there to stop them, killing her isn't a prerequisite to any military success.
2. Only the Silver Huntress is the one who is really about "remove this disgusting turd from the world" and she's a heroine. I don't think she'll insist if the cards are against it.
3. Killing defeated enemies after you've proven you are better is Ranger's thing. They don't have to imitate it.

shikkarasu

I want one of them to transition into Lady of the Lake and become the next generation of... whatever you call Ranger's schtick. Like, it isn't a Name yet, but it easily could become one. It would also keep with the theme of "member of the Woe doing what their Calamity Counterpart did, but better/with more compassion."

Shveiran

But that is not a theme.

Hakram is not doing what Captain did, at all.

Masego is not doing what his father did beyond "magical research remains most interesting"; he is aiming for godhood or at least godhead whereas the Warlock never did. Vivienne doesn't even have a predecessor, unless you count Scribe, and you really shouldn't; there were some similarities, but few and far between. And now one is a proto-queen while the other was a tool to someone else's ambition and was happy running a network in the dark.

And Archer sounds like Ranger, sure, so long as she is talking about things she doesn't CARE about. Which shows it's just her origin and not her core.

The Woe. Are not. The new Calamities.

Insanenoodlyguy

Actually not so much. Captain was going to be led by an Orc god to lead his people back to old days of Glory. Instead she simply snuffed that story out. Hakram will lead the Orcs into new days of Glory.

Warlock made a life of magical research devoid of ethics. Masego developed some of those and as you said, reached for an entirely different tier of power. Scribe/ Assassin spent her time in the shadow of another, and can't conceive of a life without that. Vivienne faced her losses and emerged as her own person on her own path.

And archer, as you mentioned, is the whole point. She is willing to acknowledge strength and companionship in a way her teacher never could.

It's not about them being true parallels, they aren't. And they certainly aren't the new calamities. Instead, they are something better.

shikkarasu

They don't need to be 1:1 parallels of the Calamities, and the story would be worse if they were. They are the New Generation. Taking from the old in the same way that the Army of Callow borrows heavily from Legion doctrine, but with a new spin on it.

Hakram can respect Catherine's wishes and stand on his own two feet in a way that Eudokia never could until the day she was fired. (I honestly barely feel any connection between Hakram and Sabah, esp. once we found out that Assassin was just an Aspect from Scribe. She kept Black alive, killed his enemies, and made sure his paper work was completed on time)

Masego is -begrudgingly- willing to work with and teach others. He may be aiming to become a god, but he isn't going to hoard his knowledge in a vault somewhere. He also doesn't, as a random example, leave a few hundred people in hell like someone casually littering.

I'm not going to elaborate on Archer, you and Insanenoodlyguy hit it on the head.

Vivienne is not was not broken by a lack of hard power and total authority. She learned to rely on others and trust in her allies, even if Hakram and Catherine had hurt/betrayed her in the past. She has a long way to go before she's on Malicia's level, and maybe she never will be, but as things stand she may never *need* to be. That's the important part.

My main point (doing what their Calamity Counterpart did, but better) is that, of all the ways that they are not the same as the characters who came before, the biggest and most important difference has been one of compassion. In short, the values that they instilled in

Akua. The Calamities were family, but it was much more of an exception they made for one another, not a general rule.

... but that's a lot of nuance to condense into a half sentence. Sorry if I missed the mark.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Re: Gandalf expies: one of Gandalf's monikers is "Grey Pilgrim," but that doesn't mean the Wizard of the West isn't also a Gandalf.

edrey

oh chaos, the mark of father and daughter
Amadeus is joining the dance, good. i wasn't expecting the spiders from him, but from cat using one of the aspects of beastmaster, still, its nice

ninegardens

Oh, Arthur tragically missing the point of who he was talking to was so so fabulous.

Arthur is fun. So is The Drill. The Refuge trio is... definitely a story well aimed at bringing ranger down (possibly even in a non-lethal manner!) and is definitely a story aimed at... entangling her for the duration of this adventure... a clever ruse.

Kpaxmaji

Did he use the goblin fire to burn the spider nests and force them into the surface? Or the goblin fire is still in play.

Someguy

He probably used smoke to drive the spiders out so the'd be extra pissed. Goblinfire would still be in play

Flameburst

Rule 73 of Catherine Foundling: Until someone has blamed me for burning down the city, the goblinfire is in play.

shikkarasu

Rule 73.5 of Catherine Foundling: "Wrong again," I replied. "I set fire to *everything*."

Miles

Come to think of it have we seen her use goblinfire twice in the same battle yet?

Gotta be a move she's saving for the finale.

jamesc9

She doesn't have the goblinfire. Amadeus does. We know a lot less about his rules for living with fire.

devildragon777

I have to say, unleashing several hundred years of giant spiders is...uh...a very *novel* starting play.

I see this is also going to be another game of "Cat has a plan stashed away somewhere in this mess, and we're going to Interlude for the Unspoken Plan Guarantee". I'm guessing next interlude might have Hakram? It seems like we're getting Akua portions the entire way through though.

Poor Nim, she's just so lost in all of this. At least Akua seems to have pulled her out of the "death by Squire" route.

...Arthur and Sapan are reminding me of baby Cat and Masego.

[Liliet](#)

Alternatively, Cat genuinely doesn't have a plan and things are too chaotic for her POV to be productive. Her plan could be "sit back and watch the fireworks, whatever the fuck they are".

ninegardens

I feel like the thing about Cat is that she plans based on peoples GOALS, not based on their methods.

She doesn't know HOW malicia, or Akua, or Bard or Black are going to do the things they do. Hence she'll sit back and watch. But she does "know" what they each want (or at least, she thinks she does). Hence, she isn't planning for the details. Its why chaos works so well from her, because she focuses on the forest, not the individual leaves and branches.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

The funny thing is that most possible outcomes here are good enough for Catherine. She only needs to employ course corrections that will steer away from unacceptable outcomes.

Tenthyr

Kinda weird how Bardish I took Black to sound there, before he was revealed.

[Liliet](#)

He's pretty bardic!

[credulapostero](#)

I have been wondering since Cat started seeing stars if her (and/or Black, after this chapter) are potential claimants for the name of Intercessor

jamesc9

Although Cat's version will be optimised toward order-ish and justice-ish, because of the number of people who saw her being a contact person under the Truce and Terms.

Sir Nil

If Dread Emperor Tenebrous is allowed to return then I fully expect Ime to rip off a mask and be revealed the he Dread Emperor Traitorous all along.

Big I

Lol. Just as planned.

Syndic

Honestly, if the story ends with Traitorous back in the tower and everyone else too entangled with each other to do something about it, I won't even be mad.

In fact, I'd probably laugh for days every time I think about it.

The roughly three chapters of Cat grouching, complaining, groaning, cussing and complaining some more would be epic!

[irritantseraphim](#)

And her shoemaker was Irritant all along!

Juff

Typo Thread:

nobles lines > noble lines
him buy > him by
power and > power, and
Black knight's general > Black Knight's general
tired to make > tried to make
still now sure > still not sure
what their target > their target
It was the noble (extra space)

timers > times
lords" > lords."
chokepoint > chokepoints
in amount > in amounts
itching away > itching away at
still in air > still in the air
pale of eerie > pair of eerie

DemBonez665

AMADEUS OF THE GREEN STRETCH LET'S G00000000

Peter

PLEASE LET ME HAVE INTELLIGENT GIANT SPIDERS. I need the spiders to be intelligent, I didn't realize how much I needed spider-legionnaires until right now.

Shveiran

Oh my god yes.

jamesc9

The drill will have to be rearranged, so that they can salute acceptably.

Small price to pay for wall-climbing and web-leaving capabilities.

Cicero

Spiders... why'd it have to be spiders.

Steven Silver

At least it's not snakes 🤩

jamesc9

This too shall pass.

dadycoool

That last conversation was beautiful. The moment EE described the "lieutenant" the same as the Carrion Lord, we all knew exactly who Arthur was talking to. lol, Arthur goes up to him as he's watching Ater burn and says "Good morning" as if the ruin of the Capitol of the Eastern Quarter of the Continent was as calm as a meadow.

Also, I love how Akua was trying to spark a heroic band coming together to save the day, yet the Black Knight just didn't get it.

[irritantseraphim](#)

"Good morning'" – "Must have been in the Army of Callow for too long!" Is great dialogue.

jamesc9

Thank you; now I understand what he meant, which is that nobody who'd been through less would make time for civilities in this situation.

[jerdenzen](#)

I feel like the Dread Empire is lacking in heroic bands, Akua's been with the good guys (sorta) too long.

[Liliet](#)

That's not a reference to a heroic band, that's a reference to the Gallowborne.

Benjamin Huang

YESSS! THE MADNESS BEGINS!
BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!
SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE!
PLOTS FOR THE THOUGHT GOD!
DREAMS FOR THE DREAM MAZE!
SHIPS FOR THE SHIP GOD!
DRAMA FOR THE DRAMA THRONE!
nurgle gets nothing

SpacyRicochet

WHAT! NURGLE IS ALL!

Earl of Purple

Nurgle has been getting far too much, this past year and a half.

Ihatemyselfforthis

"Plot" for the Thot god

john

Nurgle gets everything, eventually. There's no rush, though, he's chill enough to let everyone else take their turns.

jamesc9

For a different, but related, take on the same interaction:
<http://freefall.purrsia.com/ff3400/fc03306.htm>

[Adrian_V](#)

Spiders, giant man eating spiders possibly led by a past emeperor who had to be 1 of the best by virtue of still being alive, this will be interesting.

Also again SPIDERS!!!.....this may be the first time Erra gives me nightmares xD

[irritantseraphim](#)

Also by virtue of being possibly more insane than most of the others.

[Adrian_V](#)

Is not insane if he proved himself correct!! xD

[Sugar Roll](#)

Troop movements spotted outside the city. Was it the clans?

[sengachi](#)

Consider me sufficiently primed to go nuts about the Ateran sewer spiders.

[Liliet](#)

I think my favorite part is how this mirrors Catherine's fae stratagem at Kala.

Like father like daughter ♥

ChillyPepper

Did anyone else notice how Akua is now mimicking Cat, is this foreshadowing?

[Liliet](#)

Akua has always had enough in common with Cat to predict her reactions to a significant degree despite being overall kinda shitty at non-scripted politics (she's an expert on the script though).

This was inevitable in the best way.

kinghaart

They really aren't even that different, in the scale of things.

Cat is putting Akua through all of this because deep down she knows she has made similar decisions, most notably letting the

Lone Swordsman live despite knowing how many deaths that resulted in.

It's like how Frodo had pity (and disgust) on Gollum partly because he saw his own future with the ring in that creature.

letouriste

This battle will be so much fun!!!

Tenebrous making a claim for the tower again? :p

Unrecovered

>>"Agreed," Lady Akua said. "Do you, by any chance, happen to have a disreputable company of golden-hearted rogues with a chequered past who have something to prove under your command?"

>>"A what," the Black Knight replied.

>>"It would significantly increase our chances of success," Lady Akua insisted.

I can imagine a sheer disbelief on marshal's face when she realized Akua is being totally serious. Ah...new to her name, still doesn't know what a battle of Named is. As the Barrow Sword had put it, "like shatranj for the mad, with half rules unknown and half made up along the way".

M0och123

Oh God spiders! Why is it always spiders? Giant ones too!

If I was a Callowan Legionaire, hordes of undead and fae and even crusades would fail to break me. But spiders? I'd be the first to NOPE out of there!

rouquincool

Amadeus of the Green Stretch, dripping so hard Squire can't identify him.

jamesc9

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Drippin> ?

Earl of Purple

That drill wouldn't work on any other wall, not as quickly as here. Maybe on the walls of Keter, but the issue there is the dwarf moat of lava getting in the way.

I knew Amadeus was killing district mages, the ones responsible for keeping sewers warded to prevent an invasion of giant spiders. Malicia knew it, too. But she didn't connect the dots.

[sengachi](#)

Oh, I hadn't caught that that's why the district mages were being killed. Nice catch!

kinghaart

Yeah I had figured it was Amadeus but I didn't figure why.

Good foreshadowing!

ohJohN

Even worse that she didn't **Connect** the dots! She's really slipping.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I can just tell this one's going to get blamed on Cat too.

Steven Silver

Nah, it doesn't get blamed on Cat until the goblin fire comes out. But what are the chances of that, eh?

Reader in the Night

LOL Giant drill. Cat just Ba Sing Se'd Ater. And then Amadeus countered with Giant Spiders. And the fireworks haven't even started yet, literally, because Black has tons of goblinfire stashed around somewhere. This is going to be an amazing gambit pile-up. Akua appears to be playing a purely defensive game, but I can't wait to see what happens when Malicia and the Bard throw their own hats into the ring.

[anonymous4968](#)

This is the second time I've seen Ba Sing Se get referenced this week. Are people just rewatching Avatar these days?

Shveiran

People are always rewatching Avatar, and they are always right to do so.

beleester

Heh, Arthur really takes after Catherine when it comes to getting a mage to explain something to you in the most annoying way.

Reaver0f

That has to be the most patient Chekhov's Gun of all time.

So much juicy forwarning and yet I truly did not see it coming 😊
!

Mental Mouse

Well, it's not quite a Chekhov's Gun, but In All Night Laundry, Jack Fractal threw a brick from the beginning to the end of the story – something like 6 years real-time.

Darkening

8 bit theater ends with resolving a joke from the very beginning of the comic lol.

Daniel E

The fact that Masego continues to find new & creative methods of sneaking books into important meetings has to be the best running gag of the entire series.

kinghaart

Losing his eyes only made him more creative – Cat could stand to take a page... ahem... from his book.

ksmvr

I just thought of this. Is Cat good at stories because she's now the canonical daughter of the Fey king of winter? She was stripped of her winter power but not of her lineage.

Sinead

She got the basics from Amadeus, which she honed against William, Akua, and the Fae (her plan for success that put her in the line of succession for the Throne of Winter was based on her particular knack for stories).

She then spent a good while refining these skills with potential Fae influence for detecting the esoteric forces and she then took the Bard's knowledge from the echo in Arcadia.

mamm0nn

Wait...

"It was bloody enough fighting that the Black Queen was there and slinging around Night in amount that wiped out entire companies, but ... so Nim suspected that unless that fucking drill was broken for good Ater would fall before Noon Bell rang."

Wasn't it established that Cat's Night powers were rather sluggish and weak during the day, ever since the Sisters' Fall? Wouldn't it make more sense for Masego to be throwing magic around right now, while Cat stays in reserve until nightfall?

Also, there's an unnerving lack of devils involved in this fight. Doesn't matter that it's not quite demon time yet for the High Lords, that there hasn't been a single mention of devil companies or flying devils covering the sky means that the High Lords haven't even gotten in third gear yet.

[irritantseraphim](#)

I'd guess that we're getting Nims perspective here, who only hears about the fighting second-hand (at least second hand), so any reports are likely to be overblown by some degree.

Darkening

Sluggish and weak by comparison maybe, but cat is still a pretty heavy hitter.

[sengachi](#)

If the important fighting drags on until noon, let alone night, the Army of Callow has strategically lost. So it makes sense to have Cat out and about slinging everything she's got now while it might matter.

Fortunately, I suspect the High Lords are all scared of blowing their true demonic arsenals so long as Malicia hasn't played her own trump cards. So far as they're concerned after all, they lose just as hard if they beat Cat and then lose to Malicia the moment Cat is gone.

Sinead

I also wonder if Cat is able to make reserves of Night like the Eclipsing Well and her Staff of Age.

Not necessarily as stable as those, but the general 'store current power for later access' comparable to Masego's tokens of stored power

kinghaart

I think no Devils for three reasons:

1. The people of After
2. Nobles might be able to stop the Devils attacking their own, maybe even from attacking the citizens, but probably not from attacking all the other Nobles and *their* Devils
3. Narrative law of escalation, Devils are only brought in either in response to a similar threat or at a time of true desperation and the Praesi don't think they are truly that

desperate yet – they think that *one of* Akua or Malicia will save them.

flashburn283

Well, things are getting messy, anybody else we can bring in to up the Chaos Factor?

ninegardens

Malicia's got a tower full of sentinels and demons.

Also Bard will have... something.

Gerion

Yes!

Emerald Swords, devils, demons, enraged citizens practicing the French Revolution, fae, the veterans who offered to follow Amadeus and were told to stay at home, the sentient tigers, man-eating tapirs, the Dead King by taking possession of his envoy that is hidden somewhere in the Tower, the dwarves poking their heads out of the ground and asking where their delicious spiders had disappeared to,...

For all we know, the gnomes might show up in the minute and nuke the city.

Gerion

Also: Zombie Pirates!

kinghaart

I bet Larat will appear at least once more, though probably not here.

ninegardens

Reading "the girl who climbed the tower" again and noticed the line:

"And always devour whole a liar "... which is Alaya down to a tee. She is a liar. Not even in a bad way initially- lies were what were needed to keep the nobles in line, to keep the empire standing, etc.

BUT.

But she was a liar, and the fires are devouring her whole and... I can't help but wonder who we know that is honest enough to resist.

... Kiaros probably. Not that he would do good things as emperor, but it wouldn't devour him. Black... I honestly *don't* think would manage it. At least, not in his past renditions. I don't think any of the Woe are up to it (Masego is most honest, but its not just earnestness that's needed, its self awareness).

Saint of Swords might actually be one of the better candidates... but once again, she wouldn't do *good* things with that power.

And actually, two somewhat weird picks that might resist this particular hurdle: Robber and Rozalia... but of course, they are two people who would never try to claim the tower in the first place... which I suspect is rather the point.

kinghaart

OMG

I didn't see it before your comment but... when read out loud, it literally says

"Will devour whole Alaya"

This has been in front of us the entire series. It sounds almost too on-the-nose but now I can't unseen it. :0

Miles

Masego. Glued. A book!?

[Liliet](#)

That's a metaphorical phrasing! No actual glue was involved!

ohJohN

And (even without accounting for his deep respect for books) we know this to be true, a priori, because: when has Masego ever used a mundane substance when magic could easily serve the same purpose (but way better)? Can you imagine him spending even a few minutes asking random sappers for glue, when any scrap of magic available to him could be converted into the metaphysical essence of adhesion that perfectly obeys his will?

[Liliet](#)

Also, more importantly, HE WOULD NEVER PUT GLUE ON A BOOK!!!

(Yes, I know you specifically set that aside. I really feel like it's the more crucial part though)

Earl of Purple

Even if he did use actual glue, he put it on the bindings. That can be repaired/replaced and doesn't harm the text of the book. If the pages aren't dangling underneath the book, and it's glued face-up, eh can't turn the pages when he's finished reading them. I guess he can't just pick to

read through one page when he's finished it because pages have writing on both sides.

SpeckofStardust

I am glad that Amadeus seems to think the pattern of three isn't going to happen with the current black knight and Squire.

[Liliet](#)

It's already happening, it's just not going to be resolved today.

SpeckofStardust

Then it wont happen in PGTE, thier in the middle of the final battle for the East.

Cause you know the Squire is talking to the old man that is apparently ready to engage both his daughter and his longest partner, otherwise Amadeus wouldn't be out in the open like this.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Or it happens tomorrow or the day they finally storm the tower, as they have a lot of stuff to do right now and you don't take a city like Ater in a day. They have several sets of walls, there's the demons and artifacts in the Tower vaults etc. It's gonna happen in the next chapters. Just not that specific day.

SpeckofStardust

This argument would be valid, IF I didn't believe that Amadeus wasn't planning on using goblin fire before the final assault on the tower would take place.

[irritantseraphim](#)

We'll see. I think even despite his goblinfire plan, Arthur will face Nim in the course of the siege of Ater, as Amadeus won't torch all of Ater, if Cats planning/read of the actors involved is correct.

SpeckofStardust

I mean at this rate I could see Arthur running into a Nim that is in the middle of depression round 2. (Round 1 got beat by Akua)

In other words it wont be a third fight. Which considering the first 2 (lost/tie) went means it wouldn't fit a pattern of 3.

ninegardens

Arthur shows up
NIM: I surrender.
Arthur: Wut?
NIM: I surrender. You win. Good job.
Arthur: But...
NIM: here, you want me to help slay Giant spiders?
Arthur: ...

Some Smartass

No lie, that's probably what Akua will tell her to do, since it's how Cat got out of her Patterns. Lose on your own terms. The question, of course, is if the new Black Knight is willing to put her pride aside to make use of this bit of namelore.

kinghaart

Yes, even with the Lone Swordsman it came up that converting to being a hero (if only a lower case one) was a valid way to survive a pattern of three.

Black Spiral Dancer

Excellent!! Excited for the next one. Foul Mess.

superkeaton

"And then I hit them with the spiders." – Amadeus, probably

kinghaart

Brilliant chapter. They have all been great this book but so many excellent moments.

Many of the others have been called out already but I chuckled at Sapan's failed insult and then laughed out loud when Nim's came out with a perfect counterpoint. Really helps cement her veteran status to be able to swear that creatively. 😊

DC

All hail Dread Empress Chitinous

Interlude: The Hanged All Crooning

"Would-be tyrants always snigger when a hero comes knocking, smirking at each other that if they were in charge surely they would have killed the man when he was still a callow youth. Idiots. Do you have any idea how many callow youths are out to kill me, Chancellor? If I killed them all I could make a second Tower out of the corpse pile. The best you can do is massacre here and there and hope it's one of the dumb ones that survives all the way to your door."

– Dread Empress Rancorous

A tide of chitinous vermin poured out of the sewers, disgusting eight-legged creatures the size of horses that screeched under the glare of the sun and spread out like a plague. And they kept coming out: a dozen, a hundred. How long until it was a thousand, or even more than that? Arthur turned a glare on the disguised man that could only be Amadeus of the Green Stretch, the Carrion Lord himself. The older man seemed as indifferent to his fury as he was to the screams sounding in the distance.

"You madman," the Squire shouted. "You're releasing them into the city!"

"Well spotted," the Carrion Lord praised.

Arthur suspected he was not imagining that sardonic undertone.

"People are going to die," the orphan bit out. "Thousands-"

"An entirely foreseeable consequence of giving battle in a crowded city," the Carrion Lord noted. "Is it only collateral damage not of your own making that offends?"

"Innocents will die," the Squire seethed. "Innocents are already dying. And you're playing word games with me?"

"You're letting the Book do your thinking for you," the green-eyed man chided. "*Think*, boy. Where did you see signals being sent up? Where do we stand right now?"

Arthur seized his anger by the neck, slowed it, but did not set it aside. Anger was good, anger was your soul telling you something was unacceptable and you ought to do something about it. But the dark-haired orphan forced himself to think. The flares he'd seen in the sky, they'd been in a broad line going south to north across Ater. A battle line, he thought. The breaches, the place where the spiders were coming through, they were all places where there'd already been fighting. Soldiers.

"You sent them after armies," the Squire said.

"I did," the Carrion Lord easily replied. "I've known this city for decades, judging where the fighting would take place during the assault was not difficult. Thought that fascinating engine – Masego's work, yes? – took me by surprise. I had to compensate with some heavy-handedness around the Licosian Gates."

"You may yet ruin this city and all in it," Arthur bit out. "Worse yet, what manner of dark bargain did you strike to get power over the spiders?"

The green-eyed man cocked his head to the side, looking amused.

"Arthur Foundling," he drawled, "are you asking me to tell you my evil plan?"

The Squire paused, slightly embarrassed at being caught out instantly. Still, he must persevere.

"Do you not want to tell anyone of your cunning?" Arthur tried. "Surely a great deal of work went into this."

Evil always liked to gloat, unless it was the Dead King and his Revenants, but Lady Alexis said those didn't really count.

"I was going to use you to funnel information to my daughter, but it would be almost unprincipled of me to indulge you after that," the Carrion Lord noted. "I'd be rewarding an unsavoury habit."

"The White Knight told me this usually works," Arthur replied, a tad defensively.

"Well, if the Sword of Judgement said so," the older man drily said. "We must not make a liar out of Judgement's favourite meat puppet, I'll tell you everything."

Arthur eyed him skeptically. Maybe taking him prisoners would be safer. The Carrion Lord was on the edge of the roof, his sword still in the sheath and he was no longer Named. Just an aging man in light mail. One who was looking at him with calm, cool eyes. The fight would be his to lose, the Squire thought. He'd been training with some of the finest warriors on Calernia. And yet under the weight of those pale green eyes Arthur found he was hesitating. His instincts were telling him it was a bad idea, and though his anger at the horror the old monster had just unleashed on Ater was far from quenched he would not let it bait him into making a mistake.

He must find out how the villain was controlling the horde, what power or artefact, so that the spiders could be forced back below.

"I am not the Tyrant of Helike, child," the Carrion Lord calmly said. "You are looking for the gimmick, the toy. There is none. I

murdered the men and women warding the sewers to keep the creatures out, undid their work sent my associate to stir up the hive. The scent of blood and corpses did the rest."

The monster's face was unsmiling.

"There is no undoing this," he said, and it sounded like a nail hammered into a coffin.

"It won't only be soldiers who die, you fucking animal," the Squire insisted. "Do you think they won't spill out beyond the battle lines into the city? It's only the districts closest to the walls that were evacuated. Civilians are going to die."

"Yes," the Carrion Lord nonchalantly said. "Thousands of them. The city will be on the brink of collapse as the horde spreads. The Legions will dig in, the Army of Callow retreat. And meanwhile the High Seats will look at their household troops, their precious private armies so jealously hoarded, see them bleed and die to save people that are nothing to them. Even as we speak they wonder – is this worth it? What am I sacrificing my strength for?"

"You can't be serious," Arthur said, appalled. "You're saying they'll retreat?"

"They cannot afford that either," the green-eyed man said. "Praes needs a capital that is not a smoking hovel full of giant spiders. Neither will they be willing to weaken themselves. So they will, instead, revert to... old habits."

In the distance, the air screamed so loud that even the chittering of the horde was drowned out. Rifts were ripped open, at first only a few then dozens, and it was as if the floodgates had broken. Devils began pouring out of Lesser Breaches and sorceries fouler still: swarms of green and glittering insects, rivers of purple flame and storms in the shape of giants. And among them, things worse than any of the rest slithered. Swam amongst the spiders, turning them to horrors not of Creation.

"Takisha pulled out the storm elementals," the Carrion Lord noted, sounding surprised. "Didn't think she'd risk them with the number of demons that were just sent out. Someone's in a mood."

"Demons," Arthur choked out. "As in plural?"

"At least a dozen," the green-eyed man said. "Catherine will send out Masego to limit the spread, but the damage has already been done."

"You did this," the Squire accused.

"I've yet to take a life today," the Carrion Lord replied, amused. "Besides, you miss the altar for the corpse."

"I see exactly what you've done," Arthur harshly said.

"I am not of any particular importance today," the man dismissed. "What matters is this: in the heart of Praes, a city packed tight with men and women from all parts of the empire, the High Seats were seen to make a choice. They could have protected the people they claim are theirs, paying in blood and power to fulfill their sworn duty."

The skyline of the city boiled, wreathed in a hundred different flavours of madness. In stopping the spread of the giant spiders, in trying to break the horde, the fearsome High Lords of Praes were shattering entire swaths of the capital. How many of them had been evacuated? *Too few*, Arthur thought.

"Or they could do this," the Carrion Lord said. "Dread and hatred, burning the world so they can warm their fingers against the flames."

"All this so you could gloat that your enemies are as terrible as you?" Arthur scorned.

The green-eyed man faintly smiled.

"I gave them the chance, Squire," he said. "To prove me wrong, to show me that there was some truth to the stories we tell ourselves. That they are the logical conclusion of *jino-waza*, that their rule is more than a thousand years of fangs ripping into flesh. That they deserve the power Praes has given them."

He looked, Arthur thought in a moment of terrifying clarity, disappointed. As if he would have liked to be wrong.

"Yet here we are," the Carrion Lord said. "Before the eyes of all Praes, the High Seats have abdicated their right to rule. They have revealed themselves as nothing more than worms in the flesh. Of all that happens today, that is the only part that matters."

It wasn't about the armies, Arthur realized. Or not just about. Whatever it was the man was after, it wasn't a victory on the field. It was... larger. And, the Squire felt in his bones, infinitely more dangerous.

"What is it you're doing, Carrion Lord?" the Squire quietly asked.

"I am killing the Dread Empire of Praes," the madman replied, "one story at a time."

"Well," Archer mused, "this went to shit in a hurry."

As if to punctuate the sentence, the rooftop she was running on exploded in a pillar of blue-grey flames that smelled vaguely of saffron. She landed in a roll on the roof of the temple across the street, reaching for an arrow and halfway nocking it even as the flames across the street collapsed as if they were liquid before beginning to form into a spindly, mantis-like shape. Fortunately, Indrani wasn't going to have to waste any more arrows distracting the construct: silver Light began to glow right behind her.

"I fucking hate those things," Alexis grunted, loosing her arrow.

The missile screamed out with Light, blinding to look at even as Named, and hit the construct with a disappointing flopping sound, just sinking into the liquid-like flames. A moment later the entire construct popped as the Light's continuing presence destroyed the animating spell's framework, making the entire mass of flame drop to the ground in a smoking rain.

"Eh, after that one demon thing that was like a hundred spiders melted together it's going to take a lot to impress me today," Indrani said. "It was *impressively* creepy, and not just because it didn't really seem to get the difference between eyes and teeth."

The Silver Huntress snorted, not disagreeing. Alexis had significantly cheered up since they'd started killing things, although it came and went. Whenever they got close to the Lady it trended downwards, which Cocky had called 'an apt summation of our childhoods' when Indrani had shared the thought with her. Speaking of the Concocter, Archer glanced further back and saw that the now purple-haired potioneer was moving around the needles on that fancy little tracking artefact Cat had given them.

"Found her," Cocky called out. "She's not actually far, just on the other side of the Licosian Gates."

Well fuck, Indrani thought, sharing a look with Alexis. That place had been the stronghold held by the troops and vassals of the High Lady of Kahtan an hour back, but not it was pretty much Spidertown. Spiderville, maybe, considering it was pretty large and swarming with way too many giant spiders. Last she'd seen a few pockets of troops were surviving holed up in buildings behind wards they'd put up, but the highborn had pretty much written off taking it back the traditional way so instead they'd turned to the Praesi specialty: a bunch of devils and weird magical killer things.

"That place is bad enough I think even the devils would go back to the Hells if they had a choice," Indrani bluntly said.

"Are you saying we let her lose us?" Cocky challenged.

"No," the Silver Huntress growled. "Fuck that. You still have a set of those blue ones, right?"

"I do," the Concocter said. "And a full healing set."

"We go in with a plan this time, then," Archer insisted. "You don't have anything that heals 'arrow through the eye' which was Alexis almost got last time we thought we were ambushing her."

"She won't get me again," Alexis replied through clenched teeth.

Indrani felt like slugging them both in the face until either sense or teeth came out, knowing the sight of either would be a relief.

"*Listen* to me," Indrani said. "We're not going to beat her like this. She's better than any of us are."

"Impressive," Cocky said, "how you can lick her boot without needing it in front of you."

Archer was not going to punch her in the throat, no matter how *deeply satisfying* it would be.

"Cocky," Alexis warned. "She's not wrong."

Indrani glanced at her in surprise, the Huntress refusing to meet her eyes.

"She's faster and stronger and she has more experience," Archer said. "If we're going to get her, it's by hitting her with something she hasn't seen yet. That means it's not me or Alexis who brings this home, Cocky."

This time it was her that was stared at in surprise.

"She's taught us most of what we know about fighting," Indrani elaborated. "She hasn't taught *you* shit about brewing. What have you got that would serve as a nasty surprise?"

Cocky hesitated.

"She's resistant to pretty much all poisons unless it's ten times the concentration lethal in a human," the Concocter said. "It's an elf thing, I think. But that's for toxins. I've seen her smoke wakeleaf, which is a stimulant and nonmagical. Unless she was just puffing at the pipe for the look of it, it means her resistance doesn't apply to everything."

"You going somewhere with this?" Alexis bluntly asked.

Cocky scowled at her, but moments later she undid a clasp within her satchel and showed them a small vial with a translucent golden liquid inside.

"This is a purified version of elegy," the Concocter said.

Indrani's brow rose.

"The fun times drug?" she asked.

Cocky nodded.

"It won't harm her, but what makes elegy popular in the first place is that when you take it affects your perception of time," she said. "I strengthened the elements that cause that and took out the ones that add a sensation of euphoria."

"She'll be able to burn it out with her Name," the Huntress said.

"No quickly," the Concocter replied with a flash of pearly teeth. "Not with how concentrated it is. There's enough in there if I dropped in a lake I could see the water as the usual drug."

Indrani let out a low whistle.

"She'll need to ingest?" she asked.

"Skin contact would also work, but not nearly as strong," Cocky said.

"Then we need to cram it in her mouth," Indrani grimaced. "That's you and me, Alexis."

"I'll take it," the Huntress immediately said, reaching for the vial.

"It should be me," Archer said, and when glared at shook her head. "You're better up close, much as I hate to admit it. You're more likely to make me an opening than the other way around."

The admission seemed to mollify the other woman some, and they packed their gear again. Just in time, since one of those damned giant-shaped hurricanes was coming their way again. Indrani had seen what happened to the people and spiders that got sucked in, and she had no intention of being shredded to pieces. They got a move on, avoiding the streets that were entirely aflame and the roving packs of devils in the sky. The Licosian Gates had somehow gotten worse since their last trip thereabouts, which Indrani reluctantly accepted as being pretty impressive. The four massive ancient statues seated on either side of the gates were crawling with spiders trying to puncture the spell bubbles keeping the handful of soldiers atop the gatehouse roof, but that was almost wholesome compared to the rest.

Rival torrents of spiders and dog-shaped devils were ripping into each other in the streets around it, savagely devouring each other's flesh while still alive, and some sort of ritual had gone awry enough that balls of lightning were careening across the streets, bouncing off wood and stone but searing flesh with strikes wherever they found it. Some sort of giant snake made of ice and bone had gone wild, which would not have been as much of a problem if it apparently didn't 'eat' creatures that came too close to its body and then vomit them back out from the great maw as masses of leech-like bone creatures that liked to burrow inside the spiders and eat them from the inside. And at the heart of the mess, perched atop a tall statue of Terribilis the Second, the Lady of the Lake stood with her bow at the ready.

Looking bored, she let an arrow loose. it straight through a shield spell, taking a mage in the throat. The blue panel flickered out and moments later spiders began to pour in, screams following as the survivors inside were devoured alive.

"Well," Indrani said. "Good a place as any to fight her, I suppose."

"She's not moving," Cocky frowned. "Baiting us?"

"No, she's here for a reason," Alexis said, eyes narrowing. "Look at her face, she's already gotten bored of this."

Archer rose to her full height, cracking her neck.

"Well," she said. "Let's see if we remedy that."

—

"Our empire seems like such a fragile thing, at first glance," the Carrion Lord said. "Always warring with itself, always eating its young. Half the reason we take the sickness abroad is that there is too much of it festering in our guts. And yet, for all its many and monumental failures, the Dread Empire has stood for over thirteen hundred years."

"You've been broken before," the Squire said. "We brought it down, your Tower."

Eleanor Fairfax had answered the madness of Triumphant sword in hand, as Catherine Foundling had risen to cast out the chains of the Conquest. Evil could last, but it never prospered for long.

"We have," the Carrion Lord easily agreed. "And yet once the crisis passed the Empire formed anew. Its constituent parts came together again instead of staying parted, even though most High Seats are enemies and despise the Tower ruling over them besides. Sowhy?"

"Safety in numbers," the Squire said. "I've seen it out west, the strange alliances peril will forge."

Even the vilest sorts would come to man the wall if the sky grew dark enough.

"If external pressure was the preeminent cause for unification, once that pressure ceased the unity would begin to collapse," the Carrion Lord said. "Yet there have been long periods of relative peace with Callow and the Free Cities that saw no such thing happen."

Arthur frowned. He had never been a great lover of history writ in the large, the wars and treaties and the trades, but that did not sound untrue to him.

"Then because the people of Praes want to be as a single nation," the Squire said instead.

"Close," the Carrion Lord praised. "It is because they *believe* they are a nation."

"Is there a difference?" the Squire said.

"Belief is what comes after desire," the Carrion Lord replied. "Belief has *foundations*. The Dread Empire stands because enough of us believe in the myths of it, the stories of it. So long as those remain, like rivers going to the sea our empire will always remake itself."

"That's not what fate is," the Squire refused. "It's not some curse that can't be broken. If you do it clever, if you do it right, you can change things."

"I believed that, once," the Carrion Lord mildly said. "Then, in my old age, I looked back and found that all the terrible works of my life had been built on quicksand. It was most galling, to realize that the Tyrant of Helike was not entirely wrong when he scorned me."

The old monster did not look all that galled, shrugging.

"But we learn or we die," the Carrion Lord said. "And so once again I picked up a sword and a plan."

"You want to burn it all," the Squire accused.

"I want to take off the noose around our necks," the Carrion Lord said. "There is no kind way to do such a thing."

"Did you even try?" the Squire harshly asked. "You disappeared for years, and when the Black Queen came east to settle affairs you stayed a ghost. Now you reappear, and to do what?"

He gestured at the capital around them, the hell it had turned into.

"The first story is that Praes is a nation," the Carrion Lord calmly said. "A single realm, not a pack of squabbling fiefdoms. That one was the hardest to kill, the longest. It took years to choke it out: a fourth of the Empire became a realm of its own, Kahtan rose as a queendom of the Hungering Sands and the edges of our territory broke away."

"You didn't do that," the Squire said. "You caused none of it."

"I did not need to," the Carrion Lord said. "All that was required of me was to ensure that the hounds fighting over the carcass would never bite into the same piece of flesh. So that they could all bury their snouts in the corpse and never realize until they stood nose-to-nose."

He paused, startled, as he realized what had been implied.

"Gods, you *helped* them do it?" the Squire said.

"I have been a faithful friend to even my enemies," the Carrion Lord agreed. "The second was faster to kill, but it cost me more. It was... difficult, killing the Legions of Terror."

"Kala," the Squire said. "They stood and they bled and they broke."

"Lesser soldiers would have shattered years before," the Carrion Lord said, his pride without veil. "It took an ocean of brutal futility to end that story – it was fresher than the rest. A battle where three sisters fought, none believing in their cause or truly hating the other. A battle where weapons of war killed men by the dozens in heartbeats without swords even touching, where entire armies deserted to one side or the other. It ground the pride of the Conquest to dust."

"And today you burn the High Lords," the Squire said. "Half the city going with them."

"More of a quarter, I should think," the Carrion Lord amusedly replied.

"You could make a river," the Squire coldly said, "of the blood you've spilled today."

"Child, I have spilled seas," the Carrion Lord smiled.

The old monster shrugged.

"And what of it? You look at today's corpses and balk, but even if I'd put every soul in this city to the sword I would still be the lesser evil," the Carrion Lord said. "What are a few years of

my bloody hands, compared to the Tower's thousand years of screams and darkness? How many more days like this one will you demand Calernia suffer before my cruelty becomes warranted? How more crowned butchers and torturers and madmen, how many more Triumphants?"

The orphan's fingers tightened around his sword. Evil always had its reasons.

"The excuses of a man who knows nothing except how to destroy," the Squire said.

"We are what we are," the Carrion Lord said, eyes smiling. "Someone charged me, once, to become a man who deserves to live in a better world."

"Only a fool," the Squire said, "would have believed that you could."

The monster looked out at the madness swallowing the city.

"You're not wrong," the Carrion Lord said. "Old dogs only have so many tricks in them. But I made this mess, you see. It's mine to clean up. So now I give you a warning, one you are to carry to my daughter."

"And who are you to warn the Queen of Callow of anything?" the Squire challenged.

"The man who forced three armies to retreat without baring his sword," the Carrion Lord calmly replied.

Arthur swallowed that, did not deny it.

"This is not yet done," the Carrion Lord said. "Tread carefully: I will not tolerate Praes to be handed out like a bauble, or its affairs settled as if you had conquered us. You do not rule here."

"Threats," the Squire snorted. "What will that do?"

"Draw a line in the sand," the Carrion Lord said. "And you I leave with a question. You have been, after all, of great use to me."

"I did *nothing* for you," the Squire harshly replied.

"You helped me draw their eye," the Carrion Lord said, and looked down at the street. "Did you hear me, Gods Below? I paid my dues. Three stories I burned on your altar, the pillars of an empire, and one more still lies ahead. The greatest of them, the oldest and most terrible."

Arthur shivered, looking to the sides. Nothing had changed, not even the wind or the foul scent of smoke, but the world felt... still. As if it did not dare move.

"I gave an oath," the Carrion Lord said. "I'll see it through to the end."

"The Hellgods will not save you," the Squire got out.

"That," the Carrion Lord said, "is rather the point. As for our debt, boy, I ask you this: why do you seek the Black Knight?"

Arthur frowned.

"We have a pattern of three," the Squire said.

"And this makes her your enemy?" the Carrion Lord asked.

"She's a villain," the Squire flatly said.

"So is your queen," the Carrion Lord said. "Her and many you've fought with, never against."

"She's the leader of the Legions of Terror," the Squire said.

"The army defending a realm you are invading," the Carrion Lord said. "For one of Below's, that is reason enough. I had thought your lot to require more than that."

"Don't muddle it up," the Squire growled. "She's tried to kill me too, and I survived. You want me to just let her go now that I hold her to account?"

"I want you to answer a simple question," the Carrion Lord said. "Why is it that Nim Mardottir is your enemy, Squire?"

Arthur's mouth was already halfway open when the man raised his hand.

"Do not speak in haste," the Carrion Lord said. "A squire must, in time, become a knight."

Green eyes studied him coolly.

"Consider, Arthur Foundling, what manner of a knight you are to be."

Arthur's hand stayed tight round his sword.

"You think I'll just let you leave now?" the Squire said. "That I won't take you prisoner?"

The old monster looked up at the sky. No to contemplate, Arthur realized as he followed the look, but to look at the height of the sun. The time.

"I think you are about to be needed elsewhere," the Carrion Lord.
"And that-"

The other man's voice had lowered, so Arthur leaned closer to try to understand even as the green-eyed man turned towards him.

That was when the brightstick went off in his face.

—

Northeast of Ater, on a low slope overlooking the distant camps of the nobles, a silhouette was cut into sight by the angle of the sun. The orc stroked the back of his mount, a great wolf large as a bull, and glanced back at the other riders behind him.

"Tell the Warlord now is the time," Chief Troke Snaketooth gravelled. "Ater is ripe for the picking."

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Dredcor

So many stories clashing together.

Even if Amadeus fails, Praes will never be the same again, I'm sure.

Dredcor

I did not mean to reply here. Oops.

Miles

That just makes it better.

That comment was perfect

Insanenoodlyguy

He's in a full on Xanatos right now. He already one. The rest is optimization.

Andre Maginot

This ending is coming to be epic. A well-deserved dessert for a long road. Now imagine being the poor hard-working fucker who had to dream this up and write it out over years. God bless, EE.

Aptorian

"But we vote or we die," the Carrion Lord said. "And so once again I clicked the link and solved the captcha."

[plantsbeans](#)

wow

ruduen

Truly the most diabolical of subplans. People don't expect a villain to interrupt their own monologue.

dadycoool

Poor Arthur. "Why isn't this working? This is supposed to work." It's not working because you're trying to use Namelore on the man who taught the woman that most consider the mortal master of it.

KageLupus

Cat has died three times and it hasn't stuck. At a certain point "mortal" becomes subjective.

Matthew

It did work.

Amadeus called out the attempt... But then explained has evil plan anyway.

flashburn283

5 to 1 odds part of his plan involved revealing his plan to Cat.

[sengachi](#)

He said as much.

[onedollargum](#)

Squire was setting a story about Amadeus' arrogance, so Amadeus shifted the story to be about Hanno's tutelage instead.

Sorcoro

Wow so hyped to see how this all plays out.

Sir Nil

Man, seeing as how Kairo's final Below Due could have allowed him to ruin the continent, I'm afraid of what Amadeus' could do.

Sir Nil

"Only a fool," the Squire said, "would have believed that you could."

Hey don't talk about your mother like that.

Sinead

Break the Throne of Praes perhaps?

Hopefully Cat's reflection on the issue of 'future paths' with her own Name (from goblin troubles) means that she won't face another broken Name when Black Destroys the Tower.

WuseMajor

Ooof. Amadeus giving Kat the same "You have no authority here!" speech that every other noble here has given her is interesting.

Everyone else is doing it out of spite or thoughtless noble privilege. But Amadeus of the Green Stretch never does anything, save with intentionality. If he told the Squire that, then it was for a purpose and almost certainly not the obvious one.

I wonder if he's figured out the Bard's trap and is trying to warn her?

[Liliet](#)

I don't think it's about Bard's trap.

I think it's because ultimately, this is his *goal*. His line in the sand is his love for Praes, and it's what drives him both to break it and to prevent the pieces from being swept up afterwards. He doesn't know Cat's Name drama, he just knows what he wants and what he doesn't.

Also, him not referring to Cat as anything other than his daughter throughout the conversation and Arthur not blinking an eye at that ♥

shikkarasu

I don't think anyone sees Bard's trap, but if Catherine can reach into the deepest parts of her will and manage not to

contradict her father instantly, he might just save her from it anyway.

Burdi

I think he wasn't talking about bard trap but a mistake that maybe is the trap.

"You do not rule here"

Amadeus trying to remind cat that she never intended to rule in praes in the first place, so she shouldn't act like she's in charge by settle things between power house because it would make creation see her as doing thing half measure which surely would be published.

And that could be the bard's trap, when high lord split between malicia and akua then the horde come.

Three power come together and cat who was said that the mess in praes Made it her business would tried to Make verdict for them which a mistake because she never has intention to rule praes.

Steven Silver

I got the feeling he doesn't want Cat ruling here because that would make Praes a nation conquered, thus allowing for Stories to see it freed. If it were parceled out, Stories would see it reunified. It's like the only way for Praes to die is for it to dissolve entirely on its own.

shikkarasu

Good point. Praes is used to losing -it was founded on having lost that one time to the Miezens- but has never admitted to just falling apart.

kinghaart

They have replaced the Miezen shackles with their own, yes.

Is Amadeus an anarchist? He tends to read that way, unlike say Cat who often values order over freedom.

Juff

Typo Thread:

do you thinking > do your thinking
Thought that fascinating > Though that fascinating
him prisoners > him prisoner
he must persevere > he had to persevere
He must find out > He had to find out
work sent > work, and sent
but not it > but now it

eye' which was > eye', which was what
take it affects > take it it affects
"No quickly," > "Not quickly,"
dropped in > dropped it in
they gear > their gear
loose. it straight > loose. It flew straight
remedy that. > can remedy that."
Sowhy > So why
No to contemplate > Not to contemplate

Tenthyr

I can't help but wonder exactly what Black wants to bargain for here. Or what his ultimate goal is beyond destroying the Dread Empire. What will come after Praesi?

[Liliet](#)

I don't think he wants to bargain. He wants to direct Cat away from particular courses of action, so she'll let Praesi sort it out on their own. One would imagine he has some idea about how they will.

ninegardens

Feels kind of like Grey Pilgrim's:
"Dear Cat,
plz no interfere with Hanno's name transition bullshit.
It goes bad for everyone involved if you do.
k thx bai
– grandpa T"

stars rain down from heavens

[onedollargum](#)

Thinking about it the choirs are losing a lot of their direct pawns on Calernia. Do you think this helps or hurts the Intercessor?

jamesc9

Probably helps, because she probably has more manoeuvring room with ordinary Named.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

[Sugar Roll](#)

My money is on Amadeus steering Cat to actually conquer Praesi.

[Liliet](#)

Well, I lost my bet spectacularly. This was quite delightful!

(Waiting for the “but Amadeus just wants to spite Good” crowd to somehow fit in this one, with popcorn)

AND THAT’S A GOOD QUESTION ARTHUR DO THINK ABOUT IT

[Liliet](#)

More thoughts:

1) Seriously though, this is so sad. Amadeus)=)=)= COME ON ASSHOLE YOU HAVENT EVEN SAID HI TO CAT

2) So by how much, and by what method exactly, is Akua going to manage to reduce casualties? This has become her signature lately 😊

shikkarasu

This is about as much “hi, Cat” as he can afford.

- He has a lot to do and very few hands to do it with
- If Catherine knew how many people he was about to kill she’d never allow it
- Kind of the whole point is a Praesi doing his own thing while Callowans happen to be around.

It’s also classic Amadeus to give his daughter gifts she didn’t ask for, threats she admittedly did earn, and then beam with pride from the sidelines as she beats impossible odds.

[Liliet](#)

True, true.

I just want them to hug, though.

Shveiran

The massive civilian death toll may be some sort of hindrance

[Liliet](#)

Never has been before! Catherine was always willing to postpone the scolding for after the hug.

kinghaart

They won’t hug, they might mutually stab one another though.

Liliet

they've been hugging every time they met since the start of book 2

Insanenoodlyguy

She's going to insist she's selfishly surrounding herself with bodies between herself and this mess. What she's actually doing is forming the army that will have the highest number of survivors and save the most people.

She might become ruler of Praes simply by virtue of being the only person who could be that the people don't despise.

beleester

And then for an encore, she'll bind the rampaging demons to her service, giving herself the largest arsenal of superweapons on the field. It's such a brilliant way to eliminate her rivals that everyone will be convinced she planned it that way.

JJR

It was mentioned in the Arsenal attack that Demons of Fear can be subsumed by Demons of Excess. So subsuming each other is something at least some demons can do. Akua just needs to figure out how to get all the loose demons to eat each other in turn and become a turducken from hell that can then be banished with a single spell.

Mental Mouse

Later in some Hell: "WTF? Who ordered *this*?"

jamesc9

Or else, "excellent; with the poison sauce please."

(with credit to Vainquer the Dragon).

kinghaart

Sounds like they need a Hero. Handy that Squire is around and has just seen the light, literally.

caoimhinh

Typo/mistake:

"the fair-haired orphan forced himself to think."

Arthur isn't fair-haired, he is dark-haired.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Ah, the Praesi specialty. Demons and devils.

Trying to poison the Ranger with what's basically hyper-strength LSD? Nice plan, Indrani!

Oh Amadeus, you old monster. Not because you have done anything particularly evil in this battle, but because you had your finger in every wound. I didn't understand what was going on when it happened, but now I think I do.

Our boy Arthur possibly turning into a Black Knight? Sweet. He's not been quite the heroic type, lately.

dadycool

A young, impressionable Hero turned Evil by the Villainous Mentor he was given to by one who really should've known better? Personally, I'm one of those who was hoping for a Black Knight Arthur basically from the beginning.

Konstantin von Karstein

I would hate that. I want a mostly Heroic Callow, without too much Villains. Most Villains are monsters, those who aren't are exeptions.

Razorfloss

Yes but remember this is the beginning of age of order and the death Kell of the age of miracles. He may key word here being may become the black knight but there's no way in hell he is going to become monster. The age of traditional evil overlords is dead and gone. So all future villians are going to be in the mold of cat because this age is her creation and her mark on the world. They may be evil but only because of methods but not in character. If and this is a big one he becomes the black knight he will heavily lean on the lawful side of lawful evil and the only difference between competent lawful evil and lawful good at first glance is the methods used. Personally speaking I'm thinking he's going to end up somewhere in the middle with a heroic leaning neutral name.

diverstones

Grey Knight baby

Shveiran

There are no neutral Names like that.
Neutral Names are just Names that can be either good or

evil IN DIFFERENT INCARNATIONS. Not Names that are neither when they are actually owned.

kinghaart

That's Bard talk right there. Cat might change that thinking which is what scares her – truly Gray names don't really work for her, as Hierarch showed.

ninegardens

Personally, it feels like Maddie is *protecting* him from that path.

Basically saying "If you kill Nim just because you are enemies, that's a step down the road towards inheriting her name"

[irritantseraphim](#)

Yeah, that was the vibe I am getting. Arthur being lost/not seeing the Heroic stuff lately, with Amadeus ripping open Arthurs eyes to show him the path he's been going lately.

beleester

That makes sense. Arthur's reason for killing the Black Knight is basically military – It's nothing personal, but Nim is the commander of the opposing army (and a one-woman army herself), and if Arthur kills her that will take the Legions off the board as a fighting force, which allows Callow to achieve its military objective of conquering Praes and using it to fix their Hellgate problem out west.

Now, that's a pretty righteous cause to be fighting for – probably the best thing Arthur can be doing right now – but it doesn't feel very heroic from Arthur's perspective. If he makes that into his heroic thesis, he's basically saying "I'm just a soldier in the Black Queen's army." Which is pretty close to being the Black Knight.

Shveiran

I think he is protecting him from becoming just a nother William or Hunter, basically.

I don't think Arthur is at risk of becoming a Villain, especially since his reasons for killing Nim are not Villanous: it is not power, or revenge, or anger. He is going to kill her because she is the enemy, and not think too hard about that because she also happens to have to wrong coat. Sadly, while these look like villanous reasons to me, they were proven not to be Villanous but rather Heroic. The Exiled Prince didn't have any greater reason to challenge Cat than "I want to fight evil and also she is a commander to

this host". Most of the crusading heroes did not need any more reason than "they are Evil or the minions of Villains", and the ones infiltrating Callow were pretty much the same.

Hunter (and maybe even the Bumbling Conjuror) didn't seem to have any great ideal beside opposing Evil to join William's band.

If Arthur kills Nim now, it won't turn him into the Black Knight. But it will shape his new, heroic Name's story into one that is black and white.

That is what Amadeus is trying to save him (and everyone else) from.

Halinn

I'm hoping for the first Gray Knight. Maybe as the first Name of the new Age.

Miles

I think we're past the point where repeating things in exactly the same way wouldn't be super boring...

Such as the current squire becoming yet another carbon copy of Black or White Knight.

No, what we need now is not a Knight who is Grey either, but rather a ~~GAN~~-Knight Of Many Colors

[Mental Mouse](#)

I will not be surprised if Ranger puts that time dilation to work for her....

dadycoool

And so the tale of the Story-Slayer approaches its climax. For decades, Amadeus of the Green Stretch made every effort, spared no expense, turned over every stone to Destroy every story he possibly could. And it was all preparation for this moment, when he Destroys the greatest, most terrible story of them all: his own home.

Miles

In the end, there can be only one story.

The story of the story killer, who absorbs the powers of any story he kills

[vuthuha912](#)

Yeah. Destroy is always a part of creation – the first part and the the condition for creation to truly happen. Amadeus was channeling Shiva The Destroyer his entire life. A Destroyer is also the god responsible for transform, create and protect.

My god. Hinduism is really a fascinating religion.

Reader in the Night

Godsdamnit, Amadeus! Truly, this man is the finest butcher in Creation. Everyone else is playing the game, Amadeus decided to literally smash the board. He's close to butchering a nation by basically doing nothing at all and letting other people execute his plan on his behalf. We all expected his plan was to break the Tower, only that was just the tip of the iceberg. The madman wants to break down the Empire.

Though I do wonder how he could have arranged for those specific events to happen. Even accounting for his status as a Memetic Badass, Kala would have been basically impossible to arrange without being present in the scene. You guys think Scribe and Amadeus splitting up was all a long con so he could guide Cat into the position he needed?

Also, I wonder if the Bard saw this coming? Amadeus was basically hidden from the story so far, it's only now he announced his intention to the Gods Below (while also calling in his Due to help destroy the Tower, meaning he's trying to die).

[Liliet](#)

We know he arranged Kala by feeding Abreha plans through Grem. That only took care of one side, but the rest sorted themselves out as he knew they would. Abreha was a sufficient tool to shape the engagement.

Reader in the Night

That's the thing, though. Not even Grem One-Eye would have been able to predict every step of the insanity that was Kala, particularly by letter while being nowhere near and advising one of the losing armies.

It feels like Amadeus is taking credit for things he didn't really do here. At best, he watched them get done, but that doesn't give him ownership of the story. At best, he nudged some things along.

[sengachi](#)

The thing is that the desertions at Kala didn't happen because of the messy complicated nuances of Juniper's final glorious plan.

They happened simply because the Legions had fought one another for long enough, using war engines which ensure the death tolls were horrendous enough, until they couldn't stomach it any longer. The desertions were inevitable so long as the bloody carnage lasted long enough. And with the caliber of talent on all sides of the Legions, **that** was inevitable. After all, even with Juniper's utter brilliance backing the side with the most and best Named, and the most veteran Legions, and the best Story backing them, it **still** ended up turning into a hellish grind. Even that level of astonishing victory couldn't prevent the final confrontation from being a charnel house.

That was the **least** bloody and grinding possible outcome.

And the least was still enough to break them all, so I'd say Black knew what he was doing and can take credit when he arranged for them all to be in the same place at the same time.

Liliet

He didn't need to predict exact steps. The recipe is "all the armies at the same place at the same time", that's all he actually needed, the specifics don't matter, it plays out the same way in the dimension he's interested in.

Shveiran

TBF, he also needed "and this turns into a grinder", otherwise there wouldn't have been enough time for the sentiment to set in.

Which is... the part that I have an harder time buying, honestly. Amadeus could not have foreseen (until very recently) the actual strength Catherine would come back with.

He could not foresee the strength of her "art of war" after two years butting head with the motherloving Dead King to judge Nim's would be a match, and not flat-out superior or inferior.

He could not have foresaw the Ruination of Night, without which this wouldn't have turned into a grinder because Cat-led sigils would have flattened any fortification the Legions could build.

Come to think of it, he could not have foresaw that Catherine would have come back to Praes at all.

Now, maybe this is all on the meta-level?

Like, Maddie knows that Sve Noc upsets the balance, so something will happen to it to restore it. He knows the Dead King is not using devils yet, so he gambles sooner or

later diabolism is going to become relevant again, and that means Praes rises with it. And he knows his daughter has issues to fix in Praes, so that is where the story of the most relevant player in the continent will lead her eventually.

But... yeah, this stretches my suspension of disbelief a bit.

I can buy the Bard acting this way.

But surrendering yourself to the currents of the narrative and just trust that things will eventually arrange themselves in a way that fits your predictions... it feels like a loss of control that I have an hard time matching with Maddie.

[Liliet](#)

> Come to think of it, he could not have foresaw that Catherine would have come back to Praes at all.

He kicked the plan into gear when he found out she was coming back. And he knew she would come back at least after the war's end. Her goals require it.

> Amadeus could not have foreseen (until very recently) the actual strength Catherine would come back with. He could not foresee the strength of her "art of war" after two years butting head with the motherloving Dead King to judge Nim's would be a match, and not flat-out superior or inferior.

He could not have foresaw the Ruination of Night, without which this wouldn't have turned into a grinder because Cat-led sigils would have flattened any fortification the Legions could build.

Amadeus didn't need to foresee any of it before the actual beginning of the campaign, at which point he probably had all the intel he wanted with his old Legion contacts in the Army of Callow.

Shveiran

If that is true, then Amadeus plan was to fuck around for years waiting for Catherine to come back.

If so, that means he really saw the current apocalypse as something he had no obligation to lend a hand to, and it makes the "you do not rule here, by what right etc" spiel even more galling.

[Liliet](#)

TBF, Amadeus's fucking around was also keeping Praes from being a problem to the war effort in the meanwhile (except for Malicia's Mercantis and League meddling, but he couldn't do anything about that).

...but yes, essentially -_-

SpeckofStardust

Bard see's all stories,
"Were you watching?" he teased.

A little jest, just between the two of them. She was always watching."

-Interlude:Empires

The Dead King, is a credible source for her abilities.

"Like a bird of misfortune perched atop the tower, you see it all below," Agnes said, and her own voice sounded distant.

"Stories."

"I know many stories," the other woman agreed.

"You know stories," the Augur softly laughed. "All the stories, all the time, as if they unfolded beneath your wings and you need only look down to see the lay of them. You pick, and choose, and swoop and how does it not drive you mad."

Moonlight on frost – lizard, yawning – a distant bird in the night, halfway between the lone sentinel and the weeping man. Danger, the world whispered, tread lightly. As if she needed be told. She should not have spoken so much.

"It has been a very long time," the Bard lightly said, "since someone grasped that."

-Iterlude: And Yet We Stand

The Augur also says it, and bard confirmed it.

The Bard knows much and Name are not the limit of her sight.

Shveiran

She knows stories.

Name could very well be the limit, because after all, how many stories have pivots that don't involve Names?

It's the rule of the game. Power coalesces around weight and shape.

She will always know the partsthat matter; Amadues is, I think, betting on the fact that if he can lay enough groundwork before, she will see it too late to do much about it.

Miles

OR they're going to grant him a Name. 3 stories killed without a Name, and one with.

He'd be a claimant for the Name Bard is trying to foist on Cat, giving her a better shot at the Name she earned without Bard's interference.

And like a true Genre-Savvy Mentor he is sacrificing himself in a way that doesn't involve unnecessary dying.

Shveiran

Nah. Amadeus has not been doing what she has.
He can't step in her shoes just because he wants to; he doesn't have the weight.
If he did, he would have been a claimant for a long time, because little has changed.

[avikav](#)

> "The first story is that Praes is a nation"
> "The second was faster to kill, but it cost me more. It was... difficult, killing the Legions of Terror."
> "Three stories I burned on your altar, the pillars of an empire, and one more still lies ahead. The greatest of them, the oldest and most terrible."
Wait, what was the third?

> "The man who forced three armies to retreat without baring his sword," the Carrion Lord calmly replied.
This sounds familiar but I can't quite remember it

[avikav](#)

> "And today you burn the High Lords"

Nevermind, I was conflating that with the first

Miles

>This sounds familiar but I can't quite remember it

He's talking about this current battle.

Jason Ipswitch

"Three stories I burned on your altar, the pillars of an empire, and one more still lies ahead. The greatest of them, the oldest and most terrible."

Black is definitely burning down the Tower with goblinfire. And if he's able to secretly lure Alaya out before he does so, given how precarious her hold power (and her Name) is right now, that alone may make her no longer Dread Empress. Which gives her an

out (everyone thinking she died in the Tower) if she's willing to take it. She might be too far gone, but if anyone can pull her away from her Name it will be Amadeus.

Also, while I've no idea how it fits into everything going on, the Emerald Swords are still hunting Ranger. And I'm sure Amadeus has taken that into account, too. I wonder if Archer, Huntress and Cocky have?

ninegardens

I feel like....

It feels like he is trying to buy a favour off the gods below. Blood and Chaos and sacrifice and the will to change the world.

I don't... see how saving Alaya's life fits into that story. It reads as hesitation, of placing something and someone ABOVE one's ambition.

It feels like either he doesn't value Alaya as much as I thought, or he hasn't **really** revealed his true plan yet, and either way it feels....

I feel confused, and worried, and I wanted Amadeus to be the hero of this story.

And I don't think he is any more. 😞

Miles

I think Alaya will find a way to survive. It's her whole backstory.

Shveiran

So was the story of the Fortunate Fool, yet Keter still got his due.

Every story has an ending, and Malicia's got more opposition and bad karma than most.

kinghaart

I mean, Amadeus was never going to be **anyone's** hero.

At best, in 100 years people might look back and say – “well, he was terrible for everyone at the time, but in the long term or worked out OK for us so we will ignore him instead of judging him”

[vuthuha912](#)

He was Malicia's hero for her entire reign. He was there to keep Malicia in power. And I am sure anyone whose life he improved will consider him a hero.

And arguably, he is a Praesi hero – the type that country deserved and needed. The Destroyer of Evil and the person who make way for reforms, transform and creation. He is the story of Shiva. (I read about the idea of Shiva from another work and it fits quite well)

Frivolous

Jason Ipswitch: I don't think Amadeus cares about Alaya or her fate anymore. His actions are not those of a man who still loves her.

I believe he has changed her status to Acceptable Collateral Damage.

As I commented in Chapter 23: Sung; Singer, it would be difficult enough to keep Alaya alive if the Tower burns, but there would be all the captive demons that would be let loose, too.

Now we know that in addition to the Tower's demons, there are a dozen other demons running around, set free by the High Lords. I didn't expect that, but it only makes things worse for a presumably escaping Alaya.

Plus, you know, all the Praesi, both noble and commoner, who want her dead, whether from outrage against her policies or from power hunger.

I think right now the only person who might spare Alaya's life is Akua Sahelian, which is funny.

Mental Mouse

Just why are Archer, Huntress, and Cocky going after Ranger again? Last I'd heard Ranger hadn't even made contact with Cat's forces, and our trio (not to mention us) have no idea what Ranger's goals or purposes are here... so why are they picking the fight of their lives in the middle of the battle of their lives?

Shveiran

Because they want to bad enough that Alexis is going along with Indrani.

That much baggage needs no further reason.

kinghaart

Because Ranger abused them all in different ways and to grow beyond that they need to confront her (or at least, that's how they feel). And the only language she'll do that in is violence.

I think they are outclassed still, but they at least have a story behind them. I don't think anyone will die, maybe some injuries though.

Reader in the Night

Also, not really a serious comment, but anybody else notice that Amadeus is incredibly good at breaking stories by destroying pieces of Evil infrastructure in climatic moments to decide the fate of nations, while destroying a city in the process?

If he survives this suicidal gambit despite his best efforts to die (again), Cat should throw him at the Walls of Keter, see if he can't make something stick. The third time should get a nudge by Fate, to complete the pattern.

ninegardens

I ... ummm.... Maddie is like... a LOT more of a monster here than I expected. Like... a lot.

I know he wanted to end the tower.... but the fact that he wants to end the country... the fact that he sacrificed his own legions... the citizen's of Ater....

It's not what I expected from a man I expected to spare even Malicia.

From a man who KNOWS what lurks in the north.

... And what, his plan to rack up enough blood and chaos, let himself die, and then make a wish upon the hellgods, just like Kiaros was offered?

Or just try to undermine the story... using the same blood and chaos that has been part of the story for centuries upon centuries?

And the plan... it just ain't clever enough, based on what we've been told here. It's too brutish, too desperate, too reactive. It's the kind of flying fortress level bullshit Bard would have a field day with.

.... It feels out of character. It feels like it doesn't add up, which... possibly means I'm reading something HERE wrong, or possibly means that there are more secrets and plot twists I don't yet know.

SpeckofStardust

I mean Scribe said it herself, he will seek to destroy everything he thinks harms the Dread Empire, And considering the Destroy was an aspect of his once that was last seen breaking both a superweapon and a Name, should let you know that well..

""You're a monster, aren't you?" I spoke softly into the night, looking at him from the corner of my eye.

He smiled. "The very worst kind," he replied."

Nothing here is honestly against his nature.

Further more

"No longer extending trust to someone who deftly manipulated me into rebellion and undertaking a road that ends in the murder of someone dear to me?" Black said.

He never you know said that Scribe failed to put him on the path of murdering someone that's dear to him.

Honestly just cause you like him as a character doesn't mean you should miss so much about him.

Halinn

Except that Scribe got it wrong – it's not the Dread Empire he wants to save, but Praes.

SpeckofStardust

True, I can also see him giving Alaya one final chance to save herself, its just you know if she fails the test she will be killed.

Frivolous

Reader in the Night: You think Amadeus' plan is brutish, desperate, and reactive, and not clever enough? Interesting.

I have mostly the opposite assessment. To me it looks carefully planned, innovative, and extremely clever. Amadeus is so astute, he could have been a psychohistorian in the manner of Hari Seldon.

If you feel like it, could you explain why you think it's desperate and reactive? I really can't see it, and I'm wondering if I'm blind or overlooking something.

shikkarasu

At most he is reacting to the realisation that his old method was never going to work. He's taking advantage of the situation, but as we saw back in the Prologue of this book he was waiting and preparing for this day for 2 years. It feels much more 'Adopt, Adapt, and Improve' than desperate or reactive.

If the individual people were important to him, if he cared about the Tower at all aside from a means to an end, or if he valued his relationships above his motives there would be a case for 'desperate,' but he has massacred thousands before, he openly disdains everything about the Tower, and he has mused about arranging the deaths of Eudokia and even Ranger if they ever got in the way of his end goals.

This is Amadeus of the Green Stretch. This is what he looks like in his endgame. I will, at best, concede 'brutish.'

ninegardens

This is who Amadeus of the Green stretch **was** during the Conquests, or while fighting Dread Emperor Prequle. Yes, I agree.

But the story has kind of aimed at talking about Black's evolution and change. Cat telling him to be a better person. Him actually accepting that he hates the Grey Pilgrim **for killing his friend**.

Everyone going "Oh, well he killed tonnes of people in the conquests and wars", I'm like "But he was meant to **change**".

You say that this is an "adopt, adapt, improve", but honestly... This feels like him going for "Welp, my modern technique didn't work... so I'll roll back to the bullshit manipulation techniques of last century!"

It's the same manipulative "Trick the snake into eating its own tail" bullshit that Malicia has been playing at for the past decade (to the cost of all involved).

His aspects were "Destroy", sure, but all the successes he had in the past were the things he created (The legions, the calamities, Cat, the new order in Callow). The "Burn it down, and the ***rebuild in the ashes***". Rebuilding is the important part, and here he's pretty much said "I'm going to be too dead to rebuild. Cat should stay out of it, and all the high lords will be hated".

When I say reactive, I mean "He sees what he wants gone, and finds a way to destroy it", instead of "He sees what he wants there to be, and seeks a way to destroy it".

It's desperate in the sense of "High risk, but I don't have a better plan"; this might not work. And even if it does work, **praes* needs to be ready to fight the dead king ASAP*. He's actively crippling an empire on the eve of battle in a high risk questionable reward gambit, because he just can't accept the notion of losing.

Or waiting.

Or coming up with a plan that doesn't use his methods.

I mean, I'll put it this way: are we seriously claiming that with 2 years warning, this is the **best possible plan** that Black could have thought of?

Frivolous

ninegardens: To your assertions, I can only reply with the entire chapter of A Mould Unbroken.

Amadeus wants Evil to win, and he can't see it winning when it is constricted by the mould of the Dread Empire of Praes. Even Malicia fell to the temptation of Dark Days protocols and doomsday weapons.

So he destroys the Dread Empire's Story, destroys the Name of Dread Empress, so that something new and better can evolve. More fit to purpose, according to Amadeus' own judgment.

I have no idea if it's the best possible plan. I do think Amadeus is very clever, and this is the plan he thinks will get him the result he wants.

Zach

Where in the world did you get the idea that Amadeus was on some path of change? The fact that Catherine wants him to be a better person doesn't mean that it's true. And Amadeus caring about his close family and friends also doesn't make him a good person. He lost his Name because he decided to no longer serve the Dread Empress.

Amadeus also has no reason to care about the Dead King. The Dead King is not threatening Praes. Catherine is the one who cares about protecting the West, but Amadeus is ambivalent.

shikkarasu

I think he lost his Name due to being captured by Heroes. There was a line in Book 2 about how the Villain always dies or changes sides, they don't get to come back from being prisoner.

2:49 – Victory

"If I ever ended up in her position, I hoped I would be extended the courtesy. Somehow, it was doubtful I would. Villains didn't get taken prisoner, as I understood it. We turned our cloak or died, there was no middle ground."

This feels like EE foreshadowing. He only earned a continue as a token reward for 60 years of playing the game, by the way Bard described it.

As for the Dead king, I don't think he's ambivalent about it he just knows that what he wants and what

Catherine needs are not mutually exclusive. He isn't *ignoring* the issue, he's just using it to further his own agenda. If there is no Praes, then who tells Catherine that she can't 'borrow' their diabolists? Everyone (that Amadeus cares about) wins.

... Although Cat may stab him again for this.

[vuthuha912](#)

????

The structure is still there. I mean, the legionaries aren't forgetting their training because they deserted. It is just that they will fight for something they believe in instead of someone else's dream. It may also means they get better treatment than before by staying together. I mean farmers are important but the way they were treated in history really make you ask how much they worth. I am saying that if the government can't give them adequate treatment or a worthy cause then they ain't moving. The war in Keter is not sisters fighting sisters, it is living fighting dead. They will enlisted again with greater unity after their experience.

Honestly, we need 3 things from Praes: legionaries, resources, diabolists. Most of them are intact. The veteran legionaries can be called upon with the right cause, they won't even need training. Diabolists are just the household mages – not the nobles who gather at the Tower. With their masters gone, I am sure they will enjoy a new employer. Malicia hasn't depleted the resource of the Tower just yet, she would if Amadeus tried raising his banners. He would win in a all out struggle with her but she will use everything so he refused to do that. Enough of the structure is still intact for a great mobilization. Don't be surprised. Malicia was still collecting taxes during the civil wars. The bureaucracy outside of Ater was doing okay. We just need to replace the head fast enough to mobilize. It would be easy since Cat brings Vivi and most of her officers along and if it came to it, she could take charge. Or let the legion declare martial laws and directly take control. I doubt there aren't any logistic expert left to take control of Praes war machine. It is Ater. It is filled with people. Most important people will be in the safer place especially the high ranking officers under house arrest. It will be a lot easier than you think.

Frivolous

Addendum: Sorry, the above post should have been to ninegardens. Don't know why I addressed it to Reader of the Night.

Reader in the Night

Not me, it was Ninegardens. To me, it feels extremely and excessively violent, but extreme and excessive violence is one of Amadeus's trademarks. The man is a big believer in "No kill like Overkill."

jamesc9

One grace, one sin.

[sengachi](#)

I mean, that's the thing about Black. He says as much to Squire. These are the tools he knows how to wield. And he's not willing to accept inaction of himself.

Black has a priority list behind those gears churning in his eyes. It says what is of value to him. And yes, civilian casualties are on that list. So are the lives of the Legionnaires he raised up. But you can only have one top priority. There is only one item on the top of his list.

The item at the top of his list, the thing he values most, is breaking the wheel. And if the other things he values would prevent him from doing that, they will get mulched in those gears behind his eyes just like everything else.

kinghaart

This.

Also, it's possible that the final story to break is that *Villains* are good for Praes. Virtually none have been, Amadeus included, and he's shown that.

Praes really needs to either separate apart into more of a league (ironic that the League is presently in path to be an empire, no?) or it needs a different system of rule. One where the strongest are incentivized to share their strength.

[vuthuha912](#)

Um... I don't know how to explain this but I don't think he destroyed the country Praes, just the governing structure i.e the story. Like the Roman Republic turning into the Roman Empire. The people was the same people, the cultural was still there. They still called themselves Roman. ...He was taking the shackles of shallow ambitious and self-destructive tendency off of Praes, allowing it to transform to something new. Destroy is the first step of create, transform and reform. Didn't his plan with Callow go down the crapper because of the story (the mind-altering power that fuck with Praesi at the worst moment)? Now,

all the reforms are going to stick because the story twisting people into destroying themselves died in this chapter.

Same with the Legions – he did just destroyed it, he made it stronger with unity. Every women and men at Kala is standing in solidarity with each other. They stopped becoming a tool for the higher up and start taking power in their own hand by standing together. Just like union movement. The legion finally say enough is enough. Amadeus had teach them unity and loyalty. It was their choice on how to proceed. Is it a bad thing that these people no longer serve as a mindless soldiers for every madman and woman?

Alter is just a normal part of every great change. No change in government come without a lot of death and scheming. Compared to China or Russia or literally any other real life country, this is tame and short. The butcher had not spread further to the rest of the country or the continent. Just the capital and the army. Everybody else was doing just fine.

He had loved Malicia for 40 years until Salia even more than the Calamities because all his plan involve her outlining him and rule Praes. He saved her life from story suicide back in book 4. If you loves your lord/lady, you don't help they sacrificed 100 virgins for immortality, you slap them to their senses. Black was not blind by loyalty but his action was a greater kind of loyalty – the kind that any ruler wish to have.

Everyone was so focus on the destroy aspect of Amadeus but forget that he had built stuffs for decades. Everything he built, he built it to last. But Tyrant was right, without thoroughly destruction, everything is a line on the sand. He was swimming against the current the entire time.

Amadeus is a man of duality, destroy accompanied by reform, create and transform. Basically Shiva

Frivolous

I don't remember the spiders in the sewer being that big. Then again they were a small detail long long ago and I never paid much attention to them.

Amadeus' plan here feels a lot like the planning of Neshamah. Acting very subtly, taking advantage of exiting trends in society, moving very indirectly, giving no openings.

I suspect that in part the reason it is so oblique is that it is meant to counter any attempts by the Intercessor to notice or attack it.

Only Catherine and Masego of the Woe were there in Arcadia to witness (in Witness) the conversation between living Neshamah and

the Intercessor, but they both could have communicated to others in the years since the important fact that Neshamah was able to elude the Intercessor's attention by giving her no openings.

Amadeus might have learned it that way, or he might have deduced it himself. He is after all frightfully smart.

Given the above, I believe this plan was meant to harm the Intercessor as much as the Dread Empire of Praes. It seems almost guaranteed given Amadeus kept talking about killing and sacrificing stories, and given that the Intercessor is the "patron goddess" of stories.

Destroying the Dread Empire as a story should also remove the capacity for certain Names to exist, particularly Dread Empress and Chancellor. The Intercessor needs Names to work through; removing Names hurts her.

The Names of Black Knight and Warlock might survive, though.

This plan seems to have caught Catherine by surprise. She certainly didn't plan for giant spiders. Could it have surprised the Intercessor as well? We'll see.

Did Amadeus anticipate the orc invasion? It seems likely, given he and Ranger used the Emerald Swords to depopulate the fortress of Chagoro.

Quote from Wage: "So he wants the Clans going on the offensive too," I mused. "Interesting."

Yet he probably didn't anticipate that Hakram would become Warlord, especially since Hakram himself didn't anticipate it.

Hakram being Warlord probably changes things, deviates from Amadeus' plan. I don't think another Warlord would have gone straight for Ater. The orc Horde would have visited Nok first, learned about the fighting in Ater later, and thus arrived after Amadeus' plan for Ater was concluded.

Lastly, a nice note: When you pray to the Gods Below, you look down, not up.

Piromin

Regarding the spiders... to be fair this is a story driven world that seems to relish in following tropes, and that made an abundance of terribly monstrous spiders almost an inevitability.

Just as heros survive impossible falls, the catacombs are always bigger than one thought, the monster in the deep are also a very ingrained trope, and this is on ATER, the capital of a country known for their monsters and even giant spiders in

normal sewers, not counting the very high chance there are a multitude of subterranean secret tunnels or bases, it stands to reason that in this particular place the story of monsters in the deep and dangerous catacombs would be... overcharged? Sorry if i'm not expressing myself properly.

serdar314

You see my friends, you all miss a certain point. Meddie made legions desert, split up the factions and shown the true nature of the High Lords. Yes it is to destroy the story of the Empire, but this is not Age of Wonders. It is the age of Order. Remember the chapter so very long ago, focused at the crop growth of Presei and Callow? Or chapter about Hunger in Presei and their education system? At the base of every story Amadeus killed, there is hunger. Hunger that was solved with conquest sure but Callow now has the Black Queen. It will not bow. So how does bringing tower solves that? And more to the point who is the stories Hero(!)? A Callowan girl who grow up in a conquered country and who is waiting for the biggest Name ever. Remember this?

The question of who the most vindictive people of Calernia are has long been debated. Some say it is the Arlesites, who will duel to the death over the use of the wrong adjective in a verse. Others say it is those of the Free Cities, where the moving of a border by half a mile will spawn a war lasting three generations. Others yet say it is the Praesi, who indulge in political assassination the way other nations enjoy a cup of good wine. I would humbly put forward, however, that the answer is the people of Callow. Steal an apple from a farmer of the Kingdom and fifty years later his grandson will find yours on the other side of the continent, sock him in the eye and take three apples back.

Feels familiar?

[Burlyraven](#)

So I see two paths for Arthur following this: he either realizes that Cat's been using him and rebels against her corruption, or he realizes and accepts that despite his heroic goals, he fits easiest into the groove of a brutal villain (albiet with a loving side, like Captain). There was a path for him to be a hero birthed from Cat's shadow, but Amadeus just killed that story as well.

Insanenoodlyguy

To be fair though it's not really a betrayal. "Yeah, I set you up on a story where you can beat the evil general of the enemy army causing us the most problems." Like, how mad is he going to get about that?

[sengachi](#)

Yeah, you don't blame the Evil mentor for not teaching you to look deep into your heart and ask yourself **why** you're fighting the Evil leader of the enemy army. That's on you. And if you need your Evil grandmentor to point that out to you, that's **really** on you.

hakureireimu

What corruption?

jamesc9

Possibly, aiming him to further Evil on Evil conflict, rather than providing him with Good on Evil conflict.

masterofbones

I must admit, I'm not sure what Amadeus is getting at here. Arthur is hunting Nim because Nim serves Malicia, who has time after time proven willing to throw the world under the bus for personal gain.

Nim is a major power center, and the defense of the Tower leans heavily on her. This isn't a story thing, its basic practicality for the purpose of removing an utterly evil person from rule.

SpeckofStardust

I mean while Nim is believed to be on Malicia's side she isn't anymore, so killing her isn't as practical as turning her, After all cat intends to see Preas and the tower turned, just the current ruler to die.

ChillyPepper

He is implying he is killing her to become a black knight of Callow, possibly restarting the Dread Empire elsewhere, or so I interpreted it.

Xi Cree

What Amadeus is getting at is that the Squire is hunting the Blackknight BECAUSE... that's what the Squire does rather than the complex reason you gave.

Ie. The kid is letting himself be pulled around by the story rather than using the story to accomplish a goal.

There's good reason why he should be killing the Black Knight... but he's not hunting her for those reasons... which makes outcomes that might better suit those reasons null if they show up... like maybe turning the Black Knight against the Empress and thus using her as a weapon.

Amadeus is being the mentor Grandpa that dies for him...

shikkarasu

I think it's broader than that. He won't turn into the Black Knight by killing Nim for no good reason, but the Mirror Knight. Specifically, he will turn into another Christophe. Being jerked around by anyone with a faint grasp on Namelore.

He's warning Arthur that Catherine is using him as a weapon, but not trying not to slander his own daughter. As it stands Arthur can transition into any Name he likes, but won't have free will until he starts doing what he thinks is right, instead of doing what he thinks is expected.

Shveiran

If Arthur was hunting her because of that, you'd be right.

But though those practicalities exist, they are not the reason for his actions.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

The final story Amadeus wants to burn looks to be the story of Dread Empress. It would line up nicely with the chapter titles.

Imo, Akua messes up his neat story about nobility. She was always a bit of a blind spot to Black and Malicia so I like that she's a bit of a curve ball. She's now literally the noble he was hoping Praesi High Seats would turn out to be. I'm convinced Akua will be Cat's hidden blade against any upcoming story-fu as she's the only one who truly understands her.

It's good to see Black back in the bastard mode. He's been sorely missed.

Isaac Martinez

Yep. Pretty much.

Destroying the culture of Praes, including Jino-waza?
Nope. She is surely in there protecting what she can. Because she knows that rule and power is no her due, and people must not suffer anymore by her Folly.

Killing the Legions? Right now they are in process of being revived by the New and Improved Black Knight Orc Version. With Akua speeches included!

But that's not the point.

Things like nation and government body is defined by the people that inherits their culture, so the Empire can die with their Tower. Akua will save what she can, Amadeus will burn what is

left and the Empress is now losing her Authority and Name. Praes will never be the same.

.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Minor correction: the current Black Knight is an ogre, not an orc.

Rumu11

Arthur made a fatal mistake trying to defeat Amadeus, he hadn't reached the final step in his evil master plan!

letouriste

So...how many sides there is in this battle? 10?

- Cat&co (including maybe Abreha)
- The High Lords (which we will put in one category to simplify)
- Dread Empress Malicia
- Wandering Bard
- Warlord and his orcs
- The spiders under their maybe stil alive Dread Emperor (Tenebrous?)
- The demons which are under nobody orders
- Amadeus and Ranger
- Akua and Black Knight Nim along with the Loyalist Legions
- The common folks
- Squire maybe, if he choose to not follow Cat after Amadeus question

Could be a 7 sides battlefield, maybe more.

Sykomantis

Seven Sides and One, perhaps?

Miles

I mean, don't forget Dread Empress Triumphant, may she never return

shikkarasu

May She Never Return

Cayle

The Squire just dodged becoming the Black Knight, disappointed that I didn't see that.

Steven Silver

Er, there's lots of knights. Black knights, white knights, red knights, barrow knights, death knights, good knights, knight lights...

I think Pappy Amadeus is just helping Squire really *choose* his own path, as opposed to simply getting swept up in others' stories.

Miles

If Squire gets really good at stories, he might even get the fabled Name of M. Knight Shyamalan

Shveiran

We already got an Irritant, thank you very much.

not_traitorous

> "Think, boy. Where did you see signals being sent up? Where do we stand right now?"

Now I'm imagining the whole scene as an Invincible meme.

Steven Silver

Me: "Show me goblin fire if this is over. "

EE: *no goblin fire*

Me: "This isn't over o_o"

Miles

We've barely even seen a brightstick!

Speaking of demonic flames on the earth and goblin munitions, I wonder what Cat is up to.

nimelennar

I legitimately laughed out loud during the "Are you trying to get me to monologue?" conversation.

Amadeus' warning to Cat that she doesn't get to pick who rules is interesting, because Cat doesn't seem to care who rules, short of "Not Malicia," "Not Akua," and "Someone who will sign on to the Liesse Accords and lend us some diabolists so we can win the fight against Keter."

The first and third are pretty much guaranteed by Malicia's hubris and the necessity of the story respectively, so I wonder if the Akua gambit is going to backfire on Cat. What happens when the thing that Cat is trying to get Akua to reject as part of her redemption arc, the Imperial throne of Praes, no longer exists?

shikkarasu

I think it's the principle of her having a say in the first place. She's a Foreign Despot (if you will forgive my Belerophanian) coming to influence who gets the Tower. Like, imagine you are holding an election and this one lady with a sword loiters around the ballot box and occasionally says "change your vote." Is she picking a ruler? Gods, no. Is she rather disrespecting the entire premise of an election? I'm going to say yes, barring violent priestesses informing me otherwise.

kinghaart

Honestly I think Amadeus is just goading her. She can't interfere in Praes any more than he did with Callow already in the Conquest. If he's serious, it's hypocrisy at its finest, and he should realize that.

beleester

One thing that might put a wrench in Amadeus's plans – Akua Sahelian. She's built her claim to the tower by helping the common people of Ater, and I can't imagine that she's about to let her nobles revert to type and let the people get slaughtered. And she's a brilliant diabolist facing a problem caused by diabolism. She's got lots of possible ways to intervene.

I have a feeling that this is what puts Akua over the top – when the dust settles, she discovers that the story is "Akua was the only noble who put herself on the line to save people" and everyone is cheering for her to take the tower.

Xinci

Mm, and so the parity of shattered empires is attained and Cardinals eventual dominance at the center becomes even stronger should it be attained. The general pattern for the Accords to happen is that other groups need to either willingly cooperate or be shattered enough to be regulated to cooperate. Amadeus was aiding this path for a long time, and once its done the last resistant parts are probably Keter and the Elves.

It would be unsurprising that the Gods would like this new parity of scattered smaller realms all connected and mingling under a set of regulations. A invisible string of order allows for mixed micro-environs of conflicts between different facets of different groups to give tallies for either side of the wager without destabilizing the whole wager. It appears to fit their uses for things like Bard anyway, while allowing a far more diverse range of examples for either side.

It is still rather sad that the Praesi wont couldnt use the potential they had with all their resources to become better, but then again Akua hadnt been there that long and wasnt trying to

make a reformist movement as of yet. No goal to be “ever worthy”, and Jinno-Wazza as it is, is a resource allocation framework for scarcity, without any long term view for resource fullness they naturally take the dissenting choice when presented with a risk such as this. I am sure there will be some kind of ironic echo historically when the orcs arrive with them in such a state too, especially to offer new terms of power between the Praesi and themselves(should Praes truly still call itself that at the end of this anyway).

I am curious whether Amadeus has attained a method of cruel mercy, for preventing Cat to being drawn into a lesser role. A weaver being woven so they can be the greatest amongst the chosen, sorta deal, I suppose.

Tohron

This reinforces my idea that “belief” is the answer to the riddle Hakram told Catherine about (which had been posed by an ancient Warlord, and the answer erased by the Meizans). Societies are shaped by what they believe, here, Named draw their power from their belief in their Role, and the belief of others that their Role is significant (Akua became the Diabolist, in part, by getting other people to think of her as a diabolist).

I’m thinking that Catherine’s coming Name is going to have a lot to do with guiding people’s beliefs. She may even get Believe as an aspect.

Silverking

...Could anyone please point me to the specific point in the story where the Tyrant said that all of Amadeus’s plans to “fix” Praes were for naught? I’m sure that it happened at some point, but I can’t recall the exact conversation.

Frivolous

Silverking: This could be it:

From Villainous Interlude: Stormfront:

“You’re scribbling on sand and calling it a legacy,” Kairos mocked. “Nothing that happens before or after you matters – only the decisions you make now. And those I see you make? I find lacking.”

flashburn283

So, does the sentient tiger army take over?

tmightyquinn

In East III, a couple chapters back, Malicia notes that “She’d remained ahead of them, so far, but she was a dancer with a

shrinking stage to dance on. Gods, even district mages were getting murdered out in the ruined districts. With a goblin steel blade, so it was likely some Legion deserter stirring up trouble."

N o p e.

nimelennar

Isn't the Black Knight nominally the leader of the Legions? And he has certainly deserted Malicia. So, technically, sure, it's a Legion deserter.

tmightyquinn

Hah, you make a good point

Xinci

So another realization I have had is that Amadeus is committing Holy Betrayal to Below with his plan. Its a similar act of worhsip to Kaioro's but from a completly different angle of intent. Even should he succeeded they will likely be incredibly pleased.

Miles

I wonder if Akua's existence is about to ruin Addie's plan.

She's probably down there saving civilian lives and fighting off demons with a frying pan.

Frivolous

Miles: Yeah, Akua is running counter to his scheme.

But surely he must know what she is doing. He seems to have very accurate and precise knowledge of what is going on in Ater, and Akua hasn't been very secretive.

Yunamed

Erin style

jamesc9

Please may I contend the following items to your attention:
protectionofcivilians.org/employee/erin-bijl/
ournals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0967010612444150
from this search:

<https://lite.duckduckgo.com/lite/?q=erin+saving+civilians&kam=osm&kaf=1&kg=g>

Shveiran

You know, I didn't really agree yesterday, but some commenter really resonated with me.
This whole plan – so far at least – really feels unsatisfying.
I'm kind of mad at Amadeus now.

The whole thing about the Legions I already got issues with, but this... destroying a quarter of the most populous city in the continent with spiders and demons to prove... what, that the High Lords would use demons on their own rather than suffer a set-back?

Now I'm like... did that need PROVING? It was how Praes was presented to us. We were told this is what their stories are about, the reason why everyone in Praes knows they live at the suffering of their betters.

What's new? Did the Praesi need this to realize maybe that's a bad thing? And if they did, does this really change anything? It is nothing NEW.

And for all my distaste at Akua looking like she is set to go "no we are better than this" which already has my blood boiling, you are right: if I hold her accountable for fucking around with the apocalypse, then Maddie doesn't get a pass.

Fuck you and your charming chats with the Squire, Maddie. This is not the time to fuck about with demons, which are something YOU YOURSELF impressed upon us are not something to trifle with. What happens if this shit gets out of control, big man? What happens to the bloody continent? Or Praes down the line, for that matter, since the Dead King being someone else's problem is CONTINGENT ON THE SURVIVAL OF THE EMPRESS YOU ARE SABOTAGING.

You had to go and take a page from Kairos' book, of all people, didn't you?

And all that spiel about "this is our land, and you don't get a say?"

a), a bit rich coming from the fucking conqueror of Callow, and
b), no? Just no.

Not when you, the supposed poster boy for restrained action, just fed the better part of Ater to demons! It's your mess to handle only so long as you keep it from spilling over on other people, you moron!

Damn it, I miss Cordelia.

You see what you did? You made me miss the bloody Proceran. Good grief.

ABadIDea

Did it need proving? No. But also yes. It's the story equivalent of Abraham begging God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if he can find 10 righteous men. It's not just the past that matters, the high lords have to earn their current destruction

NOW. They have to be given the option to fail within the current story, otherwise there is no weight to it.

Also, it needs to be set up to act as a future foil for Akua.

ninegardens

>"Not when you, the supposed poster boy for restrained action, just fed the better part of Ater to demons! It's your mess to handle only so long as you keep it from spilling over on other people, you moron!"

Yeah... pretty much this.

It doesn't matter if *he* wasn't the one to release the demons. If he deliberately set up the dominos to ensure their release then... ummm... well, that's pretty culpable.

Mostly, I'm just confused because **Maddie was the obvious choice to play the hero here**. Not Akua, Not Hakram, not **Cat**.

Akua's redemption arc is... wiggly at best (I love it, but its wiggly), whereas Amadeas has always played pretty close to "brutal Villian sidetagonist", that was a natural fit to slide into "nurturing villian protagonist".

Showing Him understanding Praes *better than Cat* has been set up for so so so long, and having Cat make a major mistake here and Maddie cleaning it up for her would have been *narratively exquisite*.

... but EE has other plans.

I don't like this direction, I think it feels off... but at the same time, I won't fault an author for interpreting their own character in a way different to how I imagine them.

...I'm still mad though, for pretty much all the reasons you just listed.

kinghaart

I don't think Amadeus is or ever was meant to be a Hero.

And yes, I think you're meant to be angry here.

I think the final story Amadeus is trying to kill is that the one that claims Villains of any nature are good for Praes. If Warlock can nuke a major city (admittedly in war but still), Assassin can topple nations, Malicia can make Praes the enemy of the entire continent but the one place that people hate even more, Ranger can be buddies with the single most evil person on Calernia, and Amadeus's grand plan involves the death of a quarter of Ater... then *WITH is the point of the Calamities*?!?!?

The great thing about PGtE is that by this point one can almost forget who the Villains are. Amadeus is reminding us.

[vuthuha912](#)

I don't know but usually, when we talk about a circumstance that leads to a major change in society, it usually involves a tragedy or a very crucial moment. Did the Russian farmers and serfs know that they were oppressed? Yes, they did. Did the Chinese farmers know that during the end of every dynasty? Yes. They even have a saying like robberies at night are by robbers, and robberies during the day are by officials. Everyone knows but they keep their head down because they still BELIEVE in a bugger dream that things will get better, they can win the game, and they can wait for the disasters out. The tide has changed over the last five years. Disasters after disasters. Yet, Malicia was doing so well for the last 40 years so the trust in the Tower and the noble are quite high, tbh. When the ruler is an able one, the system kind of works. Malicia and Black have done a good job for 40 years with the system. Both of them did not change the system drastically. They went about it slowly and seamlessly. The political turmoil never spilled over to the civilian sides. Thus, it looks like the old system is working as intended. Even if the nobles are a bunch of cunts who sabotage the ones who are actually doing the work, all the people know is that the food costs have gone down, the life quality is better and whenever a noble overstepped, they were killed. Thus, people see the madmen who were at fault but not the system that keeps churning out these madmen. In a way, the spider has to happen to break the trust in the system, the noble, and the Tower. It is an event that signifies a change in public opinion. And it is a bonus point for symbolism, the biggest spider used to be a DE, they were kept under Ater by sorcery but never exterminate – the representation of all that is wrong with Praes. When the mistake finally bites people in the hide, the one who suffered is the one at the bottom. They suffered needlessly because Praesi nobles can't be bothered to do their jobs properly. They really need to SEE it.

Honestly, do you believe something like the Boston Massacre will change Ater's opinion of the whole thing? NO. They are Praesi. It is the norm for a few people to go missing or get killed once in a while. They get used to it. Thus, it would take this huge slaughter to actually shake people, forcing them to really look at the system they are following. Just like Black did when he was young. The Field of Stregé changed his entire opinion about the system. He enlisted in the legion – he probably still believed in Praes back then. Allie never saw it, Ater never saw it, and the rest of the country never really saw any of it. They don't get why he hated the system so much because they never saw any of it. He is a Duni and Allie is Sonnike. Allie was a civilian while he was a legionary. There

is a fundamental difference in their perception of the system based on their own experience. The Ater residents are looking at things like Allie did back in the day, like Maddie did once upon a time. It took around 700 unarmed civilians being shot at by the Tsarist police to finally move the Russian people to denounce the regime. It took a famine and a humongous debt to kick start the French revolution and Napoleon fighting the entire continent for the system in Europe to meaningfully change. And WWI was the final nail in the coffin. How much does Ater need? How much time and people? A lot more than that. Luckily, this is a universe built on the story so Maddie just has to create a big enough event to start.

If we look at the situation surrounding the current event, we kind of see that Cat participation speed things up and shifts things around quite a bit. Maddie is fanning the fire but Cat is the gasoline. If it was only up to Amadeus, the situation would play out a lot longer with most of the high seats broken and a cleaner slate to work with. And the spider might not be the first option. He might arrange for something more controlled, less bloody to break the idea that the Tower works. But... Dead King... Cat... everything. The spider was right there. It is convenient.

And may I remind you that the Praesi legions are still fighting on who to crown as DE a few chapters ago. Nim is the problem. She won't act against Malicia like Black. When Malicia was being a dunderhead by recalling her two best generals from the border when the enemies were literally about to attack to make a political play. Black and Grem both ignored her because if they did follow the order, the Crusader would ravage Callow – the breadbasket of the East. Malicia was trying to put a leash around their neck at the worst moment possible. Malicia is not the king of Zhao but the situation Maddie and Grem facing was the same one Li Mu faced before he committed suicide. And didn't Maddie try to commit suicide with his plans for burning down Procer? He was not Li Mu but he made the same choice in the end. He survived because of GP and Cat but he fully expected to perish during this campaign. Allie has unintentionally caused Maddie to follow through with his suicidal thoughts. Yet, Nim still has the gall to call out half of the legions for rebelling. My lady, you are the one who needs to look back at who you are following. Smart birds choose the branch to perch, and a smart underling chooses a worthy master. It is best that the legionaries made the decision at that moment and not stuck in Ater when all the crazy shits go down.

M0och123

It is a cruel thing, what Amadeus is doing, yet as so often is the case in this story, a necessary one. Even Above recognizes

that some things are beyond redemption and need to be excised with extreme prejudice and truthfully the atrocity being wrought on Ater is a fraction of the suffering that would lie ahead. So it is not the act that is the cruelty of Amadeus. Nay, it is forcing an entire culture to realize that for all their power and pride as a people, they are weak and cowardly. Amadeus has broken the Praes equivalent of the American Dream, or at least is on the way to doing so.

ninegardens

>>"It is a cruel thing, what Amadeus is doing, yet as so often is the case in this story, a necessary one."

No. Gotta disagree with you on this one. I know this story is pretty keen on the "hard men making hard choices" doctrine, but I don't think this checks out.

The fact that Praes is a cesspit of misery indicates that *something* needs to be done. That doesn't mean *this* had to be done. Whenever you get to a crossroads of "there is no other choice", and your choice is to burn half a city to the ground, you should assume your own incompetence and wait for someone with a smarter brain to come along.

That, and honestly: I do not think this plan will work. Which means all that bloodshed is for nothing.

He might destroy "the tower". He might break "the Empire". But who DAMN WELL CARES if all he sets up is some other carnival of misery and bloodshed. Which is where this plan is heading. Even if it succeeds, he leaves nothing behind but starving broken people and a burning crater. Ready for the next Tyrant/warlord/emperor/whatever the hell they call themselves.

Shveiran

Yes, precisely. If he had broken the mould less destructively, than maybe I could see the reforms, and the legions, and the centralization making a less diabolist, less elitist, more unified Praes; likely still not a good place to be, but, you know, an improvement and a removal of the previous rails that always led to misery.

But the beaurocracy is set in Ater, and the Legions he already broke, so... I don't see that happening.

Something would emerge, yes.

Something violent enough to force the others in line.

I don't see how that could ever be the seed of hope he seems to believe it would.

But EE is not done, so let's wait and see.

MoreBeer

I think this is the point. Maddie wanted to reform the Empire. Spent 40+ years trying to do it. The net result was Malicia, his partner in reforms, trying to take control of a superweapon in the expectation that the Empire would be unassailable so long as they never tried to use it and continued to simply murder the heroes who invaded "unjustly".

Maybe Maddie could or should have taken a different path, but he is self-proclaimed the worst sort of monster. He doesn't build, he destroys. He believes that toppling the current order will result only in a restart in a few years or decades, as shown by what happened to Alaya. He still wants to topple the Game of the Gods. His solution is to break the Dread Empire so thoroughly that there is nothing to rebuild, so something new comes in its place.

Is this the right solution? Unlikely. But it's very much in character and follows clearly from the history and situation of Amadeus.

kinghaart

Yeah I think this is pretty much Amadeus assuming that Praes is to Below what Liesse was to Malicia, and Destroying it.

[vuthuha912](#)

Nah

He destroy and build at the same time. It is just that he never seek full destruction of the story thus his creation can't last. You never let your enemies get away because they will regroup and underlined you at every turn.

He is doing the destroy right now but he conveniently left all the useful people for rebuild outside of Ater – in the countryside. The veteran and the local bureaucracy. And surely, they will come into play after the clusterfuck in Ater is over.

[janngran](#)

janngran a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/uUGV8zI0X0s7V3F4Yys1r>

Interlude: Kiss Of The Knife

"Treason is a distant thing, a matter for the histories. Betrayal is where the bile is: you have to love someone before they can betray you."

– King Selwyn Fairfax of Callow, the Old

"Why Troke?"

Sigvin was frowning, leaning forward so the noonday sun would not fall into her eyes.

"For the same reason I've ordered my banner not be raised," Hakram replied.

All the way south, the place of honour – the Warlord's place – among the banners had remained empty. The order had seen warriors grumble at the lack of pride, enough that he'd spread among the horde that he would only raise his own banner after Ater was made to kneel. The boast had limited the damage to reputation, and what he'd paid was well worth what he was to get for it now. At his left, Oghuz suddenly let out a loud bark of laughter.

"Look at them, girl," the chief of the Red Shields said. "How thick is their battle line?"

Hakram's eyes returned to the field. When he'd sent out his vanguard of five thousand wolf rider towards the camps to the east of Ater, the nobles in them had understandably reacted to the threat. What troops were not already fighting in the city had been mustered and ordered out, but that effort had ceased as soon as the highborn had glimpsed the banners claiming that Troke Snaketooth was the warlord of the Clans. It was, after all, an open secret among the highest rung of the nobility that Troke was an ally of Malicia's. They were still wary, as the Clans should have gone to sack Nok instead of marched on Ater, but the tension went out of their battle line.

Troke rode forward with a few picked men, champions, and the nobles sent a party of their own. Led by a Niri, by the look of their banners.

Only the vanguard had slowed, not stopped, and the highborn realized it only moments before Troke Snaketooth's warband smashed into their envoys and the packs of wolf riders howled a charge. Some of the mages with the troops got spells up in time, turning back the attack, but not enough. Most of the enemy soldiers had never faced great wolves up close and it showed: the great mount shattered the shield wall in moments and trampled dozens, terror spreading at the violent howls. Maybe eight thousand Praesi had mustered on the field and less than a tenth

of that died under the charge, but their morale broke instantly. The army shattered, entire companies fleeing the monsters and the massive horde they could see approaching in the distance.

"Good," Hakram gravelled. "Oghuz, take ten thousand shields and secure the camps. Capture all the highborn you can, I want bargaining chips."

"Warlord," the old orc replied, hand over heart.

Hakram nodded back, then turned his eye to Sigvin.

"Send word to your grandmother," he said. "I want the Split Tree to oversee the loot. We distribute only when the blades rest."

"It will be done," she replied.

Overseeing the loot was a position of great trust – the old hordes had given it a formal title, one held in great respect – but Hakram meant it as a check as well as a mark of favour. It never made a clan popular for its warriors to be the ones telling other orcs they couldn't drag away the riches they'd just won in battle. Waiting for Sigvin to finish, the Warlord watched the eastern gates in the distance. Three had been open this morning, he'd been told, but now two were closed. Not that Ater's defenders were the ones keeping the third one open: the banner hung on the gatehouses was a vulture holding a skull, Askum's colours.

High Lady Abreha Mirembé was said to have been raised as undead by Catherine at the Battle of Kala and she knew better than to cross her mistress.

Sigvin returned to his side and Hakram sent for Dag Clawtoe, the warrior he'd overtaken as leader of the Howling Wolves and who now led his personal guard. The three of them and two hundred shields set out towards the gate even as the Clans followed, columns of warriors sweeping the highborn camps and approaching the capital. His force was large enough, the Warlord knew, that Abreha would come to greet him personally. Praesi respected force even when it was in the hands of those they considered savages, and the once-Sepulchral was nothing if not pragmatic. Careful, too.

She came out to meet him near the gatehouse with two hundred soldiers of her own, but she had twice that waiting with bows up in the heights. Out of firing range, narrowly, but should Abreha retreat under their cover the ensuing fight would not go well for him. The old witch let out a little noise of amusement when they finally stood face to face.

"No longer Adjutant, I take it?" High Lady Abreha said.

"No longer," the Warlord agreed. "The city?"

"Out of control," she replied. "From the Licosian Gates to the western walls is nothing but giant spiders and things called to kill them. Maybe a fifth of the city is lost, either to flame or damages. The Legions are dug in along the Avenue of Claws and Akua Sahelian is rumoured to be mounting a counterattack, but it's not looking good. "

Hakram snorted.

"Catherine?" he asked.

"Still near the Licosian Gates last I heard, containing the situation with the Hierophant's help," High Lady Abreha replied. "The Army of Callow retreated in good order to the western gates – with civilians along, when they could."

"Quite the mess," Hakram said.

"It is," the old witch smiled. "So what is it that you've come to add, Deadhand? I must confess, it's starting to look like we might no longer be on the same side."

"Oh?"

"Had to fight Dakarai off to keep this gate open," High Lady Abreha said. "I'll need assurances before I let you through it."

Hakram laughed in her face, then let out a sharp whistle. The Aksum household troops tensed, some drawing swords, but his own warriors did not charge. Instead they turned about sharply, beginning to march away. Wary surprise found its way to Abreha's face.

"It need not be anything onerous," the High Lady said. "Just oaths and hostages."

"I won't bargain with you, Abreha," Hakram said. "What I wanted from you was news of the battle, and you have given them to me."

The old woman scoffed.

"So you dragged your horde all the way from the Steppes just to sit out the fall of Ater?" Abreha said. "Try a better lie."

"You misunderstand me," Hakram Deadhand said.

In the distance, there was a great grinding sound. One of two western gates that'd been closed was opening again. The High Lady of Askum's face went blank, hiding her thoughts.

"Why would I cut a deal with you," the Warlord asked, "when I have already done so with High Lady Wither?"

—

Indrani breathed out, nocked her arrow and jumped down.

Flashes of bright light below, scarabs the size of fists burrowing into the flesh of spiders and devils only to explode out in green flame. Distractions, all of it. At the heart of the horde, the house-sized green salamander devil was laying on the broken pedestal of some dead empress and watching it all with its jutting eyes – a spider came a little too close, mouth open in a screech, and the devil's jaw unhinged. Archer smiled. The arrow was in flight before she even knew it, her body moving by itself, and the salamander's lower jaw was nailed down to the stone. Its spiky tongue juttled out as it screamed, impaling the spider, and Indrani landed on her knees just behind the dying creature.

She snatched the spike at the end of the tongue before it could retract, to the devil's hateful screams, and rose to a run. Movement to the left, claws, but she went low and blood splashed on her cloak as a spider died in her stead. A jet of spidersilk brushed against the edge of her shoulder but she was already twisting, leaping – broken stone pillar to the side, base to leap even higher and *fuck* a devil. The coloured toucan the size of a man and made of ivory and fingers clawed at side, pale claws raking at her chain mail, and she was slammed on the side of a wall. She smacked the devil away with her bow, breaking the string, and fell back even quicker when the salamander devil tried to retract its tongue.

The bow went behind her back, just in time for the toucan devil to come back and get a knife in the belly. She wrapped her limbs around it, ignoring the horrid wiggling of the fingers, and used it as a base to throw herself atop the roof. She landed on her side, the salamander devil below screeching words in the Dark Tongue as its tongue kept extending. Almost there, Archer thought. She rolled to the side as a streak of fire tore through the roof tiles where she'd just been, breaking into a running leap at the next roof – in the distance she saw a flash of Light shine and wink out, the Lady shooting Alexis' arrow in flight – and landing just near the edge of the last roof. Just in time for spiders to begin climbing up that edge. She couldn't stop moving, she'd lose the momentum and then she was fucked.

So instead she sped up, and when the fat body full of mandibles went over the edge it was receive her boot in the face as she used it as a base to leap further up. Screeches behind her but she was flying, flying until she hit the wall with a gleeful laugh. The alcove in the tower was just large enough for her to stand in it after the bruising landing, and Indrani wasted no time hammering the tongue spike into it with her bare hand. Once, twice, and in it went. Deep. In the distance the salamander screamed in rage but the spike was stuck in now. Indrani reached

for the vial in her bag, smashing it atop the point where the tongue went into the stone. The black good solidified in moments, making sure it'd be stuck there for good.

"Well," Archer said. "Time to get going."

She climbed up the tower even as began to shake, reaching the top and the wonderful view of the howling hell Ater had turned into just moments before there was a sinister *crack* down below. Indrani moved to the eastern edge, sheathing her knife and taking out a fresh string for her bow. Down below, the Lady still stood on that statue of Terribilis as she toyed with the Silver Huntress. Arrows were shot out in flight, Ranger shot her through cover – even when stone – and twice collapsed a building with a very precise missile as Alexis tried to cross them. The arrows wreathed in silver Light that headed back Ranger's way never made it close. Lexy was too slow to imbue the Light, against reflexes like the Lady's that was as good as not shooting at all.

Archer nocked an arrow, breathed out and loosed. The Lady caught the movement, swayed slightly to the left and the shot that should have gone through her spine instead caught a devil in the face down below. Ranger cocked an eyebrow at her, as if asking whether that was the best Indrani could do. She had yet to stop standing atop the head of the fucking statue she'd been on all this time. Instead of answering, Archer nocked another arrow and grinned. If she wasn't wrong, it ought to be around – a few small cracks, then a massive one as the salamander-devil finally pulled the seven-story high tower down. Which was something of a problem for Indrani, who was standing on top of said tower, but more of a problem for the Lady.

Who the tower was falling *on*.

Whooping in delight, Indrani loosed on the arrow the Lady had just tried to put in her throat and hit the side, deflecting it. Even as she slid down the top of the tower, she nocked and released once more – looking irritated the Lady cut it down, but Alexis had taken the opening. Silver shone bright, clipping the edge of the Lady's shoulder and singeing her cloak. For a moment Ranger looked up, but Indrani realized with a start it wasn't her being looked at. It was the falling tower. One of the windows, more specifically.

"No fucking way," Archer cursed. "You can't possibly be *that* quick."

Just before the tower's roof became a wall, she leapt away and to the side. Even as the building fell onto a mass of spiders and devils she landed through a broken tile roof and into what looked like pack of shelves which were – ow ow, fucking ow – full of bottles. Indrani took a moment to be in pain as the broken shelves and bottles fell on her head, bruised and bloody, and

there was a thunderous sound and cloud of dust as the tower finished falling. Taking an experimental sniff the liquid drenching her, Indrani found it appeared to be wine. Ah, but the Gods did provide. She bit off the cork and took a swallow of what tasted like some red from somewhere, polishing off a third of the bottle because those fucking cuts on her face hurt like a bitch. Well, time to see if the Lady had actually pulled it off.

Indrani left the house only to find the Ranger smugly standing atop the fallen tower, next to what had been a window on the western side.

"Oh *come on*," Archer complained. "Are you telling me you managed to climb and cross the damn thing before it finished falling?"

"The windows on the second level faced each other," the Lady said, amused. "You girls picked the wrong tower to drop."

She paused to slap away a silver arrow.

"Fine," Indrani sighed. "Next one will be bigger, and without fucking windows. You going to say why you were standing on that statue, at least?"

"So I could literally look down on your efforts," the Lady of the Lake informed her.

"Ouch," Indrani said. "In all fairness, you're pretty hard to kill."

"Is that what you're trying?" she smiled. "I thought we were catching up."

"Sure, but we figured it'd be better to catch you then get caught," Indrani noted. "What errand is it you're running for the Carrion Lord, anyway?"

Ranger cocked her head to the side.

"You're stalling," she stated. "Why?"

"Wine hasn't kicked in yet," Indrani replied, raising her bottle.

She threw it a moment later, but it didn't work – the Lady ignored it, instead swatting the arrow without Light that the Silver Huntress had just tried to put in the side of her neck.

"Alexis," Ranger greeted her. "You seem in a mood. Rough day?"

Lexy came out of the house she'd shot through the window of, jaw clenched.

"What is it going to take," the Silver Huntress bit out, "for you to take this *seriously*?"

The Ranger considered her.

"For you to get out of the woods I first found you running in," the Lady said.

Oh boy, Indrani thought. *That* wasn't going to end well. At least their plan had worked, though. Archer wasn't hearing any devils and spiders fighting nearby, so Cocky should be about ready. Alexis took her spear in hand, Light flaring bright.

"I'm going to take that answer out of your fucking hide," the Silver Huntress said.

"You're beginning to bore me," the Ranger noted. "Cocky, won't you stop skulking around long enough say something? Crawling on your belly is no way to live, girl."

Cocky did, in fact, come out of hiding. Atop the rooftop, covered in ash and dust but grinning.

"Me," the Concocter said.

"Pardon?" the Lady said.

"You asked what she was stalling for," Cocky said. "It was for *me*."

She raised her hand, snapping the fingers, and suddenly their surroundings were filled with screams. Every devil and spider that'd been exposed to the charm potions came when called by their new mistress, prepared to kill at her word.

"So *that's* your plan?" the Lady asked. "Swarming me."

"It's a start," the Concocter said.

Ranger snorted, then glanced at Indrani – who'd been nocking an arrow, admittedly.

"I did come here for something," the Lady said. "You were right."

"And what's that?" Archer asked.

Below them the ground began to shake. Not, not shake. Something was... hitting it.

"Let *her* catch my scent," the Ranger replied.

The paved street in front of them was ripped open, a massive leg tearing through it. Merciless Gods, Indrani thought. No, that couldn't be. Wasn't it supposed to be just a story? Another street blew up and slowly, inexorably, a gargantuan shape rose through the foundation of Ater. A spider so large and foul it defied description, shrouded in darkness and venom that dripped

like rain. Her scream, when her hundred thousand eyes found the sun, was deafening. She was sniffing at the air, looking for a scent.

"Dread Emperor Tenebrous," Indrani whispered.

The Lady of Lake smiled at them.

"Now it's a proper fight," Hye Su happily said.

Slowly, she unsheathed her second blade.

"What are you waiting for? Take your shot, kids."

—

"It won't work," High Lady Takisha said, tone frustrated. "My mages say—"

"Yes," Akua impatiently said, "that the sky is too dry because of the previous rains. Which I have a solution to."

"That offensive is suicide," Takisha hissed. "You cannot—"

"My soldiers are at your disposal, Lady Sahelian," High Lord Jaheem mildly said.

Akua passed a tired hand through her hair. It was telling that no one even seemed to notice it: they were all so exhausted and on edge that the usual games had gone by the wayside.

"I need more than soldiers," Akua admitted. "I need at least three mage cabals."

The High Lord of Okoro hesitated.

"I only have two," he admitted. "One of which is of my retinue."

Which he would not part with, considering that there had been two attempts to abduct him today.

"One would be a start," Akua said, glancing at High Lady Takisha.

Who looked away. Akua could not even blame her too much for it. The Kahtan household troops had been so brutalized by the day's fighting that there was barely a third of left of them. All of the Taghreb soldiery had been badly mauled, in truth, but the Kahtan men had led the vanguard and suffered accordingly — first against the Army of Callow, then those damnable spiders.

"I will go," High Lord Dakarai said. "I still have nearly sixty mages, a third of which can touch High Arcana. It ought to be enough, I think."

A moment of surprised silence. He was taking a considerable risk, investing so much of the last strength of his house in such a dangerous undertaking. Nok had been mauled as badly as Kahtan today, losing troops to both Aksum and the spiders. Abreha's treachery had been eminently predictable, but Dakarai's apparent change of sides was rather puzzling considering it had cost him much and might still cost him more.

"It is not certain any of us will return," Akua felt bound to remind him.

"It is not certain any of us will live through the day, if those monsters are not dealt with," High Lord Dakarai flatly replied. "We have already wrecked entire districts failing to contain them, and that was before..."

"Emperor-claimant Tenebrous?" High Lady Takisha suggested.

All of their gazes moved to the hulking shape of the spider near the Licosian Gates, which had already wrecked three fortified positions in its rampage. The lesser spiders had taken advantage to overwhelm the district, killing hundreds of soldiers in the service of Takisha's vassals.

"It ought to be *empress*-claimant, surely," High Lord Jaheem muttered.

"Regardless of the titles, Ater is on the brink," High Lord Dakarai said. "You have my cabals, Lady Sahelian."

They set out as a mixed force, High Lord Jaheem insisting he send his one spare cabal along with soldiers regardless of necessity. It was hard fighting block by block once they passed the fortified positions, swarms spiders attacking from streets and rooftops as the soldiers advanced with tightly locked shields and the mages returned fire. Akua led from the front, trusting Kendi's sorcery to shield her as she went purely on the offensive with the most destructive curses she'd learned as a girl. Two thousand soldiers had set out, four hundred were dead by the time the expedition made it to the massive structure of bronze that she'd been leading it to. A reservoir, one of the largest in Ater.

It fed some of the aqueducts, hence the bronze – it was the easiest metal to enchant – but many of those were now broken and spilling anyway. At the moment it was nothing but an enormous amount of water doing no good to anyone. As the household troops dug in and established a defensive perimeter under constant harassment, Akua organized the cabals into two ritual sequences. The first was easy, requiring a dozen mages only because of the power requirement. Magic was sunk into the water reservoir, then over three heartbeats turned to searing heat: a massive column of vapour blew upwards, high into the sky, as Akua followed with a

measuring spell. It was barely enough water, but it would do. The hail of the last two weeks had filled it to burst, it was the only reason it worked.

The second ritual took every mage left, in hexagonal nodes as power was gathered and sent up into the sky. The clouds began to form after half an hour – almost half the soldiers were dead by then, the spiders attracted by the great bursts of power – but after that it was not long. Dark clouds began crackling with power as Akua sunk deeper into High Arcana than she ever had, finding the runes came to her as if she'd been born with the knowledge. As if she were *meant* to succeed.

Lightning struck the tide of spiders before the main Legion position. Once, then twice. Then four times at once. Then nine. And then a howling column of lightning descended from the sky, like the glare of some ancient god, incinerating arachnids wherever it went. And Akua moved it, power dancing under a darkened sky as the column of lightning moved along the battle lines like a pencil being dragged. Before long the power began to wane, the array began to fight her and the clouds thinned, but Akua pressed on. A little more. If she kept at it little longer, she could end this. Force the spiders to retreat, to spare Ater.

And as her pores began to sweat blood, she smashed the last of the lightning onto the massive shape of the progenitor spider. It screamed and smoked, but rose from the ground soon enough. Akua dropped to the ground, spent.

"It wasn't enough," she panted, falling to her knees.

The last wisps of power slipped through her fingers. Someone approached to help her up, but she waved them away.

"See to those that fell unconscious," she croaked out. "And prepare for the retreat. We're done here."

None gainsaid her. They looked at her with fear in the eyes, she thought, but something like hunger too. It had been a long time since Ater had seen sorcery the likes of which had just been unleashed. Within moments Akua was alone in the warm cradle of bronze, even Kendi having gone. Only the sound of her breath kept her company as her heartbeat slowed. Gods, but she wanted to sleep. To close her eyes and wake up in Hainaut, still damned but without having to look it in the eye.

"*Goddamn*, but she did a number on you."

Akua's eyes fluttered open. Before her, leaning against the wall, a woman stood with a silver flask in hand. Hanging off her back was a run-down lute.

"I've been around for a while, darling, and I'm still impressed by how thoroughly Cat got into your head," the Wandering Bard said. "It's fucking magnificent work, pun intended. Terrible too, but that does tend to be the way with our girl yeah?"

"Go away," Akua croaked out.

"Nah," the Bard casually dismissed. "We're going to have a talk, you and I. Her plan has been working pretty much perfectly, which is why it's time for me to tell you a few truths and send that off into the void."

"I will not-"

"We're going to have a talk," the Wandering Bard grinned, "about exactly what it is that Catherine Foundling has planned for you."

—

"I couldn't get my hands on High Lord Jaheem," High Lady Wither said. "He goes nowhere without a full mage cabal since his daughter was assassinated and my ambush was fought off."

"We captured two of his children and much of his extended family outside the city," Hakram replied. "It will have to serve."

Getting the High Lord of Okoro to cede some of his territory was not going to be easy, but so long as the Tower was kept out of it the Clans had the stronger bargaining position. Hostages would only improve that, though exacting it as ransom from the man himself would have been easiest. Still, disappointing as the failure was it was not surprising: if High Lords were easy to capture, they would not be High Lords. Hakram looked away from Pickler's mother and down to the city, where the unfolding battle could well be seen from the gatehouse where they stood. The staggering feat of magic that could only have been the work of Akua Sahelian had turned the tide.

The lightning storm had torn through thousands of the spiders and sent many skittering back to their hiding places below. There were still pockets of fighting between soldiers and beasts but much fewer, and already it could be seen that the Legions were going on the offensive to clear out the still-infested districts. Down south was less promising, where the High Lady of Kahtan held command and most highborn armies had gathered. The hulking silhouette of what had to be the progenitor of the infestation beneath Ater was rampaging around the Licosian Gates, swatting away at storm elementals and devils. Giant spiders were gathering to her, as if they were being called.

"It will be time to move soon," the Warlord said.

"The longer we let Takisha bleed the better," High Lady Wither smiled.

"Short-sighted," Hakram said. "We'll need those armies as fodder when we fight Keter and their nobles to handle the Hellgates. If it's truly the Carrion Lord behind this insurgency of spiders, he disappoints me: thousands died today that could have been put to better use."

"It's him," Wither quietly said. "And he's not done, mark my words."

Hakram did not ask how she knew. It would have been impolite and she would not have told him regardless.

"It does not change the need to act," he said. "I want the west of the capital firmly under our control by the time the dust settles."

"Abreha will take the safe passage to outside the city when you offer it," High Lady Wither mused. "She's not going to fight us for the gate, not when it already cost her keeping Dakarai away from it. She'll move her camp to the Army of Callow's side and stop pretending she ever switched sides. It's Sargon that's going to be a problem."

"On that we agree," the Warlord growled.

Sargon Sahelian had contributed to the defence of the capital, but most of his troops had stayed near the central districts that surrounded the Tower. Giving him the boot would not be trouble given the size of Hakram's army, but the Sahelian was sharing those positions with the Sentinels – and Hakram was hesitant to tangle with those at the moment. Whoever first cornered Malicia would be mauled by the Tower's arsenal, that was a role best passed to another. It was why he'd ordered his chiefs to seize the west of the city but go no further. The wealthy camps outside the city would sate the hunger for plunder for now, enough his warriors would not sack the capital against his orders.

"We'll test their will to stand their ground with a few skirmishes," High Lady Wither decided.

"I'm not above burning them out if I have to," Hakram bluntly said. "We need to hold the avenues and barricade them if we're going to keep the nobles wedged between us and the Army of Callow."

Which was the only way he'd get them to bend without outright sacking Ater, he figured. If they had room to maneuver they'd try to run rings around him, decide they could wait out his horde. But so long as they were stuck in the capital between his host and another enemy, stripped of their supplies and at the Tower's

feet, they could be made to bend. It was either that or a massacre, which would weaken his army and taint the concessions he was here to force. Wither was in the same boat as him, which was why she'd been willing to ally: her title had been granted by Malicia, which meant it was worth less than dust the moment Malicia lost her throne. To ensure she was not thrown to the wolves by whoever succeeded the Empress, it been well worth opening a gate into the city.

One hundred thousand orcs were a heavy argument in any negotiation.

Their conversation was interrupted by a messenger, which turned out to be for the both of them. Letters with the Tower's seal. Already checked for poison and curses. Hakram opened his own, scanning the lines, and let out a bark of laughter. Well, let it not be said that Malicia lacked audacity.

"I assume you got the same as me?" he asked.

"An invitation to a formal session of the imperial court tomorrow," Wither said, eyes narrowed. "Malicia is playing a game again. She still thinks she can live through this."

Hakram snorted. Catherine wanted the woman's head on a pike, and given the situation she was quite likely to get it. There were few people left in Praes who wanted to keep the empress alive – it was more an issue of no one wanting to be the one to kill her. Cornered foxes bit deepest. The two of them left the wall to begin their preparations for the push into the city, but once more he was interrupted. This time by Dag, who quietly told him there was a messenger from the Army of Callow. The Warlord's hand tightened. It had only been a matter of time, he knew.

Somehow he'd still been hoping to avoid it for a little longer.

The man had been led to a house on the other side of the street and kept under guard. Hakram wasted no time getting there, finding the officer was looking outside the window when he entered. The tall orc frowned. Something was wrong here. These were lieutenant's stripes, Catherine would have sent someone higher up for an important message. The human turned, unclasping the straps of his helmet and setting it down on the table, revealing greying hair and green eyes.

"Good afternoon, Warlord," the Carrion Lord said.

Hakram's dead hand clenched.

"You are not here on Catherine's behalf," the Warlord said.

The older man conceded the point with a slight nod.

"So what is it you want, Amadeus of the Green Stretch?" the Warlord asked.

"I come," the devil said, "to offer you a bargain."

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Miles

Boost for Idrani!

"to leap even higher and *fuck* a devil"

Aston Whiteman

PGTE Chapter late today...?

Delayed?

SpeckofStardust

Well, I think we can slot in Akua as being the next ruler. Which I think only Amadeus has planned for. Cause even bard is clearly on the back foot.

Arcwraith

#TenebrousForEmpress

john

Bard explains Cat's plan to Akua, who takes it as inspiration to generalize the concept of "awareness of your own misdeeds as ultimate revenge-curse" by restoring Tenebrous's sanity using an uplift template adapted from the sapient tiger army. Thus, Akua allies with the giant spiders – to her immense tactical advantage – and also fobs off the Dread Empress position on someone who not only actually wants the job, but has a record of "keeping her territory secure without causing too many problems for the neighbors" which is... quite possibly unmatched on the continent? Maybe Keter or the Golden Bloom or the Gigantes could match it, purely in terms of consecutive years, but they've got other flaws, and in any case are geographically isolated, rather than having camped out directly under a major city which was unfriendly for most of that time.

Estelulu

I can see it now. With the aid of her million children, the recently sane and recently titled Dread Empress Tenebrous goes back to doing what she loved most the most in life – building highways to places.

SuitorShooter

Bring back the position of Chancellor, replace the metaphorical spider at the heart of Ater with an actual spider, and justify all the atrocities with 'Spiders made me do it'. It's the perfect solution.

ninegardens

What makes you think Maddie planned for it?
Cause he is very explicitly trying to *kill* all the stories she stands for, and right now, she is the only thing blocking him. (also, good call on Cat for her "Black wants destruction, Akua wants reformation")

SpeckofStardust

I mean Maddie tested the high born to see if they can walk the talk of being good rulers, and currently Akua is the effective leading the faction of legitimately being noble among the high born, and he has been in the city and knows whats going on in the city. So if someone is going to rule after to wipes the slate clean she'd be his best bet.

Shveiran

Sure.

Her track records include:

- attempting to become Dread Empress through diabolism, sabotage of Imperial interest while at war, slavery and slave sacrifices, the zombification of a major city through means that would also have invited retaliation from the world, and using a millennia worth of souls as fuel;
- a few years of restraint while she was an undead spirit that could literally not go anything against her mistress' orders;
- a few months of actual restraint following the removal of her Night bonds;
- the betrayal of all her allies to the side that is allied with the undead abomination trying to eat the continent (and succeeding, as Akua well knows) and the active employment of her abilities to contribute to that side victory, including trying to save the more powerful Named in the Empress' employ from a pattern of three;
- going "oh these poor people" for about a week, using her

skills to protect people that might not even be in danger if it wasn't for her (Cause, you know, after Kala, if Nim had died and there was no Warlock? Ater would be many things but it wouldn't be a SIEGE) while still happily opposing the side keeping the Dead King from eating the Continent. Which, by the way, is so very much a Praesi problem that it baffles the mind how anyone can argue otherwise. The treaty is contingent on Malicia's survival, which isn't gonna last, and even if, Praes cannot afford for no other kingdom to remain on the continent. The dead don't farm, and Praes' food production is hilariously inadequate to their own needs.

She just **oozes** nobility, doesn't she?

Mike E.

Akua's leaving the Woe was many weeks if not months ago in narrative time. The weather fiasco Malicia let happen was 2 weeks long on its own, plus I think there was a few weeks of army travel on all sides to get to Ater before the weather event even occurred.

I was enough time for her to realize she is entirely sick of the High Noble games.

Shveiran

And not enough to consider the death of life on the continent more than a triffling detail, apparently.

Joshua

I mean, the author is pretty clearly (to me and OP it sounds like anyway) painting Akua to be following some form of redemption narrative, albeit one that has no hope of being achieved.

I dont think it's absurd for someone to come to the conclusion that Akua being willing to drain herself magically enough to collapse in front of a group of vultures that would love nothing more than to eat her alive in a moment of weakness, just to try to save Ater is exactly what Amadeus is saying he gave the nobles a chance for.

Granted, he's testing Nobles-plural, not just one person and I doubt he would consider it a success if only Akua was willing to sacrifice herself for the Empire while everyone else goes down with the ship, but irrespective listing Akua's long list of sins as if everyone commenting on this chapter hasn't been reading just as much of the story as you have and don't remember very clearly why Akua

is where she is seems a bit condescending and rude, especially since you seem to be ignoring the very real framing of the story towards her since she left Cat.

Shveiran

Is it condescending and rude to disagree with your view on the narrative and to explain why I have that view?

I certainly meant no offense to anyone, but this is a spot to discuss the chapter, is it not? I'm not sure how you'd have preferred me to act, bere.

Josh

Oh, that's my fault so let me clear, I misspoke. Rude is a bit of a exaggeration so it didn't come off as rude and sorry if the mistake made you feel a little weird about it. I just read a bit of hostility in your response to OP, and I wanted to jump in with my opinion to back them up because ai think there's a perfectly valid interpretation in their post that shouldn't be dismissed as easily as I read a dismissal in your response.

My careless word choice, so again, don't mind me and you weren't being rude.

Miles

Addoe seems completely blind to her actions. He sees what he wants to see and that's it.

jamesc9

Sorry, could you please unpack 'Addoe', 'her', 'he', and 'he', please?

I think that you mean something quite specific, but I haven't got to the start line for deciding whether I agree.

ninegardens

So, to paraphrase what you are saying here (from the point of view of the average Praes citizen)

-Continuing the rich cultural heritage of Iron sharpens Iron, by attempting to claim the tower. Attempting to overturn a Dread Empress who has since been proven to be incompetent and lacking.

-Being captured, but being too talented/useful to destroy, and managing to work your way into the good graces of your captor.

- Seducing the Black Queen, the most powerful villain of the age. (didn't happen, people still believe it)
- Betrayal of foreign oligarchs in order to rejoin the nation of your birth. Protecting a loyal general of the empire from those mean heroes, and earning the loyalty and trust of the loyal legions of terror.
- Attending to the citizens of Keter, taking care of them, and fulfilling **exactly** the role that they all **wish** dread empress Malicia was filling.

You might not like Akua's "redemption arc", but from the point of view of Praes, she is legitimately a hero, and an incredibly charismatic figure.
She **is** all those stories that they believe in.

Shveiran

Sure, but I have no beef with that. If you argue that makes sense from the Praesi pov, we are of one mind.

My issue is with this being presented as redemption to the audience.

Black Spiral Dancer

Well, if you're exclusively arguing about the POV or the readers of the story, a POV which shouldn't matter at all to the story per se (as in, that is a meta-story), I do have two arguments against yours:

(1) We as readers know every detail of Akua's mind that is shared to us, and exactly because of how and what was shared from her, we know she FEELS quite badly about it all, a redeeming-like trait, at least in the context of all the other nobles and of the dread empress herself. Of all the long list of her ill deeds, you could hardly find any noble in Ater who isn't worse, and if you compare her to the current (and arguably all the formers) Dread ruler, than she still win by leagues.

(2) Each reader has a different opinion, you rude skunk. Do NOT write as if you either know or can speak for all the audience. You don't. Each of us has their own fucking opinion and I can easily argue that Akua, having grown as she has, influenced by all the things she has, and still managing to understand and internalize empathy with such depth as she has now is a fucking miracle that even Bard is surprised about. So fuck off.

Shveiran

I think I made it quite clear I was speaking for myself, and no one else.

I reserve the right to have an opinion, and to share it without disrespecting other users.

If you disagree with me, I'm glad to discuss; but I'd appreciate it if you could leave personal insults out of it.

Stormblessed

What an interesting chapter. There's just so much going on it's difficult to address all let alone any of it easily. Just too many interesting elements from Akua to Hakram to Amadeus it's just jam packed with stuffff.

Sir Nil

How many damn Dread Emperors and Empresses are still hanging around? You can't go two steps without stabbing nobility. What is this Procer?

dadycool

Wow. No need to be so savage, there. I can think of three for certain: Tenebrous, Irritant, and Traitorous. It's like that "I'd have two nickels" meme: it's not a lot, but the fact that we can immediately name them off is weird.

Wabbitking

Don't forget Triumphant. If there isn't a corpse don't assume the villains dead.

dadycool

I was back and forth on including her. In the end, the fact that three is better than four is what made me not include her.

[sengachi](#)

Make it a three and one narrative. Three to set the stage and one to burn it down.

[Sugar Roll](#)

I'm half convinced Triumphant is a revenant on the Dead King's side.

Shveiran

Nah, Neshamah would not have done that.
If only because of the risks involved.

kinghaart

Would be funny if he HAD, but then she had actually offered him and decided to pretend to be him instead of becoming Dead Queen.

I also like how Tenebrous is a female Empreror just like how Cordelia is a Prince.

Gnochi

May she never return.

Nairne .01

She should totally return – just so we can have a nice chapter 😊

Black Spiral Dancer

I'm in!

Shveiran

And with Cat, not even then!

SuitorShooter

How awesome would it be if this entire time Jeter was fighting a second war against Triumphant within the Hells.

SuitorShooter

Keter*

God is there no way to edit these comments?

jamesc9

So the reward for defeating the Dead King is an even worse problem?

SuitorShooter

That seems to be how these stories go, honestly. One escalating disaster after another.

[lolo96](#)

Sorcerous bound his soul to the moon

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Me too.

jamesc9

So it's hard to stab, but still generally around.

aurikdomi

what is Irritant doing?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

His best.

beleester

He abdicated several times when he was in danger of losing the throne. I bet he's enjoying a peaceful retirement.

Sir Nil

Quick! Check all the shoe shops!

BargleNawdleZouss

We're still waiting for Triumphant and Traitorous to make their appearances.

shikkarasu

One more, always one more.

Linnus42

Hakram as a Wildcard. Malicia with a plot.
Bard and Carrion Lord about to flip the table.
The fighting hasn't really being excited but the politics and character dynamics quite enjoyable.

Alex

Possible spoiler alert

Five demon contracts and a bottle of aragh say that he's gonna burn the tower with all that goblin fire. Extra 2 bottles, that Cath is still gonna be the one blamed for that)

ninegardens

Honestly, I feel like Cat taking the blame *weakens* his plan.

If the Praes think "this horrible foreign invader burned our tower" they are more likely to rebuild (and conquer Callow). If they think "WE burned our tower" then...that's something different.

If they think "Amadeus the terrorist from the green stretch burned the tower" they'll probably just get more racist.

jamesc9

I'm really not sure what 'terrorist' means in a Praesi context.

Venom

Wonderful glorious violence

I need more!!!!

Linnus42

Akua on the cusp of a new name is interesting. I suppose that is why Bard can talk to her now. But its not clear what the rules are far as Bard goes as she greatly benefits from it not being explicit. I kinda think it will add to the mystery if the Bard & Akua and Hakram & Carrion Chats happen offscreen. How many potential rulers of Praes do we have running around now?

I got to say I am not really getting much from the Ranger vs her former student plotline right now. That is probably cause overall the combat be it more traditional Named fights or military stuff just isn't working for me. The character dynamics, wheels within wheels plots and politics are just more dynamic.

This to me feels like an inverse of Arsenal where the action was great and the setup/politics was lacking and dragged.

caoimhinh

For me, the plotline of Ranger vs her pupils is interesting, but it's gonna be something more emotional for them than a grand thing. It's personal, not a nation-changing event.

I doubt Ranger will die, but I think they will at least make her recognize them.

Deep down, what they really want from Ranger is for her to unsheathe her two blades as she looks at them and tells them "I am the Ranger. I hunt those worth hunting. Rejoice, *for you qualify.*"

Which is pretty much the highest praise they can get from her as they aim to grow out of her shadow.

Shveiran

I really liked the Arsenal arc, to be honest. I think even EE went on the record saying he plans to rewrite it (unless I'm missremembering), but I must say I'm not sure why? It really worked for me.

shikkarasu

The only thing that felt weak was the game of Affray, and even then only because Raising Towers was so beautifully crafted and has come up so many times. I had a hard time following Affray, not in the meaning behind the cards, but in terms of why any of the moves mattered in a non-meta sense. It felt like laying random cards down and insisting that there's a game going on.

That said, the actual conversation and overall scene with Bard? Fucking poetry the whole way through. Do not let my one small yet detailed nitpick overshadow how much I loved that whole arc.

Shveiran

I mean, yeah, but I almost thought that was the point. They were just using the cards as props to talk about the schemes they had going at the moment. The game was a metaphor, it didn't really matter at all.

I guess if it had been established before, it would have been neater, yes. But it is a rather minor thing, in my opinion.

Cpt. Obvious

The cards were representing the resources (people to Cat, tools for the Bard) and the "game" was about weaving the strongest stories around them. Cat was battling the Bard in weaving stories, pretty much the same as a high school boxer going up against Mike Tyson at his best, and end the fight still standing. She came out of it battered and bruised. A lot of people were killed. Hakram were crippled. Discord were sown amongst the Heroes. Trust was lost between the Prince of Procer and the leader of the Heroes. Cat also lost the trust of Hano and the seed of doubt that the loss of the choir of Justice had sown in hi got more nourishment.

But the thing that bothers the Bard is that she managed to keep both Sever and the research on the Autumn Crown safe, so it was a draw.

Kind of feels like a pattern of three developing. And the third round should belong to Cat.

Now being the one put in place to safeguard the stories and patterns probably also means that the Bard is eminently vulnerable to them. So if Cat really stands at one loss and one draw then the Bard can't risk another confrontation. And yet she have done just that by confronting Cat and telling her she's done playing games and intends to kill her. Question is if it counts if they

battle by proxies, or if it requires the direct personal involvement of the bard. I mean is her being in the room gloating as her chosen executor prepares to deliver the final blow enough to make it count for a pattern of three?

ninegardens

The overall arc kind of... felt like a distraction from the main front? But at the same time, if we had had an entire year of "soldiering at the main front" that would have been a real slog, since DK ISN'T an enemy you get to trick/diplomacy/weasel etc. sooo... I can appreciate the need for balance.

The "talking to Bard" scene was fine for me (I liked the Affrays), but having Cat's "name"/"title" change up EVERY SINGLE LINE was kind of... painful to read.

overall, a fun arc though, and got to highlight a bunch of fun characters (kingfisher FTW... and actually, I came to like the MK by the end of it... he tries so hard but is so bad, and he really **was** in a bad situation)

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The Arcsenal, if you will.

Miles

I'm not getting much from Bard's attempt here either. Akua *knows* what Cat did. She watched it happen and is much smarter than Cat, especially when it comes to comprehending people and their motivations. There is no perspective the Bard can present that Akua hasn't already considered.

kinghaart

Narrative. Cat herself said that Akua had to be left free to leave in truth for it to matter. But by revealing here that Akua's release was just a way to get a gatekeeper for the DK, it removes the narrative weight behind the redemption arc and means that the plan narratively cannot happen anymore. It's the "explained plans fail" trope as an in-universe law.

Jury is still out though on whether Bard can predict what Akua will do with this knowledge. There's no way that Cat would want this revealed to Akua early but it might still go OK?

ruduen

I don't know if I should find it comforting or worrying that there's an answer to the question I had a couple of chapters ago, but it's still good to have. Yes, apparently giant

spiderification isn't a problem when it comes to laying a claim on the Tower.

It says a lot about Praes in that the moment the appearance is made, the nobles all agree that the claim has to be seriously considered. It says more in that it's not at all a surprise. So, well done establishing Praes in the setting.

dadycool

The ground rumbles and cracks. Bells toll. The skittering of a hundred thousand massive spiders sounds as they rush out of the crevices, preceding a monstrous creature, even by Prasi standards. And throughout the land, one thing echoes in the ears of every living thing: A Challenger Approaches!

Ciara

So the reason that Tenebrous is only making an appearance now is that Ranger delivered his Smash invitation?

letouriste

I'm guessing Ranger spent a lot of time underground, annoying the big spider. She and amadeus had a lot of time before this battle and we knew they were in the city.

jamesc9

Not killing it must have required remarkable levels of restraint.

shikkarasu

I want to know what Ranger did a few hundred years back to warrant this level of hatred from Tenebrous. She routinely cuts out an eye from the Prince of Nightfall, so we know it's probably a big deal and almost certainly not "that one time" so much as "every time he X Ranger just had to Y."

flashburn283

I mean, technically Praes was ruled by a herd of Man-Eating capybaras for a good few days, and the sentient Tigers, and Traitorous. Honestly giant spider monster with sanity issues is fairly middle of the pack.

Steel and Elaborate Insult

excellent chapter. you gotta wonder what amadeus thinks he can offer hakram or even what he thinks hakram wants, given that what hakram wants hasn't been explicit since about book 1. hakram's sheer disappointment in amadeus can't particularly help. tbh

hakram's grasp of politicking being used for the Horde rather than for Catherine is a delight to read.

(can't wait to see how the Bard stans try to explain how she saw everything coming)

Xinci

I suppose one could say Amadeus is the metaphorical hidden knife here, even as bard pulls her own on Akua.

Also...Ranger pulled a Legolas.

dadycoool

I think Ranger might very well be what would happen if Legolas got bored for a few thousand years.

kinghaart

Does that make Amadeus Gimli?

Juff

Typo Thread:

wolf rider towards > wolf riders towards
great mount > great mounts
Askum > Aksum (occurs twice)
Flashes of bright light (missing verb)
was laying > was lying
She snatched (extra space)
it was receive > it received
black good > black goo
as began > as it began
Light, against > Light; against
sniff the > sniff of the
it been > it had been

Frivolous

Sigvin is not very bright, I think. It was obvious Hakram sent Troke ahead as a decoy, to fool everyone into thinking Troke was still in charge.

I'm still wondering if the Intercessor is aware of Amadeus' actions, his schemes. She hasn't approached him. She may still be blind to him.

Intercessor hasn't approached Hakram, either. I suspect she's scared of him. Hakram was mentally indomitable even when he was Adjutant.

Amadeus either anticipated or saw instantly that Hakram was Warlord. Interesting. Admirable even if only the latter. To predict that Hakram would become Warlord would be practically supernatural.

Wait. Ahhhhh. I see now. Amadeus is in contact with Grem. Grem is an orc and former claimant to the Name. He might know by intuition who the Warlord was.

That would definitely have given Amadeus a big advantage over even Catherine when it comes to plotting.

Linnus42

Eh Amadeus hangs out with too many Named for Bard not to have some idea of what he is doing. He may even be close to a Name but he is clearly running a storyline and he made a public declaration to the Gods Below. Bard works for the Gods so the Carrion Lord isn't exactly doing stuff that make him invisible to the Bard.

Bard is not going to be afraid of Hakram. She has only avoided Hierarch and that cause he has some pure Hax. Bard cannot really be affected physically after all DK tied her to a lab table and cut her open and got nowhere. Bard's shtick isn't mind control, she usually shows up and gives you information where some is bs and some is true.

Frivolous

Linnus42: That's just it. Intercessor appears to give you BS, especially when you're in a moment of weakness. Her entire shtick is words meant to wound you or to move you.

But Hakram cannot be moved, and he's scarily perceptive. Look at how quickly he deduced that Rozala was under new orders to coddle Catherine, in Interlude: Concourse IV.

Any attempt to move him might just give him the information he needs to push back. That makes him dangerous to a wordsmith like the Intercessor.

Also, I do not believe Amadeus is approaching a Name. I think Hakram would have noticed it.

And just because he's running a Story and entreating the Gods Below does not mean that the Intercessor can necessarily sense him.

As I commented in the last chapter, I believe Amadeus has been using Neshamah's methods when he sought apotheosis, only acting in indirect manner, giving no openings. I believe his

scheme is an attack on the Intercessor and/or meant to deny her knowledge of him or the ability to act on him.

Even the Intercessor didn't notice what Neshamah was doing until, as she said, it was too late to stop him, and Neshamah had a Name before he became Dead King. Amadeus is still Nameless.

Still waiting for real evidence proving or disproving Intercessor's knowledge of Amadeus. So far all we have is absence of evidence.

Speck of Stardust

Intercessor did notice Neshamah though, she just had no openings (or desire) to stop him.

Why else do you think she laughed when he first 'won'.

As for limitations, she knows actions she can't however read thoughts.

shikkarasu

She can't read thoughts, but she *can* see stories. She even went so far as to call it "peeking at the script" in Book 1.

So she sees where the plan will lead and works backwards to figure out why [Named] wants to accomplish [Thing] and what points of failure are needed to change the result into something she would prefer. Honestly it's more terrifying to me than simple mind reading. Reading someone's mind doesn't tell you if it will *work*.

Shveiran

For how good Hakram is, I'd not bet on him at the Intercessor's chosen game.

Even with all the disadvantages that come from people knowing what her deal is (or at least much more than usual), millennia of experience is hard to beat.

Kairos was kind of unpredictable and the oracle had the sight to help, Hakram only has his wits. And has so far been only a helper and not a player.

The Bard is not a good enemy to take your first bit at the game, plain and simple.

Frivolous

Addendum: I'd like to clarify what I meant by absence of evidence.

Amadeus is attacking the Story of Praes. He means to destroy certain Names. You'd think that would be a concern for Intercessor.

Yet Intercessor hasn't mentioned him yet. She could certainly talk to Amadeus or to Ranger, who is Named, about Amadeus' scheme in an attempt to deflect it, but she hasn't.

Instead, she's talking to Akua about Catherine, not Amadeus.

To me, if a person repeatedly fails to mention a topic that should be of importance to her, it could be she's just keeping silent about it. But the other explanation is ignorance of that topic.

Shveiran

The Intercessor doesn't really care about Praes, I don't think.

If Cordelia pulls the trigger on the Elamal, it's honestly easy to see why: it doesn't really matter if there is a change of order in Praes, because the doomsday event will change the stories going around the continent WILDLY long before those changes can achieve much.

What matters is stopping Cat, so that the elamal gets activated.

Miles

Not even sure that it's about the dead angel either. I think she's trying to stop Cat to prevent what she sees as the Dead King Version 2: Deathless Queen

Yunamed

Maybe Bard doesn't feel that's important enough...if Cat gets the name she wants without any interference she might have control over Bard or some level of influence.

dadycool

God...DAMN, Akua! That was magnificent! Not only the sheer majesty of her sorcery, but the fact that she actually called upon Above's power to save the Capitol of Evil. That right there is the power of Looking out for the Little People.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, she did what?

dadycool

When the technique just came to her, combined with everything else going on with her, that had Above all over it. Below doesn't make it easy like that unless it's the first step in a big "All According To" plan.

Providence, that's the word. Her ease was clearly Providence having a hand in it. If she had called on her own knowledge, it'd be different and I'd give her the credit, but she didn't actually try, it was basically given to her, the way it always is for Heroes.

hakureireimu

No. That's simply what filling the groove of a story or coming into a Name looks like. It's not a Hero specific thing.

shikkarasu

That said, bolts of Lightning are a much more divine method than, say, swaths of Hellflame. It may not have the substance of Above, but it has all the trappings of Above. All in all I'd say dadycool is right, but not quite for the reasons they thought they were.

Shveiran

Guys, the first Named we saw using lightning was bloody Kairos.

And even before that, we saw it used by mages, not by Priests.

Actually, tell a lie, I think the first one was actually Masego, but Kairos made for a much better point!

shikkarasu

Yes, and Kairos announced it by yelling that his **Rule** extended to the Heavens themselves. I feel this only strengthens our point that she used Good means to save an Evil city.

Again, I am not saying that lightning is a Good exclusive elemental force like Light(which was also soft-usurped by Scorched Apostate), just that it is symbolic of Above. It conjures up the image of the Heavens smiting their foes.

Shveiran

I think it is simply linked to above. As in, up. The sky.

[Liliet](#)

Huh? I was pretty sure that was her own knowledge, her recall / thinking was just eased by... well, yes, story juice.

kinghaart

Her leaning into that story (and strengthening her Claim) is probably what exposed her to Bard.

Hakram's Dead Hand

I think what they are saying is that it was providence that helped Akua. It does say "As if she were meant to succeed." but I think this is less of the Gods Above influencing her and more of the shape of a story.

Shveiran

Yeah, if I know one thing about those that say "this undead apocalypse I'm in no way protected from is certainly not my problem" is that the look out for the little people.

I swear to Future Masego, this arc is drawing me crazy.

kinghaart

TBF even Malicia had a solution ready for the Hellgates, it's Cat who is not willing to sit at the table anymore (with good reason but still, it's not really true to say that Malicia or Akua are working for the DK. Sounds a lot like "if you're not with us, you're against us" which has at least SOME ambiguity at a moral stance).

kinghaart

Like, if it weren't for Cat and all the events of the early books, would the DK even be out?

serdar314

Well, Fuck u Bard. Seriously. I was expecting her the moment Akua said it was like she was meant to win but non the less, Fuck u

[Adrian_V](#)

Huh glad to know i wasn't the only one having trouble deciding if Tenebrus is a He or She now xD

So many moving pieces, and Cat is central to all of them, i still think Picker's plea is what will define her story and probably save her ass and goals.

Also we were joking a lot about the spider and its dread emperor father/mother but how many of us actually thought HE/SHE would appear?

ChillyPepper

S/he can be whatever they want to be, GENDERFLUID SPIDERS FOR ATER!

kinghaart

I mean, who is going to contradict?

Though I read it more as Tenebrous always being female but choosing the masculine honorific, similar to Cordelia.

[sengachi](#)

Either way, I think we can all appreciate that on Calernia even Ye Most Evil Empire Praes says "trans rights", even for terrible indescribable monsters, and while in the middle of a multi-sided conflict for the very survival of their empire at that.

Black Spiral Dancer

Yeah, it has to count SOME points.

Kidding aside, it shows much more of the writer and the society he/she is from than anything much about Praes (in fact, of Calernia as a whole).

edrey

at this point i would be fucking impressed if cat predict half of this things, like the graveyard. the bard ruining her plans was a given but the rest its just a mess. but thinking again i wouldnt be surprised either if she can

[Adrian_V](#)

I kind of want her to appear smug all knowing while on the inside she is all "wtf did just happen?" kind of like Abigail, good enough to fool the masses (highlords and nobles included) but most everyone close to her knows she is full of shit xD

jamesc9

No, I disagree with that characterisation of Abigail.

The surface is "burghurk, what just happened? Please can I be fired now, pretty-please without being hung?" and the inside is "ok, so this event happened, so that set of options has closed, and this set has opened, and this is the optimal option, but they know that too, so here's the next best option that causes the most inconvenience to my least favourite people."

[Liliet](#)

BEST:

- Akua the icon!!! hell yeah!!! doing the thing!!!
- soooo will telling Akua about Catherine's plan actually sabotage it? I'm assuming yes, though alas this is not the way I WANTED this to go lmao;
- Amadeus ♥ ♥ ♥ also confirmation of him in fact having a stolen uniform from the Army of Callow and not just Arthur making weird assumptions;
- HAKRAM HELL YEAH!!!!!!
- Wither, Abreha and Dakarai ALL of them Hell Yeah I love them;
- Refugees ♥ ♥ ♥
- DREAD EMP CLAIMANT TENEBROUS

So fucking great.

[Liliet](#)

Oh I forgot: special shoutout to Catherine for helping with evacuation!!!

Shveiran

You mean the one character on scene that has been consistently trying to avoid civilian casualties? Yeah, sure, though honestly I thought that was kind of a given.

[Liliet](#)

Well, yes, but it's still worth giving a shoutout to?

[Adrian_V](#)

I thought you pointed it out because now the civillians also realize she isn't a murdering bastard, before this most of the population believed she cared nothing and would masacre them with a minor excuse.

I do think it will end up being important she was seen doing the right thing.

[Liliet](#)

Also it was important that she actually did it, *looks in the distance at the town near the poisoned lake*

like yeah it being Cathering it was to be expected but its still GOOD AND WORTH NOTING that the expecctations were lived up to

kinghaart

Not sure you can cheer Amadeus AND Cat here, one is saving citizens the other has killed maybe 1 in 4 of.

[Liliet](#)

My powers are boundless.

Raved Thrad

> – DREAD EMP CLAIMANT TENEBROUS

“And as for my choice for Chancellor, *skree*, I give you Lolth, Queen of the Demonweb Pits. *Skree*.”

shikkarasu

Sve Noc: “Hold my Greyfields ’68”

[sengachi](#)

Oh thank the gods, someone finally came up with a good gender ambiguous term, Dread Emp.

Shveiran

The Dremp?

kinghaart

Dread Emprous Tenebrous?

Raved Thrad

So much happening here, I actually found myself sitting on the edge of my seat as I read through the action sequences with Ranger and her kids. All throughout, though, the one thought running through my head was, “Saint of Swords was an idiot.”

I mean, seriously, what kind of delusional dunce thinks that they’re going to be able to I-am-a-sword through the attacks of someone who routinely shoots Light-empowered arrows out of the sky?

“I am a sword!”

“Oooh, I didn’t knew swords could bleed! Neat!”

“Rargh Let me put my intestines back in my gut, *again*, and I’ll show you bleeding!”

“Nah, bored now.”

Also, I love the part where Ranger pulls a Zen koan out of her ass to confuse Alexis. Does this make her a Zen Anarchist? Zen Murderist? Zen Thrillkillerist?

Lastly, poor Akua. Congratudolences, you are a Hero now! I half-expected her to start shedding Light in an aura around her, and for the Hashmallim to make her an offer she can't repent.

At which point every other Praesi in the area would start running away from her in horror. Or dread. 😊

Andrew Smith

The fun fact is we have word of E that it would of been 50/50 odds in saints prime with 60/40 when we met her(in Ranger favour) because Saint got old, though yeah Saint was a idiot young named(she was still the wanderer) even she had yet to do the whole become a sword thing, where she would do things like cut concepts

Reader in the Night

Well, this update was... Underwhelming.

If whatever the Bard tells Akua is not exactly something that Cat predicted long ago I'll call bullshit, mostly because Catherine couldn't have plotted Akua's "redemption" for two years and not expected the Bard to interfere. If this isn't a trap for the Bard, it's the sort of glaring oversight that Catherine might as well turn in her scheming credentials over.

And I also agree with Hakram: I am disappointed in Amadeus. He sits pretty in the Wasteland running some kind of long con for two years while Catherine desperately tries to stave off the end of the fucking world, then after his convoluted plan that involved the Army of Callow coming to Praes despite Amadeus having no possible way to predict the Fall of Hainaut succeeds, he has the gall to tell Catherine "You do not rule here"? She wouldn't need to be here cleaning up messes if you had done your job and put Praes in order, Amadeus! Now you're here, playing story games with Praes while the entire fucking continent collapses, seemingly ignoring that whatever long-term change you're plotting for Praes is useless if there IS no long-term for Calernia anyways? Bah!

Maybe after things unveil more, the plans-within-plans-within-plans will actually reveal themselves to have been clever all along, but this chapter and Black's big plan in the last one? Subpar.

Shveiran

Agreed on all counts.

Honestly, EE surprised me so many times before that I really, really know that jumping the gun on this one is going to make me feel silly.

But Amadeus and Akua, two characters I was completely sold on at the start of this book, really give me bad feelings right now.

I'm at the point where, if they show up on screen, I go "oook, another chapter I'll feel bad afterwards then".

I want to be wrong. So very badly.
Please show me I'm wrong.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yes! I'm not alone in this! I'm really disliking Amadeus here. Praes was incapable of not pissing in everyone's soup since it's birth, as Cat says. The Praesi have forfeited their right to complain about foreign intervention in their affairs centuries ago.

shikkarasu

It's less about the right to complain, and more about the Story of Praes. Invaders toppling the tower is not the end of the story, it's not even the 3rd act. It's just the backstory for the next Empress.

Amadeus wants Praes to tear itself apart and have no-one else to blame, no-one to take vengeance upon. If Cat breaks them and installs a leader then she's just another Miezani-style conqueror for them to overthrow.

"Oh, we lost, sure, but only because there was a sharper iron out there. We'll just need to build the tower one floor taller this time and make sure that the competition is that much fiercer. That way we will be the Bigger Fish next time we are invaded."

But if Praes destroys itself? Well, shit, what's the point in keeping the system going? Tenebrous, Malicia, and Sepulchral sharpened each other's iron down to nubs and the greatest city in the Empire collapsed in a heap of incompetence and petty greed. No outside force, no scapegoat to pin the blame on.

Shveiran

I see your points, and it's not that you are wrong, it's that... well, as I think Ninegardens said last chapter, who cares if the Tower is toppled, if you don't bother to put a better story in place?

Praes will be broken, and will devolve back to a scattering of hungry, desperate people that will bite each other until a big enough monster comes around that can sit on top of the pile of bones.

An Emperor by any other Name would kill as often.

It's not enough to destroy a story, you need a better one to fill the void it makes.

[sengachi](#)

And **that** is where Akua probably comes in.

(Also, Amadeus can be wrong. It is okay for characters to have opinions/plans about how to fix things and for those opinions/plans to be wrong. That's not a plot hole, that's a character flaw.)

Shveiran

True. I just hope it's not that because I'd personally find it personally unsatisfying as the final development of a relevant character I really liked.

Mainly because it is the last book.

shikkarasu

Very true, but the reason I am defending Amadeus is that I agree that they will not embrace said new Story until they are disillusioned with their current one. As long as they believe that biting each other makes them strong they will turn any new Story into Praes with a coat of paint. They could scrap the Tower, the High Lords, and the racism, but they still need to see that the ends have failed to justify the means. Only then will they accept the *new* means.

Remember Akua when she was the Diaboliost? (See Book3: Chiaroscuro) She knew that the Calamities were outperforming the Truebloods and was willing to change, but not to stop sharpening Iron with Iron. She thought that if you took parts from the Calamities' Modus Operandi and grafted it onto the Praesi way that she would become stronger.

But then Catherine killed her. So she figured Cat was just sharper.

In the Everdark she admitted that Good was outperforming Evil, but still wasn't willing to actually change. (Book 4:78) She wanted to usurp the Power of Friendship, but only to further her own goals. She still spoke of Empire as a good thing. An ideal. It took years of drinking

Catherine's coolaid and being fully immersed in her ways to *actually* change her mind. Even still she tried to go through the motions of Evil until a few chapters ago.

The rest of Praes can't go full immersion for 4+ years with a band of Heroes willing to put up with them. It's just not practical. And if they go through the process in groups they will just reassure one another that the old ways were best and that this is all BS. Rehabilitation just won't work on Praes as it currently is. They need to see, very quickly, why they cannot just adapt their lifestyle. Why it is the core of their beliefs that need to change, not just the way those beliefs are implemented.

I agree they need a new Story. You are entirely right that it is the more important part, but first and foremost *Praes* needs to agree that they need a new Story.

Gabe Meadow

Well put. And also, as stated in previous chapters, the Bard and Malicia are trying to turn Cat into a Warden of the East – one tangled up in regional disputes – to control her coming Name and create the vulnerable sweet spot.

Amadeus' warning also serves to protect her from that.

And for the issue of putting a new Story in its place, perhaps this may have to do with why he's paying Hakram a visit? The new Warlord is writing a new Story for the Clans, after all...

Shveiran

Yeah. But see, this is my beef with Akua being the poster child for the new way: she is the one that, at the end of her voyage, still chose to side with the allies of the dead king. Even if she knew the dangers and had all informations. And every day she is making that choice anew.

If that's the best we have, what good could possibly come of it?

SpeckofStardust

You say allies of the Dead King, despite the fact that Malicia quite literally handed Cat a plan of how Praes would actively assist against the Dead king and hell gates before Akua's "betrayal".

Like for the belows sake Cat was willing to ally the Dead King herself, Cat actively hates the Bard/seeks to

kill, the longest enemy of the Dead king.
Hell Akua's plan was to betray Malicia before her "oh gods I hate everything about my life now" kicked and like everyone else whose thinking ahead is trying to limit damage so that when the mess ends those forces will be arrayed against the dead king.
Like it's ok to hate her redemption arc, its however another thing to be wrong on what her actions are.

Black Spiral Dancer

Spot on. Shveiran's argument is moronic to me.

Shveiran

Aaaand thank you again for your kind words.

Seriously, I'm sure you wouldn't write this way if I hadn't pushed your buttons somehow, but let's try to turn it down a notch, alright?

shikkarasu

Yeah, we bicker, but opposing views are good. No need to attack the speaker just because you disagree.

Shveiran

I'm not sure that is the best way to portrait the facts, honestly.

Like, yes, Catherine went to Keter. It was more evil and more of and escalation to the crusade that bonfire would ever have been.

But comparing it to the Dread empire allying with Keter after the DK showed his true colors, or fight against the GA when the war is going as it is... It feels like apples and oranges to me.

Yes, Cat was a moron to ever think the Dk could be controlled.

Akua knows the stakes, and still switched sides.

Also, yes, cat thinks the Bard Is bad and the Bard fights the DK, but what of it? That doesnt somehow make the DK less bad himself. One is allowed to dislike both the lion and the bear.

if Akua ever planned to act as a mole for the GA, she never acted on It. I'm not sure what you mean with that.

shikkarasu

I don't think she's either extreme of "willingly working with allies of the Dead King" or "mole for the Grand Alliance." She was making a play for Praes and was under Malicia's thumb, but she has been only critical of both Malicia's ends and means, and has been subtly sabotaging Malicia ever since she switched sides

I see your point, and I wouldn't call Akua a good example of anything just yet, but let's not forget that she also isn't done her journey. I'd say she's still Refusing the Call in her own, personal story. She will continue to grow, but her most important quality as a Poster Child is that she wants to grow, not just gain power and influence.

Shveiran

I see what you are coming from, and you make some very good points.

Still, I must say that for me personally this really resonates the wrong way.

Akua first being put on probation may already have been more than she deserved (or at least, more than most got, considering how many of her own minions were simply executed and she was the ringleader).

Her not toeing the line during Calernia's bloody fight for survival feels like too much and too late in the game to ever be overshadowed by something else.

I think it's a fair assumption that the story will pivot on her at some point and I believe she will end up doing far more good than she ever did bad with that crucial choice.

But I see her now, playing with stakes she is and it's just too much for me to ever see her in a positive light again.

shikkarasu

Addendum: this logic is applied to a fictional society in a fictional world. Much like how EE acknowledges that Bellerophon would not 'work' IRL, I am not suggesting that mass murder is a reasonable way to fix any real world social issues.

letouriste

Amadeus could predict her coming in Praes because it was only a matter of time. At the latest, it would have been after the

fall of Keter (he does have huge confidence in her being capable to achieve even that)

It's unlikely the Dead King would attack Praes anytime soon. Even the worst case scenario of the current fight against him stopped in effect to the mountain protecting Callow and Praes should also be out of range. Also, the Dead King look fondly on Praes and would probably keep it for last anyway.

Amadeus is perfectly in his right to not like Cat coming over to loot his country (she's mainly after men instead of gold but it's still looting)

kinghaart

I don't think he did any less to Callow though.

Regardless, Occam's Razor says he knows that telling Cat to buzz off is basically an invitation she can't refuse. So he must have said that either to goad her, or to be able to say "I told you so" later, OR because he was speaking to Squire and the Bard was listening and he's trying to catch her in a trap.

My money is on the last one, but I wouldn't rule out that it's all three.

Insanenoodlyguy

The oversight is that cat wants Akua as a self hating villain. Instead she's becoming a hero because she figured it out too early: this isn't what she wants anymore.

ninegardens

I love that Hakram just *knows* that Amadeus is bad news.

Also, notice how he keeps being referred to as "the Carrion lord" here, while in other chapters he is "Amadeus" "Maddie" "Father" "Black".

It's a thing. He is living up to that name.

Also, Black trying so so hard to "kill" the story that the High Borns deserve something, and then Akua... basically just totally salvaging it. Especially love the plan Cat sent her (presumably in order to ensure this outcome... or something like it).

And... Bard talking to Akua is... bad... but I can't help but think that Cat must have accounted for that. In the sense of... she hasn't built Akua's character growth on lies. Bard can damage the link between Akua and Cat, but the thing is, Akua doesn't *like* the person she was any more. It's just... Bard can make her hurt, and angry at CAT, but she can't exactly make her stop being the Akua that Cat nurtured/manipulated her into being.

Bard is a threat, but Akua is already very much... an object in motion.

Shveiran

Yeah, I'm not sure where that will go.
I mean, Catherine planned something awful for Akua, sure. But I... don't think Akua would feel that is undeserved? Or even buckle it that hard? She might almost feel like it is a liberation from becoming Dread Empress.

I guess Bard could lie, but... how do you worsen he plan Catherine already had for her? Especially if you want to stick close to the truth?

Insanenoodlyguy

The problem is that Cat was counting on a villian. An eternal guard needs an eternal lifespan. And Akua was heading towards that, in a bizzare hating every step of it way. She kept waiting for somebody to stop her but she didn't put on the breaks. She could have said "fuck you all I'm out" To the conspiracy, instead she said "you're in my seat." She wanted it to end but didn't know what else to do. But this clusterfuck, like her greatest teacher of stories, gave her a new option. She's just trying to save everybody she can at this point, giving it her all even before people who would capitalize on her being weak. That's hero shit. Telling Akua the plan cements that because Akua, like many others in the interludes, will look at the mess of this empire and say, "well somebody needs to fix this and who else is around to do it?" She'll have something to live for.

Gabe Meadow

And as Cat has pointed out, the Bard never has truly been part of a band. Not in the way that really matters. Akua was, even if for a tiny bit of time, and that had more than enough impact on her to make her see how shallow, how self-defeating and meaningless Praesi culture is.

I have a feeling this is going to somehow ruin what the Bard tries. Because, come down to it, that's how the Augur beat her:

"I will," Agnes said, "always, always bet on Cordelia Hasenbach."

[Sugar Roll](#)

If one hundred thousand orcs were a heavy argument in any negotiation, surely the same can be said for a hundred thousand spiders. Dread Empress Tenebrous for the throne!

Miles

Tenebrous? More like Dread Empress Weaver

Or would Taylor be Chancellor in this scenario?

Odd

Have I said yet that I love how the battle for Ater has so perfectly degenerated into "oops, all knives"?

It's so very, very Praesi.

Silverking

...Amadeus is just being a terrorist right now, isn't he?

There's no army, no unifying cause, and seemingly no actual answer to "What comes next?". He has no control over the spiders to use as leverage. He presents no real carrot to any faction, and I think he's only got one stick left: a trigger to the bomb of goblinfire big enough to bring down the Tower on everyone's head. His only real advantage right now is being a wildcard between all the different factions; he has no staying power on his own. I'm not sure what his real endgame is, but there's a non-zero chance that the other factions will try to make peace without inviting him to the table, leaving him hanging in the wind.

Shveiran

Which, knowing him, he will have considered.

But yeah, I really have no idea what his endgame actually is.

"Breaking the story of the Dread Empire" seems where the smart money is, right now, but I really don't see how he could think that was sufficient without putting a sustainable story in its place.

Practicalfanofevil

So i think i figured out bards game and how amedeus is going to destroy it. Akua is pretty much confirmed as a heroine because bard used the story of giving a critical truth at a key moment to turn the battle around and claim victory against the scheming villain. Same story cat used at the arsenal. What i think is that cats plan was that akua would be raised as the dread empress but doesnt succeed because she considers it to be a death sentence and she will use the confusion to accomplish whatever she wants. The way bard wanted to exploit this was to force akua to accept the throne by chaining her with a heroic story. She convinced malicia to basically cause chaos all over the place with the excuse of trying to kill cat but as the one who cleaned all of this up

akua started to take up the role of someone that helps the poor victims of a mad villain. (Btw i think what bard is doing with malicia to weaken cats name and kill her in transition is the main blow she is aiming which will fail miserably because of that stuff with picklerand the stuff with akua is the hidden knife as cat puts it) anyways by placing akua as the dread empress she basically destroys everything cat builds because there is no way callowans allow the doom of liesse being the dread empress and they will see this as cats fault. While in the short term cat will get what she wants in the long term she will basically lose any qualifications she have to rule callow or even lead the army without causing rebellions left and right. This is the hidden knife like that stuff with white knight and first prince that takes a while to appear but causes a huge mess. The reason this will fail is because it depends on there being a dread empire after the dust settles with akua on the throne. Our dear friend amadeus however will succeed at destroying the dread empire which will end up with akua leading the survivors to form a new nation which is essentially a mix of good and evil and very fitting with the narrative of the new era.

kinghaart

I think even Akua doing that much will still make Callowans (justifiably) mad.

Abnaxis

I'm pretty sure Amadeus doesn't have a trigger on the goblinfire to use it as leverage. I'm think he fully intends to actually use the goblinfire to burn the Tower down with no diplomacy involved.

There's no way he can kill all the destructive Praesi stories without giving the Tower the Blessed Isle treatment. "The Tower endures" will never go away unless the Tower is a smoldering ruin.

Miles

I'm starting to suspect he actually wants to get at wharever Tenebrous was guarding down there. No way she lived all this time without a Name to sustain her lifespan and the only available name for a villain that doesn't do anything is some flavor of "Dungeon Boss"

Which implies some sort of treasure after the boss room.

Zach

Starting to think the “Akua headed towards heroic Name” people might be on to something. She was empowered in the process of a benevolent action.

[sengachi](#)

I mean Contrition must be absolutely salivating over her.
“Repent, you will not be forgiven” and all that.

Miles

Mercy and endurance both seem like good fits too.

Shveiran

Not Mercy. Compassion, if anything.
Mercy is about the long view and shaping the world so that less suffering happens, whilst Akua is not looking at anything but the here and now.

Frivolous

It’s a pity Beastmaster didn’t live to be there. He might have easily solved the entire spider problem by Mastering Tenebrous.

Also a pity that even after centuries not one Praesi noble house took the time and trouble to craft a ritual or artefact specially designed for killing or defending against or controlling giant spiders. It’s like they forgot they were living on top of thousands of giant spiders.

Or maybe they were proud of living on top of thousands of giant spiders. Maybe it added to the Evil cachet of living in Ater, or helped separate the true metropolitans from the tourists and provincial riffraff.

Abnaxis

They had rituals keeping the spiders in check. Amadeus just killed the nagged doing the rituals, plus any backups of there were any.

Frivolous

Abnaxis: Yes, but the Aterans just assumed no one would ever do what Amadeus did.

That was foolish of them, but I now suspect that might have been caused by the Story. It might be a trope for Evil to ignore the horrible monstrosities living nearby, so that heroes can later release them to Evil’s detriment.

Might be a subtrope of Evil turns on Evil.

Sinead

Are we going to have a callback to Cat and Akua's shouting match in the High Court but with Roles somewhat switched? Akua is the one off balanced with Cat being the manipulative one.

It'll be different because it will be a lover's spat in front of the Imperial Court. Considering that Cat can override Malicia's Rule, I wonder if this may backfire with Cat slapping her down in front of the High Seats.

BurnedGlade

Warlord, I've come to bargain!

jamesc9

Bargainer, I wonder if your eyes are tasty.

superkeaton

I was wondering when the Bard would do this, ever since the obvious Redemption Equals Death-askew angle Cat was shaping. I'm just wondering if Akua will even care. It wouldn't be the first time Bard's been rebuked by someone with strong ideals.

kinghaart

Eh, I think Bard has seen this more time than she can count. Cat did a good job with Akua but it's hardly the first time we've seen such a story, and now it's gone from "Cat was punishing a Villain" to "Cat was using a Villain" and that story isn't nearly as strong.

Interlude: Strangest And Most Solemn

"It is true it would be safer, Chancellor, to refrain from gloating. But then why even bother? If I can't crucify whoever speaks in accidental rhyme or throw heroes to three-headed snakes or feed a baby to another baby, then why should I even want to be Dread Emperor?"

– Dread Emperor Revenant

The Carrion Lord was a greying swordsman without a sword or a Name, trapped in a small room with an armed Named orc almost twice his weight. The warriors outside the door held no loyalty

to him and this entire district of Ater was under the rule of the Clans. He was completely at the Warlord's mercy by almost every way of measuring the situation that the tall orc knew.

Hakram had not felt this wary of someone in years.

"A bargain," the Warlord repeated.

"Indeed," the green-eyed man agreeably replied.

There were no windows to the room, only a ragged tapestry of black and white hung on the wall and a faded magelight set in the wall – old enough its glow dimmed for stretches of time before burning bright again, moving shadows across the wall. Back and forth, like fingers clawing at stone. Amadeus of the Green Stretch looked calm, but then that was his legend. The story went that Istrid – not yet Knightsbane – had bit down on his wrist until her fangs tasted blood to see if he'd flinch and he'd not batted an eye. *A hand for you would have been a worthwhile trade,* the Carrion Lord had claimed. *What was there to flinch from?*

No wonder the Red Shields still loved him like a fucking lost son.

Hakram's first instinct was to kill him, here and now. Lunge across the table and smash his soft human skull against the wall, rip out his throat and let the lifeblood spill red on that mangled weave of black and white. But that was the red in him, the part that hated feeling wary of a man in his power and wanted to destroy the source of that discomfort. The Warlord picked the sentiment apart, looked for the sliver of sense at the source of it. It was, he eventually decided, that he did not like or trust the former Black Knight.

In a distant way he recognized that the Carrion Lord was half of the pair that'd done more for his people on half a century than their predecessors in a millennium, but that was not something he could connect to the pale-skinned man in front of him. The deed was too large, too looming, to be tied to someone of flesh and blood. Instead the parts that came to the fore were the human ones, the glimpses he'd had through Catherine over the years. None of these particularly endeared Amadeus of the Green Stretch to Hakram. Yet that dislike was his own, not the Warlord's, and so he swallowed it.

He would not close the door, listen to the fear. But neither would he pretend to be deaf.

"We have not spoken much over the years, you and I," Hakram said.

Maybe a dozen conversations when Catherine was not there, none longer than the time it took to boil a cup of tea.

"You were the Adjutant," the Carrion Lord simply said. "It was not my place to trespass."

Hakram bared his teeth.

"I always did despise it the most," he said, "the way that you always give her what she wants, but only ever in ways that benefit you."

When she'd been a girl still, all swagger and distrust and fear, Catherine had wanted... room to grow. Support but from a distance, the kind of help that would allow her to still believe herself bound to nothing save her own ambitions. And she'd gotten it: her own legion, Masego and Indrani, opportunities to prove herself with no one standing above her. Only the legion had bound her to Praes, the children of the Calamities to their legacy and every victory had advanced the plans of the pale man seated across from him. A hook in every gift, and there had been *many*.

"That is who I am," the Carrion Lord replied, neither proud nor ashamed. "I am long past the days of fighting it."

"It would not be as obscene, if you did not genuinely love her," Hakram said.

"I did not mean to," Amadeus of the Green Stretch admitted. "But once I saw the anger that burned like a torch, it was water down the slope. Inexorable."

"What you did today will rip back open the wounds you left after the Doom," Hakram gravelled. "How many thousands did you burn today? So much for the coming of the Age of Order."

Green eyes studied him coolly.

"Are you certain that is a conversation you wish to have, *Adjutant*?"

The tall orc clicked his fangs. He had not forgotten what Tariq Fleetfoot had told him as Hainaut broke around them, but what had once been a comfort was now a noose around his neck. Not that he would allow himself to be cowed by the other man's turn of phrase.

"What must be settled between she and I will be," Hakram said. "Do not pretend understanding of it, any more than I could claim understanding of what lay between you and Scribe. It is... personal. Your madness is not."

The green-eyed man leaned back in his seat, looking amused. Hakram itched to take an eye for it, just so that he'd be forever half as nonchalant.

"My madness?" the pale man asked.

"You fed thousands of civilians to blood-mad critters," the Warlord said. "You weakened armies needed against Keter and broke the capital. You sit here as if it makes you a victor, but all I see in you is a Dread Emperor as this land has known by the hundreds. Why should I bargain with the likes of you?"

"Because none of these were accidents," the Carrion Lord calmly replied.

Hakram paused. Killed the scorn on his tongue, the easy comment that if anything that only worsened his impression of the other man. Perhaps that would still be true later, but first he would think it through. See why a largely intelligent man would think this reasonable to say here and now. That meant looking at the deeds and going back, methodically. *What is there to gain by today?* Hakram considered the blood, for often that was where the truth of things lay. And from a cold eye this Battle of the Spiders, not quite yet finished, had bled the High Lords and Ladies the most.

Of soldiers, yes, but not so many as that. Of the thirty thousand that had first gathered outside Ater at least twenty thousand should still remain and most the dead would be levies. The household troops had lost but not been crippled. No, the cost had been subtler. The High Seats had ruined their reputation with Ater when they sacrificed almost a quarter of the city to contain the spiders, their devils and wonders killing almost as many as the monsters come from below. If any of them tried to claim the Tower, the city would riot. That would not necessarily stop them from trying, but history taught that a tyrant without Ater's affection rarely lasted long in the Tower.

Only Ater is half a ruin now, Hakram thought, so that doesn't matter as much. Love could be bought with food and shelter provided to refugees and the disposed, not that it would be sustainable in the long term. Hakram had experience with matters like this, having once handled the masses of refugees in southern Callow after the Doom and Summer's depredations. The tent-cities had eventually broken up, leaving smaller towns behind as the people moved away to – Hakram paused. Not an accident, the Carrion Lord had claimed. Not the destruction, not the deaths, not even the gargantuan spider unleashed on the Licosian Gates.

"You are destroying Ater," the Warlord said. "Emptying it for good."

"Are you familiar with the Haunted Scholar's works?" the Carrion Lord asked.

Hakram was and admitted as much with a nod. The man had claimed in his treatises that the instability at the heart of Praes came from the weakness of the Tower relative to the High Seats. Three burdens in particular had been identified. The Legions of Terror,

which were dependent on taxes paid by nobles for their upkeep, the asymmetric accretion of power – Dread Emperors were individuals, had to build their power as individuals from scratch when they rose, while the High Seats were dynasties with permanent seats of power – and most importantly of all the capital itself. Ater, the behemoth city that could not feed itself or pay for its own upkeep or close its gates to its enemies.

“I suppose it is a sort of madness,” the Carrion Lord conceded. “But it is a methodical one. Ater must be reduced to a sustainable size if Praes is ever to be free of constant civil strife.”

The Haunted Scholar’s thesis on display. If Ater could not be held without the support of a High Seat then civil war was inevitable because the Tower was certain to be bound in the dynastic disputes of its backer.

“You haven’t solved the other two,” the Warlord said.

“The days is young,” the pale man smiled. “Shall we discuss a bargain, then?”

Hakram wanted to deny him. The Warlord considered it. It was an intricate plan, weakening the High Seats in several ways and attending to a deeper issue with a single stroke. Not the kind that someone lost to the old ways would be capable of conceiving. And that meant, regrettably, that Amadeus of the Green Stretch was still worth hearing out.

“Speak,” the Warlord ordered.

“There are three plans afoot in the capital that are not ours,” the Carrion Lord said. “Your intentions for the Clans cannot cohabit with any of them succeeding.”

“Bold claim,” Hakram growled.

“Malicia intends to stand as Dread Empress when the ashes have cooled,” the pale man calmly said. “To do this, she has driven every High Seat to such hatred of the others that none will tolerate another to rise to claim the Tower. All the while, she sunk a great deal of her remaining resources in ensuring that Akua Sahelian would be crowned empress in her stead. She intends, I imagine, to peacefully abdicate.”

“Even if Sahelian spared her, her supporters wouldn’t tolerate the loose end,” the Warlord pointed out.

“Which doesn’t matter, because Malicia believes that Catherine will kill the Doom of Liesse the moment she dares to claim the

throne," the Carrion Lord said. "Putting the empire in an... interesting situation."

It took a moment for Hakram to put all the pieces in place properly. Sahelian dead, the High Seats livid at the offence but too deeply feuding to be able to raise one of their own instead. It would leave only one person with enough prominence to fill the seat, wouldn't it? Malicia herself, not an hour gone from the throne and yet somehow made into the compromise candidate. And Catherine might want to kill her, but would the High Seats stand for it? Killing one empress would have them furious enough, two would be beyond the pale. Subjugation in all but name.

It might cost her the armies she'd come here to claim, the diabolists she needed.

"It won't work," the Warlord said.

"No," the Carrion Lord agreed. "It is an outstanding piece of scheming on Malicia's part, but it falls apart because she failed to properly grasp the nature of Akua Sahelian."

"And you have?" Hakram derided.

"No," the man easily replied, "but I understand Catherine and that is quite enough. She would not tolerate the owner of the Folly to rule Praes, no matter the nature of the deeper game she is playing with Tasia's daughter. Which brings us to my daughter and her own plan, beginning with the crucial moment where Akua Sahelian will refuse the throne she is offered."

He'd never heard the man claim Catherine as his daughter so openly. It felt like nails on chalk, for all that Catherine returned the favour from her side regularly. Somehow Hakram doubted either had ever spoken the words face-to-face.

"I know what Catherine plans," the Warlord said.

He had no need to hear out a plan he'd helped make, though he was certain changes would have been made since he'd left for the Steppes.

"Which is why you are not acting hand-in-hand with her," the Carrion Lord calmly noted. "You already know that your leverage against the Tower depends on being someone whose support can be courted against her."

The Warlord did not deny it. If he entered the Tower as Catherine's ally, he lost all bargaining power. The Clans became a chip on her side of the table, not players in their own right. It lost him the great influence he would be wielding in there as the only person left in the empire with an army on the field that could give the Army of Callow pause. Beyond that, he would lose

the influence he would need to bend the Grand Alliance to make the concessions he needed. Much as the pale man irked him, he was not wrong. He could not go along with Catherine tomorrow.

"And the third?" the Warlord grunted.

"The Intercessor wants Catherine dead and Praes a pit of civil war, as far as I can tell," the other man shrugged. "Her means are still opaque to me, save that she will moving through Named and pivots. Still, I don't believe that you could ever ally with the Wandering Bard."

"And so that leaves you," the Warlord said. "Or so you would like me to believe."

"Indeed," the Carrion Lord cheerfully replied.

"Only I could speak with Malicia instead," the Warlord said. "Or back a High Seat against the others."

Malicia was the best candidate, save in the sense that Catherine would set fire to the Tower rather than to allow her to rule a latrine pit, much less Praes itself. Hakram was still deciding how heavily that should weight on the scales, given that he might be in a position to strongarm the issue. He was not alone in this. High Lady Wither, his closest ally, had been clear that she would personally prefer Malicia as ruler even if she was open to other candidates. Neither of them were eager to lend a hand to the man seated across the table, even knowing he was likely the most acceptable candidate to the Grand Alliance.

Hakram was able to separate his dislike from the necessities of the situation, so his reluctance was not personal. Amadeus of the Green Stretch, while popular with the Legions and the people of some regions of Praes, would not be uncontested as ruler. He was a Duni and he'd spent most of his career as the Black Knight rabidly at odds with the same nobility whose support he would need to govern, which was far from ideal. The Carrion Lord was an able enough man that Hakram believed he would be able to make the High Seats fall into line, but he also believed that achieving this would take several years and a fairly brutal war.

A war they did not have time to wage and which would draw heavily on the resources of his supporters. Neither Hakram nor Wither were particularly eager to bleed their people for that purpose. Jaheem Niri was likely their best bet, like it or not – they could trade the territorial concessions Hakram wanted and the assurances Wither wanted for their support, which he could not claim the Tower without.

"You could," the Carrion Lord said. "Only it won't get you what you want for your people."

The Warlord bared his fangs.

"And what would you know about that?"

"Enough," the pale man said. "You were seen to use both the Red Shields and the Split Tree as lieutenants outside the city, which means you're threading the needle between the clans that want closer ties and those that want to distance themselves. You're after major concessions from the Tower while aiming to remain part of Praes."

Hakram's dead hand clenched. Only a handful of people in all of the empire could have derived the same conclusions from seeing what the man had, he reminded himself. His intentions were not obvious for everyone to see.

"You tread dangerous grounds," the Warlord warned.

"It's habit by now," the Carrion Lord smiled. "My point stands, regardless. Even if you can back someone to seize the Tower and they fulfill the bargain you struck, it won't get you what you want."

"And why is that?" the Warlord gravelled.

"Because their successor will have no incentive to keep the bargain," he replied.

"War against the united Clans-"

"Will be the *selling point* of breaking faith," the Carrion Lord coldly cut in. "You know your histories, Warlord. How many tyrants continued the policies of the predecessor they murdered? How many of them immediately threw themselves into a war with Callow or the Free Cities or any enemy at hand because a fight against a common enemy would solidify their grip on the empire?"

It had the sting of truth, but also of the inevitable.

"That is Praes," the Warlord said.

"That is the Dread Empire," the Carrion Lord challenged.

Hakram almost laughed.

"What else is there?"

"A bargain to make," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said.

The Warlord scoffed. Arrogance.

"Why would your successor be better than anyone else's?"

"Because I do not intend to be Dread Emperor," the pale man calmly said.

The Warlord paused. Narrowed his eyes.

"So what is it you do want?" Hakram Deadhand asked.

"Your help," he said, "and a single favour."

It sounded too good a bargain, the Warlord thought.

"Do not be relieved," the Carrion Lord mildly said. "The favour, I think, will be for you the heavier of the costs to bear."

Dead fingers made by a now dead man clenched.

"Tell me," the Warlord ordered.

—

Archer fainted to the left, then hastily drew back when the blade came a hair's breadth away from her neck – she felt the very point scrape her skin – and shifted to the side only to eat a pommel in the stomach. Even through the mail she bent, gasping in pain as the Ranger moved around her so the Silver Huntress blow would go wide.

"Indrani," Alexis hissed, "get out of—"

She never finished the sentence, the two of them seeing the movement coming from the corner of their eye. The leapt away before the leg tore through the house whose roof they had been fighting on, Tenebrous scattering the stone walls like they were made of parchment and dripping darkness everywhere. Like pools of ink the dark tainted whatever it touched, spreading down slopes and through crevices. Twice now Indrani had seen devils fall through a large patch as if it were a hole. Cocky had said that Tenebrous was living domain, but Archer had her doubts. Althea Maronid's research in Ashur had decisively proved that a domain must be internal if it belonged to a living creature, else it would cause uncontrolled creational cascades.

More likely Tenebrous' domain was physically incarnated and static, somewhere far below Ater, and she was trying to bring it up here by spreading around that darkness clinging to her hide. On the bright side, that meant climbing on top of the spider wouldn't be like stepping over one of the pools: if the domain was external it wouldn't work on the creature herself.

Looking through the clouds of dust and raining darkness, Archer looked for the Lady's shape. Alexis had gone the other way, but neither of them were getting – oh, shit, she'd climbed the leg. And ol' Tenebrous wasn't liking that at all, by the deafening sounds of her screeching. What few windows in the neighbourhoods

hadn't been broken all exploded, and a few devils actually died. Indrani fought through the pain, then blinked as a large, winged devil with purple veins landed before her in a crouch. Cocky was offering a ride, huh? No point in declining. The devil needed a knife in the side to be guided properly, but even as Light lit up the sky and flew out in an arrow – the Lady had to stop and shoot it down – Indrani flew ahead.

The Lady killed her mount with a second arrow a heartbeat later, but Alexis had bought her long enough: she leapt off the dying devil, landing on Tenebrous' back. The monster did not like that at all, not only starting to screech and trying to shake her off but doing... something with its body. The thick darkness she'd been stepping through turned from a misty cloud to something thicker, like mud, and the hair beneath her boots hardened like iron into a forest of needles. Fuck, that wasn't going to be fun to fight on but it wasn't like she had a choice: in a matter of moments the Lady had finished climbing up the leg and was looking at her from her a hundred feet away.

Now Archer just needed to distract her long enough that Alexis would be able to make it up here without getting shot.

Rolling her shoulders to loosen them, Indrani took calm steps forward. The longknives the same woman she was not fighting had gifted her in hand, the scarf they had taken together in Mercantis around her neck, she began to move quicker. Indrani didn't like thinking when the blades were out, not more than she needed to, but her mind was ajar. Asking questions like why she was doing this, what there was to win. Alexis wanted to kill the Lady, that was no mystery, and Cocky wanted to... get even somehow. But why was Indrani here, dragged into this? Cat had asked her to find out what Ranger would be up to, and she'd found out: baiting out a huge fucking spider monster near the fortified positions of the High Lady of Kahtan. Job done, not great but still done.

So why was she breaking into a run, measuring the distance between her and her teacher?

The blades sang, steel on steel. Parry, riposte, spin. The footing shifted on them, Tenebrous raging at their presence, but even as the world shifted and great towers crashed around them they kept striking. To miss a beat was to lose, perhaps even to die. Indrani found she was smiling through her scarf. So was the Lady, for a while, but it did not last. Indrani was falling behind. She kept coming in close to make her knives count, to go against the length of Ranger's swords, but it wasn't enough. The Lady did not fall for feints, and when Indrani ignored what she had thought to be one she nearly lost an eye. Blood began to pour down the side of her head, kept out of her eye only by her eyebrow.

"You've improved," the Ranger said.

"I don't know if you have," Archer admitted.

It might, she thought, be why she was fighting in the first place. To see if she could reach the end of Ranger's skill. Whether or not she beat the other woman didn't matter that much to her. It wouldn't really mean anything, even if it ended in death. But knowing where she stood compared to the only person she had really wanted to measure herself up against? That was worth the blood. The Ranger studied her for a beat, slapping aside a cut from the side and forcing Indrani back with the riposte, then scoffed.

"Your mindset is still lacking," the Ranger said.

Archer grit her teeth, feinted to the side – ignored – and with the flat of her other blade tried to throw darkness in the Lady's face. It was cut through, and only a desperate half-step kept Indrani from losing half her face. The cut went deep, from just below her right eye to her jaw. If it'd been any deeper bone would have been scraped.

"Light as a feather," the Lady of the Lake said.

Indrani licked away the blood pooling against her upper lip and went on the attack again. Aggressive, forcing a lock of blades and when Ranger pushed her back she tried to slide under. It got her a kick on the chin for her trouble, but she'd expected that – Cat did the same, because the Carrion Lord did the same and he'd learned it from the Lady – and she caught it with crossed blades. The Lady was forced back, one leg in the air, and Indrani lunged forward with both blades. Only to take another kick on the side of the head, tumbling against the ground with a grunt of pain.

The Lady stabbed down at her shoulder, chipping the mail and finding flesh beneath before withdrawing so Indrani's swipe would hit only air.

"Heavy as a mountain," Ranger finished. "You must be one or the other. Anything in between is wasted time."

"That one's an old lesson," Archer rasped out, rising to her feet.

"Yes," the Lady coldly said. "You should have learned it by now. I thought going out into the world would temper you, but I seem to have been mistaken. Instead you've spent your time fucking Amadeus' apprentice and playing house with Wekesa's boy. It's disappointing."

Indrani held back a flinch.

"I've done more than that," she bit out.

"You have done things," the Lady dismissed, "but you have not *improved*. Your mindset was not refined, your experiences did not broaden your horizons. Do you even have a reason to be fighting me?"

Archer opened her mouth.

"Do not offer me empty words, Indrani," Hye Su warned. "Those I would take an insult."

Archer's mouth closed. It felt childish, while facing those eyes and those blades, to speak of understanding where she stood. Of comparison between them. Like she was a child going around in adult's clothing.

"I thought as much," Ranger sighed. "Go on, get out of here. I will see if the others have grown and deal with you later."

Fuck, Indrani thought. Was the Lady right? It felt like she was. What was Archer even doing here? She'd just let Alexis and Cocky talk her into this because she felt bad about how they'd been back in Refuge, gone along with this stupid idea because of guilt she should have left behind long ago. Baggage like that was best left behind, she'd known that for year. Why was she saddling herself with it now? She'd been with Masego and Catherine too long, gotten too comfortable. She was forgetting what the real world was like.

"I-"

The silver arrow of Light thrummed with power, but it was not so swift that the Lady did not bat it aside. The Silver Huntress was already putting away her bow, short spear in hand with a snarl on her face. Indrani, though, did not move. The image had been seared into her eyes. The Lady of the Lake, knee-deep in darkness and armed with nothing but steel parrying that blinding burst of Light. Casually, as if she had never even considered she wouldn't be able to do it. No delay, no hesitation, no questioning. Indrani had forgot what it was like, seeing the Lady in her element. Seeing who she was.

Action without doubt.

Archer attacked. She could not leave, even if she struggled to articulate why. To think of it. Blood went down her face, down her neck, but her knives did not slow. It was flashes of movement, of sight. Ranger parrying a spear and blade with a hand each, spinning to carve through Alexis' skull – hitting hair instead, cutting through, but only narrowly. Strands of red flew as steel shone in the sun, Indrani's knife finding mail and skidding against it as an elbow snapped back her chin. She fell but Alexis struck, hammering down, and while Ranger caught the spear burning with Light she had to take a steadying step back.

Devils began to land around them, croaking dark calls.

Tenebrous tried to shake them off again, so Indrani caught a glimpse of the blade as it came down. The elf stood behind Ranger, hacking at her neck, but she went low. A jab at the Emerald Sword's chest as the strike went wide, their silhouette shivering. The blow touched nothing but mist, but as it reformed a step back it lost an eye to a perfectly timed follow-up lunge. The elf retreated, another shimmering into view at their side to cover them, and Ranger let out a laugh.

"Where are the other rest, Noon?" she asked. "It'll take more than you two to make this interesting."

"Careful what you ask for."

A vial hit the ground and there was a small tinkling sound, like a bell being rung, that shivered across the darkness. Above them, riding a scaled devil with great wings, Cocky was glaring harshly. The darkness on Tenebrous' back began to thicken, then move. Spin and roil, like angry snakes.

"Concocter," Ranger greeted her. "Still relying on others to do the heavy lifting, I see."

"Freeze," Cocky answered.

Nothing was happening, Indrani thought, but a look told her that neither the elves nor Ranger seemed to agree. They were all having to rip out their feet from the darkness, as if it'd suddenly turned solid. The Concocter grinned.

"Burn," she hissed.

The great spiders let out a scream that sounded like a laugh, and darkness billowed up in great columns of smoke. Indrani cursed, since it might not hurt her but the dark sure as Hells broke her line of sight, and broke into a run. She found Alexis, whose Light-wreathed spear was keeping the darkness at bay and they set out in pursuit together. They found an Emerald Sword, entirely by accident: they were looking the other way swung blindly backwards at Indrani's head when she approached. She parried the blow narrowly, gritting her teeth as she was somehow driven back one-handed from behind, but the moment Alexis stepped in the fight was over.

The elf stared at her with their too-wide eyes, wrinkling their nose in distaste, then vanished into the darkness.

"Right," Indrani breathed out. "They say they're Good, so they don't fight heroes."

"Doesn't make them less pricks, but at least they're fighting Ranger," Alexis grunted. "What was she talking to you about anyway?"

Indrani hesitated.

"Nothing," she said.

Alexis frowned, then went for her side and pressed a cloth against her hand.

"Wipe your face," she said. "The blood's everywhere."

Archer's teeth grit. She knew the gesture was not condescending, that she was not being coddled. And still she curtly threw the cloth back at the Silver Huntress.

"I can handle myself," she bit out.

Without waiting for an answer she pressed forward. They found Ranger only when then burning darkness began to disperse, already fighting two Emerald Swords. The same, different ones? It was impossible to tell, quick as they moved. Indrani glanced at Alexis, whose face was hard-set, and without a word they attacked. Archer's hand went for the vial Cocky had given her earlier, staying back as the Silver Huntress joined the melee. It was hard to follow the movements, but Archer steeled herself and waited. When she did strike out, it was a wild blow at Ranger's back – who parried the blade, frowning, but only too late saw the other blow.

Smashing the vial against the Lady's neck wouldn't have worked, so Indrani instead crushed the glass in her hand, ensuring most of the liquid within sprayed on the back of Ranger's neck. Almost as much soaked her hand and arm, though, and immediately she began to retreat. Already she could feel the world quickening around her, her pulse going wild.

"Cocky," she screamed. "I need an antidote."

She felt something burn across her belly, her chain mail giving, but it was all... distant. When she came back to herself the Concocter was feeding her something from a green vial, frowning. Indrani swallowed, throat gone dry.

"Did it work?" she asked.

"Almost," Cocky sighed. "I took enough that Alexis almost cut off her arm at the shoulder, but then she retreated."

Archer looked down, realized that she was still standing on Tenebrous' back. Only it was no longer moving.

"Is it..."

"Not sure if it's her or the Emerald Swords that killed it," Cocky said. "Either way it's dead. I had to lift you off with devils while it trashed, it got ugly."

"And the Lady?" Indrani asked.

"She cut out the drug from herself," the Concocter grimaced. "The concept of it. I had no idea she could even do that. Seems to have cost her, though, she's been slower since."

"Good," Archer grunted. "I can head back into the fight, then. Is she handling the elves?"

Cocky shook her head.

"They retreated after she wounded a few," she replied. "They'll be back, I'm sure, but it's supposed to take them a while to make their wounds disappear. My bet is we'll get all ten when they reappear."

"Lovely," Indrani drawled. "Which way?"

"Follow me," Cocky said. "I just held back to take care of you."

Indrani bit down on the sharp answer at the tip of her tongue. Cocky hadn't meant it that way. It was not a difficult trip, now that Tenebrous no longer move. The two of them were righting atop at tower against which a great leg was resting, flashed of Light searing the afternoon sky. Alexis was looking worst for wear, bleeding from her gut and a leg, but the Lady still had a grievous wound on her right arm. That had to slow her down, even if it looked like she could still use it some. Indrani went in straight while Cocky took a long war around, aiming to keep out of sight. Alexis was driven back with a cut on her face while the Ranger cast a look her way, cocking an eyebrow as Indrani arrived.

"Back, I see," the Lady said.

"Yup," Indrani shrugged, limbering her wrists.

"And more settled," Ranger said, eyes narrowing.

"I guess it's just clicking into place, now that I've seen you again," Archer said.

The dark-haired woman, after a long moment, smiled.

"You have found something," she said, sounding pleased.

"I used to think I wanted to be like you," Indrani said. "But that's not it, not really. I get that now."

"So what is it you do want?" the Lady of the Lake asked.

"I want to be the Ranger," Indrani said. "I think I've wanted it for a long time, actually. I just couldn't admit it."

"It's not something just anyone can claim," the Lady of the Lake calmly said.

"That's fine," Indrani grinned. "It just means being better than you, and that's the point in the first place."

"Indrani, what the Hells are you talking about?" Alexis snarled.

"It's not wrong, how she raised us," Archer said, to the Huntress' visible fury. "It's not right either, though. And I think I'd do it differently in her place, *so I will.*"

The Lady laughed, sounding genuinely amused.

"You've claimed, Indrani," the Ranger smiled. "Now follow through."

It was the storm, after that. They were all bleeding and tired and slowing down, but one would not have known it from the blades. Indrani had never fought more aggressively, not even against the Saint of Swords, but she could feel it. The **Flow**. It was in her blood, in the pounding of her feet against the tiles. And it came to her as naturally as breathing, so easily she'd not even noticed she was slipping into the aspect. Ranger struggled with that, to the extent that she focused on Alexis in an effort to take her out first. Indrani cushioned the first blow for the Huntress with her own shoulder, letting the mail eat it, but the second was at the wrong angle and... a devil took it instead.

Cocky's eyes were wild as she stood behind Ranger, hand moving as she threw a red vial at her back, but the Lady must have heard her. The devil had tipped her off. She was swinging backwards, through the vial but Indrani's Name pulsed. It would be more than that, the angle of it and the strength... Cocky would die. It would go through her skull. But through the kill the Lady was making a mistake – there would be no coming back in time, no last moment parry. If Indrani struck now, struck at the right place, then she could win. Not a kill, maybe, but enough that Ranger would be forced to retreat. And in the heartbeat where that all sunk in, she saw the same realization harden in Hye Su's eyes. There Indrani saw the expectation of defeat. Would it be enough to claim the Name, to make her the Ranger?

No, she thought. But it would be the first step. The most important one.

Indrani felt like screaming. She wanted this. Wanted it badly enough to fight. So why was Cocky getting in the way? She needed to think, to weigh it up, but there was *no time* and her body moved on its own. The blow went for the arm, the one that would

have carved through the Concocter's face, and Indrani froze in surprise even as Ranger spun away and threw Alexis at her. They fell in a tangle of limbs, pushing each other off even as Cocky backed away from the Ranger with naked fear on her face. She'd gone pale as snow.

"Disappointing," Ranger sighed. "All three of you. Anger but no control. Hatred but no discipline. And most disappointing of all, desire with no will behind it. None of you learned a thing."

Indrani offered her arm, dragging Alexis up, and the two of them moved shoulder to shoulder.

"Cocky, stay behind us," the Huntress said.

"She's done playing around," Archer agreed.

"I am," the Lady of the Lake agreed. "And if all these years have not made the lessons stick, this time I will have to leave a permanent reminder."

Well, that didn't sound great, Indrani thought. Only before anyone began to move, the sun dimmed around them. Something enormous was looming just at the edge of their senses as Indrani heard the distant cawing of crows. Besides them, Tenebrous shivered. Still dead. No longer unmoving. All of them glanced to the side, to the rising gargantuan shape of the creature, and found a woman standing atop it. Looking down at them as she leaned on a staff of dead wood. Her cloak was one of many colours, and Catherine Foundling looked down at the Ranger with a hard smile.

"Dodge," the Black Queen said, and the Lady's eyes widened.

A heartbeat later half the tower was gone, Tenebrous' leg gone straight through it, and Indrani found that she couldn't help laughing.

This wasn't over but, Hells, at least they'd all live to see tomorrow.

—

"You know," the Intercessor said, "I always kind of liked you, Akua."

Ah, the familiar grounds of being lied to by an eldritch abomination with sinister intentions. If there were comfortable cushions, candied dates and a dozen dead bodies it would be her eighth nameday all over again.

"You once threw sand in my eyes after calling me a self-important megalomaniac," Akua noted.

"And both of those things were well-deserved," the Intercessor cheerfully replied. "Isn't that what friendship is, darling?"

"Sand in my eyes?" the dark-skinned mage drily asked.

"Shit, you actually have a sense of humour now," the Wandering Bard said, sounding impressed. "Like a functional one, not a 'hahaha down into the tapir pit you go' kind. You're mostly a person these days, it's kind of fucked up you managed that."

"Yes, well," Akua smiled, "have you considered-"

She was still only a thimble of power away from collapsing, but it was all about focus. There was plenty of water in the air and it was child's play to shape some into a nail that she threw right into the Wandering Bard's throat. Only the pest didn't die naturally, gone before the ice even broke skin as Akua fell down to her knees. The wave of nausea had her retching wetly as she leaned a hand against the warm bronze of the reservoir walls. A heartbeat later the Bard was there again, picking up the silver flask she'd dropped fleeing.

"Aw, you made me spill some of the *mignolet*," the ageless monster whined. "Do you know how rare it is for me to get the good stuff?"

Akua forced herself back up to her feet, leaning heavily against the wall as her vision swam. Gods, she was close to falling unconscious. Worse, another spell like that and she was at genuine risk of burning out. Overdrawing on one's magic was a particularly painful way to die even by Praesi standards.

"Yeah, I only came when you'd be in no state to stop me," the Bard easily said.

Akua managed a glare towards the fair-haired woman. This incarnation was tanned and blue-eyed, and shapely in a lowborn way – the kind that came with the frame one had been born with, not proper meals and comfortable living. The Intercessor seemed uncomfortable with the body, though, she noted. The movements were not as smooth as they had been when the two of them last met, with none of the certainty behind the casual laziness in sight.

"Teehee," the Intercessor deadpanned, batting her eyes. "What a coincidence."

"It's been some time since I've last wanted to kill someone this much," Akua admitted.

"Come on now, love," the Bard grinned. "That's not quite true is it? You haven't been standing on all those ledges 'cause you like the view."

Two words in the magetongue and a single runic line, but before the curse of silence could fly out the backlash rang up her arm. First a shiver, then a sensation like every vein was bursting as Akua swallowed a scream. She fell back down to her knees, sweating and trembling. If she'd finished the spell, she thought as her arm pulsed with pain, it would have killed her.

"So," the Intercessor happily said, "we were talking about Cat, yeah?"

"Fuck you," Akua hoarsely said.

Not the finest retort she'd ever managed, but her arm felt like it was bleeding acid from the pores and she once again felt like throwing up.

"My heart," the Intercessor gently said, "if *she* wasn't game to get naked, why would you think you'd meet *my* standards?"

Her fingers clawed at the bronze wall. There was a pause, then a fat chortle.

"That one was a little mean even for me," the Bard admitted. "But hey, you're still pretty terrible so I don't actually feel bad. The important thing, though, is that you're trying to redeem yourself! Kind of."

It was difficult to think through the pain, to focus, but she had been trained in this. She gathered herself, got back on her feet.

"You are here because I threaten you and your designs," Akua said. "The why or how is not particularly important, I imagine. You are trying to sway me from the path I am on, whatever that might be. You will fail in this."

The fair-haired woman snorted.

"See, this is why I actually do like you," the Bard said. "You're a tragedy, Akua. But the thing is, when you watch a tragic play usually you feel kind of bad for the lead. They're put through some pretty dark shit. But that's the great thing here! You are – and I think I might have mentioned this before but whatever – actually *pretty awful*. So I can watch the tragedy and not feel bad, because you kind of have it coming. It's the best of both worlds for everyone."

A pause.

"Except for you," the Bard helpfully clarified. "You definitely get the worst of both worlds. I thought that went without saying, but sometimes you're a little slow on the uptake so I figured I'd throw it in just to be sure."

"Considering I also have to put up with... whatever this is, my situation truly *is* a tragedy," Akua mildly replied. "Of course, I-"

She lunged forward, but the Bard was already moving. Not quite quickly enough to avoid the sorceress' hands around her throat, she thought, but then she tripped on something – the lute, *the damned lute* – and she was on her knees, swallowing a scream as agony shot up her arm. The Bard patted her shoulder amicably, leaning against the wall. Her lips were wet from the flask she kept pulling at, pulling into a condescending smile.

"This is actually for your own good, sort of," the Intercessor assured her. "See, you've been going down this road since you got out of the cloak and it's coming to a head. And there's a bunch of interesting ways it could end, which aren't unique – you're not that special, darling – but I'll admit that some are pretty rare. Only someone's been paving this road for you, so you're not actually going to the end of the road: you're going to be yanked away just before getting there, 'cause our Cat has a plan for you."

"You are not nearly as interesting as you seem to believe you are," Akua hoarsely said. "Or clever. Do you think I am unaware that *she let me go*? She did it because it does not matter whether I am at her side or on the other side of the Tyrian Sea. I carry my cage with me wherever I go."

"This is the sweet spot," the Bard enthusiastically said. "First you had to lose. Then you questioned your beliefs. Then you pretended you believed what other people do, until you'd been lying long enough you had a hard time telling if you were lying – that one's a pattern with you, love, you should really work on that."

"You know nothing," Akua hissed.

"Sure, sure," the old monster insincerely said. "Anyways, now you've been freed and cut loose but you're finding you kind of still buy in those things you insist are lies. And it's chewing you up, 'cause you're horrible and for the first time in your life you actually know that. But this is the fun part! Because you're failing at dying – also a pattern in your life, have you ever considered *not* failing at everything of import you've ever tried? – so you're not going to be able to take the easy way out. You're actually going to have to change. Find a path forward you can live with."

Ah, so that was her game.

"Are you to be my personal angel, Bard?" Akua mockingly smiled. "My guide to the embrace of redemption?"

"Call me Yara. And of course not," she solemnly said, face serious as a priest. "I would never *dare* meddle in the story of another Named, I'm a firm believer in the integrity of..."

The Wandering Bard cracked up, laughing until her breath was choked up.

"Oh man," the Intercessor wheezed. "Good times. Yeah, I'm here you actually end up somewhere. Anywhere, really, I'm not super picky about what happens to you on account of not really caring about you as a person. Cat's not interested in you having ending, my sad little friend, which does pisses me off a little. Screwing around with fate like that is *my* shtick, you smarmy one-eyed drunk. Can't you go original for once?"

"Your only interest is in using me to kill her," Akua calmly said.

The Bard grinned nastily.

"Which you don't want," she said in sing-song voice, "cause you're in luuuurv."

The kissy noises that followed were not even the worst part.

"Oh, Catherine, won't you find a stool to stand on and kiss me," the Intercessor continued in a high-pitched voice, then lowered it to a gritty one and closed an eye. "I can't, Akua, even though I've been hinting I want to for years. Staring at your tits is definitely part of a grand master plan, and not just something I enjoy doing."

The Wandering Bard closed her mouth, then turned to meet her eyes and pointed an accusing finger.

"This is you," she contemptuously said. "This is what you sound like."

Akua's jaw clenched.

"Are you quite finished?" she asked.

"Nah, I mostly did that because kicking you in the belly emotionally is kind of fun," the Bard easily admitted. "The thing is, Akua, this superbly accurate rendition of your innermost thoughts I just treated you to is actually kind of nonsense. It's what you like to think is happening, because it's a comfortable idea that you're tortured and in love and it's all very tragic and o Heavens, what could have been if only you weren't just, kind of appalling!"

The old monster thinly smiled, revealing crooked teeth.

"Only what's actually happening is that she's fucked with your head pretty thoroughly because she doesn't believe she can kill the Dead King so she needs someone powerful to step up and contain him," the Intercessor said. "Used to be she was going to lean on Masego to make a seal on the Hellgate that you'd be stuck maintaining forever, but she's gotten a little more ambitious since. She figures she can destroy the undead threat with that little Arsenal project she got Hierophant to cook up and then toss Neshamah himself into the Twilight Ways where you're going to serve as his prison warden forever."

Akua stilled.

"Yeah," the Bard said, smile broadening into a grin. "That's right. She's going to offer you Larat's sloppy seconds of a crown and then drop you in Liesse so you can think about what a bad girl you've been until... well, pretty much the end of time really. She's been priming you to accept that role for *years*, my heart. I've been following the whole thing, not because I need to but because it's like reading a Proceran romance serial where everyone is terrible and pretentious and you don't even get to fuck. It's been *great*, so thanks for that."

Part of Akua felt like being angry, like accusing the Intercessor lying and being indignant. But she'd spent the months since she had left the starry cave on the outskirts of Wolof running away, and now she was simply... tired. It was true, because Catherine loved the sort of cutting irony that the punishment described here would carry and because this had all been coming for a while, hadn't it? Maybe not this specifically, but something like it. A long price for her folly. Nothing she'd done since leaving that camp had mattered, had it?

She'd killed and saved lives, she had fought and bargained and now she was finding that the Tower itself was in her grasp – but she did not want to be here. Not in Ater, not in Praes. Not anywhere, really. Akua knew that the Intercessor had not lied because here and now, on her knees with a broken city around her, going to the Twilight Ways sounded *restful*. It would be a relief, to leave it all and take on a duty that was grim but also for the greater good of Creation. Not something to even the balance against the evil she had done, but something she could take some satisfaction in nonetheless.

Scratching the edges of the itch, but was that not the best she could hope for?

If that offer had come tomorrow, after the Tower all but fell in her grasp and the great lords of this empire all looked up at her with hopes in their eyes like she could save them, save anything at all, then Akua Sahelian knew deep in her bones that she would have accepted it without a second thought. And this terrified her, not because of how deeply Catherine had come to know her –

even now that thought was a thrilling anguish – but because the moment had already come to her. Just now. But soon it would fade. Soon the exhaustion would leave her, and with rest the last of this sudden clarity would be gone to never return.

“You didn’t come here to convince me,” Akua quietly said. “The only reason you’re here is to spoil a piece before it all comes together.”

“Got it in one,” the Wandering Bard smiled. “But since it’s the end times, my sweet, I’ll offer you one on the house. The truth is, you don’t owe shit to Catherine Foundling. What did she lose at the Doom, except for soldiers? It’s the foundation of her reign. No, that day gives her no claim on you. It’s the people you murdered that you’re indebted to, and what the fuck do any of them care about the Black Queen?”

She shrugged.

“You probably don’t have much longer left to live,” the Bard said. “Maybe none of us do, if Nessie gets his way. So for once in your life, Akua Sahelian, won’t you actually make a decision?”

The old monster met her eyes.

“Not do what your mother burned into you,” Yara said, “or Praes or Catherine. Something that *you* think worth doing.”

Her jaw clenched.

“I will not be your puppet,” Akua said.

“That’s the beauty of it,” the Intercessor smiled, raising her flask in a toast. “I’m the only person in this entire empire of the damned that does not need you on strings.”

She drank deep, looking unspeakably satisfied, but Akua knew the look in her eyes. She saw it, sometimes, in her own looking glass.

“How long have you been doing this, Yara?” she quietly asked.

The Intercessor studied her.

“I remember when the first boat touched the beach,” the other woman said. “The sound their boots made on the wet rocks, the way my little brother kept tugging at my tunic in excitement. It wasn’t called Ashur, would not be for many years. The men were not yet called Aenian.”

“What happened?” she whispered.

“The same thing that always happens,” Yara of Nowhere said, “when men with swords are greeted by songs and gifts.”

"You survived," Akua said.

"Survived," the other woman smiled. "There's a word that means nothing. You can keep breathing and have most of you waiting in a grave, Akua. If you learn anything from me, learn that. There's no worth in just existing. You have to make it count."

"Don't you?" Akua asked.

The Intercessor smiled.

"We'll meet again," she said, "before this is over."

She rapped a knuckle against the bronze wall, a loud ringing sound, and the moment Akua blinked she was gone. Silence lingered in her wake. Eventually, the golden-eyed noble left the reservoir. Below her vultures were waiting, circling. High Lord Jaheem was the one who handed her the letter with the Tower's seal. They'd had one of their own as well, he told her. Summons to a formal court tomorrow. Offers to allow in household troops for security.

"It is an abdication in all but name, Lady Akua," High Lord Jaheem said, tone tight with excitement. "Malicia only seeks to preserve her dignity by being properly defeated before the greats of Praes before she surrenders the throne."

Akua thumb slid across the smooth writing on the parchment, the words that gave a time and a place and a knife. *Malicia chose this*, she thought. *For herself and for me*. And still, looking at the letter was the first step up the stairs of the Tower, Akua wondered. It was rope she held, she recognized.

But was it a knot or a noose?

generalchaos327

Droughtbringer can't do it today, so go vote! <https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Matt

All hail Amadeus Warden of the East

Linnus42

Yeah I still think the whole Ranger plot just isn't working and Ranger hit the nail on the head. Indrani doesn't have motivation for the fight, it doesn't even feel she has it in say the classic

Zoro vs Mihawk way where I want to be the very best. The student must surpass the master.

The Amadeus & Hakram, Malicia and Bard & Akua plots are far more interesting. Hakram is stepping out behind Cat as an independent player. Akua is actually going to make a choice. I do think Bard did tell Akua the truth in some much as she just needs Akua to make a move and not walk into the trap. Even Amadeus is doing some fresh stuff but I still think he is lack of respect for cultural norms is going to screw him in the end. Its simply not purely academic overturning cultural norms and the like unless as Hakram notes you want to do a whole lot of killing to make it stick.

Albert Wen

Yeah. Cat set up a pretty blatant Rule of 3 there (a loss, ending with a last minute save by the mentor), but that plan might be destined to turn on its head like every other so far. I think that, just like with the goblins, and Hakram, and Akua, Indrani's story is going to become interesting in a completely unexpected way. The final payoff will probably be Cat having a nervous breakdown before ditching the plans and diving the chaos like she did at the very beginning.

dadycool

Oh, I really hope she goes back to her roots as chaos incarnate. Times were funnest when she was Chaotic Evil as opposed to trying to be Lawful Neutral or whatever.

Miles

Epilogue:

The Warlord, Hierophant, Conqueror of Ranger, Fair Queen, and Brawling Tavern Wench walk into a bar...

Miled

NO I MESSED UP! THAT SHOULD SAY POWER RANGER!

What a missed opportunity!

shikkarasu

The bar apologises profusely

[Liliet](#)

TBF Cat was never Chaotic Evil. She's been fluctuating uncertainly between Lawful Evil and Chaotic Good, with occasional forays into Lawful Neutral and Neutral Good when

she's confused, but Chaotic Evil is about as outside of her domain as Lawful Good is.

Cicero

Nah, I like the Ranger-Archer subplot.

It was a big step for Archer, she had a chance to take what she wanted and decided she wouldn't pay the price. That's it's own kind of story. A different one than the story Ranger had laid out for her, so Ranger is all pissed and disappointed about it, but notice that Archer isn't.

It's the moment when a mentor loses her power over her student. Win lose or draw, Archer will never be the same again.

[Liliet](#)

Yep!!!!

Indrani is there for multiple reasons. She doesn't have to pick the one Hye Su approves of.

[Orm Granskau \(@GranskauOrm\)](#)

Surely someone called the Carrion Lord would shy away from doing a whole lot of killing.

Stormblessed

I really hate the Bard.

[Sugar Roll](#)

No one likes spoilers and the one who delivers it especially so.

Abrakadabra

It is not the spoilers. Sadism is Just disgusting.

SuitorShooter

The Bard never does anything for no reason. All those jabs and insults were to goad Akua, not because the Bard enjoyed it.

Or, not *just* because she enjoyed it, maybe.

Abrakadabra

Jabs, eh? I Say emotional torture. And basically unnecessary. What is relevant to her purposes is to reveal Cat's plan.

Shveiran

It was emotional manipulation.

That doesn't make it acceptable (or any more acceptable), but it was not sadism for it had an objective. It is a different thing.

When someone that skilled manipulates you, nothing they say is unnecessary, even if the only achievement is to cloud your judgment for the part that matters.

Abrakadabra

So it is emotional torture 'for a reason'. I kicked the sick dog to make it feel worse, for my own sake. And it even felt good.

kinghaart

What specifically was sadistic here? I saw gloating and very dark humor. Bard has seen Akua do much worse than this to actually innocent people. I don't think anything Bard did to Akua is worse than the things Cat has done.

And the stool thing made me laugh out loud TBH.

jworks17

I feel like by the end of the series, when we finally know about all that the Bard is really about, she's either going to be an extremely compelling character or an extremely disappointing character.

Like why does she refuse to genuinely work with anyone else? Why is every other character just a tool to her, with her being unwilling to accept any plan not her own making? Why doesn't she cooperate with anyone?

How that's answered could make her an awesome character or ruin her character.

Nairne .01

I think she said it in this chapter – "You have to make it count."

And I she isn't the one who saves Celernia then what did her life matter?

[Liliet](#)

I mean, tbf, I consider "i am multiple thousand years old and 99.99% of all people I've ever known have died and the 0.01% includes the Dead King and the Forever King who are NOT the people I'd have picked for that" to be a legitimate reason to

not be much of a team player. Just, accumulated trauma eventually makes the limb not work, where the limb in this case is the ability to genuinely connect to people.

kinghaart

I think it's also fair to say that the interactions (subservience?) with Above and Below are also pretty likely to have warped her well beyond the point of insanity by now.

[Liliet](#)

i mean, 'sanity' is a nebulous concept. i do not think anyone in the cast is currently 'sane' as in 'perfectly neurotypical without any degree of trauma based mental shit'

Cpt. Obvious

Given what we already know she's a tragic character.

We've known for a long time that she's incredibly old, but now we have kind of a timestamp. We also learned that she's not a god, though her powers certainly toes the line. Another thing is that her story as the Intercessor starts with the death of everyone sh loved at the hands of men with weapons. Note that I did not write "Evil men" as the may very well have technically in the service of the gods above.

Somehow these experiences formed the Name she acquired.

Now she's spent millenia using Named to manipulate the stories. We do not know to what degree her Name or Role dictates what she does, but I feel it's pretty safe to guess that at first she was fanning a hate for the invaders who murdered her loved ones.

But once they had been driven back to whatever continent they came from, and she's apparently not able to pursue beyond the borders of Calernia, that hate must have felt empty.

Over the millenia that followed it's likely she's wavered between trying to stomp out evil to nurturing good, within the limits of her Name and Role. But all with very little good to show for it.

Whenever she tried to stomp out evil new evil rose. And just because someone technically belongs to Good doesn't mean the can't be murderous bastards. The situation in Praes is a good example of how Good rulers can trample over scores of corpses of their subjects in order to enrich themselves. And for every truly good ruler there's 50 or more Good rulers who

will backstab, cheat and throw away the lives of their subjects if it net them some gains.

To say that the Bard is disillusioned by now is probably the understatement of millenia.

From the first time we learned that she's incredibly old I've thought that she's trying to find a way to truly die. And I'm still pretty sure that's at least partly true. However now I believe that her loss of faith in Good and in humanity's capacity for good has driven her to consider just wiping the slate clean. And there's where that corpse of an angel of Justice comes in.

It's been shown that Justice doesn't do Grey. It only knows black or white. Either you are guilty or you are innocent, and if you're guilty you die. The level of guilt or the severity of the crime is unimportant. If guilty, die!

If she can manipulate the situation so they use Justice trying to stop the Dead King, and she's able to pump up the power (manipulating angels remember?) then she might be able to wipe Calernia clean. Well clean of those Justice finds guilty, which probably is something like 70 – 95 %. Remember Justice isn't choosy and doesn't do mercy.

With any luck Justice will find her guilty and put an end to her existence.

Now I'm not sure what her main driving force is, but I'm guessing it's the hope of finally dying. But even if she doesn't get that then at least she'll have a clean slate to work on.

It's pretty much a Thanos move...

Earl of Purple

My interpretation is that the invaders weren't driven back to where they came from. She said 'they became the Aenians', which is the main ethnic group of the Free Cities, and whilst she could be talking about her own people in that, I'm not sure enough survived to settle elsewhere. The island, however, became Ashur, so I think the invaders were forced off and settled in the area around Helike before spreading into the Aenians of today.

Onos

Awesome stuff. Nice to see little Indrani growing up at last. Hard to believe there's more story after Praes is sorted out!

devildragon777

...Hrm. I guess the theme of this one is in finding a different path than you thought you were going?

I think Indrani's made her first step towards becoming a *better* person/Name than Ranger. When the time came, she chose not to sacrifice her sister on the altar, and that's not a choice Hye Su would have made.

Poor Cat, though, she's getting betrayed from a bunch of angles
=/

The Pickler decision feels like a boulder going downhill right now, that feels like it'll make a splash and blindsides everyone.

So Yara was Meiezen? That...feels right, actually, she's like the fading remnant of the group that oppressed basically everyone, and still conspires to keep everyone in chains...

Also, a lot of Yara's sentiment towards Akua can be turned right back around on her! Bard is just as unsympathetic and has caused even more damage!

ninegardens

"Also, a lot of Yara's sentiment towards Akua can be turned right back around on her! Bard is just as unsympathetic and has caused even more damage!"

And I suspect that WB **knows** this full well.

[Liliet](#)

Akua recognized the look on her face from having seen it in the mirror.

yeah.

kinghaart

I wonder if this is just Bard's death wish at play. She tried to have Cat kill her as a Hero and that didn't take, so she's now playing the Villain, gloating and all?

Though I still don't know if Bard has just been acting like this to prod Cat etc. towards success, or if she wants the world to burn with her.

[Liliet](#)

mood

Apollo

I believe she was actually Baalite since that's who colonized Ashur

[Liliet](#)

She was from the people who welcomed, not from the people who invaded.

Also, the Aenians seem to be the people who invaded, and Baalites were later, so yeah. We've never heard of people who were Yara's.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Miezan? I think she was from whichever people lived in AHSUR before BAALITES landed there.

Earl of Purple

That's probably a better take than my first one, where Bard was on the boats. They weren't yet Aenian, and it's the Empress of Aenia that Basilia is going for, so her people survived. At least some of them.

[Liliet](#)

Oh no, it was the people on the boats who were Aenian. Bard's from the people who were there BEFORE them.

Earl of Purple

The Miezens were the other side of the continent. And much later, they arrived long after Neshamah's play. The Aenians live in the Free Cities, but they weren't Aenian yet. For one thing, they don't live in Ashur, yet that was where Bard made her first footsteps on Calernia. Her people brought song and gifts, and were met by swords.

Konstantin von Karstein

I think it was the reverse: Bard's people was on Calernia when the not-yet-Ashurans appeared.

greycat

Yes, Bard's people were the natives, and the invaders on the boats came with swords. Bard's people met them with songs and gifts, and... somehow the Bard survived. It's implied that nobody else (or very few others) did.

[Estelulu](#)

The men were not yet called Aenian. Presumably the slaughterers were men, from mainland Calernia where the Free Cities now sit. Ashur is an island.

kinghaart

Or were like the Baalites from overseas. Calernia may well be populated by almost entirely non-natives now, with the possible exception of the Riddle Maker.

kaldurak

And now she is a sword.

[Estelulu](#)

Sounds like she was indigenous Ashuran, and when her people spotted the ships of the proto-Aenians, they excitedly prepared to welcome them.

The proto-Aenians slaughtered them, but the Bard survived the attack.

Clmineith

It assumes it's the truth rather than yet another lie. I'm not convinced.

[Liliet](#)

I get the impression Bard usually tells the truth when she says things about herself – what she likes, dislikes, etc. She revealed a lot about herself to William that was later more or less confirmed true by what else we learned. Her intentions are something she will 100% lie about, but the small details? She tells them with the purpose of manipulation, sure, but that doesn't mean they're not true.

Truth makes as good a hammer as a lie, and less effort to think up.

kinghaart

Have we actually caught her in an outright lie yet (beyond where she's joking and admits it in the same conversation)?

[Liliet](#)

i cant remember out of hand unless you count lies by omission which i do for most purposes but not this one

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Zggt

The Bard sure spends an inordinate amount of time gloating and being generally spiteful, which makes her seem above such petty things as "consequences". Seriously, if there is one character here that is repeatedly asking for the literary fate worse than death, it isn't Akua... and I think she knows this (at least on a certain level).

Eris

I wonder... will the Wandering Bard take Akua's place as keeper of the Dead King? It would make sense.. they've been fighting each other for so long, and both of them have committed so many atrocities. It would also make room for the new Age.

[Mincheriit](#)

Consider this. Is her role a fitting punishment flr itself? She is somewhat forced to act in certain ways to carry out plans for both above and below. I see this as a 100% mental suicide job eventually. She cant even die, shes been trying to get herself killed too. If she did t have a choice but to keep carrying out these plans or act on behalf of the two forces, she is pretty much guaranteed to end up the warped being she is now, doesnt matter how she started. Part of the job pretty much.

Ok i know i conveyed this wrong but j think someone will get something of what i was trying to say, i was supposed to be asleep 4 hrs ago my brains asleep already.

[Liliet](#)

That. Actually makes perfect sense

kinghaart

Yeah I think this is the right call.

I do wonder if maybe early on she and all others were wiped out by the invaders and Above and Below offered her soul the chance to get back at the invaders (ie Calernia) by binding them to cruel fate. And revenge list meaning over time even as the spite and bitterness stayed.

Cicero

I thought she was already suffering a worse fate than death. Isn't that why she keeps hoping she'll die?

ninegardens

... This may be the first moment I feel like I've really seen the Wandering Bard like... completely off her rocker. Derranged. Out of control, talking about her original life (perhaps), just... this line:

>>"I would never dare meddle in the story of another Named, I'm a firm believer in the integrity of..."

>>The Wandering Bard cracked up, laughing until her breath was choked up.

>>"Oh man,"

This is the first time I've looked at the WB and thought "Holy fucking shit, you are losing it. You are the villian. Like, actually the villian. Holy shit this lady is scary."

Maddie's plan is.... making more sense now, but still seems monstrous, and I still don't buy the idea that it was the **best** plan, as opposed to the plan which best advanced the plot.

The fight with Ranger... just kind of doesn't seem that interesting? We get some good fighting beats, but at the end, everyone is still alive, and the storyline of "ranger tests her apprentices" is still going.

We get Archer foregoing her victory to save Cocky, but... that isn't **new**. Archer has been a better person for a long while. Which I love her for, but also, feels like the Ranger fight isn't going anywhere (so far).

Apollo

I think she's trying to be a villain and to get herself offed by either cat or akua. In this chapter akua says she wants nothing more than to kill the wandering bard and then the WB is like "do something about it, don't just be someone else's plot puppet"

Gabe Meadow

See, I don't agree with how everyone is assuming the Bard wants to die for good. Everyone is forgetting something important. Kairos Theodosian's Wish aspect allowed him to see what people want, and this is what he said in Interlude: A Hundred Battles about the Intercessor:

"It would shed the chains binding it for a set more pleasing, if you let it." He met the Black Queen's gaze, with his bloody red eye. "Don't let it, Catherine," he said. "It does not deserve this."

That definitely doesn't suggest death to me. Whatever her game is, it's something else entirely. Probably having to do with the fact that she's constantly been interfering or

meddling in ways that undermine the Grand Alliance's chances of success, and pushing them towards the use of the ealmaal.

[Liliet](#)

I'd argue Bard can want multiple things. You know, Plan A, Plan B, Plan C...

kinghaart

Hm, maybe she WANTS the role Cat envisaged for Akua, but for herself?

john

" I still don't buy the idea that it was the **best** plan, as opposed to the plan which best advanced the plot. " Plot is literally how the magical physics of this setting work.

Shveiran

The narrative force in the universe and the one driving the book are close but not actually the same thing.

Deworld

A very good notion. The best example of this is Cat: for us, she's the main character, we know that she is bound to succeed at least in some way. But it isn't true in-universe. Every Named is an MC of their own Story, and when those overlap, a ton of outcomes are possible.

shikkarasu

Maddie's plan: I think it's the best plan that anyone has tried thus far. Still atrocious, but he makes a good point that the Dread Empire churns out so many corpses each decade that there are precious few means that cannot justify its end.

Reader in the Night

I think Amadeus' plan might not be the best plan, but it's the best plan someone like him is capable of coming up with... Or at least, that's the narrative he's selling.

I will admit to being disappointed in Amadeus: coldly-calculated destruction has always been his way, but Catherine had challenged him to be a better person, and he seemingly gave up on that challenge...

But I'm not convinced this isn't all according to keikaku. Amadeus has been dropping pearls like "you can't teach a new dog old tricks", and "I am what I am, I'm too old to change" near constantly ever since he's shown up.

But the thing is, he's a storysmith with nearly 50 years of experience under his belt, he KNOWS that the aging mentor with salt-pepper hair admitting that he's seen too much and done too much to fit into the new world they've helped create is basically a death sentence. And he's actively inviting it.

I think he's setting himself up to fail and die here (in a way that still accomplishes his goals and so is almost indistinguishable from winning). I think, like Hakram said, he's going to set up one last gift for Catherine that still forces her to do exactly what he wanted, so it's as much a genuine gift as a manipulation.

ninegardens

The whole ageing mentor thing is a VERY different story for heroic as opposed to villainous characters. They may both be a death sentence, but the "mentor heroic sacrific" vs "oh no, my manipulative mentor/trecherous apprentice has finally betrayed me" is VERRrrrrry different things. And while we all love maddie (except Hakram), he isn't exactly leaning in on the heroic version of the story just now, is he?

Ain't saying your wrong to call it, just saying that, for a heroic mentor, the interpretation is pretty clear ("three days from retirement"). For Amadeus its... murkier.

kinghaart

Thing is, that actually helps here.

By being a monstrous Villain mentor, Amadeus is ensuring that Cat can pivot *away* from that instead of leaning in.

We know Cat is capable of brutality when she deems it necessary. Seeing Amadeus do the same might be a wake up call of sorts.

Ravenking

Come on! Tenebrous Zombie Mount! How epic is that?

Black is Killing the DreadEmpire with stories! He is moving around and talks to Named like the Wandering Bard! Let him eat that Role!

And Indrani is becoming the better Ranger, one who is part of a band. One who is having a path instead of a pure thrill seeking half goddess. She already grasped one of the Aspects. It's just now about not becoming what you replace.

No damn idea what Akua becomes, but we all knew, it's not the Twilight Guard on the DK. It will surprise us all. Not Dread Empress as Maddie is going to burn the Tower and Ater in Green

Flames. And he even destroyed a potential Claimant with Tenebrous.

RoflCat

It's also 8-legged grey(?) mount...

We've got the crows, the missing eye, and now the ride.

What else are we missing to complete her Odin-ness? The last famous story about Odin would be Ragnarok where...oh no.

Darkening

Don't forget the bodyswapping trickster with a grudge against her. Maybe we'll get to see WB tied up in a cave with a snake dripping venom in her eyes.

Abrakadabra

Zombie the ninth?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Dread Emperor Zombie.

jamesc9

Except, unfortunately, that it probably no longer has the legally correct relationship to its soul, and Cat would have to stay around to pilot it.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Cat can rule very briefly as Dread Empress Arson the First, change the law to include an exemption for undead spiders, and then abdicate in favor of her faithful steed.

kinghaart

Actually, very good point here that Cat has now killed at least two Dread Emperress Claimants and resurrected them in her service (three if you count Akua). Pattern forming?

Cat also seems to be able to bring back most of a person's identity, I wonder if she might be able to Wrest the undead from the DK once her Name settles. Might at least be a way to give some closure to some of those who lost loved ones in Procer. 😞

Black Spiral Dancer

Impressions:

(1) Interesting behind-the-curtains politics. Cat being blindsided.

(2) Felt that the Ranger fight was dragged, only for that specific moment. However, the story needed to go there, Archer going from 0 to hero without a mid-point would feel even more forced.

(3) Akua and the Bard delivered. Also, Akua is clearly climbing the tower, just like that first Girl who was the FIRST to climb the tower, back then. That's why the Bard said her fate wasn't unique, but might be RARE. Akua will somehow be the FIRST to do... something. So, like the founder of the Tower, she will be the Founder of... something else.

shikkarasu

New song: The Foundling and the Founder

Juff

Typo Thread:

people on half > people in half
to took to > it took to
most the dead > most of the dead
disposed > dispossessed
days is > day is
gone form > gone from
will moving > will be moving
should weight > should weigh
Huntress blow > Huntress' blow
The leapt > They leapt
was living domain > was a living domain
was not fighting > was now fighting
take an insult > take as an insult
that for year. > that for years.
other rest > others
way swung > way and he swung
then burning > the burning
trashed > thrashed
longer move. > longer moved.
righting atop at > fighting atop a
flashed of > flashes
long war > long way
its was > it was
to I figured > so I figured
I'm here you > I'm here so you
having ending > having an ending
does pisses > does piss
Intercessor lying > Intercessor of lying
raped a > rapped a
preserver > preserve

Benjamin Huang

Broken melody on tired lute,
A garden rotten, stem and root,
A glass of wine and gameboard set,
Sacrifice and madness, gambit met,
To persevere through aeons fair,
And ages past- spun into air,
Puppeteering puppet on broken strings,
Dancing to the tune that madness sings,
Crooked smile and glass of wine,
Knowing not death, nor true life

burnsy

"She was forgetting what the real world was like."

No, Archer. You've been learning what the real world is like. Where people do care for each other, and form emotional, and do things purely for altruistic reasons sometimes. Not the hyper-violent, pseudo-darwinist ego trip that Ranger thinks the world is because she actively enforces it wherever she goes.

God I hope Cat absolutely fucks Ranger up.

[Liliet](#)

YOU SAID IT

THANK YOU

Steel and Elaborate Insult

> The truth is, you don't owe shit to Catherine Foundling. What did she lose at the Doom, except for soldiers? It's the foundation of her reign. No, that day gives her no claim on you. It's the people you murdered that you're indebted to, and what the fuck do any of them care about the Black Queen?

this is the core. this is it.

what matters are the victims. the people whom akua murdered. justice is not retribution, and it's not redemption. justice is reparation. and without the victims involved in the process of justice, there can be no reparation. it's not about whether or not akua deserves to be tortured forever. it's about whom the process of her sentence involves.

i really think akua's going to transform the tower. i don't think she's going to die. i think she's going to change – herself, and everything else. it's not going to redeem her. it's not going to torture her. i can't speak to what it is. all i can hope for is that it's going to be what indrani wants, too – it's going to make things better.

time to drag praes kicking and screaming into the century of the fruitbat.

[Liliet](#)

Tbf, Cat's idea would kinda have Akua help fix the world. It's not THE best way though :3

Sinead

I also find it interesting because Cat would also agree with that assessment of the Doom, though her priorities would be different.

As you have pointed out before, Cat's pursuit of a long price for her and Akua is her penance to that failure of rule (in her eyes). I'd argue that Malicia and Amadeus were the rulers at the time, but that's not how guilt works.

nimelennar

Wasn't fruitbat /last/ century, though?

john

All the more reason to get it started – and then over with – quickly.

ruduen

From a meta-plot/story perspective, I think there's a possibility for something along these lines. It's kind of interesting to think about what will happen due to the Bard 'spoiling the story' in this manner. The original plan is unlikely now, but unlike some dramatic reveals, the revelation doesn't change the core of the character involved.

That is, Akua may not accept Cat's plan because the 'weight' of that plot was spent – when Cat actually makes the offer, it will lack impact. However, Akua also still wants everything she wanted before – as Cat stated, she's still looking for whatever redemption she's able to find. And though the weight of that revelation is spent, the weight of the character arc still exists.

Now, the tricky part is trying to find out what form that redemption will take now – whether it's something related to the tower, or going in a different direction in terms of plans for the war or the Dead King, or even something related to the Bard now.

I wonder what the options and the choice will be now.

jamesc9

I wonder if there's an option where Alya gets left in the tower, with Amadeus as her warden, and the political centre of gravity of Ater shifts to wherever Akua has been living.

[Liliet](#)

Oh man.

First: we actually did get to see both of these conversations I loved it and I 100% did not expect that.

Second: YES HAKRAM NEVER LIKED AMADEUS I KNEW IT. Also love how it's just personal bc of how he used Catherine, fucking best ♥

Third: so Hakram specifically plans to be confrontational with Catherine, huh. Good thing Catherine has already admitted she basically doesn't care who has the Tower so long as it's not Malicia, huh? Nothing he asks should be too arduous for her to concede to.

Fourth: I'M SORRY TENEBROUS WAS/IS **HOW** BIG. Holy shit. I love this story

Fifth: SOMETHING is definitely happening with Ranger and her kids, and I think I'm liking it. She dug her own grave by treating them like she did, Indrani COULD have killed her there, but what she DIDN'T teach them was her salvation – Indrani's choice. And now that the gloves are off, they get to capitalize on the advantage they have and she doesn't – allies. And it's... Archer might or might not transition into Ranger (kudos to people who called this holy shit yall were right), but Hye will lose and she will remember the loss.

Sixth: never have I wanted to sock a fictional character on the mouth quite so much. Genuinely, not Bard, not Akua in her early smarmier moments, just Ranger here and now. Holy shit. She really does know how to target weak points, and that includes mine apparently, because I want her smeared on the ground – alive, so she'd get to KNOW she lost. To children playing house.

Seventh: I find it interesting where Catherine is in all this – and where she, by inevitable consequence, isn't. What she is doing and what she is leaving to resolve itself. It's... interesting :3

Eighth: I love how Hakram considered killing Amadeus on a yes/no question of whether he's mcfucking lost it like Malicia did. Wonder what the favor is going to be!

Ninth: Akua trying to kill the Bard but stopping half a spell short of actually directly killing herself? Bard taunting her about how suicidal she is? That entire fucking conversation? Akua going for strangulation? Bard remarking how she's learned an

actual sense of humor? As horrible as it is glorious, every bit of it.

Tenth: so yeah, Cat's plan would have worked. Akua would have agreed and she knows it. I'm really curious where it's going to go instead.

Eleventh: so let's count up the clusterfuck. Amadeus is confident Akua will refuse the throne. Malicia is confident she will accept and then get immediately killed. Catherine is confident she will accept and then immediately abdicate at her offer. Akua meanwhile is playing the role of the HORSE IN THE HOSPITAL. What's going to happen? ♥

Twelfth: I love how Amadeus is like "I don't fucking know what Cat thinks she's doing with Akua but I know she knows what she's doing" ♥ ♥ ♥

Thirteenth: Hakram's deep skepticism of the cutest father/daughter arc is fucking great. As much as I love it he's not wrong. THEY REALLY HAVE NOT CALLED EACH OTHER THAT TO THE FACE FOR ONE

Fourteenth: yeah I also can't believe I haven't run out yet. Anyway BARD BACKSTORY. The peoples the Baalites conquered, it seems! And a little brother...

Fifteenth: special shoutout to her feeling most uncomfortable and awkward in her own body and yeah I think it wasn't stated outright but yeah. It is. I know that, yall know that. It is.

Sixteenth: UNDEAD SPIDER TEN ELVES THREE SISTERS RANGER FIGHT!!!
heavy metal blaers in the distance

[Liliet](#)

P.S. EIGHTEENTH APPARENTLY: Akua did figure out that Catherine let her go! Or knew from the start. I mean Catherine releasing her from the soul leash and telling her she has her blessing to leave was not super subtle. How and when did the thought come together though I wonder? 😊

Black Spiral Dancer

Shouldn't it be Seventeenth?

Miles

Seventeenth: The hidden knife

[Liliet](#)

...I also lost count. Fantastic lmao

[Liliet](#)

P.P.S. I... sympathize with the Bard? I want her bullshit with Akua to succeed? I, also, want to see what the horse will do in the hospital? BLASPHEMY, and yet,

[Liliet](#)

Like, I legitimately like that she did this, I love the idea, even if Akua just turns back and does what Catherine says it's 100% better than if Bard hadn't interfered here. I even loved the (horrible, awful, don't ever talk to people like this) banter.

Oops?

SpeckofStardust

Wow Liliet you've gone full madness here,
Now my list

1. Utterly wrong about Black reading Akua.

2. Amadeus plan is to make it so that whoever holds the tower doesn't need noble support to keep the city running is the only part we didnt pick up on,

3. Bard is just... its wonderful.

4. Cat misread all of Bards plans

5 Bard plan

a. Die

b. Set up Praes for the next fucking age because that's what Akua + Amadeus plan will get to happen.

c. let Cat win everything she needs while thinking she failed.

Nairne .01

Hmm... that last thing caught me off guard...

[Liliet](#)

I mean, that Amadeus wants to make it possible to hold the Tower without noble support is Hakram's conclusion, and it's the conclusion from BEFORE Amadeus tells him he doesn't want DEs anymore (presumably). We didn't pick up on it because our presumption is that Amadeus doesn't want anyone to hold the Tower period, and it has yet to be proven wrong actually.

To be fair, Cat read Bard's plans as Bard presented them to her!

ninegardens

>> "I love how Hakram considered killing Amadeus on a yes/no question of whether he's mcfucking lost it like Malicia did. "

Mostly, as some might have guessed from my comments on the past few chapters, I just really appreciate having a character in story who is calling Amadeus on this- its super cool having the story address the question of "has Maddy gone cray cray", and having that verdict be given by a character who specifically *never bought into his legend*. Love it. Still not convinced on how Maddy has done things here, or about it making sense in character, but am happy the story is interrogating that, so oh well, close enough.

>>Akua trying to kill the Bard but stopping half a spell short of actually directly killing herself? Bard taunting her about how suicidal she is? That entire fucking conversation?

I was so hoping Akua would get three kills in, pattern of three the bard far way.

And also, I was wrong about something from earlier. In previous chapters I questioned whether Bard *could* break Akua's momentum. In the sense of "even if Akua here's the plan, she'll still go for it"- and we see that play out perfectly here.

Akua hears Cat's plan... and DOES go for it, accept it, etc etc etc.

But then, the momentum isn't broken or deflected, its just... spent at the wrong moment. Which, for a story, makes all the difference. Very clever, well done EE.

[Liliet](#)

YEP. Happy the story is interrogating that about sums it up for me too, for that entire exchange.

As much as I love Amadeus, I do derive a certain mean kind of satisfaction from there being someone who actually knows the stuff he's been doing his whole life AND dislikes him on a personal level, NOT for asshole reasons (ie hes a duni etc).

YES! I loved the momentum thing too. And Akua is just kind of left questioning what she wants to do now that she knows.

THERE'S A HORSE IN A HOSPITAL!

Reader in the Night

> Fifteenth: special shoutout to her feeling most uncomfortable and awkward in her own body and yeah I think it wasn't stated outright but yeah. It is. I know that, yall know that. It is. <

I'm pretty sure she felt uncomfortable because she picked a body similar to Catherine's to appear before Akua, which is why we get a long and loving description of it. Akua just did a Cat

by openly perving on her enemies. And then Akua is annoyed and the Bard comments that yeah, it was a bit heavy-handed of her.

Shveiran

Wait, I thought so too, but she is described as

“tanned and blue-eyed, and shapely in a lowborn way ”

Cat is brown-eyed, and definitely not shapely. So...

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, this isn't Cat-like at all. This is the Yara body Cat saw her in too, and it's most likely her true body.

[Liliet](#)

I... no. Bard doesn't pick bodies. We know for a fact she doesn't. She gets a body+name for a storyline until it's over, and she's still Yara.

(The only part of this that's speculation is that storyline specifically is the limit. It's heavily implied and how it's worked so far, but it's technically possible there's another demarcation)

(Another factual limit that's been observed is that she keeps the same body+name from death to death – not teleported-away-at-the-last-moment death, actual death)

Black Spiral Dancer

What's a horse in the hospital Role?! Tried to google it but nothing came up.

[Liliet](#)

Black Spiral Dancer

Man, how have I never heard of this guy before?! He's a genius!

Yunamed

I love what Bard did for Akua, gave her a choice. No one seems to have any sympathy for her...just a pawn in other people's plans...I want her to choose to do good and not have it crammed down her throat.

Black Spiral Dancer

Actually, I want just her to choose. Choose evil, as long as it is her own choice, is still something to be proud of.

[Liliet](#)

TBF, she's been choosing it fully voluntarily and also to spite everyone else present (except for Nim, Nim is cool) ever since her arrival to Ater. Cat let her go for a reason (this reason).

kinghaart

Not for me. Her choices can't be her own because she has to bear the Doom. She can't run from it. Maybe you can call it choosing it herself but the reality is that with her personality and intelligence the only viable thing she can do is go and figure how to rebuild what she destroyed.

That itself can never really be done, but she must keep doing it anyway.

Heriaks

Thanks for the chapter.

Cat has a new MEGA zombie ! The war campaign against Praes is not without rewards

Shveiran

I mean, she cannot bring it north, but still... it's god damn cool.

[Liliet](#)

Can't she though???? Can't she really???

Who's going to tell her not to

Shveiran

Common sense? Paranoia? An Amadeus-shaped devil on her shoulder?

It's an undead eldritch abomination the size of a fortress, you just don't bring that shit close to Keter.

[Liliet](#)

Their current plan includes MULTIPLE ways of making DK lose control over his undead.

Also, Zombie III was fine.

letouriste

Gods, Yara mocking Akua feelings in that particular way was REALLY excruciating. I didn't feel that particular "mean" way since...high school i think.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

It was gloriously uncomfortable, wasn't it?

Nairne .01

I agree.

kinghaart

To be fair, Akua's feelings for Cat are very Stockholm-Syndrome-y and mocking them kind of serves to point that out in a less direct way (whereas saying it directly would probably just have been met with denial, this way it will dig at Akua and she will Doubt).

[Sugar Roll](#)

I never liked downsizing but after seeing how it's done in Praes, I guess what I've seen isn't too bad.

Frivolous

I had this great idea for a commercial that would work only in Calernia:

Cast: Person A and Person B, and maybe some others to serve as contrast. Person A wears the product.

Action:

Person A turns around and Person B stares at Person A's shapely muscular ass and announces, "I'd like to tap THOSE ass-pecs."

Person A looks over their shoulder at Person B and smiles invitingly.

Then a close-up of the shapely muscular ass clad in denim showing the brand's name and/or logo, and a disembodied voice says, "Ranger Jeans. Rejoice, for you qualify."

What do you all think?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hello yes I'll buy 20 pairs.

Abrakadabra

That is working.

nimelennar

> "Because I do not intend to be Dread Emperor," the pale man calmly said.

Note that, as he's said he wants to end Praes as a Dread Empire, he's explicitly not saying that he doesn't intend to rule Praes.

[Liliet](#)

Fun, isn't it~

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I hope Malicia opens up a shoe shop as part of her abdication. Wouldn't feel right otherwise.

Deworld

Nah. She isn't smart enough for that.

nimelennar

I think she's gone slightly beyond being an Irritant at this point, though.

Shveiran

Also, I think that only works if you ARE an Irritant.

Not if your shtick is, like, manipulating world politics and the fate of kingdoms.

I can see heroes falling for that... not world leaders, though, you know what I mean?

nimelennar

Yeah, I agree. If you perform a few raids across the border into Callow, steal a few sheep, empty a few granaries, but refrain from burning too much down, then the Hero who leads an army might accept the whole abdication deal. If you slaughter armies, occupy Laure and declare Callow to be part of Praes, then when the Exiled Prince comes back to reclaim his throne, he's probably not going to be inclined to be so lenient towards you for being atop the tower when the conquest happened.

kinghaart

Shame she doesn't have a Chancellor handy to hand the scepter to.

sidehammer056302

Wow, I didn't think I could hate the Intercessor anymore than I already did. Poor Akua.

And the Lady, I'm not much of a fan of her's either. Poor Indrani.

And if what is happening is what I think it is, I'm pretty mad at Hakram, too. It was heartbreaking already that he and Cat seemed to really have fallen out, but to think he's willing to play some political game against her, after all they've been through together. No one has ever been closer to her heart, none of the lovers, not her Father, not even the Sisters, Cat's life really is a tragedy. Her refuges of light and warmth are winking out one after the other; if this goes on, I don't see her outliving the war on the Dead King. She's lost Callow to Vivian, Zombie to the Dead King, Hakram to pride, Akua to principal, her Father to ambition; all she has left now is Indrani, Vivian and Masego, and all three of their hearts belong to others, if Indrani doesn't manage to get herself killed protecting her foster-sisters. 😞

Xinci

Bard told her that love always fucks you over. She wasn't exactly wrong. All connections may lead to conflict of interest in time, one way or another.

Zach

But Cat is the one who is essentially ambivalent about Hakram's people. As much as Hakram loves her, he realized that she will never care about the Orcs in the same way she does her own people (and that he needed to step up and become Warlord to do what was best for them).

Catherine had basically ended up with a mindset where she was just thinking of the different peoples of Praes as "game pieces" towards accomplishing her broader goals (namely defeating the Dead King and later passing the Accords). Hakram and Pickler are both highlighting this and represent paths where Catherine isn't unilaterally making all these monumental decisions for entire races (and I have a feeling that the same is true for the humans of Praes re: Amadeus's plan).

Catherine is ended up in conflict with these people because she had taken it upon herself to decide the fates of all these large groups of people (understandably give the stakes, mind you).

Shveiran

I wouldn't go that far, personally. Ultimately, Cat wants to push the Accords precisely to protect and help all these people, orcs and Taghreb and goblins and Sonike and Duni included. It's just that when you are working toward something this large and this game-changing, there is a lot of compromises and even more long-term perspective needed.

It can be rather hard to see what good this does for, say, the orcs in particular, right now; and so on.

Cat is looking out for the continent, Hakram is looking out for the orcs.

And, like, there is nothing wrong with either, really. They are not even opposed.

But they are not the same thing, and Hakram can't actually throw his full weight behind Catherine because he was the Adjutant until yesterday: if he does, and everyone is given reason to assume that he is just an extension of the Black Queen, there would be consequences.

Either he would stop being the Warlord altogether, or no one would take the orcs seriously.

Liliet

I mean, Hakram's dynamic with Cat as her Adjutant was getting increasingly toxic over time for the last several books. They were a perfect match in books 2 and 3 when Cat was leading an army, but ever since Cat started leading a nation... an Adjutant just stopped being what she needed. But they both kept playing the role, awkwardly fitting themselves into the confines and pretending Hakram wasn't much more than that and at the same time more distant than that.

Like, one of Catherine's two spymasters competing with her new personal guard over who gets to fetch her her cloak? That's really a sign that something has gone wrong.

This is better. Sure, they're going to miss each other, but they'd kind of already been spending a lot of time apart BECAUSE HAKRAM'S EXPERTISE WENT FAR BEYOND BEING CATHERINE'S PERSONAL SHADOW.

This is actually genuinely better for both of them, and in the long run I suspect Catherine is going to appreciate having an orc leader who knows what she's doing and agrees with her most important long-term goals very much.

And they will continue to be friends. Of that, I'm certain.

sidehammer056302

I agree with your account of the political situation, a Warlord is by far more powerful than an Adjutant and will likely prove beneficial in the unification of the continent, but to be honest, I care more about Cat's well being than the continent's. The more isolated she is, the more likely she does something drastic near the end. I don't want to see her martyr herself because she has nothing left. I don't want people thinking back on her fondly or bitterly, marveling at

the world she created. I want her to build her city and rule it like the stone cold magical badass she is, ensuring its success not just because it was a good idea and her followers made it happen in her honor, but because she grabbed it by its neck and beat it into submission.

I'm being a bit dramatic, but I feel a sacrifice plot looming, and I'd rather Cat get to have a happy ending. If this really is the final book in the series, I'd rather it being spitting in the eye of the gods and narrative convention than succumbing to the fate of a tragic hero.

Liliet

Honestly mood.

I do however genuinely think that FOR THEIR RELATIONSHIP, FOR THEIR FRIENDSHIP it's much better that Hakram be her equal as another ruler than whatever THAT had been. Seriously, it was *rotting*.

Steven Silver

Malicia thinks Cat will kill Akua if Akua takes the Tower. Amadeus thinks Akua will refuse the tower outright. So, from this, we can deduce one thing: none of that's happening 🤪

dadycool

Akua: "Cat, I'm taking this tower and taking up the arduous and painful task of reforming Praes for the better. Sorry I can't be the seal, but I'm not ready to rest yet."

Cat: "K. Can you send the stuff I need back west?"

Akua: "Sure. Scribe, make it happen."

Basically everyone else everywhere: *confused screaming*

Regret

I think that will become more and more the plan, until in a final twist Amadeus is assassinated and then Cat and Malicia burn the entire city down to ash looking for the culprits, effectively achieving Amadeus's goal. In addition to the current blow to the reputation of the High Seats, the Nobles are all killed as well. Their armies unconditionally surrender to Cat via The Princess for protection against Malicia (who is even more angrily unhinged), giving Cat the diabolists she needs to take out the army of the dead. Since she has almost nothing left to live for, she becomes the seal that holds that undead bastard locked up.

Akua dies saving a part of the civilian population by using all the surrounding death to turn a neighbourhood into an improvised flying fortress that moves away to an abandoned

edge of Praes, starting a religion amongst those civilians which of course has zero overlap with her own morals.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus ""is assassinated""

[Liliet](#)

HOLD THE FUCK UP

> "I remember when the first boat touched the beach," the other woman said. "The sound their boots made on the wet rocks, the way my little brother kept tugging at my tunic in excitement. It wasn't called Ashur, would not be for many years. The men were not yet called Aenian."

IT WASNT BAALITES

IT WASNT MIEZANS

IT WAS THE ARRIVAL OF THE CURRENT DOMINANT ETHNICITY OF THE FREE CITIES

THAT is how far back the rabbit hole goes

[Adrian_V](#)

Yeah i was trying to figure it out too, do you have a cronology of ancient events lying around? xD

[Liliet](#)

Not me, but people have it!

This is the first we're hearing of THESE events though. We do know Aenians are the (current) people of the Free Cities. Otherwise, this is just me parsing the text as presented.

kinghaart

So, does Bard actually have it out for Basillia and the Free Cities? Consolidating them so that she can somehow use the Praes and/or Procer situation to end them?

Could all this stuff with Cat and Akua just be misdirection?

[Liliet](#)

I... genuinely don't think that's her motivation, no.

Xinci

Hakram's goal is quite precipitous, as he must balance the two differing groups and indeed, two differing realms(of steppe orcs and "town" orcs) while avoiding the already solidifying cracks

that would allow a unified enemy leader to enact a divide and conquer strategy on them down the line. The orcs have to be sustained with a steady flow of conflict and food, and a smaller sustainable solidified Ater with semi-independent holdings of Praesi around it actually work quite well for this. As it allows select trade deals for resources from each holding, with the orcs own standing being fairly secure in comparison. The territory taken can be a nexus point for these trade routes in Praes while also connecting to the routes of trade and herd migration in the steppes. Which aids mitigating an eventual split due to cultural drift between the sedentary and nomadic groups of the clans. Given he is going for a mercenary style their trade in orcpower can be used to further align cultural imperatives for the orcs while also bringing back food and resources to the clans, but it still all relies on Praes being in a state a independent troupe of mercenaries is seen as useful rather than a threat to be used as a unifying sharpening stone for the Praesi.

Idrani wanting to be the Ranger makes sense, though given she didnt take that first step, I am curious if she and her sisters will manage to make a Band as she goes on a different route to becoming so. Teamwork did aid them in ways that Ranger couldnt quite get around at times.

Rangers comments very much echo the whole "you painted with too much black", since other elements could have aided them growing further.

Also, Ranger seemed to show that elf-killing tactics rely on being able to sense the "displacement" they have when they decide to not be affected by a rule, which fits given a elf was training her how to do it and her own senses are those of a elf. May or may not have also been touching on the concepts they were affecting to disrupt them and then go for a killing blow. They are akin to living domains, so its entirely possible, given she can touch concepts.

Relatedly, a domain not being internal causing a cascade seems rather logical given things like Skeins cage. A domain is just a set of rules on what reality currently is, so when they run into other rules that all interact it eventually causes a huge chain of cause and effect. I do wonder then how Sve will react to that Tenebrous's, looks like she will probably claim it by the end of this? Also logically under this parts of a soul are "internal" due to having a more stable set of rules for itself? So a domain could go around so long as its inside of a soul?

Also, guess that does indeed mean that, that early reference Bard made about her deal was likely for vengeance.

Nairne .01

Actually, isn't she a half-fae not half-elf?

Shveiran

No, her father was a human captain from a different continent and the mother was an elf.

Her “mudblood” status appears to be a good chunk of the reason why the “good” racist elves come after her, give or take a few centuries of mutual harassment.

Miles

Iirc elves are a type of fae.
Mentioned back in ch 1 or 2 or something.

[Liliet](#)

No. No, they are not.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, that darkness was acting a lot like Night already.
And Night is among other things a domain of sorts.

kinghaart

Maybe Indrani and Alexis and Cocky gain a shared name by defeating Hye and become the... Power Rangers?

Sinead

While I love this chapter, I am left wondering if ‘Cat takes the crown of Twilight’ is going to be how Cat breaks this knot.

The value in what Cat championed is in the idea of institutions over individuals, and too many other people want that to succeed. She has arguably put herself in a position that means her planned obsolescence of her Role is inevitable.

The impression I have is that Hakram and Akua are the only ones who know the full plan. And Cat a) has very limited options on who could be a seal. and b) only two of them are acceptable to her (Akua and herself).

Alex

The Warden of the East would make an excellent jailer for the greatest evil on the continent.

nimelennar

Isn't Keter in the West, though?

If so, would it be Cordelia jailing him, or Hanno?

Xinci

The East is symbolic of all of those old horrors of Evil. The invading horde, the sealed demons, the dragons coming in to burn etc. To be Warden of the East is to be the warden of Evil. Just as the West is the Good Kingdom, defending by a shining royalty, White Knights, heroic defenders against the rapacious hordes. Its more conceptual than topographical.

Steven Silver

I saw a map of Calernia once. A long time ago >_> Ater is like, the Eastmost part of the continent. Callow's to the West, then Procer is west of that and a little North. Procer is big so it kind of wraps around Callow. The Dead Kingdom is North of Procer, though.

Shveiran

I agree. But becoming the warden of Keter seems like an all-time job.

Like, I don't think you can do that and still have a Name that's not Jailer of the Dead, or something like that.

I mean, it's like Rocky becoming a trainer, right? You know he can teach you to punch things right because he was the champ. You know he is qualified.

But he becomes a trainer after stopping being a champion. He doesn't do BOTH.

I can't really see Cat being WotE and also going "By the by, I also keep the greatest evil of the continent sealed up. No biggie."

Soronel Haetir

I would almost rather WB get stuck as DK's Twilight jailer. Akua us – yes –, terrible, but WB has her beat by entire boat-loads of bodies. Akua, on the other hand, could still be useful out in Creation.

I do not, however, believe that Cat's plan was ever anything like kill Akua after Akua becomes Dread Empress. Malicia's death is simply too central too all of Cat's plans, abdication may once have been acceptable but I do not believe so any longer.

kinghaart

Ooooo I wonder if Akua will run into one of the Emerald Swords who will ask why Bard spared her to cause the Folly.

That actually DOES make all of Bard's statements about choice a load of BS because Bard had chose to stop Liesse from happening.

Though a counter argument is that maybe the Emerald Swords really just wanted to get at the Deoraithe spirits in an even more destructive way, so maybe that would have been a terrible outcome too. But we only have circumstantial evidence to suggest that.

[Adrian_V](#)

Me reading Tenebrus died: "Ñ000000000000"

Me later reading Cat's intervention and the raising of the giant Spider: "Hell yes, bring the rock'n'roll music baby!!!"

Seriously i loved that, it is a awesome weapon to have around and it was a former emperor turned monster but i bet the sister regained a lot of night with that move, that domain thing it had was intriguing.

"You're mostly a person these days, it's kind of fucked up you managed that"

As good a description of Akua's whole plot int the story as any, and between Amadeus and the Barb interferences we have no idea how it all will turn out, we still don't even know if Cat is going to help Pickler yet or is undecided.

kinghaart

Cat supports all three, leading the Matrons to duke it out in Foramen while the rest of the Goblins move to Callow.

nick012000

Now that the Bard's spoiled Cat's plan, I'm half expecting Akua to be like "Sorry, Cat, that sounds lovely and restful, but I don't have any time to rest because I've got too much self-flagellating atonement to do" – and unlike what Amadeus or Alaya think, I think that Cat would be totally fine with that.

dadycool

Wow, the Woe are graduating in their own ways. Adjutant, now Warlord, is growing into the name and learning what it really means, Archer is beginning to take the Final Exam of Refuge Academy, and Akua is about to make her own decision for the first time. It's interesting to see that they're all growing alongside Cat, not getting left behind in any way. The only one we haven't seen start to grow is Masego, but he's already basically at the top. Without getting new magic, there's not anything I can see him evolving into.

kinghaart

Maybe he can get the Gift back somehow?

Though I think Masego's arc is with Neshamah, who forced him to kill Indrani. Masego may learn more about the trick of perspective which makes us Above and Below too.

Frivolous

This chapter is very complicated for me, but I think I'm ready to comment now.

First, the plan Amadeus told Arthur Foundling is very different from the one he told Hakram. No mention of Stories in this chapter, just of economics and politics. Why?

Is he lying to Hakram, or just giving incomplete information?

Second, Amadeus claims that Malicia believes Akua will climb the Tower, and then Catherine will murder her. Is this the essence of the story about the wedding (but really a funeral) that the Bard told Malicia in Interlude: East III?

We all know that the Intercessor is a lying liar who lies, but if the plan she told Malicia was a lie, then what is her real plan?

I wonder if the Intercessor is uncomfortable with her body (according to Akua's observation above) because this incarnation is right after Catherine killed her in the Arsenal.

Still don't know what the hell Intercessor was doing talking to Akua. What was the point?

And why not talk to anyone else? Amadeus, Hakram, etc. all left alone. Was it just because Akua was the lowest hanging fruit?

Black Spiral Dancer

What do you mean? Read the other comments, it's simple to see why talk to Akua: to fuck up Cat's plan by making it get spent earlier at the wrong moment.

Now, if you mean HOW that fits with her whole bard-plan and catherine-death plan, well like we would know THAT.

Frivolous

My problem with the Intercessor attacking Akua at this time is that it's so trivial.

Akua is supposed to be the gaoler of Neshamah in the Twilight Ways, and this scotches that. Fine. But that presupposes that the Grand Alliance win the war against Keter and defeat Neshamah.

Until then, Catherine's choice of dooms for Akua doesn't matter.

The Intercessor can be anywhere she needs to be, but even she can't be in two places at once. So why is she wasting time on Akua? That is what bugs me.. She could have been distracting Catherine, distracting Indrani, distracting Amadeus, distracting Hakram.

If I didn't know better, I'd say that the Intercessor has given up. She's wasting time with Akua because she's already lost, and since she can't prevent Catherine from succeeding, she's just being petty and vengeful by screwing with Akua.

ABadIDea

Because she wants to force the Angel Corpse to be used for whatever reason. Without an Eternal Jailer, Quartered Seasons isn't a permanent solution just a stop gap. Removing Akua removes Catherine's eternal jailer, and leaves Hasenbach's angel bomb as the only option. Or at least the only viable option for Hasenbach in a reasonable time frame which means Cordelia WILL use it.

If Cordelia and Catherine fight over whether or not to use it, well that's just a bonus.

Frivolous

ABadIDea: I'm pretty sure that's not logical.

The reason Cordelis is contemplating using the ealamal is because of Keter's armies, which are all undead.

Giving Neshie the crown of Autumn takes away Neshamah's control of the undead. Once the undead stop marching, Cordelia's desperation evaporates.

The eternal jailer part is just a coda. And anyway they can always get an eternal jailer later.

ninegardens

Hell, you don't even NEED an eternal jailer. Just form an order of monks or something- IDK. Shouldn't be too hard.

At the very least, put someone as temporary jailer and then figure the rest out in time.

Not. Too. Difficult.

(once you've got the dead king defeated and shove him in a can, that is)

Miles

Not lik Cat's ever gonna die anyway. All she needs to do is pick up an Evil Role every couple years to reverse her age a bit and then be defeated in a way

that lets her give up the powers to escape alive. Easy. She's done it like 5 times already.

jamesc9

I think that I recognise this plan.

I wonder what happens when the Gods Below notice it and develop a sense of humour.

Shveiran

Yeah. I mean, once he doesn't have an endless army of undead monstrosities and access to millennia of ritual arrays in Keter proper, he is just one powerful entity.

Not nearly as much of a threat, even if he was invulnerable to everything and anything and pooped nukes.

Black Spiral Dancer

Well, you DO know that Amadeus and the Warlord would kill her 3x if she got anywhere near, right? Just like Akua tried to do, but couldn't. So there it is: it was the only named she could screw up with and not get 3x killed.

beleester

I think his answer to Hakram was the more truthful one – a recurring theme in this story is that “great forces” like politics and economics matter more than the individuals acting in them. The reason the Dread Empire tries to conquer Callow isn't just because that's a classic story, it's because the Empire will starve without Callowan grain. The story that he told Arthur is just the means to that end – something big enough to change those forces for good.

I think Amadeus's take on Malicia's plan is mostly accurate – that sort of “I win by making everyone else lose more” scheme is her trademark. But I think the Bard's plan is to build off the story it creates – everyone coming together in one place to make their demands, forcing Catherine to play the role of arbiter/warden/whatever her Name will be. And once she comes into her name, she's vulnerable in some way? Still not sure where it goes after that.

Frivolous

beleester: Interesting answer. I hadn't expected that.

Other commenters have in the past responded about how only Amadeus' ability to craft a good Story matters, rather than

his ability to attend to a large number of tactical, strategic, and logistical details.

Your idea about what the Bard's plan is makes sense. Thank you. I'd been wondering what Malicia's invitations to everyone of note were about.

My own opinion is that the Bard might hope to fool Catherine into taking up the Role of warden for the political East, rather than the Story East, but that the scheme will fail because Catherine is mostly indifferent as to who rules Praes. She's too canny, and she just wants a lot of diabolists.

In other news, I think Hakram is foolish to be so insecure about Catherine's love for him. I'm increasingly hopeful that Catherine to some extent anticipated all his moves.

She may even have intended for him to become Warlord, because she knows how he likes to fix things, and the orcs' relationship with the rest of Praes and with Calernia could not be fixed by anyone but the Warlord.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly yeah I'll be surprised if Hakram the Wardlord was not an outcome Catherine had considered.

[Liliet](#)

He hasn't actually told Hakram the whole of his plan yet, the actual bargain/plan is left offscreen.

And he had no reason to tell Arthur the economic implications. Arthur wouldn't understand/care, and Cat can figure it out on her own.

Frivolous

I think that translates as the Intercessor has given up.

She can't talk to anyone without eliciting attacks that banish her, so she wastes her time and actions with Akua.

Theoretically the Intercessor should be acting in a way that helps her regain some credibility with the heroes and villains of the Truce and Terms, or that advances her aims. Being mean to Akua doesn't do any of that.

Frivolous

In other news: I wonder how smooth a ride is the Dread Conveyance Tenebrous.

I can envision Tenebrous becoming a fashionable travel method. But only if the ride is smooth.

If the ride isn't smooth, Tenebrous can still haul freight.

beleester

I still can't figure out what Amadeus's goal is. He's all but said that he wants to destroy the Tower and its institutions, but I don't think he simply wants to split Praes into its component parts. That wouldn't end well for anyone – it would either turn into civil war or get carved up by the Grand Alliance the moment the war is over. So how do you hold Praes together without the Tower? Move the capital somewhere else?

Also, I note that he's made very different pitches to Arthur and to Hakram. To Arthur he basically said "Here's how I'm destroying Praes's national identity, army, and leadership in one fell swoop", but with Hakram he's taking a more measured view – "We know there are three main problems with Praes. I solved one by blowing up Ater. Now we need to solve the other two, or the Dread Empire will turn on you like it always does." Neither Hakram nor Amadeus seem to believe that Praes is as crippled as he made it sound to Arthur.

(Amadeus's original plan was not to destroy the Empire, but to make it so secure that the Emperor no longer needs to wage pointless wars to keep his position. I suspect his goal still involves some sort of independent central authority in Praes, just one that's not tied to the Tower and its accompanying love of stupid evil schemes.)

[*Liliet*](#)

"That's the Dread Empire"

"What else is there?"

Amadeus very much implied the destruction of the story to Hakram.

Someperson

Even odds the endgame with guarding Neshamah in the Twilight Ways is just a straight up lie that Catherine told Just to screw with the Bard. Yara of Nowhere isn't omniscient, I have to wonder where she learned the specifics of a plan Catherine only seemed to have uttered once and to a limited audience...

[*Liliet*](#)

I imagine she talked about it more with Hakram.

And she didn't actually explain it to Masego. The explanation was internal monologue, audience-only.

And yall are forgetting that Yara of Nowhere *sees stories, all the stories, all the time*. Not stories being told, stories happening and about to happen. What Catherine was doing with Akua was a story whether anyone knew about it or not, so Yara knew. Catherine herself could have been ignorant of what she was doing, and Yara'd still know.

Someperson

Sure, but the outcome of Akua shoved into the Twilight Ways with Neshamah to create a Sealed Evil in a Duel is just... Pretty specific.

It doesn't honestly take an immortal dedicated to understanding stories to figure out that Catherine is preparing Akua for some sort of sacrifice for the greater good, or even that it would be a long price and not a quick sacrificial death at a critical moment, but stories have some points of flexibility. Seeing the shape of a story doesn't necessarily fill in all of the details. The bard acknowledged that there were many ways Akua's story **could** end but professed specific knowledge of what Catherine was planning.

Sure, maybe the Bard is just that good. But I have my doubts.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think it's about her being good. It's that Catherine having that plan in mind made it so this was the story that was happening: Catherine was grooming Akua for that role. That was a *fact*. Bard gets to know that sort of fact.

SuitorShooter

Literally anything: **Dies**

Catherine: It's free real estate.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The best part is that this also applies to Catherine herself, as you know.

Frivolous

While we're waiting for the extra-special extra-long next chapter:

Just now and belatedly realized that Amadeus's plan all along had to do with the orcs. I feel stupid for taking so long to see it.

It was Amadeus and Ranger who caused the Emerald Swords to attack and depopulate the fortress of Chagoro, which in turn led to the Horde invading Praes.

It was Amadeus who all along was conspiring with Grem One-Eye, who is an orc and a genius.

I think Amadeus always intended to speak to the High Lord of the Steppes and/or the Warlord who came as the leader of the Horde. If not Hakram, then Troke.

Whatever Amadeus's plan it, it needs the Horde as a vehicle or instrument.

The good news, from my point of view at least, is that Catherine knows at least some of this. She was the one who deduced that it was the Emerald Swords who killed every soldier at Chagoro.

She might therefore have been able to anticipate Amadeus's moves.

Also, I wonder where Grem One-Eye is. Still in his house under arrest, or has he gotten loose by now?

[Liliet](#)

I mean, his house with a bunch of guard is probably the safest, comfiest and coziest place for him to be rn. Gives him a front row view, too.

Hakram's Dead Hand

What a great chapter. I love the Ranger Sub-plot. It has some really cool action scenes, like them fighting on top of Tenebrous. I also love the reminders that Indrani is still incredibly intelligent, and it's nice to finally see her discover more about herself. It's just right that Ranger's apprentice does this by fighting.

kinghaart

Yeah I liked the little segue into magical theorumms in the midst of a battle.

Interlude: A Girl Without A Name

"Fate is a stone made up of your every deed and hung around your neck. If it breaks your back, there is only one soul to blame."

– Queen Eleanor Fairfax, founder of the Fairfax dynasty

Sitting on the edge of a rooftop, looking down at the long stairs of stone, the Wandering Bard began to tune her lute. This, she knew, was to be the place.

–

Ater was still as a grave.

Vivienne had last seen a city so injured in the wake of First Liesse, as she ghosted through the fallen city avoiding the Fifteenth's goblin hunters, but the tone of the streets was different here. In Liesse the people had been happy in a bittersweet way, for though the rebellion named after their city had died within its walls the people had been spared a dark fate at the hands of a horde of devils. Here there was no joy, the Princess thought. Ater was huddling in its houses, averting its eyes even as the last ashes of the Battle of the Spiders began to cool. But underneath that fear, Vivienne thought, there was anger. Furious, desperate anger.

The High Seats had massacred thousands to contain the spiders, and while there were many who'd argued much worse would have happened if they hadn't the opinion was not popular. Not when everyone had a cousin or a daughter or a husband who'd seen the household troops of the great nobles retreat to their barricades in good order and leave the rest of the city to burn. Reports had come overnight from the Princess' agents that it was Malicia that was being blamed for the spiders themselves, seen as some kind of desperate attempt to destroy the capital's current favourite: Lady Akua Sahelian.

The Empress in the City, they called her.

There had been no riots since the end of the battle, no mob had taken to the streets as the Legions moved to clear out the last of the giant spiders and seal the openings, but the anger and fear hung in the air like poison. The stalemate in eastern Ater behind the horde of orcs that'd seized the city and the noble armies that'd entered it illegally kept the people behind closed doors, afraid of another battle erupting, but it wouldn't last. Like all leashed monsters, it would shake its way loose eventually. Someone was going to pay for the Battle of the Spiders, but the part worrying Vivienne Dartwick was that she wasn't sure *who*.

"Gods," the Squire muttered. "The city looks empty. Not a stray cat out in the streets."

"Assuming there are any left, after the spiders," Vivienne drily said.

It was not yet dusk, but on the horizon the sun was dipping low. They would make good time, she thought, as their party had yet to even be hailed as it passed through the ash-strewn streets of the city. Not that many would dare make demands of the force the Princess was leading into Ater: only twenty knights of the Order of the Stolen Crown rode with her, but a cohort of legionaries from the once-Thirteenth marched behind them. Wind picked up suddenly in the distance, making strands of some sort of iridescent cloth spin under the sunlight, and half her men reached for their swords. They had come invited, but most her soldiers were Callowan: no one here put much stock in the Tower's word.

Arthur Foundling grimaced at her answer, soft-hearted boy that he still was. Catherine had been adamant that he come with her even though Vivienne would have much preferred Indrani as an escort, but the Princess understood why. The pattern of three between him and the Black Knight was a tool that would be very precisely used so the day could be brought to the right ending.

"The Carrion Lord is a monster," the Squire cursed.

Vivienne cocked an eyebrow.

"Water is wet," she answered.

The young man had the grace to look somewhat embarrassed. He had an expressive face, young Arthur. That was for the best. Vivienne preferred knowing where she stood with him: the heroes that were most controlled, like the Pilgrim and the White Knight, tended to be dangerous and unpredictable. That expressive face flickered through hesitation, then the steel of determination.

"Did she know, Your Grace?" the Squire asked.

Vivienne kept her eyes from glancing at the broken districts they had left behind her. Ravaged by devils and demons and monsters of all stripes. *Did the Black Queen know her teacher was going to do to this? Did she allow him to consign thousands of innocents to death for some mad plan?* The Princess met his eyes squarely.

"No."

The dark-haired squire looked guiltily relieved and Vivienne was again reminded of how young he was. Young enough he'd not thought to ask the right question. Would Catherine have intervened, if she knew? Vivienne was not sure, and the thought worried at her.

There had been a time where her friend would have executed someone guilty of something like the Battle of the Spiders without a second thought. Cut their head off where they stood. But that'd been before the Everdark, before the war on Keter and the dark choices it had demanded of them all. Catherine sacrificed people more easily than she once had, and it did not eat away at her so much afterwards.

It was something she'd had to learn to keep them all alive, Vivienne reminded herself.

And yet the Princess could not shake the thought. This entire campaign, beginning with the attack on Wolof and then moving through the bruising battle at Kala and now this bloody wrestling match over Ater, it felt... different. It was not being waged like older campaigns. Lives were being sacrificed for Named victories, for schemes that used the very currents of Creation, and there'd been a time where Catherine had balked at such things. If the way she'd been going about it had reminded Vivienne of the Black Knight or Tariq Fleetfoot she would have set the worry aside, but it wasn't either of those men that came to mind sometimes.

Vivienne Dartwick was one of the few people alive to have been in a band of five with the Wandering Bard, and dreaded that sometimes she saw glimpses of one woman in the other.

"Thank the Gods," Arthur Foundling murmured. "That would have been difficult."

An understatement. The boy cheered up soon enough, fears alleviated for now. Lucky him.

"So how did was our invitation secured, anyhow?" the Squire asked. "I'd heard that Dread Empress Malicia wanted the Grand Alliance nowhere near her court."

And there was the counterargument to Vivienne's fears, brought out by the same young man who'd raised them. She slowed the gait of her horse and flicked a glance behind them. Arthur followed her gaze, both of them taking in the massive shape of the great undead spider that loomed over the eastern walls.

"I asked her why she chose to raise Tenebrous," the Princess said. "It seemed wasteful and slow, if she only intended to fight Ranger. But it was never about that fight – she was forcing Malicia's hand."

Arthur looked surprised.

"The Empress is hiding in the Tower," he said. "I doubt a simple undead monster is enough to topple that abomination."

"Malicia herself is out of reach," Vivienne agreed, "but what about everyone else she invited?"

That'd been the unspoken threat. If the Grand Alliance were not invited, it would have to knock. And maybe the empress could ride out that storm, but all the other guests had assets that mattered to them in the city. Would they stay and humour Malicia at court while their armies and kin were being trampled? And so Catherine had raised a city-sized spider so that she could then refrain from using it, still getting exactly what she'd wanted all along. That was the answer to Vivienne's every fear, every worry about her friend and queen growing harsher and more ruthless by the years. She was all those things, yes.

And it worked.

The Princess breathed out, spurring her mount into a trot. It would have to be enough. After the war there would be time to learn kindness again. For all of them, not only Catherine. Until then, she would silence her doubts. And continue to carry into the heart of Praes the two deaths she had been charged to bring, one hidden and one due.

"Let's hurry up," Vivienne Dartwick said, looking up at the looming shape of the Tower to the east. "It begins at dusk, and it would not do to be late."

—

Dusk was coming and with it the end of Alaya's reign.

The Dread Empress of Praes leaned against the balcony, watching night crawl over her capital. There was no wind here, enchantments prevented it, but high above the perennial storm clouds that haunted the Tower's heights were roiling. Five years ago she'd been the law of this land: her enemies had been broken, her influence spread to every nook and cranny of the empire. How quickly it had all gone wrong. Now she struggled to find the decision that had begun it all. Letting Akua Sahelian loose to build her weapon instead of having her decapitated head tossed into the Hall of Screams, maybe. Yet the thought was cowardice, the avoidance of a less pleasant truth.

There was no 'one decision' to point at because she'd been losing her grasp for years.

Alaya was not yet certain it had been a mistake the doomsday weapon. Had it not been broken during the Folly, had she had more time to lay the foundations abroad... Well, the world would never know. But looking back, it had been foolish of her to go about it the way she had. She should have sat with Wekesa and explained her reasons, asked for his help. She should not have gone behind Amadeus' back to get it built either, for though it was her right

as his empress it had also been a betrayal of their partnership. Too many things between them had been left unsaid over the years, the weight of too many private disappointments coming to crush their backs.

"I became comfortable," Dread Empress Malicia quietly told the horizon.

And though the Tower could forgive a hundred thousand sins, never once that. No, she had made mistakes. Others had as well, but those were not hers to answer for so what point was there in listing them for the Gods to hear? Ater would need to be rebuilt, and this time Alaya would see it done right. As a capital of a great empire should be, not the horror it had been. Those who had supported her she would reward, those who had betrayed her she would bury, and beyond that there were... affairs to settle. Mistakes had been made on both sides but from them she would salvage what she could.

Though Amadeus' stroke of madness with the spiders had become a stone around her neck, the city being convinced it was her doing, Alaya held no grudge. Even in the years of their parting, they had never struck direct blows at one another. That hope she cradled still, for all the cold of the night, and though it was not an answer for their years of bitterness it was not nothing either. A foundation, perhaps, for something new. A different understanding of who they were to each other. It would have to be revisited when she reclaimed her throne. *If* she reclaimed her throne.

This game was now long past certainties.

Ime's soft footsteps shook her out of her reverie, though she did not turn to look at her spymistress. The other woman came to stand at her side instead, sharing in companionable silence for a moment before the demands of the evening forced an end.

"It is all in place," Ime said. "They are beginning to arrive."

Far below, Malicia could make out the distant banners of Takisha Muraqib and her many vassals. Like a river of colourful silk they streamed down the avenue, preparing to enter one of the formal gatehouses that would allow entry into the Tower.

"I might well lose, tonight," the empress admitted. "It's been a long time since I was so close to complete defeat, Ime. I cannot help but think it might be one many years in the making."

A moment of silence.

"It has," Ime finally said. "You have been making mistakes, Alaya. Embracing schemes more convoluted than they need to be, using the same tactics that put you in a corner to try to get out

of it. It got worse after Amadeus left, but the tendency was there even before."

The spymistress grimaced.

"But you kept winning anyway, so who were we to argue?" she said. "Only the victories became narrower, costlier. And now here we are, at a crossroads where there is so little difference between victory and defeat they might as well be the same thing."

The words stung, but Alaya did not flinch away from them. She was not in a position to close her eyes.

"There will need to be changes," Malicia quietly admitted.

Ime nodded.

"It will not be the same, after tonight," she said. "But I would not have you forget, Alaya of Satus, that you ruled ably for forty years. Longer than any tyrant before you, perhaps longer than any tyrant ever will. Your reign waned, as all crowns do, but that does not lessen the achievement."

"I'd thought to have eternity, once," Malicia smiled. "Forty years seems all too few."

"It has been a worthy reign," Ime softly replied. "And I am proud of the part I have played in it."

Alaya's eyes moved to woman at her side. It had been many years since the two of them had shared a bed, and even when they had there'd been nothing more than attraction behind it. That weighed as much as dust in the wind. But the years themselves, Ime standing at her side, those mattered. More than she had ever spoken out loud, and perhaps that should end. When would she speak the words, if not now?

"You are the one who stayed," Alaya said. "I will not forget that, Ime. It..."

She hesitated, tongue stumbling over the words.

"I am grateful," Alaya said. "That you are with me. That you have been for all these years."

Ime smiled, her face worn with age but her eyes still so bright as they had been in their youth.

"I don't regret it," she said. "Even should we lose, I will not regret it."

Connect bloomed to life as the Dread Empress smiled back at her spymistress, a reassuring pressure against her soul. It was not a lie. Ime would not turn on her, not even now – the loyalty she

felt had not lessened. Both of them looked down below, beholding the City of Gates.

"I must go," Ime finally said. "I'll see you on the other side, Your Dread Majesty."

"Gods willing," Malicia smiled.

And if not? Hang them all. Ime disappeared into the Tower, the sound of her footsteps fading away, and Dread Empress Malicia was left to her thoughts.

Somewhere below her the girl come to take her throne was taking her first steps up the Tower.

—

Akua Sahelian looked up at the dark clouds above, breathing in the evening air.

The stairs beneath her feet were smooth stone, carved into the likeness of twisted and weeping souls. Every step she took was on their backs. The Sentinels stood on the sides in eerily still rows, garbed in wrought steel as their eyes followed her from beneath the black iron masks covering their faces. Akua had been in the Tower before many a time, but this was the first time she had ever been invited to take the Tyrant's Gate. The dark-skinned sorcerers breathed out and resumed her climb, Kendi trailing behind her like a shadow. He would not be allowed in at her side, but he would accompany her every step of the way until then. It was reassuring weight to have at her back, his hatred. Like a knife at her throat. There was not a sound to be heard save for their boots against the stone, and under unblinking stares they reached the summit.

Before them stood before an intricate puzzle of obsidian, shifting pieces of it inscribed with runes. The gate was tall as three men and half as wide, thrumming with ancient power. The brother of a woman she'd led to her death at the Folly stood by her, eyes hooded.

"It means nothing," Kendi quietly said. "That is the secret of this place. It is an altar to Below, and you may think yourself the mistress but all you can ever be is the sacrifice."

He leaned closer.

"Climb and bleed, Akua Sahelian," he whispered into her ear.

She did not turn to watch him leave, disappear into the deepening shadows. She would meet him again tonight, but the crossing would be hers alone.

"I come summoned by the Tyrant," Akua Sahelian called out, voice calm. "Gatekeeper, grant me entrance."

The obsidian pieces shivered, twisting and turning as if it were living flesh. A terrible face emerged, its great and burning eyes the ancient runes for order, and the ancient demon that Dread Emperor Sinister himself had bound to the gate began to laugh. The sound was like rust swallowing a precious thing, the death rattle of a hundred babes.

"You," the demon said, "are of the master's blood."

"True to it, my mother liked to say," Akua replied.

The old abomination laughed again. Every instance was a fresh horror.

"I grant you entrance, Akua Sahelian," the demon said.

She shivered. The face shattered, breaking apart in tiles of obsidian, and locks unseen began to open one after another. The gate slowly opened, revealing a floor of dark marble leading into an antechamber. Akua stepped through the threshold, eyes growing accustomed to the gloom, and as the gate closed behind her she found a lone Sentinel waiting for her. They stood at the edge of the high-ceilinged room beyond the antechamber, not far from mosaics enchanted with curses so hateful that she could almost taste the emotion in the air. Akua approached, cocking an eyebrow at the soldier.

"A lone soul to guide me up the Tower," she said. "My own personal psychopomp, is it?"

She offered the Sentinel a smile.

"Elegant to the end, Malicia," she said. "Shall we?"

The Sentinel nodded. Oh? Unusually expressive of it. They led the way through the large room and up the spiralling stairs, not that Akua found it hard to keep up. She ran her finger against the scaled railings, the sculpted serpents shivering at her touch. The sorcery in the stone was older than Procer, but it purred maliciously at her touch.

"So how did you end up chosen for this, anyway?" Akua idly asked. "Picked the short straw?"

An amusing thought, a pack of eerily Silent sentinels staring at each other through the iron masks while drawing from another's hands.

"I volunteered."

The golden-eyed sorcerers almost missed a step. A man's voice, that. She could make out as much even through the mask. And a very unusual Sentinel indeed.

"Alas, if you intended to seduce me then I must warn you that my heart has already been taken," she easily said. "It should be somewhere north of Vale, assuming a wight didn't eat it."

The Sentinel did not betray amusement, thought it was hard to tell through that armour.

"I will have to live with the disappointment," the Sentinel replied.

Akua's fingers clenched. No, that wasn't a Sentinel at all. The same sorceries that made them so unflinchingly loyal to whoever held the Tower did not allow for anything as delicate as a sense of humour to remain. Her steps stuttered, stopped. She laid a hand on the railing.

"Who are you?" she coldly asked.

His hand went up, reaching for the top of the helmet. There was a little click, then another, and with the deft fingers the man took off the iron mask. Below were pale green eyes she had seen before, though the face around them had aged since she last saw them.

"Akua Sahelian," the Carrion Lord said. "We are overdue a conversation."

A flash of rage seized her by the throat, clenched her muscles.

"We have more than that overdue," she snarled.

Sorcery came to her harsh and eager. The fireball she tossed at his face was cut through – a single smooth movement from draw to strike – but she'd known it would be. It had bought her the moment she needed to sink her hooks into the railing through her hand, part of the stone smoothly coiling around arm as a fanged head emerged behind the Carrion Lord and struck. He parried it somehow, reflexes inhuman even without a Name, but it was a sword against stone. The steel broke, and when he avoided the snakes' second attack the Duni found that the wall behind him had turned into a nest of snakes. The Tower sought her commands hungrily, like a hound starved of affection.

The snakes in the wall caught the Carrion Lord's limbs, and as he struggled to rip himself free Akua coldly smiled.

"Rip," she ordered in Mthethwa.

The snake come from the railing hit the side of the armoured man like a scorpion bolt, fangs sinking in and wrenching out an

entire armour plate as well as chunk of the aketon beneath. The Carrion Lord's jaw clenched in pain but that was only a start. Releasing the railing, Akua strode half a step and sunk her knife deep under his ribs. In the stomach. The man gasped and she felt a spurt of satisfaction.

"I could have aimed for the heart or the lungs," Akua told him, tone even, "but you don't get to die that quickly."

She twisted the knife cruelly before ripping it out, enjoying the way his face drew tight.

"Did you think I'd forgotten my father's death?" she harshly said. "The goblins might have pulled the triggers, but the kill was yours from beginning to end."

Feeling like she wanted to rip out his throat with her own teeth, she stabbed him in the stomach again and ripped it free in a spray of blood.

"You are no longer under Catherine's protection, you old fool," she hissed. "And I am no longer at her side. Did you really think that without her in the way there was anything stopping me from killing you?"

To her utter fury, the man hacked out a wet laugh.

"No," the Carrion Lord said, lips flecked with red. "But I knew you'd go for the slow death."

"And what does that give you?" she mocked.

"Until I bleed out," the green-eyed man replied, "to convince you to heal me."

Akua blinked at him, silenced by surprise and utter disbelief.

"Mother always said," she finally replied, "that you were just as mad as your predecessors. Just better at hiding it."

The Carrion Lord slumped down against the wall, armoured boot slipping against the stone with an ungainly sound. He was, she noted, positioning himself so he would bleed out more slowly. A methodical lunatic to the end.

"This is the Tower," the Carrion Lord said. "Where are the mad to go, if not here?"

He looked amused. Akua sliced him across the face for it, deep through the nose and both cheekbones.

"I've always used torturers instead of my own hands," the golden-eyed mage said. "But for you, Amadeus of the Green Stretch, I will make an exception."

And maybe his screams would drown out the sound the bolts had made when the volley had pierced through Papa's flesh. A thump, she thought. Almost like biting into an apple. She cut him again, stabbing deep into his cheek until she felt bone.

"I imagine you'll get practice enough," the Carrion Lord rasped, "as Dread Empress."

She laughed in his face.

"Is that what this is all for?" Akua said. "You cower at the prospect of my taking the Tower?"

What a stupid way to die, she thought. He chuckled wetly, tongue flicking across his lips but only spreading the red.

"So which was it the Bard pushed you towards?" he asked.

Her eyes narrowed.

"She wants me to take the throne," Akua said after hesitating a moment. "I think. But as a Dread Empress Benevolent the Second."

Dread Emperor Benevolent, the first and only hero to have ever reigned over Praes. At war with over half the realm from the moment of his coronation to the last gasp of his very grim end. There were few tyrants who could boast of having beaten Dread Empress Massacre at her namesake, and Benevolent was hallowed even among those. He'd come terrifyingly close enough to *winning* that he had been purged from every known record, demons of Absence being put to work to tie up loose ends. Only private libraries like those of the Vault still had mentions of him.

"Always a game behind the game with her," the Carrion Lord said. "We haven't seen the end of it."

"You have," Akua smiled.

His face had grown even paler. The internal bleeding must have been excruciatingly painful, she thought with satisfaction. May at least one of the screams he was swallowing make it to the feet of the Gods Below, so that they might pass it on to Dumisai of Aksum as his daughter's funerary gift.

"Maybe," he shrugged, hacking a cough after. "But that matters little. I am an instrument. If purpose is served, the outcome is acceptable. It's you that concerns me now."

"Oh?" Akua smiled. "How novel. Won't you Speak to me, Carrion Lord? Ask me to knife my hand again. See what happens."

She stuck him in the stomach again, just because she could. He gasped in pain.

"Have you decided I am not fit for the Tower?" she mocked.

He laughed.

"Worse," the man said. "I put the nobles of the Wasteland to the test, Sahelian. Only one passed."

Even though the implication was obvious, the sheer absurdity of what he'd said meant it took her a beat to realize. It was unthinkable. His hatred of the nobility was a keystone of his reputation, his legend. It would have been like Catherine staying sober for a month, or Vivienne Dartwick not being a disappointment in every single way she could be. Still, the sentence had her lips quirking into an unpleasant smile.

"My, but that must sting," Akua purred. "Though if this was meant to silence me, I must say-"

"Do you want to rule Praes?" the Carrion Lord bluntly cut in.

She blinked. Hesitated.

"What is your game, Duni?" Akua finally asked.

"You could," he said. "Maybe even well. I don't like it, wouldn't like what you would do with it. But you could."

"Are you offering me your support?" she asked, voice thick with disbelief.

At least the blood loss was making him entertaining. Akua did hate a humorless bleeder.

"You remind me of Alaya," the Carrion Lord noted. "When we were young. The best of her, and some of the worst. And there are rules. So you could claim it."

"And what would that have to do with you?" Akua scorned.

"Is it worth keeping?"

She paused, studied him through narrowed eyes.

"You are trying to talk me out of taking the throne," Akua said.

It was the best reason she'd heard to climb the Tower so far.

"Heh," the man said. "No. I want more than that. But this first. You've been out of the cage, now. Seen the world. The Dread Empire of Praes, the way it is, is it worth keeping?"

Akua's lips tightened. If it were, would she be so horrified at the thought of being forced to rule it?

"What do you want from me, Carrion Lord?"

"Nothing," the man laughed, his green eyes bloodshot. "I already know your answer. Wouldn't have passed otherwise. You see it now, don't you? *The sickness.*"

"And you think yourself the man to excise it?" she laughed. "Oh, the cold man with the hard hand here to teach us his better ways. Praes is not a young widow looking for excitement, Carrion Lord. There is no appetite for Dread Emperor Amadeus."

"It's not about me," the dying man said. "Or you. Look around, Sahelian. *Why is this still standing?*"

"There is nothing else," Akua said.

"Maledicta the Second," he said. "After her assassination-"

"Haider's Reign," she frowned.

"The Throneless Years," he retorted.

Both referred to the same two decades after Maledicta II's death, though his term was the one used by the Tower's formal chroniclers.

"You want to change Callow for Keter," she realized.

She was reluctantly impressed by the boldness.

"No," he coughed. "Not just that. It ended with Vindictive the First. It shouldn't have."

Akua breathed in sharply.

"That would not be an empire," she said.

The man offered a sharp, bloody smile that split his face in two.

"No," he agreed. "It wouldn't be."

"You talk in circles," Akua said. "What is it you *want*, Carrion Lord?"

He moved and she almost slashed him against, but he didn't even have his sword in hand. It was further down the steps. Instead he was pawing at his belt with armoured fingers, and what he presented her he was holding between his thumb and his forefinger. Akua stilled.

"Take it," he said.

"This is a trap," she replied.

"The trap is in not giving it to you," he rasped. "I see that now."

He coughed out a laugh, red trailing his face, but his eyes were clear.

"I always thought it'd be me," Amadeus of the Green Stretch confessed. "That it was what I was for. But that was arrogance, Alaya was right. I never loved this place enough to have the right. It has to be you."

"You despise me," Akua said.

"Yes," he smiled. "But it has to be you. Because you passed. Because it's in your blood. The original murder, Sahelian, isn't that your family's favourite boast? You began it all."

She snatched it out of his fingers, as if expecting to be bit, but there was nothing. No trap, no trick.

"And that's all it takes?" Akua asked.

"A choice," the Carrion Lord rasped. "What more could you need? It's the only true gift the Gods gave us."

"You don't know which one I'll make," she said.

He grinned, blood-streaked and nasty to the bone.

"*Mile thaman Sahelian*," the Carrion Lord mocked.

Her fingers clenched.

"Were you not going to convince me to heal you?" she sweetly asked.

He shrugged.

"Win some," he began, "lose-"

She stuck the knife back in his belly.

"There," Akua hissed. "You'll bleed out slower, and that's the only mercy you'll ever have of me."

Let him die here at the bottom of the Tower, forever reaching beyond his grasp. She kicked him away and he fell down a few stairs. She breathed out, looked down at the small thing still in the palm of her hand. She closed the fingers, breathed out and settled herself. She rose, to the distant sound of a dying man whistling the tune to an old song.

It was, Akua realized as her blood ran cold, *The Tyranny of the Sun*.

—

Breaking into the Tower had been *shockingly* easy.

Archer had felt a little cheated, even though it stood that things should be pretty much stacked in their favour. The three of them had Scribe guiding them for one – well, arguably this was about them escorting Scribe but eh – and the great difficulty in accessing the Tower from underground was gone. The giant spiders lurking in the tunnels were, you know, already topside in dead. Which meant the tunnels were moist and stinky but not actually all that dangerous and they'd made it to what Scribe claimed to be the lowest levels of the Tower, the 'underpinnings', without much trouble.

"The haven't been many guards," Cocky said.

Which was all well and good to say, when she hadn't been doing any of the killing. That'd been Indrani and Alexis, yeah, as usual doing the grunt work.

"The Tower is as a city within the city," Scribe replied. "Most parts of it are like small villages that rule themselves with only occasional intervention from the tyrant. I've had us skimming the edge of where the latrine men live. They post few guards, and the Sentinels are spread too thin to plug the gaps as they usually would."

"I'm not complaining," Alexis grunted. "Hopefully it'll be just as easy getting to this Ime."

"We've been lucky," Scribe said. "She'd be much harder to get at if she hadn't gone to the underpinnings."

It was nice of the Huntress not to be the kind of heroine who asked too many questions when Catherine sent you to capture, interrogate and execute the leader of the Eyes of the Empire but unfortunate since Indrani *did* actually have questions about that. Now she was going to have to ask them herself, like an asshole.

"Do we know why she's down here?" Archer asked.

The corridor ahead of them was empty, as the last two had been. They were large, windy and winding things that snaked towards a distant centre. The grounds above which there was an actual giant tower, presumably. The Tower was kind of like a tree, the 'roots' that were the underpinnings actually spreading out much further than the structure stood.

"There has been activity from the Eyes down here over the last two days," Scribe said. "Presumably Malicia is preparing something for her guests upstairs."

Which was presumably one of the reasons their buddy Ime was going to be interrogated before the execution. Might be useful to know what Malicia was up to except for going crazy and pissing everyone off. They switched corridors twice before finally running into people, which happened to be a pair unarmed messengers. Alexis was a softie so she knocked hers out, but Indrani wasn't in the business of letting liabilities get up. Hers wouldn't. They were close to the centre, Scribe told them, and it checked out: moments later they ran into the first checkpoint manned by Sentinels. Only ten of the, though, so before long the four of them were wiping their blades. and moving on.

Another two checkpoints with Sentinels, but after that it was only Eyes manning the gates and they honestly weren't much to write home about. Like, even Cocky could handle them up close and in Indrani's humble opinions there were some trouts in the Hwaerte that would give the Concocter trouble in hand-to-hand.

"It's unusual," Scribe noted. "It should be Sentinels handling this, not Eyes. Ime is trying to keep something quiet."

"Quiet from who?" Indrani frowned. "The Sentinels answer only to the Empress, right? They're supposed to be all brainwashed to be loyal."

"Exactly," Scribe replied, sounding fascinated. "So what is it that she's trying to hide from Malicia? And more importantly *for who?*"

There wasn't time to stop and interrogate a prisoner even if they took one, since if they stopped pushing in there was a decent chance someone would find one of the older corpses and send a warning ahead, so they pressed on urgently. It went pretty smoothly until they hit a real blockade with crossbowmen and a few legionaries – unmarked, so they were likely Eyes too – that made it a proper fight. Alexis took a cut on her face and Indrani had to ask for a healing salve for her hand after she made a mage eat his own fireball. Hilarious, but she wasn't made of fingers. Unlike that fucking toucan yesterday, there was an image that'd stay with her for a while.

Behind the blockade Scribe had told them there was one of the main water tunnels for the Tower, but the large room they entered past the corpses had a lot more than water in it. It also had what was at least a thousand magically sealed barrels, not a single of which was stacked over another. There were even little palisades between sections: whoever had put these there had been real careful about it. That smelled of danger to Indrani, but she didn't get to spend much time thinking on it because there was also an old woman inside the room and Scribe was looking all pleased.

"Just a guess," Indrani called out, "but would you happen to be Ime?"

The old lady was Soninke and pretty clearly getting long in the tooth, but she was keeping it tight. Probably highborn, they tended to age better than most out in the Wasteland. The older woman glanced at her and then sighed.

"And I take it you three are the Ranger's pupils," she said before her eyes moved to the fourth among them. "Scribe, I see you've stopped clutching the Black Queen's skirts long enough to make act of presence. We're all very grateful, I'm sure."

"I might clutch them," Scribe mildly replied, "but at least, unlike some, I can claim never to have been *under* my patroness' skirts."

"Savage," Indrani appreciatively said.

On the other hand, while Malicia was terrible and kind of evil but she was also ridiculously good looking so, you know, respect.

"I suppose it is harder to get into pants," Ime smiled pleasantly. "Though certainly not for lack of trying."

Indrani shared a look with Cocky, who was also smothering a grin. It wasn't often they got to hear the old guard air their dirty laundry, this was to be savoured. Only, Gods forgive her, Archer was actually kind of in charge here and they had a mission to get done. Once they nabbed Ime and got her singing, they'd finally have an idea of what the Hells was going on here on top of neatly ensuring Malicia wasn't going to see Vivienne coming. There was a reason they'd brought Scribe here: once the current mistress of the Eyes in Praes had gone to join her agents Below, the old one could step back into the role.

And it some of the officers hesitated, well, that was why they'd brought knives.

"It genuinely breaks my heart to stop this," Indrani told them, "but we're going to have to wrap this up. Ime, congratulations, you have been taken prisoner. Please don't resist, we're trying to wean Alexis off kicking people and it only encourages her."

"She's lying," Alexis flatly said. "They're not actually trying."

"Charming," Ime drily replied.

Scribe suddenly hummed, stepping back from a barrel.

"These are goblin-made," she said. "Straight from the Eyries. What is it you're doing down here, Ime?"

"You don't know," the old woman mused. "Interesting. So why are *you* here, if not to interrupt me?"

"It doesn't matter," Scribe said. "It's finished."

There was a long moment of silence as the two women stared each other down. Indrani awkwardly cleared her throat to get their attention and was entirely ignored.

"You're here for me," Ime quietly said, "because you're trying to blind us. You smuggled something into the Tower you're afraid I'll catch."

"You're losing your touch," Scribe smiled.

"That's enough of that," Archer sharply said, baring her blades. "We're done here. Scribe, shut your mouth and Ime-"

"Assassin," Ime hissed out. "You brought Assassin in here. You're trying to kill Malicia."

Fuck, that wasn't great. She put a spring to her step even as Ime began to move away, past rows of barrel and close to the large water-filled tunnel flowing behind them.

"I'm sorry about this," Indrani said, halfway meaning it.

"I'm not," Ime said, then glanced at Scribe. "Do you think you're the only one who can bargain with devils?"

Oh boy, that did not sound – Archer ducked, the arrow brushing through her air. On a balcony above, the Ranger nocked a second arrow before leaping down. She landed at Ime's side, looking amused.

"Devils, are we?" the Lady asked. "Ime, you're getting rude in your old age."

"Well, we can't all be born ageless bitches," the spymistress flatly replied.

Cocky swallowed a laugh behind her.

"I'm calling in my marker from helping Grem get his letters out," Ime continued. "I need to get out of here."

"I needed to be here for the barrels anyway," Ranger shrugged. "Go ahead."

"That's not happening," Indrani flatly said.

Behind her, Alexis nocked an arrow. Tension rose.

"Hey Scribe," Ime called out.

The villainess in question stared at the other spymistress.

"Yes?" she reluctantly.

Ime glanced at Ranger, then at the three of them.

"Mine's bigger," she said, and broke into a run.

It went downhill from there.

—

The twenty-fourth level of the Tower was large enough a scream would echo, the Warlord thought.

It was a striking place, as befitting of the hall that hosted the imperial court. Black marble walls rose tall, touched by plume of colours: makeshift pillars of cloth hanging from the ceiling in red, green and gold. The floor beneath their feet was a great mosaic depicting the history of Praes. It went as far back as Subira Sahelian murdering the founder Dread Empress Maleficent in order to become Dread Emperor Sinister and stretched out to events as recent as Wekesa the Warlock immolating Thalassina – the only event of Malicia's reign depicted at all. Everywhere jewels were set in walls and furniture while gold veins dripped down stone as gilded ornaments.

The two orcs at his side, Oghuz the Lamé and Hegvor Allspeak, looked intimidated by the luxury. There were benches here set with enough rubies to feed either of their clans for a year. And some of the nobles wore on them more wealth than any of them would spend in a lifetime: enchanted cloths that looked like shadows, rings made entirely of rubies and even a woman in full dragonscale armour.

"There is nothing to be impressed of," Hakram spoke in Kharsum. "What is there here that was not built on our backs?"

"Ha," Chief Hegvor snorted. "Well said."

"Should have taken the court instead of the camps, Deadhand," Oghuz grinned, baring fangs at noble who'd come a little too close. "More loot here and fewer swords to defend it."

Few of the nobles had dared approach to talk since they had come, and none since a young lady vassal to Okoro had tried to needle Oghuz and gotten an eye ripped out for it. High Lady Abreha had visited before, courteous for all that she might well be their foe now, but High Lady Wither was keeping to another part of the hall. They'd traded nods but nothing else. Nothing more was needed, in Hakram's opinion. They were allies, not comrades.

"When is Malicia meant to come out, anyway?" Hegvor asked.

"When everyone's here," the Warlord grunted. "She's taking her time, reminding everyone she's important."

"Can't be many people left," Oghuz opined. "The Callowan princess was invited into the back just now, and she was one of the last to arrive."

Vivienne had not stopped to talk, but Hakram hadn't expected her to. She... would not take the choice he had made up north well, he knew. Perhaps worse than Catherine would, though that might be wishful thinking on his part. Either way he'd known that she'd avoid him beyond the necessary until there was opportunity for them to speak in private. She preferred to vent her anger away from prying eyes.

"Company," Hegvor said.

The Warlord followed her gaze, finding an old companion at the end of it. Akua Sahelian was dressed simply, for a noble, but that was a statement of power too: she needed nothing more than dress in white and gold to draw the eye. It was easy to forget how powerful a mage she'd been, but now it was impossible to ignore: even from across the room, her power filled the air. Behind her trailed a dark-skinned man with a short beard and golden earrings. Mage too, by the robes. Mfuasa? Might be someone High Lord Sargon had sent to spy on her. The hall did not quiet when Akua came to stand before him, but eyes followed. They were of interest. They were watched.

"Warlord."

Hakram considered her. The face was a mask, as it always was, but below that he smelled... unease. Something was unsettling her, and for once it was not him. What kind of trouble had she found, that she might then find him preferable to it?

"And what am I to call you, Akua Sahelian?" he asked.

The mfuasa at her side smiled.

"The name is enough," the golden-eyed noble said. "It has been some time, Deadhand. We stand on grounds much changed."

"The trick is to change with them," he gravelled.

He stepped forward, she to the side. It was almost as if they were to begin a walk together, an illusion of companionship.

"Have you?" she asked.

Hakram studied her a moment. She seemed *sincere*. Not it was his turn to be unsettled.

"More than I thought I would," he admitted.

A pause.

"You?"

"I," Akua Sahelian, "am trying to decide."

"That was always your trouble, Sahelian," Hakram gravelled. "Too much red where the thinking should be. Too much thinking where the red should be."

She grimaced.

"I've suffered many a skewering this week," she said, "but not one of you has had the decency to at least stab me as well to distract from the ignominy."

His gaze sharpened.

"Visitors?"

"An old friend," Akua easily said. "The one who talks too much. And another since, whom I left bleeding to death in the stairs."

Hakram clicked his tongue.

"You know better," he said. "Unless you take the head..."

She smiled.

"Then I will get to kill him twice," the sorceress said. "Hardly an imposition."

The Warlord was more impressed that the Carrion Lord has survived a run-in with that one after killing her father than worried about his accomplice's survival. Like as not, he'd planned for it. The man was the kind of clever that thought receiving stab wounds was an acceptable step in a plan, which was by far the stupidest kind of clever.

"And what did our old friend want?" he asked.

A long silence.

"I am less sure," Akua admitted, "the more I think of it."

That was the curse of facing the Intercessor, wasn't it? Your reaction to her prodding might well be part of her plan in the first place. It was like facing an oracle out to get you.

"That tends to be the way with her," the Warlord conceded.

She glanced at him, seemingly amused.

"And if I ventured to ask you for advice, Hakram Deadhand?" Akua said.

He considered that a moment and chose honesty.

"I don't like you," the Warlord said.

"It's actually rather refreshing," she admitted, "for someone to say to my face."

"I don't like you," Hakram repeated, "but I did respect you, once."

"No longer?" she asked, sounding more curious than offended.

"When you were the Diabolist, you were terrible," he said. "But you were truer to yourself than most people ever are. That, if not the deeds of your hands, was worthy of respect."

She chuckled.

"You've always had a knack for surprising me," Akua said.

He snorted, dismissive. She'd just never learned what to expect from him.

"She only has the power we give her," the Warlord said. "That's her trick. Be who you are, Sahelian. Right or wrong, at least it will be true."

Her face closed, eyes looking away. The silence stretched out.

"I never liked you either," Akua confessed. "It was the loyalty as much as the lack of ambition. There was never a lever to pull with you, so I could never be comfortable."

"And yet here we are," the Warlord said.

"Here we are," Akua Sahelian softly agreed.

She breathed out shallowly.

"Do you know what the difference is," she asked, "between a knot and a noose?"

He laughed, to her visible surprise – which in turn surprised him. He'd thought she was making a reference.

"It's the setup of an old joke in Kharsum," Hakram told her. "Because the words are the same, only with a suffix added."

She cocked an eyebrow.

"So what *is* the difference?" she asked.

"They're the same thing," the Warlord told her, "until there's a corpse."

Her face was a blank mask, for a moment, until to his utter surprise and that of most the hall she burst out laughing. Long, throaty and loud. She laughed and laughed, until she trailed off into giggled as she held her ribs loosely.

"Until there's a corpse," she repeated, grinning and shaking her head.

Unsure what had set her off, he settled for eyeing her warily instead.

"I thank you for the advice, Hakram Deadhand," Akua said.

"Found what you were looking for?"

She flexed her palm, smiling.

"Close enough. Fare well, Hakram."

Het met her eyes. Moments passed.

"And you, Akua," he replied.

She left, still shaking her head and smiling. Her attendant, who she'd never introduced, waved a cheeky goodbye. The Warlord flexed his dead hand, wondering if he'd just made a mistake. Whatever the truth of it, though, it was now too late. Events were in motion, even those that had nothing to do with the sorceress. From the corner of his eye he saw that a warrior with a painted shield had come from below to speak to the chief of the Split Tree Clan in a low tone before being dismissed. The Warlord glanced at his adviser, who came closer. Hegvor leaned his way so she could whisper into his ear with her lips hidden from sight.

"We have word," she said. "We've taken everything we need out."

Hakram nodded, satisfied. On schedule.

"And our way out?"

"Waiting for the signal," she said.

Good. Everything was in place, then.

There was nothing left but seeing how the dice fell.

—

Arthur wasn't sure what in the Heavens he was doing here. A trophy hero, maybe? No, that thought was unkind to the Princess and she'd done nothing to deserve that. The Woe had their reputation, but he'd never seen Princess Vivienne be anything but roughly decent. Even Grandmaster Talbot spoke well of her, and when wariness was in order it was not tinted with the kind of

fear that the Black Queen commanded. No, the Princess earned rue instead. Arthur would not be surprised if the barracks tale of the Thief having stolen every pair of shoe Brandon Talbot owned after he misspoke in court were actually true.

"I'd expected Queen Catherine to attend personally," Dread Empress Malicia said. "One must wonder what preceding claim there might be on her time."

The Squire had heard the empress was the most beautiful woman in the world and he supposed she was graceful enough, but it was a kind of put-together that put him ill at ease. Like a man too handsome and well-groomed, it hinted at artifice or vanity. Princess Vivienne had taken it in stride, though, and looked calm as a pond on a windless day.

"She likes to delegate minor affairs to me," the Princess mildly said. "I'm sure you won't take offence."

It wasn't a question. While those two continued to spar, Arthur let his eyes and attention wander. There were few people in the antechamber where they had been invited by the servants and fewer still who talked. The Princess had been allowed two guard compared to the twenty Sentinels in here, and to match Arthur himself an old foe had been summoned. The Black Knight loomed so tall he had to wonder how she'd even been able to enter the room, her heavy plate dark as pitch and polished like a mirror. The warhammer whose head rested on the ground was almost as tall as a man, and Arthur knew from experience that to take a blow from it without Name strength was to lose whatever limb was struck. She'd plowed through a line of legionaries like they were kindling back in Wolof, never even noticing that they fought back.

While their rulers talked, the two of them stood to the side like ornaments. He'd felt the Black Knight's gaze on him several times and returned the favour when it moved away. He could not help it. *Why is it that Nim Mardottir is your enemy, Squire?* The Carrion Lord's words were like a fly nipping at his neck. The man had been playing a game, pretending they were not at war and the Black Knight not Malicia's greatest servant, and yet the hesitation remained. Because Arthur had never really questioned that he was going to kill the Black Knight before this all ended, and that admission shook him. It'd just been a given. He was the Squire and she the Black Knight.

What other way could it end?

Only now, without violence between them, he was standing next to her and noticing things. That she seemed as bored with the talk as he, that she liked to drum her fingers against the grip of her warhammer. Small, meaningless things. But it made her less a force of nature, of Evil, and more a woman in black armour. Maybe she was both, Arthur thought. Maybe that made it even worse, that

she'd had a choice and still made this one, but the words felt weak. The resolve behind them was fragile and Arthur Foundling had not become a squire so that he would grow into the kind of knight that swung a sword weighed down with doubt.

So he asked.

"Were you in the streets, when the spiders came?"

His voice was quiet, so that the two rulers by them would not be drawn into it, but the Black Knight heard him. Her armoured head moved to study him in silence. After a moment, she nodded.

"I looked for you," the Squire admitted.

"I know," the Black Knight replied. "Our pattern is not yet finished."

So she knew, he thought with surprise. He wondered what it must be like, knowing that the very currents of fate had worn into Creation the promise of your death. Looking to the horizon and seeing only darkness ahead. It must feel, Arthur Foundling thought, a little like being alone on a shore and knowing nothing you could do would change anything. That the man you loved would still be dead even if you swung your sword until the Last Dusk. It must have had the bitter taste of futility to it.

"I wish it didn't have to be this way," the Squire said and found he meant it. "That it could be... fair."

"Fair is not what we bargained for, Squire," the Black Knight said. "We took on the mantle knowing there would be days when we taste blood, when ashes sift through our fingers. My people say that on the day we are born, our death is born as well. We run towards it, it runs towards us, and the most we can take from life is to steal a march on it before we meet."

She sounded calm. Serene, almost, and Arthur felt a surge of disgust clog his throat. Not for her but for him. Nim Mardottir was the one with the sword hanging above her head, and yet he was the one babbling like a sentimental child. It was shameful.

"I'd thought you would hate me," Arthur quietly said. "I almost wish you would."

The Black Knight chuckled.

"Black and white," she said. "That's always been the game. Hate it or laud it, nothing changes. So why burden yourself with the hate?"

He swallowed drily. There was an answer in him, but he did not know how to voice it. Could not, and suddenly he realized there was a silence in the hall. For a moment he feared that their talk

her interrupted that of their rulers, but when he looked it was not there that their attention laid. Someone had come up stairs in the back of the antechamber and was forcing their way through the Sentinels. It was an old woman, dark-skinned. Princess Vivienne went still.

"Assassin," the old woman called out. "Assassin is here, Malicia. He's coming for-"

One of the Sentinels behind the empress moved jerkily, blade coming out as the Callowan guards shouted in alarm and reached for their swords. Only the killer was too fast, too smooth, and even as Malicia's eyes widened and she began to turn the point of the steel touched her back – only for a great hammer to smash through it, shattering the blade.

"Behind me, Your Dread Majesty," the Black Knight said, moving the shaken empress.

The Assassin, still faceless and garbed as a Sentinel, immediately began attacking again.

"*Treachery*," the Princess called out as she drew her own sword. "They're attacking us. Squire, face the Black Knight."

Heart in his throat, Arthur drew his sword. Was this it, then? Their ending. The orphan was not a fucking fool. He'd been sent here so that he could kill the Black Knight and clear the way for the assassin his own queen must have sent.

"Why?" he heard the empress ask her champion. "You-"

"I cannot tolerate the way of the world," the Black Knight answered, sounding as if she was smiling. "So I must change it. I will not compromise who I am."

It was like a punch in the gut. *Why is it that Nim Mardottir is your enemy, Squire?* Gods, was that who he was? The kind of knight he was going to be?

"No," Arthur Foundling answered, biting down on his indignation. "No."

He moved, Name pulsing, and struck. The blade ripped through the Assassin's hand as he jerked in surprise. The killer drew back to flee, Sentinels converging on them all as the Princess watched them all with cold eyes. But it was the Black Knight's gaze he met, finding the silent question it held.

"Not black and white," the Squire answered. "Right and wrong."

It was just words, but they burned in him. Scoured his veins clean, cleared his gaze. It felt like he could breathe again, stand straight. It would stay with him, the answer. He would

carry it with him wherever he went, sword in hand if he must. Because it wasn't a game, never had been, and if for just a moment people could believe that the graveyard might stop devouring the world.

"Right and wrong," the Black Knight quietly repeated.

And as they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the assassin, the Knight Errant finally found he could smile.

—

The Lady had healed up but so had they.

Scribe disappeared early, which was for the best because she'd only get in the way. Yesterday it'd been half a game, at least until the end, but today there was nothing playful about it. There was no tide of devils to put in between, no spare breath to be squeezed out as the world whirled around them. Down here there was only the stone and the water and barrels around them.

That and the years of poison they'd brought in with them.

"He was still wearing those fucking bells when he died," the Silver Huntress snarled. "Did you know that? Did you even care enough to ask?"

Her spear skidded along the Lady's blade, the tip exploding with Light, but she'd already shown that trick before. Creation narrowed to an edge as Ranger cut through the burst of Light with her other sword, flipping her grip to ram the pommel into Alexis' mouth. Teeth broke and the redhead rocked back, might have gotten her throat cut if Indrani didn't leap over a barrel to stab at the Lady's back. Her wrist was caught and Ranger was angling to spin and tossed her into the water when Indrani leaned forward to ram their foreheads together, buying just enough room not to get eviscerated when the Lady's blade came up towards her belly.

She was still thrown, rolling on the stone until she got to her feet. Alexis has spat out blood and teeth, her spear alight in silver as she circled around a pack of barrels to bring the fight to larger grounds. Good call. Space was better for them than Ranger, especially when Cocky was cooking up surprises behind them. A glance told Indrani she'd opened a barrel with a knife and was studying the contents with wide eyes. Archer cleared her throat, trying to draw her attention so she'd actually toss the concoctions she'd prepared for this fight, but she was ignored.

"John had promise," the Lady calmly said. "He was sharpening. If he'd stayed a few more years instead of run off to play the hero against my instructions, he would still be alive."

"Of course he ran off," Alexis snarled. "You fucking hammered into his head that he wasn't as good as the rest of us, that he needed to prove himself. If it hadn't been the Liesse Rebellion, it would have been any other of a dozen wars. And he would have died in all of them."

Ranger seemed amused.

"If you were so concerned, why did you not accompany Indrani when she went to fetch him?" she asked.

The Huntress' answer was inarticulate rage, leaping forward over a barrel instead of completing a circle. Indrani cursed under her breath, hurrying up. Alexis had gotten baited and paid for it, Ranger on her before she landed on the stone and catching her by the throat. The Huntress was slammed on the floor, hard enough that her bones cracked, and would have gotten a blade through the eye if Indrani hadn't thrown one of her longknives at the Lady's back. Hye Su snatched it out of the air and threw it back without batting an eye, but the heartbeat was long enough for Alexis to wriggle out of the grasp and kick the Lady away. Archer caught her own blade before it could carve through her throat and breathed out in relief, hurrying to the Huntress' side so she would be able to get up without getting killed.

"You need to stay in control, Alexis," Indrani harshly said. "If you get angry, get stupid, you'll die."

Ranger sighed.

"This is sickening," she said. "You need to make a decision, Indrani. Are you trying to win, or are you trying to be liked? Because now you're trying to do both, and you are *failing*."

"Yeah, she's trying," Alexis growled, spitting blood to the side. "It's why she's already better than you. Did you ever find out how Lysander died, Ranger?"

"Disappointingly," the Lady said.

"Alone," Alexis said. "He died alone, not even forty feet away from someone who would have fought at his side. That's what you taught us. That's your fucking legacy, Ranger. Dying alone, just like you will."

"The difference between us, child," the Lady of the Lake replied, "is that I do not fear it. And that's why you'll lose."

And the thing was, Indrani still admired that answer. It made her blood sing, it was everything she'd decided she wanted of the world as a child. But that couldn't be her, not anymore. Because it'd mean leaving behind Masego, never again curling up by his side to read. Never again talking late into the night. It would

mean leaving Cat for good, the laughter and the warmth and the home she'd made herself into. It would mean no more rooftop skulking with Vivienne, no more dicing with Hakram. Hells, she'd even miss Akua and the way they talked trash about everybody else.

Indrani didn't want to stand alone anymore. And maybe she'd die that way anyway, but she wouldn't make herself pretend it'd be a good thing.

"You didn't need to be," Archer said. "Alone. That was a choice."

She'd made it. But had any of them had, or had she made it for them too?

"You'll learn otherwise," Ranger gently said, then her eyes hardened. "Or you'll die. One last lesson for the three of you."

"Here's one for you too," Cocky said.

The thrown vial broke against the floor, small puffs of grey smoke taking to the air and then wildly swelling. The grey began to billow in every direction but neither Indrani nor Alexis hesitated to charge in. They knew exactly what this was, and they were in no danger from it. Ranger was better than either of them at fighting sightless, but there was something to even the odds: the moment she took a swing and Archer parried it, the Lady let out a soft noise of surprise and backed away. Yeah, the smoke was eating away at her gear. Figured she'd notice when blades clashed. The Huntress pushed but had to draw back when she almost lost an eye.

Indrani tried to flank, blades high, but Ranger backed away entirely out of the smoke and it dispersed after a few more moments.

"That explains the smell," the Lady frowned, eyeing her dulled blades and eaten at cape. "You coated all your equipment in a solution to prevent it."

"I still remember when we first met," the Concocter said. "Do you recall the first question I ever asked you?"

"Could you have stopped it," Ranger quoted.

"You didn't," Cocky said. "You let them die, because you didn't care. And that's all you are, isn't it? The absence of caring. That's the sum of you."

"How far you've travelled, Concocter," Ranger said, "to still be standing by that campfire, looking for someone to save you. Is that all you learned of your years as my pupil?"

A glance was flicked at Indrani and Alexis.

"Different saviours to beg salvation from," the Lady of the Lake scorned.

"No," Cocky snarled. "I learned too much from you, Hye Su. Let it sink into my bone like a fucking disease. But I've given you that for too long."

The Concocter smiled, hard and proud, and looked away from the Lady. At the two of them.

"Constanza," she said. "My name is Constanza."

Indrani went still. The Concocter breathed out.

"Let's finish this," she said. "All three of us."

Alexis breathed out, hands shaking.

"Yeah," the Silver Huntress got out through her broken teeth. "Time to end it. Indrani?"

Archer met the Lady of the Lake's eyes.

"One last lesson," Indrani agreed. "For us, and for those we left behind."

Violence ensued. Steel sang and Cocky – Constanza, she thought with wonder – unleashed all she had prepared. The poison cloud that hurt only elves, the sentient drops of hate that hunted the sole person who'd not drunk an obscuring potion, the fumes that turned to glue and the glue that turned into acid. Ranger came for her, seeing her as the weak link, but none of them minded. It told them where the fight would be. Indrani took the first wound, a slice across the face. Cocky the second, an arrow that went through her shoulder. The Lady went third, losing her cloak and the edge of her eyebrow when Archer setup Alexis to detonate her spear next to Ranger's head.

There was no elegance to it. It was simple, brutal attempts to kill. And Gods forgive them, but they were losing. Even with all the tricks and the rage, she was just too fucking good. No pass worked on her twice, and every time a sequence did well against her the Ranger learned in the moment that followed and turned it back against them. It was like fighting a mirror, only the reflection was *better* than them. Archer fell first, to a kick in the stomach as she parried her death away, but Alexis had overextended. She took a slice across her face, across her right eye, and as she drew back in pain the opening was made. Indrani felt a shout rising up her throat as the Lady darted forward past the two of them.

To Constanza, whose fingers were fumbling over a vial. The sword was swung, the arc smooth and perfect about to take the head of a

girl Indrani had known since they were both children. Only it was the Lady that fell instead, taking a hit in the side as a cloaked figure stepped out of nowhere to her left. The Emerald Swords, Indrani thought as she rose to her feet. They must have used the same tunnels. Ranger swatted one away but three more materialized in the heartbeat that followed and there was no room to manoeuvre down here. Another appeared by Alexis's side, striking her knee behind so she'd fall, and Indrani rolled to the side just in time to avoid being skewered by a sixth.

Evidently, the Emerald Swords were done fucking around.

"Cocky," Archer shouted across the din. "This is done. We need to leave."

She backed away from the elf pursuing her, the slender sword seemingly made of wood biting into her longknife like it was made of cheap tin. Fuck. Alexis had gotten away from hers and they came back to back, safe enough that Indrani could spare a look away. Cocky hadn't been targeted, they weren't seeing her as a threat, which meant there were eight of the fucking Emerald Swords fighting the same woman. And, terrifyingly enough, though Ranger was losing it wasn't by a large margin. She was being pressed back, not overwhelmed.

"We grab Constanza and go," Indrani said. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Alexis grunted.

They moved in unison, ducking beneath a blow as Alexis lit up her spear and used the flare to blind their opponents for half a heartbeat. Indrani used the delay to leap over a row of barrels, landing in a roll on the other side as a sword cut through where her belly would have been if she'd been standing. Fuck, she hadn't even heard the elf move. Cocky was, inexplicably, dipping what looked like a long thin stick into the barrel she'd opened earlier instead of *fucking running away*. Another flare of silver light, then Alexis was with them. Half her face was covered in blood from the cut Ranger had left her with, and that eye might well be a permanent loss.

"What are you doing?" the Huntress snarled, "we need to-"

Constanza reached into the pouch at her side and took out a red gem, idly throwing it at a barrel to their right. The stone hit and got stuck on the wood, then began to shine.

"Fuck," Indrani swore, throwing herself down.

The world exploded in green. Goblinfire. Merciless Gods, the place had been loaded with the largest amount of goblinfire Indrani had ever seen. And there were explosion in the distance, like there'd been other stacks out there. She got back to her

feet as Cocky smiled smugly. The roar of the flames had surprised everyone, but it looked like the Lady had been the one to pay for it. She'd gotten run through from the back, Indrani said, and another Emerald Sword had just broken her jaw. A third was about to put his blade through her heart when he suddenly backed away, a chandelier writhing with green flames falling where he'd just been.

The goblinfire was spreading everywhere but nowhere more than near where Ranger still was. Lying on the ground and bleeding out, the elves struggling to get close enough to finish her off.

"All three doors are on fire, you fucking idiot," Alexis said. "How are we supposed to get out of here, Cocky?"

Even the water wasn't an option. It was on fire too, because goblinfire was a goddamned horror.

"By following me," Constanza smugly replied.

She still had that slender stick in hand, and when she pulled away she kept it high. What had to be the goblinfire from the barrel followed it, like a strand of glue, which was weird. Goblinfire wasn't supposed to do that when inert, Indrani was sure of it. She must have done something to the substance while everybody else was looking. They followed her, and as if that stick was a magic wand the Concocter used it to part the flames in front of them. Every time she touched the green fire with the coated end of the stick, it was sucked in up the strand and towards the barrel. Which was not, as far as Indrani could see, burning yet.

"Straight path," Cocky said. "I can only divert so much before the threshold is passed and my barrel blows too. That... won't be pretty. Dragon blood is something of an amplifier."

Oh, that did not sound good at all. Still better than dying in a fire, though, so on Indrani went. And the straight path they were taking through a cage of flames was, inevitably, one that led them straight to the Lady. Still lying down there, bleeding out. There was movement, the Emerald Swords coming, but Cocky was quicker: she flicked her stick, snapping the strand, and a curtain of goblinfire closed behind them. There was a thundering sound inside a heartbeat later, the barrel finally exploding. But that felt another world away, when they were here looking down at Ranger. The three of them shared a long look.

An understanding came, eventually.

"We could leave you to them," Alexis said, crouching by the Lady's side. "Toss you back in there to die."

"It'd be deserved," Constanza said, crouching on the other. "A long time coming."

"It's one way to end this," Indrani said, meeting her teacher's eyes. "To make sure you don't come for us to even the scales for today. That you don't decide it makes us worth hunting."

"But I still remember when they sent me into the woods to die," Alexis said. "The look on the elderman's face. He thought he was doing right by the village. One girl for all of them. And I never got angry enough to forget that look, Ranger. To remember I swore I'd never be like him."

"I could let them kill you," Constanza said. "Like you let those bandits kill my family. But that's just you winning, isn't it? Me still living by your rules. And I won't have that, not anymore. I'm going to be *better*."

"There's dues, though," Indrani said, knife in hand. "And I have learned a thing or two about long prices. So here's your ending, Lady of the Lake."

The hand came down, the knife slicing deep across the nose. She passed it to Alexis, who cut deep down the left cheek. And she passed it to Constanza, who cut the last down the right cheek.

"They'll scar," Indrani said, knowing it to be true.

"Every time you look at them, remember that you once had pupils," Constanza said.

"And that you might have left marks on us," Alexis grinned through broken teeth, "but we left those on *you*."

A strange expression passed in the Lady's eyes as they rose, one after the other. Indrani did not dare put a word to it. They left her there, lying on the stone as the goblinfire burned behind her. Maybe she'd get up, maybe she wouldn't. Either way, it was on her alone. The three of them left the same way they'd come.

Together.

—

The Dread Empress looked troubled.

Akua was not the only one to have noticed, and all who did were troubled in turn. All of the city knew that Malicia had gathered the court here tonight so that her reign could end in dignity, so that she might try to become Chancellor under the new rising power or otherwise seek mercy. Most would be disinclined to grant it, but Akua Sahelian was said rising power and it would be her decision to make. If she sought to become Dread Empress. If she cared to sit the throne that Malicia was going to empty.

Yet here the empress was, looking troubled. Something must have happened in the receiving room out back. Vivienne had left it in a hurry, and looking harried, while the young man who was the Squire these days had looked oddly serene. Power now wafted from him stronger than Akua had ever felt it, which smacked of a transition – as did the even look of respect he had traded with the Black Knight before they parted ways. A Squire no longer, perhaps. For the best. Akua had struggled to pair the Name with anyone who but the last woman who'd worn it.

What had happened in there? Akua considered her curiosity, then set it aside. It was of no great import. Events were precipitating, and after the empress glanced away her face returned as a lovely mask of control. The doubts gone, and the tension went out of the nobles. All was as it should be. The Dread Empress of Praes would present one last play, and the fate of Praes would be decided by the worthies of this great hall as it had been for centuries.

"She schemes your death," Kendi whispered into her ear. "They all do, or will. One day they will see the truth of you, and all of Praes will recoil."

She considered that.

"Do you like singing, Kendi?" Akua asked.

"My sister did," he smiled, without a single speck of warmth.

"Have you ever heard *The Tyranny of the Sun*?"

He cocked his head to the side, nodded.

"What would you say it's about?" Akua murmured.

The dark-haired man held his tongue, chose his words.

"This very hall," Kendi Akaze finally said, "seen from below."

The Carrion Lord, she thought, really was such a terrible prick. She'd liked that song once, for all that it was maudlin and banned by decree. It had such a pleasant melody. Only now all that she could think of was that it dated back to the Sixty Years war, nearly five hundred years ago, and already the singers sounded... tired. Of all this around her, of the empire writ in dread. Of the dooms sought to the west, a hundred apiece for every ashen victory. A servant came to her, offering a golden goblet, and she almost smiled. Ah, there it was. She took it in hand but did not drink, dismissing the man. Akua waited in silence, even her supporters standing far from her now that Malicia was seated on her throne.

Out of fear, yes, but not of the empress. None wanted to steal from her moment and earn her ire for it.

"Akua Sahelian," Dread Empress Malicia said.

Silence fell like a blanket over the court. Not a soul dared to move.

"Malicia," she replied.

The older woman smiled.

"Am I not your empress, Lady Akua?"

Akua gently smiled back.

"Are you the empress of anyone at all, Alaya of Satus?"

A shiver in the air. Sharks smelling blood in the water.

"A bold claim," the empress said. "Empty, if no one speaks for you."

And that was the part where her backers were to step forward, speak on her behalf. Make boasts and promises, praise her deeds. It was rare for the throne to be abdicated with a semblance of peace, but hardly unheard of. Some tyrants could grasp that it was over before they found themselves bleeding out on the floor with a knife in the stomach. Some had even spared their predecessor instead of ordering their death as their first decree. All very civilized, an old play put on with fresh colours. And no doubt Malicia had a scheme at work. Malicia always had a scheme, it was her blessing and her curse.

But Akua had not climbed the Tower and walked through the Hall of Screams so that she could dance to the empress' tune.

"No," Akua said.

Surprised silence. She swept the hall with her gaze, saw wariness and greed and hate in the eyes of those around her.

"I am tired," Akua said, and then forced herself to say more, "of this, Malicia. This... play we are to put on. The pretence that you leave this throne willing, that I take it up instead of seize it."

"All of the empire is a stage, Akua Sahelian," the Empress replied. "We play our roles."

"And where did that get you?" Akua asked. "*Playing along.*"

Malicia's face, so lovely and so cold, hardened.

"Those graceless in victory," she said, "are uglier still in defeat. Take care to remember that."

Only, Akua realized, the empress' attention was only half on her. How delightfully insulting. Malicia was looking around, scanning the room under the pretence of matching eyes with highborn. She was looking for someone and Akua happened to know exactly who.

"She's not going to come," the golden-eyed sorcerers said.

Malicia turned to her. Now she had the full attention.

"All that cleverness," Akua mused, "turned to waste by a single mistake."

"You-"

Gods, but she was tired. As if the Tower had eaten the marrow of her bones, left her to walk rattling. Tired and irritated, because what was even the *point* of this?

"Step down," Akua cut in, "or be made to."

The empress looked as if she had been slapped. Akua took a step forward, then two. Malicia looked so utterly at a loss that she almost laughed. The dark amusement running thick through her veins, she raised the golden goblet she'd been handed and tossed it at the Dread Empress of Praes. Who looked like she'd just swallowed a surprised yelp as she ducked out of the way. The goblet clattered against the throne of the Dread Empire, that ancient ghastly thing. The dark liquid dripped down the welded stone and iron, the ancient seat little more than a squat, ugly pile of stones.

Akua advanced, passing by the aghast Malicia without a word. She came to stand by the old thing, trailing a finger down the arm. She turned to offer a smile at the nobles below the dais.

"My ancestor," she told them, "murdered a woman here. Before this very seat."

Her hand left the stone.

"She trusted him," Akua said. "And he plunged a knife in her belly. Left her to bleed out on the floor. And when the life left her eyes, he sat down on the throne and named himself Sinister."

She had them, she could see it in their eyes. The hunger, the want. To be her, to serve her, to fuck her – to eat her whole, swallow up everything that had made her rise and make it their own. What was this empire, if not a covenant of the hungry?

"My mother used to say that Maleficent made an empire, but that it was Subira Sahelian that made it the Dread Empire," Akua said.

"She was not without wisdom. And that legacy, that blood, it carries with it a duty."

You have the master's blood, the demon bound to the Tyrant's Gate had said. Her line had been there since the first stone was set over another. Masters of dread, makers of horror.

"And so here I stand, where Subira once stood, beholding his work," Akua idly said. "And I wonder – would he still have plunged the knife, knowing what we'd become?"

The crowd shuffled, uneasy. These were not the words they had come here to hear. That was not her role in the play. They should have listened to her more closely.

"There comes a time where one must look back and ask: what purpose does this serve?" Akua said. "One thousand and three hundred years the Dread Empire has stood. Through triumph and disaster, through the darkest pits and the tyranny of the sun. And now, looking back, I ask you: what purpose do we serve?"

Unease thickened. She was mad, they thought. They had chosen a madwoman to lead them. The dark-skinned beauty laughed.

"I struggled with the question," she admitted. "But we do find answers in the strangest places."

What was the difference, between a knot and a noose? *Nothing*, Hakram Deadhand had told her, *until there is a corpse*. And that was the balance of it. The Dread Empire of Praes, was it a knot that could be undone or a noose strangling its people?

One need only look out the window to know the answer.

And so Akua Sahelian touched her sleeve, taking out the terrible gift her enemy had given her. Such a small thing, for the power it held. She touched it to the arm of the throne, the rough stone.

"Nothing," the blood of the original murder told them. "We are not the masters of this place, we are the sacrifice. And so I tell you now: this Dread Empire is at an end."

Smiling, Akua Sahelian struck the match against the throne. It burned bright and, feeling as if finally she could breathe, she dropped it on the throne. Where the goblet had spilled.

There was a heartbeat of utter stillness, as if the world itself had ceased spinning.

Then the throne burned green.

—

The world had been shattered under their feet.

Alaya was a fool. The Intercessor had never even been an ally of convenience, the old monster had known from the start that her scheme was fatally flawed and not said a word. All because she had thought she understood Akua Sahelian, that the girl was her mirror in the generation that followed. That she would want the throne, if only to mend it all. How terribly, utterly wrong she had been. Praes was a game that could be won, but Alaya had not won it. She had lost it, along with her throne, and now she was fleeing with the rest of the crowd like a rat leaving a sinking ship.

The orcs had known, she thought. They had been part of it. How else would they have a gate to Arcadia ready, would they know to herd the panicking nobles through it. They left Creation with a shiver, treading the realm of the fae to breathtaking sight. Higher than a mountain, a great tower of stone and bone rose through clouds and sky until it disappeared into the dark. The Tower's mirror here, seeping malice and madness out of every pore. They all fled from the sight of it, hurrying along a winding path of stone, and at the end awaited a way out.

They returned to Creation as a pack of huddling refugees, eyes drawn high to a sight none of them would forget as long as they lived. The Tower was burning. Like an emerald candle in the night, green flames rose from the bottom to swallow it whole. There was not a soul in the city who would not see it. As far as the Blessed Isle, Alaya thought, they might see the green light searing the sky. Her eyes lowered, finding a silhouette awaiting, and suddenly it fell into place. They were not just below the Tower, they were at the very bottom. At the foot of the sculpted stairs that led to the Tyrant's Gate, and atop those a man was waiting.

The tunic was a simple grey, its belly covered with bandages stained red. But there was no mistaking the man himself, for all that his hair had greyed and he had grown a salt and pepper beard. He watched them, they'd who'd been brought down below the first step one might take to climb the Tower, and smiled. His eyes were green as the flames behind him, the emerald blaze wreathing his silhouette and casting his shadow down over them all.

It slowly sunk in for everyone, as it had for Alaya, that he'd played them all for fools.

"Praes," Amadeus of the Green Stretch calmly said, "is a mould that must be broken."

And now everyone was there, the Wandering Bard smiled as she tested the string one last time. Perfectly tuned. She'd had the place from the start, but now she had the time and the officiant. All she needed was – ah, and there came the last missing guest. Catherine Foundling walked out of the dark, power still clinging to her cloak, and looked up through the gloom. Their eyes met, a moment, and she offered Yara a wink. She winked back, making herself comfortable on the stone, and strummed her lute with a practiced hand.

It was time to kill her and doom the world.

"There was once a girl," the Wandering Bard sang, "without a name."

Someperson

Well. That was quite the interlude.

Rest in pieces, Dread Empire of Praes. Long live the Not-Quite-Dread Not-Quite-Empire of Praes.

serdar314

Is it weird I hear bards song like Ragnar the Red?

Blue1ao

This was beautiful

Raved Thrad

Gah, now I'm going "Catherine! Catherine! Naal ok zin los vahriin! Wah dein assholes mahfaeraak ahst vaal!"

To the tune of "Sovngarde," of course, which I like much better than the other song. 😊

Raved Thrad

Blegh, that was meant as a reply to serdar314. >_>

SpaceDorf

I think the „Bards Song“ by Blind Guardian is more fitting, both in melody, context and name.

Meela

Amazed that I have not seen a single person mention this, but as soon as Indrani saw the barrels my mind started playing the music from Game of Thrones during the destruction of Baelor's Sept. Quite a lot of parallels here to mid-series GoT with wine-sipping Balcony Queen and the capitol that can't stop infighting even with invading armies at the gates.

One thing I don't understand is why Cocky set off the barrels in the basement. They would have been able to get away anyway and it looked like Ranger was already losing against the Emerald Swords even before the distracting explosion. So she didn't get any benefit from doing that and should have assumed that Cat did NOT want the Tower burned down, since part of Cat's scheme was taking place inside it.

kinghaart

It seemed pretty clear that Cat was fine showing up outside the Tower so I wouldn't be so sure.

She probably also figured they were rigged to blow anyway so she prepped that one barrel as a way out for them.

Metalshop

Oh man, that epigraph hits real different on the second read through.

Here's where we find out if Cat is bad enough to still triumph after this level of not compromising with anyone.

morroian

Broady this went pretty much as I expected and have so for a couple of chapters now. Speaking in 2022 with no spoilers now that we're near the end of this arc I'm being disappointed with every climactic moment since Kairos being a series of interludes with almost no Cat chapters. I really wanted at least 1 Cat chapter in the middle of these. Yes I can see that the interludes are now at an end but I still wanted a Cat chapter as all the events in Ater were unfolding as I have in the climaxes since Kairos.

Daniel E

I thought this would have been mentioned, but saw nothing in the comments. We've seen Knight Errant before; Book 6, Interlude 'Reprobates' – "And so Dread Emperor Irritant did shout thus: 'Leave him to me!' And then he did ignore the Knight Errant, and brawled with a common soldier instead, and triumphed over him."

Chapter 26: Singer; Sung

*"There was once a girl without a name,
There was a tower no one could claim
No one remembers why she has climbed,
Or all those she must have left behind*

—

*The first step is hardest, they told her
You'll have to walk into the fire
It will burn away what you once were,
And always devour a liar*

—

*The second is the longest, they said
You will walk under the restless dead
The hanged all crooning from the gallows —
To join them and rest in the shadows*

—

*Taking the third step is the cruellest —
Walk when the moon is at her clearest:
Love will end with the kiss of the knife,
Trust is the wager that takes your life*

—

*The last is strangest, she said to them
The easiest and the most solemn
For when the tower is yours to claim
You will have forgotten why you came*

—

*There was once a girl without a name,
There was a tower no one could claim
No one remembers why she has climbed,
Or all those she must have left behind."*

– "The Girl Who Climbed The Tower", author unknown

The moment Scribe had first lied to me I'd known I was in mortal danger.

That lie, the refusal to share something with me she had grasped, was the crack in the stone. It didn't necessarily mean that Eudokia was meant to be my enemy or even the instrument of my downfall, but because of that night I had a blind spot and the Intercessor meant to kill me with it. The trouble was, of course, that knowing I was walking into some sort of trap didn't tell me anything about what that trap was. For all I knew, not walking in was exactly what would get me killed. Guessing games with the Wandering Bard were a good way to lose your fingers, if not outright your life, so instead of sitting in a dark tent to brood and try to make out what her plan was I'd gone on the offensive.

Even when you couldn't find the snake in the grass, you could still set the grass aflame.

So I'd thrown my torch. I got things moving in Ater by ordering Abreha Mireembe and Dakarai Sahel to betray me then throw their support behind Akua. It was a risk, of course. I did not believe that the same woman who had once been the Doom of Liesse would now claim the Tower, but I couldn't be sure. Not when the Intercessor was out there and circumstances in the capital changed by the hour. But it was the lesser risk, so it was the one I took. Then, 'lo and behold, after the grass took fire the snakes came slithering out. There was some sort of botched coup attempt against Malicia – by High Lady Takisha, apparently – that resulted in the Tower's weather artefacts going wild and covering the capital in vicious storms.

On the surface that was just highborn doing as highborn did, but there'd been one telling detail: the Bard had not intervened to prevent this. Which meant she wanted the storms to delay the resolution of everything in Ater, since little would get moving before my army breached the walls and I wouldn't attack while the capital was a deathtrap. From that I learned that the Bard's game was about the Tower and that she wanted to delay until certain conditions were met. The next step was, naturally to try and figure out what those conditions were. I had almost two weeks to see to that while hailstorms and other unnatural weather ravaged the capital, but immediately I began to feel like I was making a mistake.

It wasn't that we didn't find anything. Between Scribe's contacts and the Jacks I found out quite a bit, including what was to my eye a pretty clear campaign to make sure the High Seats were on the verge of open civil war. Over those two weeks pretty much every High Lord and Lady in Praes was given a visceral, personal motive to despise the others. No way that was a coincidence, and again it pointed at the Towe – and whoever climbed it – being the lynchpin of the Bard's game. Only that wasn't going to work, and I grew increasingly sure none of that was actually the Intercessor's doing at all. This was someone else. Malicia, probably, though I wasn't sure what she intended to get out of it.

It wasn't like the High Seats hating each other would make them like her more.

So the conclusion was that I was being had, and all these games surrounding the Tower were the red herring the Intercessor had laid out for me to pursue. I'd just arrived to that conclusion and was wrestling with the need to second-guess it when I received a gift: my camp was approached by a dozen people from the Green Stretch who claimed to be envoys. Envoys from what, was the natural question, and the answer turned out to be that many of the freeholders – swelled in numbers and skills by deserters from the Legions – had gotten tired of the Tower's shit and they wanted to secede. I was the natural interlocutor for that, it was hard to deny it.

I was still Queen of Callow, the kingdom the Green Stretches was only parted from by a river, and my army was besieging Ater. If I didn't back their play for independence, all they had to look forward to were a few early successes while whoever held Ater was busy settling the empire and then a brutal crackdown when the Dread Empire decided to put its breadbasket back in its place. On every level it made sense that they would come to me, but the *timing* was what drew my attention. I'd already been approached over the state of goblinkind, and now another chunk of Praes was looking for me to decide its fate? I smelled a rat. Someone had a hand in this.

So I heard out the envoys and then put them off, which they didn't like but couldn't really do anything about. Who else were they going to go to? They needed me to settle it for them, I told Vivienne when we discussed it, else nothing would change. And that was the moment it struck me. I looked for the stars again and found them faded. Grown even more distant. So *that* was the trick. The Role I had worn into the fabric of Creation, year after year, was that of a wrangler for Evil. I was the commander of Below's Named, a leader of the nations that kept no faith with angels. And looking back now, when was it exactly that the Intercessor had first seriously tried to kill me?

The Arsenal, once the Truce and Terms had been in place long enough they began to have the taste of law. The Intercessor did not care in the slightest if I was influential with *nations*. I could be Queen of Callow or First Under the Night and she'd shrug. Kingdoms weren't the weave for her loom. But when I'd become the representative for Evil, when Hanno had become one for Good, we'd changed things. It used to be that there were only Gods and Named, with the Intercessor in between, but that was no longer true. Now Named looked to either the White Knight or the Black Queen when they had grievances: there was another intermediary.

And how could such a thing ever be acceptable to an entity that the Original Abomination himself had called the *Intercessor*?

We were infringing on her power. Reducing it in a real, practical way. Just spreading about the knowledge of her existence had been enough to hamper her severely, hadn't it? There could be no more sneaking her way into a Band of five to tug at the strings up close and personal, not when her Name was known to everyone in our charge. Only it was even worse, because now I was directly claiming power that'd once been hers alone. More than once I'd called her the goddess of stories, but my Name was already beginning to steal fire from her hearth. I could already feel Named and I'd not even come into my mantle properly. How much more would I to do when I did?

So I must die, that much was a given. But that wasn't enough. I had to be killed in a way that undid the groove I'd worn into Creation, otherwise she was just kicking the trouble down a few years. If someone else took up my Role it'd be just as unacceptable, so more than just slitting my throat she had to undo the very Role I'd cobbled together. Which was why suddenly everyone was knocking at my door, bringing their troubles with them and asking me to fix it all. The Intercessor's power was not in destruction, it was in the nudge – so she was trying to nudge my Role. I was on the cusp of my Name coming together and if I settled the goblins, settled the Green Stretch, then I was forging my Name into a tool to move those forces.

About the disputes of borders and kings, the lands that had forged me into the ruler I was today. I would not be the Black Queen, that Name had been destroyed too thoroughly at the Folly, but it would not be so far. I would be a ruler over Evil. But not over Named, save those sworn to me. That was why I'd been able to feel Vivienne even though she was a heroine instead of a villain, I suspected. I would rule over some Names in the same way that a Dread Empress did, based on authority. But the sight of the stars in the dark would fade entirely away, that door closed. So I avoided speaking so much as a word to either goblins or the Green Stretch envoys, knowing it would give the Bard her victory, and looked for the final blow. There would be a third., because there

was always a third. And looking back at the storm over Ater, I found my answer: the Bard had not stopped that disaster. She wanted the delay, because her third had not yet arrived.

It'd been two weeks away, the very orcish horde we'd all been following as it marched south on Ater. There was a Name among it, a powerful one, and I had thought it to be Hakram but it shone too brightly for that. Or perhaps, I'd thought, it just shone too brightly to be the Adjutant. Either way, there was only one thing to do. Against Juniper and Vivienne's protests, I refused to send envoys to the horde as it approached and forbade the Army of Callow from approaching the Clans. If it truly was Hakram leading the orc clans, then I could not risk conversation with him. I knew myself well enough to be aware that I'd be sucked in the moment we sat at the same table and that might very well be a disaster.

To beat the Bard, I had fight the same instincts that'd kept me alive all those years and take a step back. Do nothing. How restless and unhappy that made me ended up making me more certain than ever I'd finally caught my enemy's tail. And though there was a price to my abstention, there was also a prize. I had abandoned a path for my Name to take and embraced another, how could that be without consequence? After the Battle of Kala I'd come to see some Named as stars shining in the black, but my own Name was precipitating. Strengthening. It was more than just the stars, now, I could see *trajectories*. Objects in motion. And those paths were the paths their stories would take if they were not meddled with.

I'd seen only villains this way and earned splitting headaches trying to go further, but it'd opened doors for me.

When the storm ended, when the orcs approached and the confluence at the Tower neared its resolution, I acted. Regardless of the Bard trying to break my Role, she'd be using a knife to slit my throat so I set about removing them from the field. I sent the Ranger's three pupils out in the city to face her, knowing one way or another that confrontation would remove her from play – either she'd lose and be defeated or she'd defeat them and lose interest. I sent out the Squire to collect the Black Knight's head, but she slipped my noose after my own father let loose thousands of giant spiders into *districts still full of civilians*. The chaos that act of lunacy unleashed on Ater flipped the orderly board I'd been setting up.

Fine, so that round was a wash. I bailed out Archer and her companions when Ranger looked close to a win, knowing my side would benefit from there being a rematch – she struck me as unlikely to learn a lesson or come to an understanding that'd sharpen her Name, while I'd made a career out of betting on angry young women bringing it home. It wasn't a total wash, even though

the Clans stumbled into the mess and the Army of Callow had to pull back all the way to the eastern walls. I finally knew where my father was and I got an idea of what he was after through Arthur's report, which had me adjusting my plans. I still had to avoid the Clans, and avoiding thinking about why lest I falter, but I knew where the fulcrum was now.

It wouldn't be the battle for Ater but the Tower itself, all signs pointed to it. So far I'd avoided the Intercessor's knives, so all I needed to do was ride this out to the end and I would get what I wanted. Which was more than just getting the East in order. Oh no, after all this I wouldn't be settling for so small a prize. Masego and I had already faced the Bard once, in the Arsenal, and this time she would not be getting away so lightly. And what we'd get out of her might well win us this war. She had set a trap for me, but I would turn it into a trap for her.

If the Tower was to be the battlefield, then I ought to take care of loose ends. Following Malicia's trajectory in the dark told me she was about to kill herself. Not with her own hands, but by following through a plan that'd kill her because of a fundamental mistake. I couldn't *what* mistake exactly, just that the groove would be 'villain fails to understand the other and gets her comeuppance'. Had to be either Akua or my father, I figured, but hard to tell. More importantly, it was a stable trajectory – and that meant the odds were good the Intercessor would be using it for something. I didn't need to know for what to know it was better to disrupt it.

She was best removed from the board before the resolution came, so I sent in Assassin and then threw in Squire as well when I saw that the Black Knight had hit the resolution of staying true to her ideals. That likely meant protecting Malicia, so I could call in Arthur's last part of the pattern of three to allow Assassin its clear shot at the Dread Empress. With Vivienne riding herd on the situation, the matter should be handled. I couldn't step in myself, much as I wanted to. If my boots were on the ground, the chances were too high that the Intercessor would be able to entangle me. I had to keep away until the end, act through intermediaries.

The irony of needing to fight exactly like the Intercessor to beat her did not escape me.

I disliked the idea of being blind in the Tower when it was where it would all come to a head, so I sent Archer and the other two after Ime. They were escorting Scribe, who I meant to take over the Eyes after their current mistress was eliminated – once she had, I'd get the stream of information I needed. Even better, I'd know *more* than the Intercessor in some ways. We could both follow Named, but I'd be the one with actual spies. It was the edge I needed, and it couldn't hurt to blind Malicia anyway. Masego I

kept on task, I couldn't spare him for anything else, and Ishaq I had another use for. Apprentice I sent out to have a look at something else, an errand to keep her busy and away from what I didn't want the Bard to see.

With all that loosed, I found a rooftop to stand on the edge of. Waited for moving parts to come together. And my Name sang in joy, coiling around me. Began to bloom inside me. I already had an aspect almost fully formed, I found. Something I'd done again and again, something that aligned with what I saw as my Role in the great machine that was Creation. It felt deep and quiet, like the bottom of a well. But it wasn't even that revelation that had me smiling. I could see, now. Just small things, but it was a start. I caught pieces of Malicia watching the city from above, of Archer leading her companions through the tunnels beneath Ater.

And when the conflict came, I saw that too. The trajectory of my defeat: Ranger stepping in before Ime could be taken, freeing her to arrive just in time to derail Malicia's assassination. But I scored a victory as well, when the Lady of the Lake's three pupils left her bleeding on the ground. She'd survive, but she was done for the night. And Archer had created an opportunity for me without knowing it, one I took even knowing it might cost me my throat. I dipped out to see to it, returning just in time to see the last pieces coming together. The Tower was burning, my father was triumphant and the last test had come upon us all. Everyone was there, nobles and orcs and goblins and even the Black Knight. I came out of the Ways in a whisper of darkness, catching a glimpse of the Bard on a darkened rooftop and offering her a wink.

I had brought three knives here tonight – one up my sleeve, one waiting and one veiled. Time to see which of us had the sharpest blades.

Scribe was waiting for me in the dark of the street, eyes patient. I pulled my cloak tight, watching the nobles huddled at the bottom of the stairs that I could see from the side.

"Report," I ordered.

"Malicia abdicated, Akua Sahelian refused the throne and struck the match that set the Tower aflame," Eudokia said.

I kept the triumphant smile that itched to break out away from my face. So close to the end, gloating would be dangerous. Even if I'd been right, even though I'd seen the truth of her. It had not been a mask. It had been her, and now we would begin the last part of our journey together.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Malicia's in the crowd," Scribe said. "We lost track of the other one. She left the Tower, though, that much I'm certain of."

"She won't die like that," I quietly said. "She'll be here. She wouldn't-"

Movement caught my attention. She was stunning, I thought, it pale and gold. Like some ancient goddess of dusk come to witness the death of empire, a wisp of impossible beauty unmarred by the grime of Creation. And Akua, eyes hooded, gracefully folded her legs and sat at the bottom of the stairs. Lower than my father, but still higher than anyone else. And with that, the end had begun.

"Is this all your doing then, Carrion Lord?" High Lady Takisha called out. "You burned and bled us so that we would kneel to Dread Emperor Black?"

"Did you not hear?" my father smiled. "The Dread Empire is dead."

I glanced at Scribe. I'd had my doubts his plan would work, but just in case I'd set Apprentice to look for one of the indicators that'd follow if he had succeeded.

"What did Apprentice report?" I whispered.

"Last word is that the Tower in Arcadia is aflame too," she murmured.

I grimaced. Amadeus was calling it too early, then. Until the monstrous mirror of the real thing was broken in Arcadia as well, I wouldn't bet on his work destroying Praes lasting too long. If he wanted to stick the landing, he still had to sell his story. To these people and to Below.

"No one here will kneel to you," High Lord Jaheem scorned. "This is nothing more than the tantrum of a man knowing he could never claim the Tower himself."

"What Tower is there left to claim, Jaheem Niri?" the Carrion Lord gently asked.

The sky was burning green behind him and they shivered.

"The Dread Empire failed," he said. "And so it died. It will not return."

"And what would you have instead?" High Lady Takisha challenged. "King Amadeus is no better than Dread Emperor Black. I'll not have it."

Murmurs of appreciation.

"There is a precedent," my father said, sounding faintly amused. "This land has been ruled without a tyrant before."

Sure, before Maleficent the First and the Miezans. It'd been a pack of squabbling petty kingdoms, much like Callow. Only somehow I doubted that was his plan, given that I'd inherited my tendency for centralizing authority from the man. Similar skepticism came from the crowd. A few scorned him out loud for wanting to split up Praes into lesser kingdoms.

"Are you so unfamiliar with our own history?" Akua laughed. "He does not speak of the Many Kingdoms. Or has Haider's Reign already faded from all your memories?"

That was vaguely familiar, but not. I glanced at Scribe.

"The Throneless Years," she murmured, looking spellbound as she watched the discussion. "It's what highborn call it."

Ah, I thought. That was why the name was familiar. Haider had been the Chancellor's name. It was old history from the Sixty Years War, which Dread Empress Regalia II had begun by invading Callow while it was still occupied by Procer. She'd died long before its end, even as the Fairfaxes reclaimed parts of the kingdom and it became a three-way brawl, and her successor Maledicta II's early victories ended in defeat and then assassination after repeat purges of the imperial court. Maledicta had killed most of the leading nobles that could easily take the throne, though, so it turned into a messy civil war around Ater as Callow took the time to force the last Procerans out. With no clear winner in the civil war, the Chancellor – Haider – proposed a compromise.

The lords and ladies of Praes would instead march west against Callow, and whoever distinguished themselves the most in the conquest of the kingdom would climb the Tower when the war was at an end. Haider would, meanwhile, rule as Chancellor much as he would have had Dread Emperor gone to war westward and left him in charge. The High Seats had accepted the compromise and the 'Throneless Years' lasted for two decades while the Praesi fought my countrymen as well as each other. As a military strategy it was a failure, since the Praesi made alliances with Callow against their rivals, but it did keep the civil war out of the Wasteland until the lord that would become Dread Emperor Vindictive I seized the Blessed Isle.

He cut off the supplies for the armies still west and closed the gates. Once his last rivals were dead beneath his walls, he marched on Ater and took it by force before crucifying the Chancellor. A charmer, that one.

And though it was thin grounds, I thought, my father was not wrong to bring it up. It was a precedent for rule by someone else

than a Dread Emperor with no higher authority above them. Only what was the point of all this, if he was just going to torch the Tower and then replace one title by another? So long as the Role beneath did not change, nothing would. And the Tower in Arcadia would keep burning, but in time the flames would fade and the old abomination would rise anew.

"There have been Chancellors before that were Duni," Sargon Sahelian mildly said.

A wave of surprise. It was not endorsement, but it was not dismissal either. I frowned. *Why?* When I'd spoken with him in Wolof, he'd made it clear that he wanted my father nowhere near any sort of throne. What had changed? My answer came in the form of a shadow standing behind the green-eyed man, an aged woman finally arrived. Ime, still mistress of the Eyes of the Empire. Who was, by the gesture, declaring the Eyes supported him. My fingers clenched. Ah, so that was why. Ime had taken out Sargon's soulbox when the Tower burned out. It was now my father who held his leash.

"Are we going to entertain this masquerade?" High Lord Dakarai scorned. "It is becoming Dread Emperor in all but name. Just a fig leaf."

"The days of tyrants who ruled until death are behind us. The Chancellor will rule for seven years and one," the Carrion Lord replied. "Not dawn longer."

My eyes narrowed. There were flaws with that, obvious one. How would the Chancellor be chosen, what would keep High Seats from starting civil wars to depose them? My concerns were shared by some. High Lady Takisha let out a mocking laugh.

"And why should any of us obey such person?" she asked. "We would be the greater in every way."

"Because on this very night," the Carrion Lord said, "every army in Praes save the Legions of Terror will be disbanded."

Pandemonium. Half the nobles were screeching in anger, the rest jeering.

"A jest in poor taste," High Lord Jaheem said. "You have gone mad in your old age, Carrion Lord, to think we would meekly bend the knee to this. *Why should we?*"

The green-eyed man grinned.

"One vote," he told them.

Oh, I thought, you wily fucker. And he'd got their attention.

"Every High Seat will get to either name a candidate for Chancellor or cast a vote in the election," the green-eyed man said. "So will Ater, the Clans and the Confederation of the Grey Eyries returned to the fold."

And I saw it in the crowd, the hunger. Taking the Tower by force, it was tricky business even if it went perfectly. Tricky and costly. But here he was, offering them an easier way. The High Seats would have the majority of the votes – Wolof, Okoro, Nok, Aksum and Kahtan. Assuming Foramen kept its vote, there would be two goblin votes and one for the orcs. Ater would be loose vote, a ninth one to ensure there could be no ties. They had a clear majority, but that was where he'd been tricky: you could either nominate or vote, but not both. Alliances. He was forcing whoever wanted to be the Chancellor, the power in Ater, to earn the support of a majority of Praes.

And if anyone tried to go against the result, the sole army in Praes – the Legions of Terror – would grind them into fucking dust. They didn't get a vote, and I'd bet rubies to piglets that being part of the Legions would disqualify you from being nominated. My father was leaving enormous power in the hands of the High Seats, which had to gall him, but realistically speaking he couldn't break their influence without twenty years of brutal civil war. Instead he was consigning their influence to the political, which there was no taking away from them without extermination anyway, and making sure they had no *military* power. It was the kind of compromise I'd honestly not expected him to be able to make.

"And you support this, Lady Akua?" High Lord Dakarai asked.

Vivienne believed he'd genuinely flipped to become a supporter of Akua, this one, and I was beginning to be convinced as well.

"The Age of Wonders is dead," Akua Sahelian quietly said. "Are we to follow it into the grave? Scorn him if you wish, but I hear none offering a brighter tomorrow."

And that was another hit. It shook them, enough that the crowd began to hesitate. They didn't like him, didn't like this, but what else was on the table? And they had to know that if they didn't come to an accord, if they all fled back to their cities, Praes would collapse. Without something to bind it together, a new heart, the High Seats would turn into kingdoms and make war on each other once more. And after years of civil war, no one hear was hungry for more slaughter. Many began to discuss it, but it was High Lord Sargon who broke the stalemate.

"Wolof nominates Amadeus of the Green Stretch for Chancellor," Sargon crookedly smiled.

It was a challenge as well as a statement. Speak or walk away.

"I nominate myself for Chancellor," High Lady Takisha replied through gritted teeth.

Ah, and there went the southern half of Praes.

"The Clans vote for Amadeus of the Green Stretch," Hakram calmly said.

My fingers twitched at the sight of him. There was no denying it now, was there? He was the Warlord. He was lost to me. I forced it down. I could not afford distractions right now.

"Foramen votes for Amadeus of the Green Stretch," High Lady Wither said, then cackled. "So does the Confederation of the Grey Eyries."

Surprise and fear. Ater could have no vote, not in this election, and so four of the eight who'd speak already had. One more and my father would be the Chancellor of Praes.

"Your opinion on the right to rule of the undead, lord?" Abreha Mirembec called out.

He grinned, all teeth and malice.

"Acceptable," he replied.

The old corpse grinned back. I could have stopped her from speaking, I knew. Pull at the strings. But not now, not when I was so close to getting the outcome I wanted – my father on something like a throne, Praes in hands I could trust.

"Aksum votes for the Carrion Lord," High Lady Abreha called out.

And just like that it was over. Dakarai Sahel voted for him as well and Jaheem Niri nominated himself, but it was already settled. Rising to his feet, the bandages on his side flecked with red, my father smile.

"Then for my first decree I dissolve every private army in Praes," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said. "And charge the Legions of Terror to enforce the result of any and all elections."

Nim stood high above the crowd, and through her helm I thought I glimpsed eyes gone watery. She was moved.

"We will take up the duty with pride," the Black Knight replied.

He offered her a fond smile.

"As for my second decree," the Chancellor, "we will begin negotiations to sign onto the Liesse Accords. We will bargain with the Grand Alliance."

I swallowed a grin. I was still furious at him, deep down. What he'd unleashed on the city... But he'd always been a monster. I'd known that from the start. The reason I'd come to love him anyway was just before my eyes. He was going to do it. He was going to get Praes in line and join the war.

"Are we to bleed for Procer, then?" High Lord Jaheem coldly asked.

"We earn our place at the table, so that we might bend the terms," he easily replied. "And if you worry of the costs, perhaps you should remember the last Throneless Years."

Puzzlement.

"Callow was meant to be the proving grounds deciding who would claim the Tower," he reminded them. "Let Keter serve the same purpose. When my eight years come at an end, who better than the victors of the war against the Original Abomination himself?"

Ah, the appeal to pride. No lack of that here to use. There was some back and forth, questions and answers, but my attention was elsewhere.

"So?" I asked.

"We'll know soon," Scribe replied.

The runner came back with word from Sapan quick enough. Scribe grimaced.

"The Tower is broken," she said. "But it still stands."

Fuck, I thought. It wasn't over yet. It was exactly what I'd been afraid of: I was going to have to bless this. Like a queen kissing a baby, I'd have to signify my approval before it came to an end. And that meant stepping into it. I breathed out. Not too far from here I could feel the Night I had invested, the knot of smooth power. I'd taken the precautions I could, I reminded myself. Now I just needed to wade in and see if I'd beaten the Bard or if this was all going to turn to ash. I steadied myself, patted Eudokia's shoulder and strolled out around the corner.

It took a moment for people to notice me. It was dark out and they were talking and there were many of them. But in time they did, and the sound of chatter died. Soon not one of them dared even to breath too loud, leaving only the sound of my deadwood staff clacking against the stone as I limped forward. Some part of me gloried in it. In the terrifying figures of my youth now going still at the sight of me. At the fear in their eyes. Once, as a young girl, I had seen my father silence an entire banquet hall simply by entering it. I'd sworn, that night, that one day I would have that power to.

I'd kept my oath.

"Black Queen," my father greeted me.

"Carrion Lord," I replied. "Or should it be Chancellor now?"

"Either will suffice," he said.

"Chancellor, then," I mused.

I swept the assembled nobles with my gaze. Only one met it: Akua's golden eyes met mine. She was on her feet now, but her face distant. As if unconcerned with all this. Waiting for it to end.

"You speak for Praes now," I said.

"I do," he replied.

"Then you answer for Praes as well," I mildly said.

He conceded the point with a half-nod.

"I am not unaware that we have earned enmity," my father replied. "Reparations will be offered."

"It will take more than gold to even those scales," I coldly said.

"And I offer more than that," he easily replied. "Our signature on the Liesse Accords, yes, but a more immediate boon as well."

I cocked my head to the side.

"I'm listening."

"I have a way to even the odds against the armies of Keter," he told me.

I stilled. Well now, there was a princely offer. Below us both, some of the nobles smiled. For people who largely despised him, they were warming up to the regime rather quickly.

"A worthy price," I said.

He cocked an eyebrow.

"But?"

"There is one thing more," I said. "One among you allied with the Dead King even as he sought to destroy all of Calernia. One of you sabotaged and attacked the Grand Alliance at every occasion. That offence needs answering."

"Careful now," the Carrion Lord softly warned.

I met his eyes with my sole one, undaunted.

"Give me Alaya of Satus," I evenly said. "Who was once empress. Give me the hand behind the Night of Knives and a hundred enmities since."

Give me Ratface's killer, I thought. Give me the reason I had to come to the Wasteland when the world is dying.

"The Grand Alliance," he said, "does not get to make such demands."

My fingers tightened.

"Careful now," I echoed. "Do you think that, after these last few years, Praes can make any demand at all?"

"It does not have to be this way," he quietly said.

"It does," I coldly replied.

Because Praes had gotten away with this for too long. And I loved him like a father, even after this latest monstrosity, but that did not mean he got a pass. That burning the Tower would end it all. Praes would pay one last price in blood for the horrors it had unleashed on us all. Let the slate be called clean after that, but not before. I glanced down into the crowd and found the woman who had been the Dread Empress of Praes this morning. Alaya of Satus looked... tired. Her beauty had not waned, but the elaborate green dress hung loosely on her. She looked tired and afraid, I thought. She met my eyes with resignation. She saw her death in me.

I had thought I would take pleasure in this. Now I felt almost ashamed. It still needed to be done.

"Then I'm sorry," my father told me.

He descended a few steps and my eye followed him down. Hakram had risen up a few steps until they stood side by side. Their heights made it look almost comical, but there was no humour to be found now. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach, like I'd just made a mistake.

"No," the Warlord said.

My face turned into a blank mask. I set aside the feeling of betrayal, raw and bloody as it was.

"Warlord?" I flatly asked.

Hakram's face was as carved out of stone.

"I have sworn an oath that the Clans will not march against Keter if Alaya of Satus is taken," the Warlord said. "I will stand by it."

My father's face was not apologetic, but there was not a speck of joy to be found in it. Behind them, I found the mood was matching. Some of the nobles were smiling, once more, and when I looked at the others – well, the orcs were a given but I found no purchase with Wither either. I had not struck a bargain with either her or the Grey Eyries, and now that decision was coming back to haunt me.

"The way to even the odds against Keter for her life," Amadeus calmly said. "That is the bargain."

And I considered it, for a moment. Maybe if I made a compromise, then – and immediately I let out a soft gasp. The stars were dying. The black was fading. The Name itself, after all this time, was waning. And in that moment, I finally understood the trap that the Intercessor had laid out for me. I'd told dozens of people I had come here to kill Malicia. High nobles and Named, rulers and simple soldiers. It was one the thing about this campaign I'd never wavered about or hidden. I had staked my reputation on it. And now, on this final night where my Name was to form, I was being forced to walk back those words. I had come here to assert power over the East, and now the East was throwing that claim back in my face rejecting it.

It was never only Named or nation, I realized with dim horror. I'd always needed to have *both*. I'd just been tricked into thinking it was a choice. And so now that I was on the verge of losing one entirely, I was on the verge of destroying my own Name before it could form. I'd understood what the Intercessor was after all this time, but I had been entirely, terribly wrong about how she was going to do it. It'd been about this the whole time. She had made sure that my father would win and Malicia would survive just to ensure that this very moment would come about. And now I had the choice to either throw away a Name that might win us the war tonight – Gods, what Masego and I had planned! – or... I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. Or assert my authority over them the hard way.

Kill them.

I had been a hard girl and I'd become a harder woman, but I still flinched at the thought of that.

"If she dies," I quietly told them, "the war could be won tonight."

I saw that sink in, and even as in their eyes the realization of a mistake bloomed I felt my stomach clench. How very deeply I had been manipulated. I'd kept my distance from all of them for fear

of them being used as a knife against me, but that'd been nothing more than a shadow on the wall. Now the knife was being pointed at my throat *precisely because I'd not spoken with either of them*. I the distance I heard notes of a hauntingly familiar tune, sung by a heartbreakingly beautiful voice. The only person who'd had all the information was up there on that roof, smiling as we all stumbled in the dark. I closed my eye, then opened it. Breathed out. Found the frozen calm at the heart of me, the ice.

"Step aside," I said, and it was nothing less than an order.

"And who are you to demand that?" Amadeus asked. "It is a conqueror's demand, and you have not conquered here."

The wants of the woman, I thought, and the needs of the queen. Hakram saw it in me first, took half a step back. I loved them both. Hakram more than my father, perhaps, but both deeply. But that was just me. I could make another Warlord. I could force another Chancellor to kneel. But to gain my victory over the Bard, there was only tonight. And that victory, I thought as I felt like weeping, might save millions. What we'd planned, Masego and I... What did two lives matter in the face of that? I could love them all I wanted, but I had buried people I loved before. Two lives against millions.

Gods damn us all.

"I am," I replied, "your keeper."

It rang out, loud and clear, without my ever having raised my voice.

"There might come a time where you earn a kind hand, a protector, but not tonight," I coldly said. "Instead you earned me. You dealt out evil and it has been returned to your gate, but you think that at this hour of reckoning you can flee from your dues?"

I struck my staff against the steps and the stone cracked, split as if the very earth knew my anger. They backed away, both

"*Who am I?*" I hissed. "I am Below's watchman, the enforcer of the black laws, and I tell you now that if you do not settle your debt in full then I will cast your shivering souls out into the darkness from where is no return."

Power coursed through my veins, the open maw of a great beast just my ear. If could feel its warm breath, the eagerness in the fang. It wanted blood. An old friend returned at my side.

"I am the Warden of the East," I told them, and it became true. **"Step aside."**

My words rang with power and Hakram had to fight it, but my father only froze half a beat. I met his eyes then. That eerie pale green, and behind them I saw fearsome thing I always had. Cold gears of steel, turning. Grinding. And the mind behind it, as he had once told me, worked only one way. *In the face of conflict*, he'd confessed that night, *I will reduce all individuals involved to instruments, and seek what I consider the best outcome*. I'd never seen it happen before, him finding its path and committing to it. Power pulsed heavy in the air. Something old and deep, something beyond even the Sisters. He was calling in his dues to Below, as Hune once had.

A heartbeat later he had a knife in hand and I flicked my wrist, the leather contraption Pickler had made me bringing his first gift to my palm.

He took half a step up, and flush as I was with the power of my Name I saw him move. My neck, the blade would bite into my neck. I took half a step down, already seeing it happen in my mind's eye. The blow would draw blood, but not deep enough. Mine would not miss. I let out a ragged breath, half a scream, and as we embraced steel found flesh. My knife, my gift, bit deep found the heart. And I felt a cold edge against the side of my neck. No, I realized dimly. Not the edge. *The side*. He'd not so much as pricked my skin. I broke away, but could not part too far. He was slumping already, but on his place face I found a twitching smile.

In the distance, a lute made a false note.

"No," I whispered. "No, no, no – Father *why did you do that*."

"Forced your hand," he murmured. "You have to spare her now. There's no one else who can replace me."

And he was right. The High Seats all hated each other now, there was no one else left who could possibly rule except Akua. And she would refuse it. We slumped to the ground together, my leg throbbing with pain, and I reached for Night. Tried to stop the damage. It did nothing, as if some force was devouring the power. He had, I remembered with horror, called in his dues to Below.

"It didn't have to be this way," I croaked.

"It'll take blood to finish it," he rasped. "It always does."

"You hate martyrs," I cursed him.

"This is Praes," he smiled. "What is one more sacrifice?"

"You fucking fool," I wept.

Tears. How long had it been, since I had wept tears? The lute again, in the distance. The melody was smooth.

"Proud of you," he got out. "So proud. My daughter."

And what kind of a man would say that to the girl whose knife was still in his heart?

"Monster," I accused.

The green eyes softened.

"The very worst kind," he smiled.

He clutched my hand.

"Please," he asked. "Goodbyes."

Face grimly set, I rose away. The knife I left in him. It was the only thing keeping him alive. Alaya of Satus came without needing to be called. There were tears, I saw at the corner of her eyes. She knelt by his side, all of us watched by a hundred eyes, and what they whispered at first I did not hear. But the end I did.

"It was both of us," my father got out. "Both."

It was getting harder from him to talk.

"It shouldn't have come to this," Alaya whispered.

"Do better," he said. "Do it right, this time. For the both of us. Make it as it should have been."

"I, I can't-"

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

Her face, I thought was the picture of anguish.

"Always," Alaya of Satus hoarsely replied.

"We'll win," he promised, threading their fingers. "Be free."

In the distance, the empire burned green. With a last rasping breath, he laid down on the steps of Tower and died. I'd killed my father for the third time, and this time it was true. And I knew, without asking or knowing how I knew, that when the message from Apprentice came it would tell me the Tower in Arcadia had broken. I breathed out raggedly, and the sound of it covered the footsteps.

The knife sunk through my ribs, but it stopped before it could reach my heart.

Not because Scribe had stopped striking but because she was dead. The sword, shining red and wetly in the light of the half-moon, ripped clear out of her skull. The last wisps of the veil faded as the Barrow Sword flicked away the blood from the edge. Eudokia slumped to the ground, eyes lifeless. The moment Scribe had first lied to me I'd known I was in mortal danger. And now I knew what it was that she'd kept from me. That my father would, whatever the cost to him or anyone at all, keep Alaya of Satus alive. I put a hand against my side as I limped away. It came away red. I seized Night, slowed it down, but I could not heal. It would have to suffice.

Of the three knives I had brought, two had found blood. Only one remained.

"He didn't buy you your life," I said.

Alaya of Satus, once-empress of Praes, met my eye unflinchingly. Hers were as red as mine, but what did that change? I had loved him, but I was still the Warden of the East. I would still collect the dues.

"I thought as much," she said. "Seven and one?"

I nodded.

"And when the first dawn of the ninth year comes," I quietly said, "I will come for you."

She did not answer for a long moment, looking down at his corpse.

"Eight years will already be too long," she quietly said.

I stood in silence as I watched the greats of Praes gather again for the election of their Chancellor. The votes, this time were unanimous. It was done. Only one last thing remained. I took back the knife from my father's corpse.

"Won't you come out?" I asked. "You failed, Yara. I still live."

A snort from behind me.

"Well, you're already well on your way to being dead inside," the Intercessor said, frowning down at my father's corpse. "Gods, what an unreliable prick in the end. Didn't think there was that much of a person left in him."

"Your mistake," I said.

"If he'd been Named it would have worked," she sighed, "but you don't have that many blind spots left. Balls. Next one will be our last, I think. You can have this one – you've got to be getting used to the taste of ashes in your mouth."

"No," I quietly replied.

"No?" she repeated, amused. "Then why do you keep swallowing them?"

"There won't be a next time," I said. "This ends tonight."

She rolled her eyes. Then a heartbeat later, she cocked an eyebrow.

"So that's why you kept Hierophant back," the Intercessor said, then shrugged. "You're getting repetitive, Cat. You gonna try your Arsenal play again? You ought to-"

The silver harpoon took her in the side. It didn't break flesh, but it sunk deep. Eyes shining under the eyecloth, Masego ripped his way out of the Twilight Ways and strode onto Creation as the barrier between realms screamed in pain. The glass eyes lingered on my father's corpse, then on Scribe's.

"You-"

His long, clever fingers closed around the harpoon and he tugged. The Bard's scream interrupted her own words.

"When I am done with you, Intercessor," the Hierophant said in a calm, even tone, "there is nothing Above of Below that will be able to put you back together."

I shivered, as much because of the mildness of the delivery as the words.

"You can do nothing," the Wandering Bard hissed. "You think it's not been tried before? I can't die, you fools, and pain just-"

"This isn't about death," I said. "It isn't even about pain. This is about loss."

I glanced at Masego and he nodded without turning. I put a hand by his own on the silver harpoon's shaft. The sorcery he held washed through the both of us, thundered through our veins. And I glimpsed it, just for a moment, what she saw. The lay of it. Like a city seen from the sky, a maze of turns and twists only they were all stories. People. All the stories in the world.

"As I thought," Hierophant said. "It will take two."

"Better this way," I spoke through gritted teeth. "I'll finish it myself."

He ripped out the harpoon, and even as the Intercessor hoarsely shouted I saw half the world disappear. We'd stolen it, Hierophant and I. Half the stories in the world, we'd stolen them from her. Above's stories were gone from her sight, from her

soul. They'd make a decent enough present for the Warden of the West, but before that it was time to take my half. I took her by the throat and my beast laughed, laughed in a way that sounded like a howl.

"Can you taste them yet, Yara?" I whispered. "The ashes?"

And she opened her mouth to answer, or so I thought, but I saw only red. She'd bitten off her own tongue, I realized. And she was choking herself to death. I tried to save her, keep her alive longer, but the moment the Night touched her she was gone. I could almost feel her, feel her eyes on me. Feel the utter, absolute fury. And when I reached out for my Name, for the stars in the black and the stories they followed, I saw a shiver go through the world. They stopped. All of them, stopped. The Names still existed, but they no longer moved.

"Oh Gods," I whispered.

We had stolen half the stories in the world from the Intercessor. And now, in her wroth, she had *killed the other half*. It was gone, like vanished in the air. Below's Named were no longer bound by stories. And Above's had been wrested from the Intercessor, *but we didn't know how to use them*. I found one star brighter than all the rest, followed, and glimpsed what lay within.

A dead man sat on a throne, still as the corpse he was.

"Interesting," the Dead King said, and if a skull could smile he would have.

Oh Gods, I thought again. Villains no longer had stories. There was no longer anything holding him back. The sigh faded, leaving me to stand alone as the sky burned green above me.

I had just doomed us all.

Golden Lark

Guys.

Guys guys guys guys guys.

I can't believe no one has mentioned it yet.

TRIUMPHANT.

Raved Thrad

Don't you mean "She Who Has Returned?" 😊

dadycool

Oh yeah, without Stories, there's nothing keeping her away, just like her friend and ally the Dead King.

Shawn DeLuca

Not gonna lie, while I loved so much of this chapter, I found Cat's new name pretty anticlimactic. I was thinking Black Queen of the Damned or something big and new. Warden of the East feels lackluster after all the build to it.

But everything else in the chapter was amazing!

Thanks!

Shawn

dadycool

I was imagining her Name to simply be "Black", as in representing the entire Below faction. In some ways, a Name is what the Named makes of it. Think of the two times Cat was Squire. First, she was, pure and simple, Amadeus' student. Second time around, she was a Queen in her own right with vastly different goals, and Aspects to match. Even Names with predefined functions, like Black Knight, have a lot of wiggle room, like letting Amadeus be Chancellor in all but name and rule Callow all by himself.

kinghaart

But Amadeus ISN'T the Black Knight anymore?

Noldere

Now that the tale Catherine- master of story-fu- is done, maybe we can get back Catherine of the flipped shatranj board?

kinghaart

I think she just flipped all the boards and found the DK waiting on the other side.

I wonder if the DK saw this coming based on third Liesse?

ISiejek

Well the specifics with the story's was interesting and I didn't see that coming but the twist of the knife went just as I thought, and I still can't articulate properly what I expected but it is exactly that slow twist with a sharp edge

broadaxe

sounds to me like its more of a reset, i mean all these stories and grooves were created at some point, so presumably new ways of being of below will be created as belows lot do things, making stories anew?

Idunno i'll be interested to see where this leads, though i am a bit scared of disappointment here :3

AceOfSword

I think you're right, but the problem is that while Below is free to create new stories they've also lost all the momentum associated with the established plotlines.

Remember how the Tyrant kept going at some point just by always having plans starting one after another because the first step of any villainous plan is always successful? Well, now that the stories are gone that might not work anymore.

kinghaart

But more importantly, nothing stops the Villain from totally winning anymore which is Bad News for the GA against the Dead King.

One Comment

I've seen comments guessing the Name that Cat would receive awhile back and I always rather disliked Warden of the East as an option, not because Cat doesn't fit the role, but because it is so limiting. There is not a single person alive that has half the accomplishments that she has nor has she been limited to just the east. She fundamentally changed the course of an entire race as well as become their leading religious figure, she also was directly responsible for twinning of two fae courts and the birth of an entire realm, while Hasenbach has been able to keep the west limping along that has only been because of Callowan gold and grain and the deals Cat made with basically the entire continent; none of those were in the east and are arguably bigger accomplishments than anything she did in the east. Hasenbach might be warden of the west but she was only able to do that thanks to Cats actions. Sure, Hasenbach or Hanno can be counted as stabilizing the west, but why is their Name and Role equal to what Cat's Role has been or what she has been able to accomplish in her life. It's depressing that even one of Cats accomplishments since she graduated from the college would be enough to earn anyone else a name, and she has dozens of them, and somehow her Name is equal to what either Hanno or Hasenbach can reach? I get that the Role she has been in recently is getting the east in order, but she's basically been soloing the entirety of the continent; She's gotten in order and is the keystone of the alliances between the Drow, Dwarves, Levant,

Callow, and Procer. Why is her Name defined on her bringing in one more in the form of Praes?

Abrakadabra

She did not Just bring in Praes. She brought in Callow too. Both is the east.

kinghaart

Also the Drow were in the East when she first got them. She's also taken steps towards bringing in the League of Free Cities.

Not sure about the Golden Bloom however.

Zach

The "East" here is shorthand for Evil/Below. The Name in this case means she has authority over Evil Named in general (well, in Calernia at least).

Sinead

'East' is a poetic touch. Think of the Ministers of Left and Right already mentioned for the Yan Tei.

Burdi

The Name is the same but there are a fundamentally different, Warden of the West was a Name created by Wandering Bard. It was a political name, govern over Border and political thing. Warden of the East is created by Cat govern not only over Border, area and political thing but also over Villain.

Hasenbach has political power while hanno has Named power. Meanwhile Cat has both of it.

Though it looks the same, Warden of the East is more powerful because She has both of it.

green

once Cat settles down I hope she realizes what a *fantastic* last gift the Bard gave her. she's just been given the knife that will save Calernia. maybe she'll start to realize it when she gets a good look at the Knight Errant.

let Good have their worn-in-the-groove stories. Evil is now officially off the leash, and the Age of Wonders is dead.

tmchin75723

Right? Most of Amadeus' teachings are how to circumvent stories. Most of the Grey Pilgrim's teaching is how to lean into stories better.

Unless you're a Tyrant, stories are usually bad for those below. Cat often wins by coopting hero stories.

Horrible demon plagues and full on destruction might be coming, but if they win then this is overall a very good thing.

Insanenoodlyguy

That's a big iff.

green

everything about this development is a big if, frankly. it depends on how this "Evil stories are dead" thing works. does it mean that Evil Names don't work anymore? bork goes Calernia! does it mean that Evil Names aren't *bound* to stories any more? Evil's off the leash! does it mean something else entirely? who knows!

I see the Knight Errant as spearheading the Gray Names: not bound to Good and stuck in their stories, or bound to Evil and loose/depowered because of it. Ranger and Archer also seem to be in that category, despite their current leanings towards Dark. I was really hoping Cat's new name would *break* the Light/Dark dichotomy, and in a way the Bard did it instead.

though if Evil Names were all borked, I have to imagine that the Gods Below would have *quite a lot* to say about it. imagine the hissy fit the Choirs would pitch if it was the Good stories that got "killed." Below doesn't seem to intervene directly in mortal affairs as much as Above does, but I can't see them simply sitting back and being cool with that much of a loss.

I know, this is all kind of incoherent and probably self-contradictory, I'm still thinking about this chapter.

[Liliet](#)

P sure Knight Errant is a TYPICAL hero, just one in response to unusual circumstances.

MoreBeer

I assume the loss of villain stories means the grooves are wiped away. Villains will no longer be compelled to monologue etc, nor are their short term successes and long term losses guaranteed.

Probably new villains can't come into being either, since Names are the ruts in the road worn by the stories. I'd expect that until new stories form somehow, the current villains are the last.

tmchin75723

Well, no groove means less Squire -> Black Knight, but it shouldn't have much effect on the process of coming into a new name.

There weren't grooves in the beginning, after all.

Raved Thrad

Took me a moment to reparse that as "if and only if" instead of "identify friend or foe." Confused me there for a bit. 😊

mavant

Amadeus 😞

David Stone

The feeling I get from this is that the Wandering Bard is more important than we realized, and I think this explains why the Dead King saw her as *the* enemy. She didn't see stories and interfere with them, I think she was the reason stories exist. The Dead King didn't fear her because she could meddle with his plans and he didn't want to kill her to prevent that, he wanted to kill her (for real) so that he would just be an immortal entity who could slowly plan his way to victory rather than "Evil that eventually gets defeated no matter what". The Wandering Bard doesn't understand the stories, her power is to cause the stories to be powerful.

MoreBeer

Been thinking something similar for a long time now. That the WB is the reason for stories having such power in the Guideverse.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I believe you're correct, but it still feels like kind of an asspull.

Before the Gods wrought Creation, they made Arcadia, a world in which narrative is the only meaningful force in existence. Yara of Nowhere was formerly Yara of Some Place or Another, a random mortal in the right place at the right time with the right personal qualities for the Gods to make her an offer she either couldn't refuse or was fooled into accepting; so how did narrative causality work in Creation before there was an

Intercessor? Did the Gods have some power that they gave up unto her? Are we to believe after all this time that the Gods waited for ages of Creational history (from the age of Titans and the divine beasts that became dragons 'til the advent of sovereign human civilizations, then from that advent 'til Yara's predicament) to reintroduce the mechanic their previous game was centered around? I honestly suspect that Bard having this level of importance is a retcon.

I'm still committed to seeing this story through, mind you.

kinghaart

If it's a retcon, it began at least 5 books ago.

Though I think your premise is off. Bard isn't important, per day. There were others veggio and more will come. It's more that Bard had POWER, since she is the one who tells the stories she can blot them out.

Really, this all came to prove that the Age had ended and with a new age, new stories too. Heroes need to find their grooves again, but Evil can now chart a new course.

I don't know how much of an inkling Amadeus had about how this would shake out with Bard, but I think daughter just outdid father as far as "breaking the mould" that binds Villains to losing.

Leblanc

Oh baby the good old victory fallowed immediately but greater defeat as is Practical guide to evil law, I wish I could say i was didn't see it coming the moment Cat won something.

Christian Oaks

The dead king can finally go all out that is terrifying.

[Mental Mouse](#)

At the same time, he's lost the stories protecting him too....

kinghaart

From what, really? The only forces left to challenge him are Good ones that are still stuck to their stories.

He can now open permanent he'll gates anywhere with no consequences.

Salt

The stories probably aren't gone for good. Catherine, quite literally the "Queen of Lost and Found", just got a role making her warden over Villains as a whole. Villains who just Lost all their stories.

Pretty high chance, imo, that one of her aspects lets her do something along the lines of forcibly applying stories to Villains or dredging up lost stories back into relevance. It'd cement her wardenship over Villains even further, if she could either empower or kill villains by forcing the right story on them. She wouldn't be directly controlling them or anything, but her authority as a warden would be unquestionable and nigh-impossible to challenge.

Person

I feel like Warden of the East is a little anticlimactic as well. Cat may have been trying to set up a sort of 2 Wandering Bard like names (but a little more human) for evil and for good (Warden of the East and Warden of the West respectively) that would keep each other in balance.

Zach

I feel like this chapter did a good job of explaining away my misgivings about Warden of the East. Like Cat mentions, she's only had authority of heroic Names that she's been in a position to have authority over through her position in the Grand Alliance (mainly due to the other side of the coin – Hanno – not really taking up the mantle of being a leader of Named to the same extent that Catherine did).

But she does not personally have an ambition to have authority over all Names. She always wanted to let someone else handle the Good Named.

gibsonstratocaster

Interesting chapter, but I somehow feel too much happened too quickly. Let's see the aftermath in the next chapter.

Richard Tweeddale

Who was holding the Barrow Sword? Has that sword appeared before? I've kind of lost track.

Deworld

Borrow Sword is a Name of a person. He was around since previous book.

Ragnarok Ascendant

Yeah, no. This is just...look.

Cat came here to deal with the problem of the Dead King and to get diabolists for sealing the breaches.

This? This is just piling more shit onto the shitpile and quite frankly I'm tired of this entire 'Cat can't ever win straight on' dynamic that keeps popping up. There was no reason for her to so firmly grasp the Idiot Ball when it came to her father and there's no reason for Bard to have such power as 'yeah I can insta-kill all the stories when I feel like it'. It's an escalation that was never foreshadowed and, like a lot of this chapter, feels a great deal like authorial fiat.

This chapter would've been a lot better if it'd been 2 or 3 chapters instead.

Sinead

To be honest, I do not know why Cat could not see this come to pass, unless she was working from the basis that Amadeus fully broke ties with at the Peace of Salia.

As for Yara, I read that as her using the fact that Maseago was pulling the power out of her to give her the chance to wipe the villainous grooves out of Creation.

If we had a chapter or two where they set up this plan and foreshadow the spear (it's a bit of Take and Wrest) there can then the general strategy could have been laid out ahead of time.

Person

Agreed. I would honestly have liked Cat to just win here. She's going to be facing up against literally the most powerful Name to ever exist on the continent, she doesn't need more shit thrown her way. Especially in a way that feels kinda arbitrary.

therealgridlock

It's been foreshadowed since the very beginning of the book.

Father figures die. They're expendable, in this world and any world, and if they die for a cause then oh well.

As soon as Amadeus was her father, he was always going to die to do something, either prove a point or save her or teach her a lesson, and he died destroying the last story of Praes.

This has been very well foreshadowed.

As for the bard? We've always known she had a big role to play, just never what that role **was** so the revelation that she can wipe the trajectories of stories clean entirely? That doesn't surprise me.

Yes, the escalation is new, but the trend isn't. They brought out the pilgrims star and then neshamah went "well now I get demons too, cuz you did it first" and here we see the bard doing the same thing.

They use a magic harpoon that frankly I don't remember but was probably mentioned before, to rip half the stories out of the wandering hard, and before they can rip the other half out, she escalates to the same level of force. Even if she wasn't able to do it *before,* she can *now* because Cat did.

Rip out half the names? She can equal that and rip out half the stories.

But, everyone is right, this can be a good thing or a bad thing.

The age of wonders is dead, the age of order is beginning. Heroic names have set stories now, and villains do not, meaning how they act in this upcoming war will decide their fate for the next age.

This is their opportunity to fight back the greatest evil that ever lived, and then abide by rules of conduct. To stop making flying citadels and sacrificing masses of innocent civilians. Once they reforge their trajectories through the fabric of story? They can act orderly and all go to college and learn to read and write and do math and magic 🤪

The good guys won't be able to *do* much to them any more, because they don't go after civilians, so the knights can't go slaughtering evil hordes, they just send them to supervillain jail 🤪

And then, we get the gnomes. After Cat has her victory over the whole continent, and an age of order, research into magic and technology and society, the gnomes.

Others have mentioned we have pacts with dwarves, fae, Drow, I don't know if the elves will ever get involved or not, but at this rate, the elves and the gnomes are the only stories left untold. Likely the gnomes will applaud them getting their shit together, since they keep giving red letters for inventing technology before their society is ready to handle it, now that they have society, maybe they can get farming tech to save their people.

We get one more book, if I remember right, so my bet is this book ends with the death of the undying, and then next book, either triumphant, or the gnomes. There's always a bigger fish, but I look forward to it.

MoreBeer

I don't get the impression the gnomes are altruistic here. They're not wiping out civilizations for having tech before they're ready for it, they're killing civilizations who learn to industrialize and therefore free up their people from primarily engaging in farming and warfare. From presumably gaining the freedom to actually begin to be a threat.

therealgridlock

We actually have no idea why they do it, we just know they stop technology and have fortunate son helicopters.

I'm choosing to believe that a technologically advanced civilization would see that calernia is covered in savages who would destroy the world, and are keeping them there until they civilize.

It is entirely possible that they really **are** evil and just rule the world by denying technology, but we have only one way to find out.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The elves have had their story dribbled out – they have the Spring Crown to restore their fertility, but are likely to take it (and perhaps the Golden Bloom entirely) to another shard of Arcadia.

This is meant to be the seventh and last book, but given the “seven and one” pattern, some of us are hoping for an epilogue book, likely featuring Cardinal.

kinghaart

After the last few chapters I don't foresee needing a “scouring of the Shire” equivalent but if Cardinal eventuates, a short book there from maybe another POV could work.

kinghaart

The Bard part made sense to me, though I was a bit unclear on the harpoon.

Neshamah and Amadeus have both dropped hints about wanting to be free from stories and the death of the Bard achieving that.

For all we know, she didn't do it herself, but rather Below decided that if there's a new Intercessor (or equivalent) there should be new stories.

I am actually really interested to see what happens between Cordelia and Hanno now. Cordelia had obviously gone to extremes and doesn't seem that unlike Malicia but on the flip side she

is just so much more driven and hardworking than Hanno by virtue of not having a Name to coast on. I don't think she's perfect by any means but I don't really see many choices I would have wanted her to do differently either.

samshadar

Wow.

I suppose the bard was the repository for the stories. Which makes sense. She may have shown up before writing, when there were only the oral traditions. So you've got to use an "immortal" library to store them in.

The stories of Below have now been whiped clean. But I'm sure new ones will form.

dadycool

And after everything, Yara still wins in the end. That is honestly frustrating. Everything Cat has been working towards since her first murder in the alley of Laure, reduced to ash? I get that any kind of victory against someone like the Intercessor can't be without sacrifice, but this is actually bullshit.

I glanced up at samshadar's comment and have slightly calmed down since this does present an opportunity for Cat to remake Creation, or at least the dark half of it, in her own image. In the meantime, she never lost the ability to rule Named, or at the very least Villains, so I suppose she only lost the Bard's arsenal. And now that the world is officially ending, she can Struggle helplessly, which is the only way she ever wins anyway.

I stand by my initial reaction, but it is tempered by my second thoughts.

Lyna

Is it Bard's win? She wanted Catherine's story to die. I thought it was Amadeus'.

"You asked me what I want. This once, just this once, I want us to win.

To spit in the eyes of the Hashmallim. To trample the pride of all those glorious, righteous princes. To scatter their wizards and make their oracles liars. Just to prove that it can be done.

So that five hundred years from now, a band of heroes shiver in the dark of night. Because they know that no matter how powerful their sword or righteous their cause, there was once a time it wasn't enough. That even victories ordained by the Heavens can be broken by the will of men."

-Black, Book 2, Chapter 36: Madmen

It was Bard's action, yes. It was her strike at them when she died, yes. It was her contingency, yes.

But Amadeus paid his dues. Catherine was told so many times by the Calamities that Amadeus did not value his own life. So he called the dues in.

He saved the girl, he changed his country for the better, and broke the villains' destined loss. Amadeus, both the part of him that was the Black Knight and the part of him that was a loyal friend, won. In the end, I don't think he could have gotten a better send-off.

Someperson

Yeah tbh when the dust clears the only person who really came out of the chaos in Praes who could be said to have won is Amadeus of the Green Stretch. He is the one that set the pattern for the nation to come more than anyone else. He is the one who achieved all of his main goals.

Only living to see it was never one of them. Rest in peace.

N/A

Honestly, I feel like this was a fantastic step in the story... Until that last development. That last bit does not enthuse me.

The idea that the Bard holds actual mystical power or authority over the narrative laws of Named is something that follows from what I've seen before, or is narratively necessary, or is all that compelling. The impression I've gotten has always been that the Intercessor was familiar with the scripts of stories, in a like manner to Cat and her namelore, just an order of magnitude more experienced and coming at it from the perspective of being a 'behind the scenes agent', rather than that of somebody living on the 'stage' so to speak, who's had to learn it all the hard way. That stories having power is a phenomenon of the world, not discrete things that can be stolen or destroyed.

And this would be fine if, as an unexpected reveal, it portended cool turns for the story, but I don't think it actually does.

For one thing, it's a considerable escalation jump, and those make me wary. Stories are not automatically made better the more you climb up the power scale – Worm, I think, demonstrated this well in that the further it ventured from its street-level roots, the worse and more incoherent it got. One of the reasons I like Practical Guide so much is that EE has consistently demonstrated a solid sense of when to step the power scale back a step, as with Cat losing the power of Winter, going from a nascent deity to the high priestess of another power. The Praesi campaign worked best, I think, when it was motivated by worldly concerns

and temporal power; about acquiring the diabolists and expertise to neutralise the hellgates the Dead King had opened up, and removing the Dread Empire as a source of support for Keter. And, of course, the character motivations, but I'll get to that in a bit.

For another, well, does the Dead King really NEED another win? Does he need, does he even benefit from, this kind of win in particular? He was, after all, already winning. He's been winning for a while now. He's won *literally every major battle* – Hainaut was supposed to be the turning point, where the Grand Alliance took the initiative back and went on the offensive, instead it was a humbling defeat that killed multiple recurring characters, devastated Procer, and allowed Neshamah to deploy a bunch of superweapons that can't be stopped by intervention from Above because they were his ANSWER to intervention from Above. Since then we've had multiple interludes covering how the defence lines are collapsing and Procer is months, maybe weeks, from collapsing entirely. The story has built plenty of heat for the Dead King, is what I'm getting at – there comes a point where it starts to feel excessive.

The way that Hainaut turned out is especially important though, because it illustrated one of the Dead King's biggest qualities that make him not just threatening, but *interesting*; that like Amadeus and Tariq and Cat, he's canny enough to make the story-logic of this world work for him. That's vital to him, because from a narrative perspective he and his have to struggle uphill to be interesting to read about, simply by dint of the fact that he's a mostly-offscreen villain who presides over a faction which primarily consists of mindless, faceless undead. He can't carry the drama the way that Praes can, filled as it is with conniving schemers and energetic personalities undergirded by the realpolitik of crop yields, and *history,* so much of the history of places and people that we've been with and been getting invested in all the way back to chapter one.

Which means that unbinding the Dead King from the chains of stories is playing with narrative fire, because while it makes him more threatening (when he was plenty threatening already) it does so by removing one of the few narrative tools he had to do anything really sit-up-and-take-notice *cool.* It could work out; it could be that taking that sword of damocles away from over his head is what he needs to take the stage in a way that drums up drama for him, but 'partway through the final book' feels a little late in the plot to get us really enthralled with him.

N/A

"The idea that the Bard holds actual mystical power or authority over the narrative laws of Named is NOT something that" wrassin frassin, that was a typo and a half...

MoreBeer

It's in Yara's Name. She's not the Sage, knower of lore. She's the Bard, the maker and singer of stories! That she knew so much about Names is because she is the one making the Stories, and those who thought she was just knowledgeable without true power seem to have been fooled.

This was foreshadowed for books, IMO. Since book 1. If stories have so much power, what of the story teller?

kinghaart

I dunno, I think he's interesting because we still don't know if he's evil or just Evil.

I mean, yes, obviously very evil but he can make the same argument as Amadeus – he might have eaten Procer and opened the Hellgates to force Cat back to Praes to kill Bard. He did foresee *something* back after 3rd Liesse after all.

So if he planned this, for all we know he just wanted to have stories end so he could not have to worry about all the bottled evil tropes and can just do his thing, and can now go back to leaving Procer alone. I don't THINK that's what he'll do, but if stories are broken – we don't know.

Also, while stories may have lost their power, Cat still seems to have her Name and I suspect it will still be effective against Neshamah. She might also have supercharged necromancy against beyond what Night provided.

Darkening

Well, bright side. Alaya will probably be a better chancellor than a dread empress! It's what her Role always was after all, even if she didn't take the Name.

Steven Silver

Yo, someone with a good memory: is this the second time Cat and Bard have butted heads directly? 'Cuz this encounter with Bard was a Draw. Suuuper bloody, but still a Draw. The only other clash I can remember was at the Armory, and Bard got what she wanted out of that. Are they in a Pattern of Three, now?

Xinci

Honestly they more or less seem to be in one, yes. If not a pattern of three specifically, they are still in a death struggle over who gets to have the role as a stabalizer of the board.

therealgridlock

They've clashed more than three times, but I don't know in what order.

If the arsenal was a win for the Bard, and this was a draw, then the Bard loses next time.

If the arsenal was a draw, when was the win or loss before? Does this mean this is a loss? Or a victory?

If the arsenal was a win for Cat, and this is the draw, then Bard wins the next one.

Arsenal is what I'd call the first conflict between the two on equal footing, I just don't know if you can call it a win or a loss, they both didn't get what they wanted. Bard was still alive and Cat wasn't free of the Bard.

Maybe three draws? If win-draw-lose means you always get a reversal, maybe three draws means you get a subsumation? A replacement?

Maybe they're acting out all 9 patterns of three? 3, 3, 3? I don't know enough about the numerogy of this world, for all I know they could be going for 7 and 1. Idk what makes 8 more interesting than 9, or why making it out of two primes makes it interesting. This is all probably eastern Europe stuff.

Tiranu

That is if the pattern of 3 still works. Bard just killed all the stories of villains. Cat is a villain and the pattern of 3 falls under story (grove).

therealgridlock

Yeah but it would still exist from the hero side. Technically WB is probably evil anyway, so it wouldn't matter because I don't think you can pattern of three your own side, but we shall see.

kinghaart

Bard tried to kill Cat at Liesse, failed.

Was killed by Cat again at Arsenal.

And was just killed again now.

Hard to say if there's a win-draw-loss there.

Black Spiral Dancer

I still don't understand... why couldn't the Black Knight let a single person he knew die? They weren't even lovers! In fact she tried to assassinate him over and over the last few years. I don't get it. He ended up as a fucking martyr, self-sacrificing for someone not even worthy. Talk about stupidity! And I guess Ranger rolled the dice to die the same way.

What has gone with the story? This chapter makes it unrecognizable for me. All of a sudden the bard can make evil and good names disappear by choking on her own tongue? Wait wait wait... but we had established she couldn't die at all! You mean to say All gods above AND below are less powerful than some magical artefact Hierophant devised? Because they were the ones enforcing her continuous life, so I heard.

And Catherine gets a Name, only to make the wrong move and LOSE HALF THE NAMES OF THE CONTINENT, her new one included. But wouldn't that mean that every aspect should be gone from every evil character (and good, I suppose, since that's somehow "kept" in the artefact)? How come the Dead King still seems all-powerful even after this whole change?

It doesnt make sense for me.

Deworld

1. Amadeus' close connection to Alaya was well-known for a very long time. Despite the fact they parted ways by the end, they still deeply cared about each other. "They are not even lovers" sounds funny. As if bedplay is the only way love can manifest. They certainly loved each other, and with villains like them, it's the kind of love that persists despite everything they do to each other,
And no, I don't remember a single time when Alaya tried to assassinate Amadeus.

2. It's not clear what exactly Bard did and what are consequences of it are. Maybe she just stopped current stories, maybe she destroyed villain stories as a concept, who knows? It seems like Bard, as the emissary of Gods, was given authority over those stories by them, and she, well, used it. It isn't that she is more powerful, it's just she is in a position when she can do something like that.

3. No, Bard didn't destroy Names, she destroyed Stories. Those are different things, despite being connected. All Names, Aspects, and other Name-given powers still exist, Cat's included, just villains are no longer bound by patterns and rules of narrative. Or so it seems. As I said, it isn't clear yet.

Black Spiral Dancer

Well put. I find the idea of the namelore getting destroyed but names themselves remaining quite odd, it's like the past being erased – how the hell can the present exist without a past? One shouldn't exist without the other. In the same way, names should exist BECAUSE they have stories backing them up. Or so I thought.

Even putting that aside... how come you can have HEROES stories still existing without any villain story existing? What about the many many times such stories are intertwined? How can you tell a hero's tale where there is a villain without AT THE SAME TIME telling indirectly the villain's lore/story?

The second part bothers me more rationally than the first.

kinghaart

I think this is Read And Find Out territory, but those are good questions.

My guess is that Heroes will still get things like Providence, but can't rely on Villain story weaknesses like monologuing (which might actually be safe to do now...!). And Villains will need to expect that Heroes will still get a last wind before going down, but that might not be enough. On the flip side, the first part of their plans could fail, and they also won't necessarily get to spite their killers with a final revenge curse etc. (which is actually super important because imagine what that would have looked like for the DK vs Cat).

ninegardens

"I still don't understand... why couldn't the Black Knight let a single person he knew die? They weren't even lovers! In fact she tried to assassinate him over and over the last few years. I don't get it. He ended up as a fucking martyr, self-sacrificing for someone not even worthy. Talk about stupidity!"

Wut?

What has them being lovers got to do with it.

Despite all their anger, despite all their arguments, Alaya never ONCE tried to assassinate Maddie. Hell- she was at some point willing to go on the warpath against cat, *and all of Procer* for daring to lay a finger on him. Even when he turned against her, and named her unsuitable as dread empress... who one desire was for him to "Come home".

And even ignoring all that...

The story that Black wants to build is not one that wants betrayal and trechery at its foundation. "Kill the previous empress and claim their place" is a story told a million times

over. He is trying to build something new, and that, by its definition needs love at its basis.

... there's also the fact that, despite all her flaws, Alaya probably IS a better Chancellor than Black. She probably **is** one of the best people to attempt to redeem/reconstruct Praes.

Black Spiral Dancer

Fair points, actually. Kudos.

Black Spiral Dancer

also, just pointing out, I probably didnt read their backstories so I had the sense that Amadeus was this cold, calculative guy who would never sacrifice himself for anyone else (like most evil people in fact, and for good reason). I'm not really sure how gaining Alaya 8 years of life helps anyone, but after reading all comments I find it more likely all this was planned so he could WIN in his fight against heaven or something. Also Amadeus kinda seems to be wanting to kill himself for a long time.

kinghaart

Read the Seed chapters. Also Cat's Name dreams of Black show clear ties between him, Alaya and the Calamities.

Interesting that Ranger is the only Calamity left alive... truly alone.

superkeaton

All this time worrying about an angel corpse, only to do so much the same.

Well. Here's to new beginnings.

Rabblrouser Storyteller

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck **fuck**.

SaveOurSquirrels

And then Neshamah quit his job and took up pottery

kinghaart

See you joke but now he CAN. He actually couldn't before, he works have lost his Name and died without acting like the story demanded.

So he can go from Big Bad who had murdered millions to Irritant-copycat and while that made no narrative sense before, there's no grooves to stop that now.

SaveOurSquirrels

Yes that's the point of the joke

Someperson

Rest in peace Amadeus of the Green Stretch 😞

Yara shouldn't have bet against Catherine carrying out a price to the bloody end... That is what Catherine does successfully over and over and over again and I really would not be surprised if it became one of her Aspects.

And Catherine probably should have realized that being the villain who uses "the ends justifies the means" as a way to pursue personal power was a losing proposition, narratively speaking, no matter how well intentioned it may have been and no matter that there is a hint of a plan to use that Name to beat the Dead King. On a deeper level, threatening to topple the entire resolutuon of the state of Praes for the sake of a single powerful Name is kind of the opposite of what Catherine stands for, and there are few ways that could have ended other than in tragedy.

Anyways, the loss of stories guiding villainy will have an absurd number of implications, and not just for the war against Keter: also for what comes next with Cardinal and the Accords. I'm not even sure I get how that works, because heroes and villains stories are often so closely intertwined, and because some few Named don't even fall neatly into one of those two categories. Find out next time on A Practical Guide to Evil, I guess.

Frivolous

I wonder if Alaya will have to sign onto the Truce and Terms.

The Name of Chancellor still exists, right, or is it burned up with the Tower, becoming only a mere title?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yup, that's part of the deal with Cat.

Odd

"So close to the end, gloating would be dangerous."

Followed shortly by,

""Can you taste them yet, Yara?" I whispered. "The ashes?""

Oh, Cat. Still human.

Black Spiral Dancer

Good catch!

Tenthyr

You know it only just occurs to me the brilliance of Cats choice of name. Because by doing it she DEMANDS above answer her in kind. Because there has to be symetry. Every white knight has a black, every destroy a protect. And so if belows worst impulses are leashed by a Warden of the East, the role of Warden of the West must be taken up in answer, Hanno's budding transition, to do the same for Above. Creation has no choice but to conform to the shape of the Liesse Accords.

I mean obviously the Dead King unleashed is probably gonna ruin it all but the sheer balls of it, lordy.

[Catastronaut](#)

Just wanted to point out that it seems like the Mantle of Woe might become the Mantle of the W.O.E.

This is probably just a coincidence, but an amusing one.

Black Spiral Dancer

OMG, I just realized...

The Bard is just like Atreyu from the NEVERENDING STORY. It is repeated there that every story begets many others, and someone has to take care of them. Atreyu offers himself to the task so that the protagonist can return to his world, otherwise he would have been trapped in the book forever.

My gosh, did EE also has The Neverending Story as major inspiration? It remains my Favorite Book of All Time. And TPGTE seems awful like one story inside the neverending story book-universe.

Black Spiral Dancer

So many similarities...

Keep in mind in the Neverending Story, there is A Tower, a girl atop said tower, an evil werewolf, an akua-like sorcerer, a Dread Emperor (the protagonist for a time, as well as other long-maddened aurnyn-starved "emperors")...also, a band of five or something?

I finally found the primal Source. Though I likely never will get confirmation from EE, I know it in my "heart of hearts".

nipi

Im guessing Cat cant raise Amadeus as an undead because he called in his dues

Pog

Cats name sucks ass, damn. Why does the intercessor have the power to destroy the control the rules of creation have over named ????? Seems like

Interlude: End Times

"Better the tiger atop the mountain than the wolf at your feet."

– Praesi saying

Antigone had been just a little too slow to stop it.

That would have been enough to unsettle Hanno even if he'd not just seen the Tomb, the great lake that separated Hainaut from the Kingdom of the Dead, freeze over. A horde whose numbers dwarfed the stars in the sky had already begun to march across the thick ice, a tidal wave of death advancing without anything as careful as tactics or strategy: they marched in a straight line, killing every living thing before them. Hainaut was lost, Hanno of Arwad had known in that moment. It could not be held against this, even though the Dead King might well have doomed himself with such a bold stroke. And yet, even as the dark-skinned man watched the inexorable crawl across the horizon, it was not the sights that had his attention. Or his worry.

Antigone had been *just a little too slow* to stop it.

It was not that providence had abandoned the Witch of the Woods, for it had not. She'd been awake and out in the hills when it happened, at Hanno's side as they discussed whether a raid to break up the army gathering north of the Cigelin Sisters was feasible. Antigone had been, relatively speaking, in the right place and at the right time. She *could* have prevented it, feasibly. Looking back, Hanno was certain of that. The opportunity had been provided. And yet Antigone's answering stroke, her attempt to inflict a flaw on the enemy ritual, had been just a little weak and too slow. She'd misjudged what was

needed by a hair's breadth, which against the likes of the Dead King was more than enough to lose.

It'd been just slightly off, and that was what disturbed Hanno. The Witch of the Woods had been nudged towards a victory, yes, but Hanno feared that her enemy had not been nudged towards defeat. That the grand scheme of freezing an entire lake through a great ritual had not been marked with doom. And the implications of that... He struggled to even grasp the scope. Had the Gods Below chosen the King of Death as their champion, intervened to protect him from the promise reverses? And if they had, was today even the only time they would step in? He almost shivered at the thought. The Dead King had been monstrous enough when he had been, if Catherine was to be believed, in disfavour with the Gods Below.

If he was the favourite son again, the war had become a manner of desperate that begged for a stronger word.

"The clouds are not receding, Lord White," the Mirror Knight said.

Many had taken to calling Hanno by the title of Prince White, and he no longer bade otherwise, but Christophe had never been one of them. The other man had been scalded by politics, the dark-skinned hero thought, and now avoided them like the plague. And it was a manner of politics to call Hanno any sort of prince, he would not pretend otherwise. A line was being drawn between here and Salia, all of the west deciding on which side it preferred to stand.

"They're expanding," Hanno softly agreed.

Dark clouds had appeared in the far distance, above what he knew bone-deep to be the Crown of the Dead without knowing how or why, and they had only been expanding since. A mile every hour, perhaps? It was hard to tell from so far away.

"I fear the Dead King means to cover the entire sky," the Mirror Knight said. "And that we've few means to stop him."

Hanno could only guess at the truth of that, but it rang true to him. It was a way to block out the sun, to wither crops and force soldiers to fight in the dark. It would spread fear, too, at the simple sight of it. How many would flee just for being convinced that the Gods were abandoning them all?

"Antigone will slow him down," Hanno replied.

Christophe turned green eyes on the once-White Knight, face grim beneath the helm.

"And how long will that hold?"

Hanno did not answer. Silence lingered.

"Hainaut is lost," he finally said. "We cannot hope to hold it. Let's head back to camp, Christophe, a message needs to be sent to General Abigail."

The Mirror Knight rose to his full height, sun glinting off the polished armour.

"And what will it say?" he curiously asked.

"That she is to retreat," Hanno of Arwad said. "As we will."

A line of defence would be left behind, but already he knew what must be done. Most of his army would go to the muster Cordelia Hasenbach had called for, the great host being assembled for a desperate last strike at the heart of the Enemy.

To Salia they would go, and after that only the Gods knew.

—

Henriette had done well, Prince Frederic Goethal thought as he beheld the walls of Courtial.

His cousin and heiress had been charged with preparing the defences of Brus while he fought abroad and she'd seen to the duty with skill. The last wave of Lycaonese refugees from Neustria was being ferried south into Segovia even as the evacuation of his own Bruseni began, emptying the north of his principality in anticipation of the war reaching it. And it soon would: Princess Rozala had sent word that Cleves was lost and she was retreating into Lyonis, which was the beginning of the end for the defence of that front. Unlike rocky, narrow Cleves the lands of Lyonis were fertile flatlands. There were no natural defences to use against the dead and too few fortresses to stem the tide.

It was only a matter of time until the northeast of Brus began to see raids from the Enemy, probing the defences, and it already was from the northwest. The retreat from the Morgentor had been a march through nightmares, Neustria falling apart around them as the dead butchered thousands and swelled their armies with the slaughter, but the armies had made it. Frederic had risked a raid against a Crab to buy the army time to pull ahead of the tireless armies of the Dead King, but Otto had decided to blithely walk back his agreement and pull him out of the fire at the last moment. It'd been a miracle they'd made it back, much less losing as few men as they had.

But now here they were, their rearguard even now making its way through the hidden paths that led through the great marshlands to the northwest of the principality. Frederic himself had ridden

with the van, as was his preference, and that'd led him to the low hill where he'd reined in his charge. In the distance the walls of Courtial, the great fortress the predecessors of the House of Goethal had raised at the edge of the swamps, rose in pale stone. There was a walled city at the foot of the fortress, a mere four thousand souls or so, but that made it the largest gathering of people in the region by far. It was why Frederic had decided on Courtial as a supply base, knowing that a host as large as his own would need the spare hands.

Of the nearly one hundred thousand soldiers that had once stood on the walls of the Morgentor only thirty-seven thousand had made it south, and of these only twenty thousand would keep marching south. Brus' borders could not be held with only the garrisons now defending them, even if Henriette had moved Heavens and Hells to swell those ranks. Twenty thousand would have to be enough when he answered the First Prince's call to muster. *It will have to be enough*, Frederic thought, *for there are no more men to spare*. The thought was grim but no less true for it. Passing a tired hand through his hair – the helm had ridden tight against a ribbon, tugging at it – the Kingfisher Prince allowed himself a short moment of peace.

To feel the wet wind coming from the marshes, enjoy the sight of the distant green of the rolling plains to the south. It had been years since he was last in the land of his birth. He almost felt a stranger to it.

The peace was ended by the sound of approaching hooves. Frederic felt his retinue stir at the bottom of the hill, but none called a warning. A friend, then, and not unexpected. It was not long before a dozen heavy horses barded in steel joined his retinue below, parting to allow through their prince: Otto Reitzenberg of Bremen, who men called Redcrown. Perhaps the finest friend Frederic had ever made, the man who had saved his life more times than he had fingers to count. Otto deftly guided his charger up the slope, slowing when they became of a height.

The Prince of Bremen was dark-haired and dour, with that unfortunate Reitzenberg nose and a chipped tooth he'd never gotten around to getting fixed, but you would not have known it from the way his people reacted to him. Cordelia Hasenbach was still held in high esteem among the Lycaonese, but she had not fought with her people – not the way Otto Redcrown had. When word had come that Mathilda Greensteel and the Iron Prince had died in Hainaut, the prince of Bremen had become the living banner of the northerners. So long as he stood, they would not falter. Frederic much feared what would happen were he slain, and not only because it would feel as if half his soul were lost.

"Otto," the Kingfisher Prince lazily said. "Come to see the sights?"

"Not a mountain to be found," Otto grunted. "It is troubling, Frederic. Like walking around with the back of your trousers missing."

Frederic laughed. Otto had never set foot out of the Lycaonese principalities before the war, and rarely out of his native Bremen. This was the furthest he'd even been from home. A home now little more than ashes and undead.

"I'm glad you will be able to see the plains before the war reaches them," the Prince of Brus said. "It is not the right season for the flower fields, but-"

There was a sound like a scream, if the world itself could scream. Frederic froze in surprise, but a heartbeat later his sword had cleared the scabbard. It was not only him who'd heard the noise, he saw, for Otto and both their escorts were arming themselves. The scream died as suddenly as it had come, but it left behind thick unease.

"That did not come from the swamps," the Kingfisher Prince decided.

"Heaven's ward," Otto quietly said.

Frederic followed his friend's gaze, across the distance and all the way to the pale walls of Courtial. At first he thought it was a heat haze, improbable as it would be, but it was not. The stone was twisting and slithering, spinning out in strands. All of the madness orbited a single form, a great eye of sickly green light set in a pulsing haze of purple flames.

"Demon," Frederic rasped out, coldly furious. "The Dead King seeks to destroy the city before we can hold it. I will not suffer it."

He cast a look at his riders.

"Raise the banner," the Kingfisher Prince ordered. "Lord Gontrand, you will ride in haste for priests and mages. There is no time to-"

The world screamed again, wracked in pain. There was a splash of murky darkness in the heart of the fortified city. Within a heartbeat, screaming began. Terror, Frederic recognized. They were screams of utter terror. His Name flared in protection, burning away the sliver of corruption carried by the distant sounds.

"You will need the Stained Sister and the Astrologer," Otto evenly said. "It is nothing but throwing away lives otherwise."

Frederic bit his lip until it bled, but curtly nodded. Getting himself killed would help no one, besides – the world began to scream again. Not the city, this time. In the distance, the green rolling plains to the south lit up with red. Fire was spreading through air and ground alike, like baleful tendrils. There was another scream.

And another.

Another.

Another.

This, the Kingfisher Prince dimly realized, was no longer a war. It was an extermination.

—

It was madness, Roland thought. Impossible.

He was in Aisne, looking into the rumour a Revenant had been seen. There was all of Brabant between him and the fronts. Aisne was not safe, for nowhere was safe in these dark times, but the principality had been spared the swords of the Dead King. Even after the Carrion Lord's depredations during the Tenth Crusade, the land here remained some of the finest in the principate: great golden plains as far as the eye could see, vineyards and orchards and merry streams. These were the heartlands of the Principate, only Cantal and Iserre fancied as richer in harvests.

And now Rogue Sorcerer was watching that same harvest die.

Entire swaths of the sunny blue sky above had broken like panes of glass, sights from the eerie horizons of Arcadia shown through the rifts, and great stones had fallen down. One through every rift, and though they fell without regard to where they might land Roland did not think that this was a mere bombardment. He hurried the closest fallen stone, riding a horse half to death, and found that death had arrived long before he could. The stone, a massive thing of granite the height and width of a dozen men, had shattered a barn that mercifully looked like it'd been abandoned. But it was not the stone that struck fear in him.

Out of small holes in granite, almost like pores, small critters were pouring out. Hardly any larger than crickets, they had a glint of copper them in the glare of the sun as they spread out like a cursed plague. They fanned out like a curtain and, instead of any sort of terrible curse, they simply spoiled all they touched. Like ripples going through the field before him, Roland watched with muted horror as in a matter of moments they made half a mile's worth of grain uneatable. Half-rotten, perhaps even poisonous. Gathering himself he pulled at the most destructive of magics within him, spraying flame and whipping up a storm of it.

Thousands of the undead critters died in moments, leaving him panting and already half spent. There were still a few out there that he could see and he took the time to clear them out, but his mind was already awirl at the implications.

"This will kill us all," Roland de Beaumaraais whispered.

How many of the stones had fallen? At least six here in Aisne, and the Dead King would have done much the same across all the lands that serves as the breadbasket of Procer. Cantal, Iserre, perhaps even as far west as Aequitan. He was killing the infestation here, but how many of these abominations would land days of travel away from anyone who might end them? The great stone pulsed with power, but the Rogue Sorcerer snarled in rage and snapped his wrist towards it.

"Confiscate."

The magic invested in it was foul, handling it felt like licking pestilence, but even as the stone went inert Roland forced himself to study the sorcery. It had been meant, he decided, to release another swarm. It had been gathering power from ambient sorcery ever since unleashing the first. Likely the stone itself was being converted into the foul critters and the spell would run out when there was no longer enough granite to sustain the enchantments. *Four, five swarms*, he guessed. And, even as his heart clenched and his blood turned to ice, Roland de Beaumaraais corrected his words.

"This *has* killed us all," the Rogue Sorcerer whispered.

Procer did not know it yet, might nor for days or even weeks, but it was starving.

—

Princess Rozala watched in mute horror as the wave washed over the rampart, sweeping men and engines away in a murderous crash.

She'd thought they had longer, that though the defensive line around Peroulet was good as fallen the city itself might hold a while longer. That it might slow down the advance of the Enemy before the army holding it was forced to retreat through the Twilight Ways into Lyonis. And was she not right to hope? The Dead King had thrown devils at these walls, and when that failed a pair of demons, but they had held. Gods, it had cost them but they had held and sent the beasts screaming back into the Hells. They'd tied down an army a hundred thousand strong by keeping the city, buying time for walls to be raised to their south, and even as the dead assaulted the walls day and night the defenders held. Exhausted and bleeding, but so very proud. Had they not held against the Enemy's worst?

So the Dead King began to drown them all.

It was said that the Black Queen's most fearsome spell – the Deluge, singers called it – had been used against her in Hainaut, but Rozala had not thought her own host at risk. The Enemy had never used it elsewhere, perhaps out of fear that he would be caught and the spell would be turned against him. Whatever the truth of it, such restraint was gone: a great gate had been opened at ground height facing the gates of Peroulet and within moments the blast of water had smashed them down. Water began pouring into the city, tipping over soldiers and horses, breaking houses. It had not stopped there. Another two gates were opened on the city's flanks, higher up. The tides there were now sweeping over the ramparts, crushing whatever men had manned them.

Rozala had been commanding from the summit of the keep at the heart of the city, as she liked the vantage, but now she was being forced to watch the city drown and her army with it.

"Louis," she said, forcing herself to be calm. "The outer city is lost. Order our priests to form shields across the streets from the height of..."

She paused, searching through her memory.

"Therrien Avenue," the Princess of Aquitan finished.

"That's abandoning a third of the city, Rozala," her husband quietly said. "The one where most of our soldiers are."

"It is either that or losing all of it," she evenly replied. "Send the order, along with that of general retreat."

The moment they had lost the walls they'd lost the siege. All she could do now was salvage all she could of the army and pray it was enough. Louis Rohanon grimaced, but did not argue. He'd been in this war just as long as she had, he too knew the looks of a city lost.

"It will be done," he promised, then hesitated.

She smiled, laying his hand on her belly. It had swollen, but she was still months away from birth according to the priests.

"Go," Rozala ordered. "We'll live through it, all three of us."

He laid a kiss on her hand and left. The princess avoided the amused gazes of her personal guard as her husband and secretary left. She had never been much of a romantic herself, as they well knew, but she did appreciate her husband's continued tenderness. It was terribly Alamans, but it'd grown on her. Shaking off the thought, Rozala brought up her Baalite eye again and continued to

preside over what was already promising to be one of the greatest defeats of her career as a general. The battle was lost, there was no denying that, but she must learn all she could of the Enemy's tricks before her army retreated.

The Dead King was in fine form today, it seemed. The water pouring out of the gates had not stopped, filling the outer city so much it was not spilling over the walls and the shields raised by priests and mages were buckling under the weight. It was not the end of it, though. Great war engines not unlike oversized ballistae had been dragged to the fore of the undead army outside the city, a dozen of them, and bombardment began unceremoniously. The projectiles they shot arced upwards, above the shields her people had raised, and tore through the hasty attempts by her last spare mages to bounce them off. Great monoliths of obsidian tore into the paved roads, cleaving through the stone, and began pulsing with sorcery.

"All Named on the monoliths," Rozala ordered. "The water was merely a strike, these are the killing stroke."

The messenger went off at a run, but few things were faster than sorcery. Rozala had read the reports of the Black Queen's battle at Lauzon's Hollow and she recalled mention of pillars of black stone with a similar look, but the difference in size was stark. No mere pillars, these: they were large enough that the war engines that shot them were made of steel and large as houses. The effect, though, seemed to be similar from the description she had read. A pulse of crackling lightning slew all men in range, and then a few heartbeats later a second pulse raised them from the dead. The size, Rozala decided, was a mere consequence of the power of the cursed things having been increased. It was still fundamentally the same trick.

Cold comfort, when she saw near a thousand soldiers die in the first pulse.

Practically speaking an enemy bridgehead had been established behind her lines and, more importantly, her shields. If the dead began killing priests... If Louis were here, with his head for numbers he might hazard a guess at the strength that the great volumes of water held back by the shields might bring to bear. Rozala did not have that particular gift, though she knew enough to suspect it would be a merciless slaughter.

"Full retreat," Princess Rozala ordered, the words like ashes in her mouth. "All forces are to immediately begin making their way towards Gueridon Plaza. The wayfarer mages are to open the gates into the Twilight Ways."

Maybe half her army would make it out of the city, if she was lucky, and this did not seem like a day for luck. Peroulet had held for weeks only to now fall in hours, and deep down Rozala

was beginning to wonder if she'd not simply been allowed to remain here for some deeper purpose. She grit her teeth, putting away the Baalite eye. It did not matter. There was only one place left for her army to retreat to.

Salia, where Cordelia Hasenbach had called for a great muster.

—

After Brus fell, it was finished.

It had taken the Dead King years to take the Lycaonese principalities, and even Neustria's fall had come mere months ago, but now it seemed as if the Enemy was no longer restraining himself. The principality of Brus still stood in the sense that most of its lands were intact and over half of its people remained, but as a state it was finished. All its major cities had been struck by demons and only the most heavily warded of border fortresses still stood, meaning that Prince Frederic now ruled over farmland being overrun and a panicked mass of refugees.

Lyonis was being swept through, its defences overrun, and now that the White Knight had withdrawn from Hainaut the lands it had defended were beginning to break as well. Prince Ariel of Arans was negotiating with the regent of Callow for his people to be allowed across the Stairway, having been refused by the Prince of Bayeux to his south, and the Brabantine refugees that Cordelia had not welcomed into Salia had armed themselves so they could force their way into Aisne even through a closed border. The moment word of it all had spread, the First Prince of Procer had lost the last power she held over the southern Principate.

No royalty south of Creusens still answered her letters, save those who had invited her to flee to their realm and continue her rule under their protection. Cordelia had declined the offer, even when made by those who genuinely meant the words. Her duty was in Salia. She had left her own Rhenia to burn for that duty and she would not forsake it now. She could feel it in the air, the way that all the winds were blowing towards the capital. The last gasp of Procer would be exhaled here, in the same city where it had been founded centuries ago. Agnes had agreed, though the predictions she shared afterwards were troubling.

But Cordelia Hasenbach would not go gently into the night, and so she had prepared.

Salia could not be evacuated. Even if her increasingly tenuous hold on the city could be used to bend the people that way, there was simply nowhere for them to go. With the refugees pouring in from the north, there were likely now as many people in Salia and its surrounding towns as in all of Brus. If the people were dispersed in every direction most would die from lack of means,

and if they remained together they would be a crushing burden to whichever principality they fled to. Cordelia, much as the thought disgusted her, knew that armies would be mobilized to massacre them before they crossed the border if need be.

A decade ago that would have been unthinkable, but after the Great War and the brutality of the conflict with the Dead King? Desperation would make for ugly deeds.

And so Salia must stand, lest Cordelia condemn hundreds of thousands to death. Her duty decided, she had set to prepare the defence and even what would come after. Armies would gather to the capital so that they might set out against Keter, but those armies would need food and steel and supplies. She bargained and begged and confiscated – stole with the fig leaf of law – to scrap together all she could, and still Agnes told her that doom was coming. The armies would not be there in time. The Dead King would strike first. And so the First Prince of Procer turned to the sole recourse left to her.

She sent all villains east into Aisne and sent Agnes away from the city, where her sight would be needed, then dismissed her servants and headed towards the Chamber of Assembly.

The seat of the Highest Assembly had little changed since the day Clothor Merovins had been elected as the founding First Prince of Procer. In a city that every ruler wanted to grace with another fresh thing of beauty, another layer of glamour and glory, the ancient hall remained untouched. Walls of whitewashed limestone, rafters of ancient creaking oak and that faint smell of wood smoke come from the fire that had caught during the second Liturgical War. In a city heavily laden with gold and marble and jewels, it was a stark and bare place – save for the twenty-four thrones that filled it. Twenty-three on the ground, one for each principality, and one for the First Prince on the dais above.

Cordelia sat on Clothor Merovins' old throne and close her eyes. She could feel the grey granite beneath her, polished by a river but otherwise unadorned, and she set her palm against the coolness of it. In a way she had never been close to that seat, she mused. Cordelia too had been worn to smoothness, stripped of all her affectations. The fair-haired princess smiled at the thought, then in the pale light of the single lantern lit she waited in silence. It would come soon, Agnes had told her as much, and it would come here. And when her answer was given, well, she would learn something as well.

She was half asleep when the scream sounded, but ice ran through her blood and she was wide awake before the roof atop her was ripped off. Cordelia looked up at the night sky, the stars and the half-moon, but they were marred by a great gate spewing out winged abominations. A Hellgate. That was the Dead King's bow, then, a Hellgate above the very beating heart of the Principate.

Yet there was more. Ugly, unspeakable things that came creeping through the dark. That bent wood as if it were water and made of tiles wriggling snakes. How many were there? She could not tell, in the dark, but there had to be more than one.

It was a great winged devil that dared to first enter the Chamber, landing in a crouch before her. Shaped like a horned man, though broader than any man she had met, and covered with thick dark fur. Bestial and with a mouth full of fangs that it dared to grin at her with. She leaned forward, her dress of Rhenian blue pulling tight on her shoulders.

"Can you hear me, Dead King?" Cordelia asked.

The creature milled uneasily, then stilled.

"In a manner of speaking," it replied, its voice not its own.

"Ah, I had hoped you would," the First Prince of Procer smiled.

"You struggled mightily," the Dead King said. "But there is no turning back the inexorable."

"It may well be that we will fall," the First Prince acknowledged. "But until then, Trismegistus King, do not forget one thing."

She smiled, cold and hard and with every once of scorn every Hasenbach had ever felt for the old monster.

"This is Procer," she hissed. "You tread here at your peril."

Pale light washed over them all.

An eternity passed. The Light had seared Cordelia's skin but left her strangely invigorated, and when she opened her eyes again she found... nothing. Not before her, not in the sky above, not anywhere at all. There was only Salia and her people. The ealamal had worked as the priests as sworn it would, scouring all of the principality from the Dead King and his works. It had been weakened, they told her, both in stringency and in scope. Power had been limited and been made less discriminating. Cordelia had still likely killed a hundreds if not thousands of people in Salia through that order, she did not delude herself otherwise. People who had not been tried, been judged under the law.

They had only been judged as taints on Creation by the Choir of Judgement even through all the priests had done to force mercy onto that judgement. No Damned could have hoped to survive were they present, which was why Cordelia had sent them to Aisne, for in the eyes of the Seraphim villains were scarcely better than devils or demons.

Even though there was a sliver of guilt at the deaths she had ensured, Cordelia knew that the fate her decision had spared Salia would have been incomparable. And, deep down, a part of her felt deeply vindicated. Many had tried to warn her off the angel's corpse, called it madness or stupidity. Yet it had just saved every soul within the borders of Salia, and likely would again. Alone in the silent hall where the princes and princesses of Procer ruled but now she alone sat with silence for sole company, Cordelia Hasenbach looked up through the torn roof at the night sky. The pale stars set against the darkness, like candle lights never more than a breath away from being snuffed.

The Lycaonese princess raised a hand, as if to pluck them from the sky, and smiled.

"One more night to live," Cordelia told them. "Dawn has not yet failed."

She would win her people as many nights as she could, whatever the cost.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Steven Silver

One more night to live. One more night to read. One more night to vote.

Linnus42

Cat let DK off the leash and apparently didn't bother scrying to give anyone a heads up that she did it. That is pretty typical for Cat though I suppose.

Sir Nil

For all we know Scrying just became impossible through half of Calernia.

Sir Nil

That or all this happened within a few moments of 'Interesting.'

[Liliet](#)

It definitely STARTED happening within a few moments of "interesting", Cat couldn't warn them of shit BEFOREHAND.

Deworld

Probably both.

nick012000

IIRC it was confirmed a while ago that scrying across mountain ranges and bodies of water is difficult-to-impossible, and Praes and Procer are separated by both.

Cheet4h

It's still possible via the Observatory – early in the Praes campaign we already saw Cat talking with Cordelia by scrying. Although the ritual probably needs more preparation than regular scrying.

[Mincheriit](#)

It is possible that all these events are happening simultaneously or close to each other very soon after Cat's vision of the Dk, meaning she doesn't really have time to warn anyone or didn't get the chance; doesn't the scrying or w/e letting them talk require a recipient? They might not be expecting a call or able to receive due to interference, don't know if the dk is doing some shit he couldn't unleash before. I assume the dk has all this shit ready or close to ready as possible and has just never touched/used any of it due to restrictions promising him a return stroke. Such is no longer, meaning he gets to use the armed nukes in his display cabinet.

Zggt

>Cat let DK off the leash

No, the Bard did. Her plan has always been to scour Calernia clean of all life. This has been repeated in her last quote in the chapter before her "death". Cat and the Tyrant actually managed to stop her doing that the first time. Her goal has pretty consistently been the extermination of human life on Calernia for *reasons*.

> and apparently didn't bother scrying to give anyone a heads up that she did it

We don't know the timeline, as far as we know, this is happening the moment the Bard died. We also don't know if scrying is possible, or if the scrying happened but just didn't reach the recipient in time, et cetera

[Hargabga](#)

What quote exactly points at her wanting to do that?

Jonnnney

I believe her justification is the life that replaced it would be solely on the side of "good"

Zach

Yeah, I have no clue what the person is talking about. If Bard had the ability to eliminate all the stories, she could have simply chosen to do this before, since unleashing the Dead King is basically a death sentence for the realm. Bard has always seemed inclined towards just preserving the status quo.

I think the one character whose motivations kind of confuse me is the Dead King himself. Like what exactly is he wanting to do? Just continue sitting around coming up with new horrifying magic, but without the distraction of all the humans on the continent?

ninegardens

Everything we've seen so far indicates that DK has sort of... Masego's goals, but with Black's means.

In that "Apothesis" appears to be the goal. Godhood. A change in perspectives, possibly even a sneaky enough change to escape the system the Gods have created.

... but, that requires time, and patients, and never ever ever making a mistake that leaves him open to being killed.

It requires power and resources, so DK accumulates those. It requires eliminating threats, and destroying assets that the bard might use against him.

But yeah- Black was okay, because even though his means were ruthless, his goals were relatively noble (and this naturally limited his means). Masego is "safe" because even if his goals are terrifying in their ambition... he just doesn't have the ruthless streak- he isn't *interested* enough in winning.

DK (from what we have seen), is very much a servant of "One Sin, one Grace"... except without Black's love of his army, of his friends, of... anything outside of himself. ... honestly, the Black-DK parallels, have been some of the most interesting and fascinating parallels in the story for quiet a while, and mostly just serve to illustrate the many ways that black *doesn't* believe the things he claims to believe (back in book one). Because we meet

someone who believes those things, and he is an utter monster.

Snappy270

Basically he wants to be an actual God. Big G. But he could only do it slowly due to WB fighting against him and the limits of being a villain. He knows that if he didn't kill Procer now it would grow stronger and bigger with the continent would continue to unite. So he is trying to nip it while he can.

Remember undead can't truly learn new things, he can only become the master of the skills he has. Unfortunately he created the modern form of magic.

[Hargabga](#)

He calls himself a pupil of Gods, stabbed them in the back so hard they stopped supporting him, and tries to recreate Creation. I say he has far more ambitions than we were shown, it's just that he's patient enough to wait a few hundred or thousand years no biggie.

Borut Bracun

Sub

Some Smartass

Not so much a specific quote as that's the only possible goal that could be served by her observed actions.

[Hargabga](#)

There are so many goals that can fit into that bag of infinite cats. She may want to die or just escape her prison, spite the Gods by turning the story against them, free Calernia from the stories while not dooming them by it, ensure that Calernia stays in the Age of Wonders without going into something new, to get into Triumphant's pants, to get into Neshamah's pants, to combat her alcohol addiction and so many more. Sure, killing everyone on Calernia may be one of those things, but it is far from the only one.

Zggt

The quote wasn't by her, it was (if I remember correctly) discovered through the Tyrant and then an expedition that the usage of the Judgement-Angel-Body-Thing as originally intended would basically kill everything on the continent and start anew. From the last interlude, "It was time to

kill her and doom the world” hints that up to her very last moment, the Wandering Bard was still on that plan.

She failed, but only because Cat and friends have been looking for ways to try to kill her for ages now, and the Bard did get careless with all the taunting, monologues, betrayals and the such.

Mental Mouse

I still think that “time to kill her” always referred to the Bard herself. We certainly know she’s suicidal!

onedollargum

I’m not quite sure what Zggt meant either, but Bard was waiting at the tower to “kill [Catherine] and doom the world.” (last few lines of Interlude: A Girl Without a Name)

kinghaart

Kill The Girl. Yara was also a girl...

Barthumphries

She’s bored and wants to die. If everything is dead then there’s nobody to reincarnate into and she finally, so she hopes, will die.

Just before Cat arrived, the Bard thought to herself, time to destroy the world, or something like that. She’s had many thoughts like that.

Miles

Stop blaming Cat this isn’t even a fire.

Sir Nil

And we enter the belly of the whale.

imagesbe

Welp. This is just too much despair for me honestly, compared to how much the dramatic struggle from previous war scenes moved me, this barely warranted more than a sigh. Unhindered as he is, the Dead King is essentially invincible. How will EE write himself out of this corner? He has a good record in the past, but I’m really having difficulty seeing this going anywhere but everyone dead by angel.

Linnus42

Yeah DK didn’t need a power up also kinda found it more entertaining when he had to play around constraints.

hue hue

DK after killing all of procer: what will you do little cat?

Catherine: you got gnomed

Warships fleet warps on top of her

Aston Whiteman

Depends on EE.

Maybe an alternative reality chapter from EE?

Good choice of Gnomes..

KageLupus

That is because the Dead King having to play around his limitations made for a better story, which is why he was willing to do it in the first place. But the Wandering Bard has killed that narrative constraint and the story is broken, and now we get to see what a monster of that caliber would look like if he behaved "realistically".

yty

EE has a ton of good polities left hanging that he can draw on. Despite the reluctance of the dwarves, they won't survive if the dead king is allowed to scour the surface clean before turning to them, so they'll have to march. The golden bloom is still there. The death of below's stories will empower the drow just as much as it'll empower the dead king, same for the chain of hunger, and since northern procer has fallen the kingdom of the dead is the only target left for it to raid. Heck, he still has the gnomes in his back pocket if he really needs it.

Shveiran

And the intervention of nearly all of them would have no link of causality with the previous events of the protagonist, making such a resolution completely unsatisfying.

Hakram's Dead Hand

Hello, I disagree! I think that Catherine has had a hand or can feasibly have a hand in all of these (except maybe the Chain of Hunger). Other than Merchantis, Catherine has been the main arbiter to both the dwarves and the drow up until now, and it doesn't seem too far fetched knowing her character to have her bust directly into the Golden Bloom and demand assistance. Catherine could possibly even force the Gnomes hands, by tricking the right type of technology into the DK's grasp. That all depends on what the Gnomes

actually are though. I'd love to hear more of your thoughts, though.

eh

A few things are still in play:

A) Calernia is an undeveloped backwater, and if the DK starts to pose a world-ending threat to anyone outside the continent Keter will be carpet-bombed by angry gnomes, eviscerated by the main body of non-racist elves, or demolished by any other great power. The dwarves are fine and still a regional power, so far as we know. He's constrained by the playing field he's on, and additionally...

B) He's still constrained by narrative. A massive unstoppable undead army assaults a battered remnant of a nation after fantasy-nukes fail to stop him, while vulnerable civilians cower in fear in their capital, as our valiant anti-hero "villain" struggles to find a solution? That was fine when he was Malicia's catspaw, but now she's on the ropes and he's the big bad it's going to turn on him. He has to be aware of this, which leads to...

C) What does the Dead King want out of all this? He doesn't act with no reason. Some goal of his has prodded him into action, probably related to risk mitigation for him and his immortality, possibly related to the intercessor or other long term threats to his life. It's possible that his end goal is to get her killed, and he's planning to be beaten back by the cornered heroes. It's possible his end goal was something related to the twilight ways, or hell. It's possible he's after a relic from the Tower. It's possible he wants something else entirely.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

The Dead King being the big bad doesn't matter anymore—villainous stories no longer have ontological force.

broadaxe

THAT is an extremely good point, there is absolutely no plot armor for him, you could assassinate him without having to beat any of the things the plot would usually require

Miles

The DK never had plot armor. He had minions

kinghaart

He definitely had plot armor.

I bet he will die to a no-Name now like Abigail.

Albert Wen

We were literally just told why he's moving: villain stories don't do anything now.

Alexander

Previously existing villain stories don't mean anything. Doesn't that mean though that *new* villain stories are being written right now?

Albert Wen

Yeah, stories like "the great evil unleashes all his plots at once, overcoming the heroes". Whatever happens now is the story going forward. That could very well be the reason: he wants to rewrite villain stories to be as favorable as possible, which means he needs to win as hard as possible, while the iron's hot.

Snappy270

Too my knowledge he wants to be an actual god but need time. So he needs to stop them from posing a threat to them, as they have started to unite and creat bigger bigger armies.

KageLupus

Pretty sure your second point is completely reversed. The reason the Dead King didn't do any of this before is because he would have been making himself too big of a threat and the narrative weight of that would have let the Good Guys fight back and eventually kill him. So instead he had to sandbag his fights and keep things on a slightly more even footing so that the story only lead to his defeat in the short term and not death (or re-death, or whatever you want to call it).

Those story chains are broken now, though, and so we get this chapter showing off just what happens when DK stops holding back and doesn't have to worry about the Story balancing the scales against him.

The Green

Don't forget, every villain under the Truce and Terms is as similarly unconstrained as the Dead King. This includes Cat, Masego, Hakram, the three most powerful villains in the story after the Dead King, and of course Sve Noc.

Frivolous

The Green: Agree.

Albert Wen

Why would EE need to write himself out of anything? The whole thing's obviously planned from start to finish. Never have we seen a sign that EE is doing anything by improv.

magesbe

You misunderstand me. I don't actually believe that EE is going by the seat of his pants by any means. I just don't see a logical way out of this situation. EE could very easily have the Dead King lose by any number of contrived plot devices, or by calling in the Gnomes or something as suggested by a couple of people. But I do not see a satisfying way out of this situation. Even Cat coming back to life her third time seemed less contrived than the Dead King losing at this point.

Darkening

Well, cat supposedly has a massive pile of dead hero aspect artifacts she's never used because relying on magic stuff gets you killed by story. The tower burned, but all the high lords have vaults of artifacts and such. And now all of that isn't going to get a villain killed for relying on them. So they can pull out all the fantasy nukes and such and start using them on the dead king. Masego probably knows where to find some of his dad's old stashes of doomsday weapons, I doubt it was **all** in the tower.

kinghaart

Well we just saw one way the DK is vulnerable. And previously using the Ealamel would have been a terrible idea narratively but now Cordelia can do it with impunity too.

He has other flaws too – with stories dying it doesn't necessarily have to be that hard to kill him since he's no longer the Big Bad, just a bad person.

And Cat's Name is about wrangling Villains, I worksheet be surprised if she can do something like Confiscate but apply it to a whole Aspect of his.

Masego doesn't have a revenge story assured anymore but he will try to write a new one anyway and when Neshamah stole the Gift from him I bet he figured out how to return the favor.

shikkarasu

It's not a corner, it's the final act. EE has clearly planned for the events of the past two books since Book 1. I recommend a reread; the foreshadowing was always there, even if it felt random the first one or two reads through. On my 4th reread I

started taking notes of the foreshadowing and Sweet Sisters of Night, the sheer number of pivots that were quietly alluded to in Books 1 and 2 is staggering. Princes Graveyard, Battle of Camps, Night of Knives, the Everdark, and even the 10th Crusade in general. All set up by the time Cat offered Juniper a job.

I have absolute faith that this will be addressed with the same feeling of "what else could possibly have happened?" that the rest of the books have had.

matesbe

I don't appreciate this perspective, where as long as I've been reading carefully I should be able to predict exactly what happens next, when by your own admission you have no idea yourself. You are literally running off of faith right now, which is fine, but don't assume that anyone who doesn't see how this is going to end in anything but tears is missing something.

I say EE is in a corner, because this is basically the end. Procer is done. Even more done than it already was. The entire realm will starve to death even if the Dead King and literally every minion just drops dead right now. And they're not going to do that.

It is possible for the Dead King to still lose if the Gnomes come in, or perhaps the Dwarves. But the realm they've spent two entire books fighting to protect is just basically gone. These outside factions are also narratively unsatisfying if they just come in and solve everything, in my personal opinion.

The only thing I can think of other than mutual annihilation by angel is time travel shenanigans.

And maybe you're right. Maybe EE will come up with some brilliant twist that is not at all contrived and makes perfect sense in hindsight. But it is hard to have faith when this chapter is basically one nonstop "bad end" where the only ray of hope is the mutual annihilation angel.

Shveiran

Honestly, It feels like just the food and refugees situation is unsolvable through conventional means.

Like, if the war ended now? Most of the continent would still starve because so much of the harvest has been lost.

EE has a very good track record about keeping these things under control, and he is putting a lantern on it besides, but...

I mean, there aren't many established options there.

I can see only some shanenigans with the Crown of Spring leading to plentiful harvests everywhere, which honestly feels contrived to me, or the elamal actually killing 9/10 of the continent, making scrapping up a meal for everyone a lot easier.

Either feel... Kind of unsatisfying. Maybe I'm missing something.

Miles

Srnd a diplomat for foreign aid. Xanxares is not dead yet and the angel whose seat he took is returning to the fold.

The people of Bellophron have put it to a vote and wish all foreign despots to know that this is why foreign despots should never be negotiated with.

kinghaart

There are new Villain stories to write though, and we could see Villains decide to use Aspects to solve the food crisis for selfish reasons like crazy loans etc.

The Dwarves could also feasibly solve the food issues, and maybe Callow can to if Praes will leave them alone for a bit.

Plus the League, plus Levant. Plus Cardinal, where the agricultural Magitech of the Arsenal will be copyright free to all.

Onos

Ever predict where the Guide was going? Did you so much as call a single Name transition or character arc? 'Cos >99% of the comments section is utterly ludicrous.

As Shikkarasu mentioned, this has all been planned for a very long time, and it's *super* clear on a reread. I don't suppose you recall all the interminable bitching about Cat crippling her Name against the demon way back when? Or about how Hainaut "was such bullshit," or any of the other (many) times our dear readership has thrown a hissy fit because we consistently fail to predict where EE goes?

If you don't like it, don't read it. It's only kept you entertained for six and a half books, it's not like the author has earned any sort of trust – no wait, that's exactly what's happened.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I don't appreciate this perspective, where as long as I've been reading carefully I should be able to predict exactly what happens next,

I don't think that's what shikkarasu is saying... rather, EE has hit us with these "all is lost, how could they possibly survive" scenes before... and followed them up with resolutions that leave us saying "of course!". That's part of his skill as a writer. Yes, it's running on faith – faith in the writer's ability.

ragnarok628

Not seeing why Procer falling is 'basically the end.' Procer is not the story. "Sometimes, you just lose" has now been fully hammered home, it doesn't just apply on an interpersonal scale but on the scale of nations, nay, entire populations.

So how's he in a corner? Procer is done... And then what happens? The rest of the story, that's what. Plenty of ways it could go, unless you assume he's going to try to un-screw Procer.

[BarthHumphries](#)

"I say EE is in a corner, because this is basically the end."

Yeah, EE has said that this is the last book, that this is the end.

MoreBeer

I don't think you're supposed to be able to predict the exact outcome of the story. I doubt anyone can, not right now, unless they are EE.

But there has been plenty of foreshadowing, plenty of dramatic reversals of near- certain failure before. They couldn't be easily foreseen but they followed from the story and were consistent and enjoyable. I assume you enjoyed them anyways because you're still reading.

My mind boggles at the thought that someone could get to this point and think EE doesn't have a satisfying conclusion to this epic in mind. That because they can't see a way out that satisfies them, the author is somehow going to disappoint.

If Calernia weren't on the very edge of catastrophe now, I'm sure a lot of people would be let down. Too easy of a win is no fun, right?

nipi

Not to mention that the Dead King eyeing lands beyond his borders has been part of the summary for a long time

Christian Oaks

Or how cat has always been stealing aspects culminating in her stealing half the bards aspect! Or trying to at least :p

Xinci

Hm, honestly I was laughing during it. For all the despair, it also showed potential. Reminded me of Irritants epigraph.

"Now, luck it always turns. Nothing you can do about that. But that's the trick, you see – wait long enough, and it turns all the way around."

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

Christian Oaks

Yeah its also building up to the final Harrah. Night is darkest before the dawn, the last stand and all that

Eleron Pfoutz

If Villains are no longer bound by stories, then Heroes can redefine their own, make new ones.

Miles

Corner? Nah this is just the setup for book n+1.

The Errant Knight and Warden of the godsdamnitallthisstupidname just got their Names and are primed for new Aspects. Warden of the mice can't get aspects since she's a villain and they don't have stories any more but that's never stopped her before. This isn't dreadful, it's exciting.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I wouldn't assume that aspects are kaput. One of the takeaways from prior stuff in the story is that despite the gaudy labels, Heroes and Villains aren't fundamental, they're subspecies of Names with a line drawn across the field..

Frivolous

Miles: Last book.

Miles

Frivolous: Not necessarily.

Seven and one.

Deworld

If villain Names are still a thing, why wouldn't be Aspects? They come mainly from the person, not from the story they're in. The time they appear can be influenced by the story, but Aspects themselves are parts of the Name.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, those stories were also part of his arsenal and his protections. But for example, he no longer gets sequel-hook immunity from total extermination. And there's at least two *more* weapons out there, which were specifically made to bind or destroy him. Neither dependent on villainous stories.

kinghaart

Yeah the Severence can now be used as many times as they won't and it won't fail in the critical moment!

aisard

Yea, really hope whatever EE is planning was worth this..

Unhindered Dead King just sucks all the tension out of the story. The theme of this arc is very quickly narrowing down in to a pyrrhic victory at best, suffer porn at worst. Regardless of the path they'll take to get there.

Killing off half the stories, the constraints of which provided the majority draw of the story as well as a good bit of tension, doesn't help. Might turn out to be not horrible? But introducing it through the extremes of the Dead King, just makes it seem like even stories don't matter much now. Not in the face of the Dead King. Nothing really does at this point. Not even beating him.

So really hope EE has a really good plan for how this goes..

DC

Well the gloves are off for every other villain on the continent too, and Cat's in charge of them all.

Tenthyr

You know, it's one thing to KNOW the dead king could finally unleash his millennia of accumulated atrocities without limit or care, but god it didn't prepare me for this bleakness.

edrey

well, i was expecting continental type weapons but the heavens would have intervened otherwise right?

Tenthyn

The heavens cannot interfere overtly without Below having the same right. Neither side is going to be willing to do something mighty enough to stop Neshamah because the sheer leeway it would give the opposition would probably ruin the wager, now.

ninegardens

"So, did Above win the bet, or Below?"

"Nope."

"..."

"Everybody lost."

"It was a two sided bet!"

"WAS a two sided bet."

tmchin75723

Ah but what if they both pull out the stops **together**.

It doesn't ruin the integrity that way— just takes a lot of tableside arguing before it happens.

Hakram's Dead Hand

From what we have seen of The Gods Above and The Gods Below, having them both pull out the stops seems like a terrible time for anyone living in Calernia.

dadycool

Like knowing about a forest fire compared to walking through the inferno. It hits different when you're watching each person individually despair.

Soronel Haetir

I actually had a different thought about Tuesday's chapter. The stories are gone, but one of those stories is the Dead King's survival, that no matter what happens he'll be back for another go. Sure, he's off the leash now but I think breaking the board is actually what was needed to break DK.

[Liliet](#)

I kind of think the same.

Too bad for the, uh, that -waves hand vaguely towards this whole thing-

dadycool

Yeah, well, you can only chop off a hand that has been extended away from the body, or something.

[Liliet](#)

Nice metaphor.

shikkarasu

I've been wondering for a while now what villains will do without stories to lean into. DK is an exception because he's been investing power in himself for, what, 13 000 years or some shenanigans? Too [EXPLETIVE DELETED] long. Everyone else has lost not only their 'doomed to die in act 3-itus,' but also the bullet proof nature that the Tyrant survived on for 10 years. I'm genuinely not sure how well this works out for Evil on the whole.

... That said if villains can start calling on their dues to Below *before* the day they die that will have some heavy utility. I hope that happens.

Darkening

Yeah, this is probably gonna make it a lot harder for new villains to rise since their initial guaranteed successes and empowerment are gone. Old villains are gonna be intensely more terrifying though without their forced doom waiting in the wings.

[Mincheriit](#)

I agree, it does help with the goal of killing him permanently instead of just permanently sealing him away, however i just think that breaking the board as you say benefits the dk more as hes the one more heavily restricted by the rules.

LarsBlitzer

I think that's the one saving grace of Cat's action (really, it was the Intercessor's but everyone will blame Cat) in all of this. All the villains are off the chain now, the board has been well and truly flipped, and all the villains are well and truly not playing chess anymore; it's Calvinball. Once Cat's done with cursing herself and bemoaning the renewed hostilities I think she'll come to the same conclusion and set loose all the Villains she has left. The question now remains: Who's going to be other Warden? Masego has a swath of stolen Name lore for the Heroes and nowhere to put it.

Christian Oaks

Well so we know its between Cordy and Hanno. Personally I want it to be Cordy because I think it would be a better parallel. She dislikes the heroes in the same way cat dislikes general villains, she has been ruling the west like cat is ruling the east, Hanno doesn't want to take up a position of ruling but is obviously being pushed towards it and I think is beginnk.g to realize the importance of doing so. I think cat will have a massive impact on who gets it if she decides to interfere because she is the one in possession of the stories of good at the moment and can give them to her favorite pick.

KageLupus

I had a similar thought, but about the Heroes still having their stories available. The Witch of the Woods had everything going for her as far as being where she was needed and when, there just wasn't a corresponding balance on the other side of the story that made sure she would win.

But Providence is still a pretty powerful force, even if it is only boosting one side and not weighing down the other. The Heroes just need to adapt and adjust to being given slightly less of a helping hand. They were caught flat-footed this time around and it really sucked, but once they know what is going on they can start to plan around it.

kinghaart

Yeah I thought this chapter spelled it out well.

Heroes retain their powers without those being impenetrable plot armor.

Juff

Typo Thread:

promise reverses > promised reverses
He was in Aisne (extra space)
now Rogue > now the Rogue
hurried the > hurried to the
copper them > copper to them
Like rippled > Like ripples
serves as > served as
not spilling > now spilling
been close > been as close
every once > every ounce
priests as sworn > priests had sworn

edrey

well, that is a show, i bet it only took a few minutes to prepare all that and he should have continental weapons, so he's still cautious.
now this is the end of an age and its just starting.

Mincheriit

Wow thats a "my turn" moment. Being the DK, i think he has to have more stuff in reserve. He hasnt gone all out just yet. Also the irony, the reasons that Cordy can 'safely' use the angel corpse is also the reason it needs to be used

letouriste

yeah, all these attacks (save the critters one) were things already seen before in some fashion.

It's like the time he sacrificed the Revenants Cat knew of. While effective, it also serve as milking them to death one last time before discarding them narratively.

Adrian_V

Well this is a fitting title indeed, Nessy isn't messing around anymore, i can imagine him acting like a gleefull kid finally able to use all his toys without adult supervision xD

Frivolous

I thought it was so sweet that Frederic thought that if Otto Redcrown died, it would feel as if half his soul were lost.

I would have left it at sweet, but then Otto talked about walking around with the back of his trousers missing, so I can only think of their relationship as bordering if not trespassing on steamy.

Ah well, at least Otto is now confirmed to still be alive.

Alas, my guess that only the telemetry of Evil's stories had been destroyed was wrong. It was the Stories themselves that were erased.

I wonder if the Intercessor really meant to do that, or if she just lost her temper.

Either way, is the Intercessor really still a hero? I have to wonder about Above, if they still sponsor her.

Also wonder what the wipe of Evil's Stories has done to the other great forces of Evil. For instance, Sve Noc and the drow.

dadycool

The stories were what informed the trajectories of the stars, which were representations of Named lives. Once the "paving

stones" were ripped out, the stars had no clear way to go, so they all stalled out. DK was simply the only Villain alive who could recognize the opportunity and seize it to do whatever the Hells he wanted without consequence.

Frivolous

Not sure I understand what you're saying, dadycool.

Are you asserting that the map was the territory, as far as stories were concerned? That removing the ability to perceive stories was equivalent to removing the stories themselves?

[Hargabga](#)

The ability was not removed, the stories were.

dadycool

She specifically said that the stars were motionless in a way that they never were before. When she tweaked a story, she tweaked the path of their motion, but Bard straight up killed all Villainous stories. That's why DK is suddenly going all-out, he doesn't have to worry about the Escalation Story or any others that keep him in line. I'm not sure what map you're talking about.

Frivolous

The stars were motionless, yes, but that was only Catherine's perception, via an aspect. Perception isn't always reality.

It would be like, for instance, a computer program coded to chart the motions of planets of the solar system. If someone arrested the program, that wouldn't mean the planets would stop revolving and rotating.

Stories = actual physical planets with trajectories. Stars seen via aspect = astronomy computer program, data only.

That's why I used the word telemetry in the first place. Telemetry != trajectory.

Snappy270

But thats not what happened. The intercessor actually wiped out villans stories. Thats why DK is able to go full out without heaven or worrying about empowering heros.

Remember what hanno said. The witch did everything right. Right time and place able to try to undo the freeze in the last minute, but she didnt. She had her

story to win this at the last second, but DK didnt have a story that daid he would lose.

The gods cant step in directly thats why they invented stories and named to begin with. On the otherside DK should be killable now.

Frivolous

Yes, I know that.

I think this will be my last response on this topic.

[Hargabga](#)

I think Intercessor always meant to do this, she just had to remove the one entity that would severely capitalise on the lack of stories (i.e. Dead King) first.

Albert Wen

The Intercessor has never been a hero. Originally, she equally represented Above and Below. It's only the existence of the Dead King that's forced her to lean Above for the past thousand years, in order to provide balance.

[sengachi](#)

.... you know what, I no longer have any reservations about the ealamal. Fire away.

I hope it *hurt* when the Dead King was present in that devil for its activation, enough to make him pay for some sliver of the lives which were lost to push him back in just this one place.

Darkening

I'm pretty confident he lost another sliver of soul to that. Makes you wonder how much he's got left.

nick012000

Huh. Confirmation that Cordelia hasn't become a Villain, then. That's sort of surprising; I thought that her last interlude strongly implied that she had been. Surely she didn't throw away her Name, right? She's still the First Prince.

hakureireimu

Having disagreements with other Heroes, even many of them, doesn't prevent you from being Heroic; see Mirror Knight, Saint, Red Axe, etc.

Konstantin von Karstein

Come on, she never had the Name First Prince! The title of First Prince (like Holy Seljun and Black Queen) was always capitalised, from the first time it appeared in the story, while not being a name. And it was heavily implied Cordelia was the rival claimant to Warden of the West.

Abrakadabra

Hey I just realized that Cat needed to be Both the politicál east and the named east, right? So that is why warden of the west is not decided yet. Because Hanno and Cordelia Both represent half of the name.

Steven Silver

Hanno might be becoming Warden of the West, but Cordelia is no longer a claimant. She rejected the Name in a previous interlude.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yes, in book 5. But we saw in the West chapters that there was a Claimant to the Name in Salia. Appart from the fact that no one else there has the narrative (both in and out of universe) weight for it, Cordelia and Hanno are constantly described as opposed by the narration.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She may have rejected the Name, but the Name isn't listening to that. We've seen that before, notably with Grem who was still a Warlord claimant.

Darkening

Yeah, cordelia's the ruler of the nations but she's acting like a named in this chapter lol, whereas hanno is the leader of named but he's acting like a leader in this chapter. Fun patterns.

edrey

Cordelia is a claimant to the warden of the west, and that last line could be like the dark stars that cat see with her name, who knows? but hanno will meet her soon so let see what happens

dadycoool

Welp, Procer's boned. No idea how far he'll go, if Levant or Callow are in danger, but Procer's gone. The Dead King has released all the restraints and, try as they might, the Heroes aren't enough. This is the dream of Amadeus of the Green Stretch realized. I'm sure Cat has, by this point, already started trying

to contain him on the Meta level, but until she stops him, he's going to push as hard and as fast as he possibly can.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, Amadeus' speech sounded like righteous indignation, but in practice most Villains are monsters deserving only of death. Not all of them, but a good chunk. Heroes being assured to win is (or was) in fact a very good thing.

dadycoool

Yup, think of that whole business with the Red Axe. The villain she killed, whatever his name was, was a serial rapist. She was honestly right to kill him, it was simply against the law and politically inconvenient. We could go on for days listing more examples, but the Saint of Swords was actually doing a good thing for a long time.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, if Red Axe had bided her time she could have found a slower way to bring the villain down and make him face justice. But legwork and waiting for him to slip up... well, it's not that they aren't potentially heroic, but they weren't *her* kind of heroism.

kinghaart

What if he hadn't slipped up? He's still guilty of the crimes.

Cat's first notable act was to kill a *would be* rapist (well two). So it's fair to say Red Axe was within her rights to tear down a system predicated on the opposite notion.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's worth noting that despite the black flag, Cat was acting under the direct auspices of her country's ruler. She was not violating laws nor oaths, much less challenging a multi-national treaty.

jamesc9

With an open question about what passes for a law, in the middle of military/colonial rule by a foreign empire.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As governor, Amadeus certainly made laws and enforced them – and as noted early on, by the time of our

tale, the Callowans generally accepted and often supported his laws.

Declaring a country's laws invalid because you don't approve of who's ruling it is a slippery slope.

jamesc9

> Declaring a country's laws invalid because you don't approve of who's ruling it is a slippery slope.

As is deciding that anyone with sufficient brute power to make a decision stick was entitled to make it.

I'm told that 'legitimacy' in political science is a theory of this edge.

Bart

Just noting, that's how the world works. That's why countries like North Korea get a seat at the bargaining table, because it has some measure of power (albeit largely by proxy through China, although North Korea's burgeoning nuclear program is growing their own power).

Hargabga

Except how much of Villains carnage was caused by them being Evil and how much was sheer desperation because they didn't want to die?

Konstantin von Karstein

Akua, Triumphant, Neshamah, Traitorous, Wicked Enchanter, most of Praes' Dread Emperors, Poisoner, Kairos, ... Should I continue? Most of the Villains were or are evil monsters, who did everything of their own volition.

Abakadabra

Or did they? What if stories forced into them becoming more monstrous than they originally wanted to be?

As with the Tower once you reached the top, you forgot Why you came.

Serious sidenote.:even in our world rogue states are being pushed into being allied with north Korea and the like for the simple reason that they are the only ones who trade with them... Even though without pressure these same states would strangle each other in a cup of water. Serious sidenote over.

Konstantin von Karstein

Maybe? But that doesn't matter for my argument. Even if (and that's a big if) it's the Story that makes them so monstrous, the fact is that they are, and that the Heroes are trying to stop them.

Shveiran

Yeah. Just look at what the poster child of practical evil ended up doing. I can't even...

Right now, nothing short of the current apocalypse would count as a counterargument to the Saint's philosophy.

[Hargabga](#)

That is not even half of all the Villains, much less a majority. A prominent majority does not equal causation, especially if the pattern of despair and escalation is so culturally ingrained that preemptive escalation seen as a good idea. Most Villains try to do their own thing, even if they have a looser moral compass than most people. I do not try to justify their crimes, I just point out that it's not unreasonable nor unfounded.

Konstantin von Karstein

That's just ridiculous, was i supposed to list every single Villain we saw that conformed to the description? Most Villains we saw do, especially historically. And even if a majority isn't causation, it's still extremely suspicious.

Villains (Named in general) receive their Name because among other things they have a certain personality already and we're doing horrible things even before getting their Name. For a lot of them, « doing their own thing » means « harming innocent people ». They don't just decide to do so because the world is hunting them, the world is generally hunting them because they began harming others.

[vuthuha912](#)

Maleficent I&II were 'normal' Villains, especially Maleficent I who united a country and got stabbed for her trouble. Terribilus I&II were decent rulers for their country, liberating Praes from foreign occupations and generally trying their best to improve Praes. Though I think it will be better if the Crusaders just help the locals by blessing their fields, creating jobs, and

generally being better rulers than Praes might have a chance to become something like Helike having both Evil and Good rulers. I guess we can't ask outsiders to care for the well-being of the natives but I do think that the Crusaders were too preoccupied with their justice and forget about the actual human. Compassion is a truly powerful force of Good. It is not a coincidence that currently there is no Hero sworn to Compassion.

Praes top positions are Villain Names. It is the only way for anyone to have enough power to actually do anything meaningful. Yet, by the time they get to the top, their wills got twisted. Black & Malicia can't be the only ones being twisted by their Names. They do love Praes and each other and we all see how their story turned out. The farmer boy became a killer while the tavern girl became a tyrant. We have to remember that they start out wanting to make things better. Amadeus tried to make friends and help the lower classes. Alaya was a policy nerd wanting to use diplomacy to win. They both studied history out of the desire to understand and better govern their country. Their original goals were good ones. Yet, how can a farmer boy and a waitress change their country? By being the Dread Empress and Black Knight. As they both become Villains, they are more susceptible to corruption by Name. Black became a cold fish only fighting to win and has an unexplained distaste for heroes – fitting for a hero killer (we see that he is perfectly capable of accepting defeat and appreciating their good qualities) while Malicia was unable to trust even her best friend and commits worse and worse atrocities just to keep her power – just like a tyrant.

Tyrant was a disabled boy wanting to make something out of his life. The wish is not something sinister at face value. He could be someone like Stephen Hawking and such but he went the Tyrant route so all of his brilliance just got perverted into being the biggest cunt on the continent.

Even Sinister – the guy that stabs Maleficent might be twisted by his name (I think any Sahelian is more likely to be Heir). He might also start out wanting to serve the Empire but ended up stabbing his Empress to either promote the iron shapes iron philosophy or try to stop the Sonnike from leaving the Empire. He chose the worst possible way of achieving it but ... we never know what is his reason or if that was the influence of his Name.

That is the sinister part of Villain Name they just twist you subtly so you can't even recognize it. Not every Villain in the series is a Villain that wants to do bad

things just for the sake of it. They all have some sort of twisted logic to their madness. A possible explanation is that they are normal human beings whose worse quality got enhanced and whose best quality got perverted.

sigh Humans aren't meant to be tested.

Silverking

Turns out when Good and Evil are no longer bound to their narrative constraints, the side that has the most accumulated power in reserve just...wins.

If I had to guess how the story ends, Cat is going to find herself in a position to effectively "write" the new rules of Evil. This is great power AND great risk, as she's going to be setting them not just for today, but possibly for centuries to come. She'll be walking a tightrope to figure out how to a) punish the Dead King for overextending, b) reducing the self-destructive tendencies of Evil that made Praes such a crab-bucket, c) granting future villains enough power to resist the forces of Good, and d) limiting the power of future villains so that another Dead King can't come to pass.

Kletanio

One interesting option here (I like this idea, thanks!), is that the new Story Grooves will be those of strength and self-reliance, but not necessarily *villains* anymore.

Zach

I kind of doubt this, since it directly conflicts with Catherine's own philosophy. Remember the scene where she's talking to Arthur and Sapan (I think that's Apprentice's name) about how important cooperation is? The last thing she wants is a bunch of Rangers running around.

hue hue

DK after killing all of procer: what will you do little cat?

Catherine: you got gnomed

Warships fleet warps on top of her

hue hue

A shit I wanted to post a comment not reply

NerfGlaistigUaine

Wow. So this is what they meant by Neshamah not being scared of Cat or the rest of Calernia, only the Bard. As soon as he doesn't

have to worry about story nooses he just steamrolls the opposition from halfway across the continent. In this chapter alone we have: freezing lakes, demons, floods, death bombs, famine, darkness, and hellgates. This is like if you were watching an epic boxing match and in the ninth round one guy suddenly whips out a machine gun because the other guy punched the ref and made him rage quit.

kinghaart

That's a... surprisingly good analogy.

Cat is still the premier Brawling Tavern Wench in Calernia though so she's still in with a chance.

WuseMajor

I suspect that Cat claiming the stories of Above is what let the Angel's Corpse work without the Bard turning it into something that destroys the continent

Matthew

The worry about the angel was that the Bard would be able to control it.

The bard is dead now.

Fire away.

Zach

I don't think that's why; it's probably the "destroying the stories of Below" that caused that. The reason why using the angel corpse is a bad idea is that it would give Dead King "story clearance" to respond with similar force (like what happened when the Pilgrim used his ability and Dead King responded with all the hell-gates).

kinghaart

Yeah it's certainly safe now either way because it brings story balance so Above can allow it.

Doesn't mean Bard's (presumably?) bad intentions for it won't play out at some point though.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I hope the author has a plan here because if this wasn't a story I'd just assume Neshamah would win. I'm a bit afraid this will turn into an Aizen or Madara situation b/c I haven't seen a villain this far above the protagonists since Scion decided omnicide sounded fun. On a related note, in just two chapters I

went from thinking the ealamal sounds like a terrible idea to worrying it won't be enough.

Hargabga

See, the thing is, Nessie started to bring out out te the big guns, and the other side didn't. The Riddle-Maker and the Titanomachy, the dwarves, the eamal, crown of Autumn, Good Stories, and maybe elves (though I honestly don't know if they intend to do anything besides breed again, but I assume letting DK win is not what they want). He escalated first which is entirely too reasonable as now he does not have any ramifications for escalating first, but this is far, far from over. The orcs, Callow, Praes, League, Ashur are also still not on the scene. I am morbidly curious about the drow too. My point is, the situation is scary, it should be scary and it should drive home the realisation that this is really the end times. But do not forget hope.

Mental Mouse

Except that even in this first round, he already got slapped down once. And there's two more weapons in the wings....

Darkening

Oh right, this probably is enough to push the Riddle Maker to make a decision and lead the giants to war. That would go a long way to countering a lot of this bullshit.

miles

Maybe what the Bard did to all the stories required intervention from the GA

kinghaart

Yeah even if Above won't auto-retaliate they won't stop Good from doing so.

I take this chapter as saying the gloves are off.

ninegardens

Welp, I will say this: this chapter really did live up to its title, End times.
That was ummm... Harrowing.

And... Cordelia unleashed the angle corpse, and honestly? Not so bad.

Left a bit of a tingling sensation, but overall, pretty good; nice superweapon. Would red-button again.

Why were we so worried about it this whole time? Seems pretty legit.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Because there were credible reasons to believe Bard was setting it up to destroy the entire continent. Now that she's out of action, there's no one pulling the strings to make it not do what it's expected to do.

ninegardens

So, just to be clear to folks "Why were we so worried about it this whole time? Seems pretty legit." was only meant as a flippant pithy remark. In the same sense as "Why didn't we try crack cocaine earlier?"

This obviously didn't come through, and I'm actually kind of happy with the resulting discussion, but y'all don't need to be taking me **too** seriously. 😊

Black Spiral Dancer

Because its activation effectively MURDERS an untold number of people that you actually have no knowledge of to actually evacuate them (only the named Villains can be warned – you never know who among the populace is good or evil – and even if they are evil, should they be murdered without a trial? One can argue easily that you can be evil without ever doing illegal things, and be an important helper to the government or other institutions. Is it ok to simply murder fathers, mothers and children if they're evil? That is what just happened.

Now that it has been used, though, the damage is done, I'm all for using it again at least as a sort of nuke-level card until the Dead King stops attacking.

Black Spiral Dancer

Actually I would argue that if she had activated the angel corpse AT ANY MOMENT before that would certainly be an Evil act (at least by OUR current standard, not in-universe-angels). The only possible justification to murder such amounts of fathers, mothers and children who happen to be more evil than good is if it prevents an even worse outcome – such as Undeath winning.

kinghaart

My fear is that like Keter's Due there will always be a price – it will "cull" the worst % of whoever is impacted.

So over time, the people who sure are less and less obviously evils ones...

Black Spiral Dancer

I'm... pretty sure that's not how good and evil works in this world. It is not relative. You're not evil to someone higher on the good scale.

Reader in the Night

Truthfully, I just skimmed. This answers none of the questions of "How?" and "Why?" we were left with last chapter. An entire update of DK just steamrolling the opposition just seems meh.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

The question it answers from last chapter is "Exactly how bad is the situation?"

To which the answer is "Pretty bad, but these cool characters are still alive and pissed about it."

That's worth reading about.

ninegardens

I dunno.

One of the main questions I had after last chapter was "If you kill the villainous half of a hero-villain story what does that even MEAN".

Hanno's section at the start did a pretty good job of communicating and explaining that, so that's cool.

kinghaart

Yeah I think this was quite an important follow up. We needed to know this sooner or later and after the last chapter it would have felt cruel to tease this out any slower.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Nessie is breaking out the hard shit now.

The boss rush has begun.

[Hargabga](#)

It's the absurdity of the scope that really strikes the sinking realisation of horror. The deeds themselves don't really impress much because they are beyond what we can comprehend, but as we scratch the limits of our imagination and realise how reality can be both so utterly brutal and grand, something so terrible we can't even feel terror at the sight of it, that really brings it all home.

Black Spiral Dancer

Your comment made me think of something... about our own reality. About how reality could be a lot lot worse, devoid of life, if small paremeters were changed... and how we are "lucky" that it all happens as it does.

What if is not by chance? Some scientists try to resolve this problem with an Infinite Parallel worlds theory (if I'm not mistaken based on string theory, which itself is non-falseable and can make no prediction about anything we don't already know), but I find it a really unlikely to be the real "answer" to reality.

Other options use the idea of a designer, either a kind of God or a Matrix-creator (for virtual reality proposers), and what I felt reading your comment is that, perhaps, if reality wasn't "guided" by anything, life shouldn't exist, least of which intelligence/conscience as we know it.

We now know aliens exist, and that they have been here thousands of years. Seems like they did intervene when our crazyeness level got a bit over-the-top with nuclear weapons, making a point that we wouldn't be allowed to simply nuke it out if one U.S. president or URSS leader simply became deranged one day and decided to press the red button. The main reason I actually believe this has had to happen (besides all the government – US and URSS – official documents stating that it did happen) was because the Cold War ending without one side nuking the other (and destroying the world) was so unlike our history for the last thousands of years. Like something was "nudging" towards it not happening. Me? I'm not believer in humanity. We don't seem to change much on the whole, still very much the same tribal mind, aggressive mysoginistic rapists of old. Perhaps we hide it better now. But that's what's hidden when one looks through the cracks of the mask mankind wears. And cracks always appear anew.

My point is that... perhaps either God/Matrix Devs or even Aliens are like the bard in a way – nudging either reality or mankind towards a positive outcome that wouldn't be likely if fate was purely randomical and "stories" didn't exist. At another level, perhaps the fact that our Consciousness "defines" quantum reality means that conscience – or life, in a broader scope – gives "weight" to things. This "weight" is story-like.

Keep in mind I'm not advocating for a "good" God(s) or Matrix Creator(s), except perhaps for it/them being on the side of "life". Which means that, in whatever universe (or creation, if anyone or anything did create it) statistic will always side with Life and Conscience – the dice will always be heavily weighted towards it, probabilities will favour that outcome instead of, say, a comet being able to anihilate mankind – that chance would be 0% if the universe uses loaded dice. Even if

catastrophes happen, mankind – or conscience- would always survive, do a comeback.

Of course, perhaps it's aliens who are re-directing dangerous asteroids away from collision courses for thousands of years without our knowledge. Once one accept they do exist, that chance jumps to more than 50%, perhaps even higher, and a lot of things we suspected was "luck" in our part was not really so. I mean, for all we know, aliens could have actually genetically engineered our primate-like ancestor, and aside from keeping tabs so that their "children" would not be snuffed out, let nature take its course. This is kinda deep down the rabbit hole, and I'm not arguing for Aliens-of-the-gaps as a good explanation for everything, but the possibility is there, and it is (much) higher than 0.

If

1. Aliens are here
and

2. They have been around for thousands of years,
then

3. Interference in some level seems very probable, (heck, they do intervene nowadays, minor but it happens, just look at the 11 near-misses with U.S. aircrafts, and the Nimitz encounter – so why wouldn't they have intervened long ago?).

Also, it's not really hard to escape the sight of (most of) our lenses, looking at how our "science" still refuses to accept what dozens of millions have actually seen first-hand in the sky, and we all suspect heavily (and has been said by whistleblowers) that at least the U.S. government has much stronger proof but have chosen (for whatever reasons) to keep it classified. George Bush is on record saying that we wouldn't be able to handle the Truth (IF there was one), and that he wouldn't say anything IF he knew something.

Anyways, here's hoping the Galileo Project will correct that shameful history we have of secrecy instead of transparency to the public.

I seem to have ranted longer than I thought I would... just like me, to go off on a tangent, but usually I do this only inside my head while contemplating possibilities. So yay, welcome to my head tonight. Take a beer while you're there, but don't forget to shut the lights on your way out.

Zach

lmao what, we do not "not know aliens exist and have been here thousands of years." I'm guessing you're referring to the handful of recently released videos of dots/disks appearing to move fast, but that's not even remotely some sort of proof of aliens being on earth.

You're basically making the same logical fallacy of someone that says "My license plate is EB3-Y29 – the chances of that are billions to one!" There is nothing uniquely good or strange about life on Earth. The fact that there are countless possibilities for a situation doesn't mean that any one of those possibilities must be impossible. And the idea that it's nearly impossible for complex life to arise has essentially been debunked; there are many planets where it'd technically possible.

Black Spiral Dancer

I will just assume you haven't really researched the subject at all. It's ok, I've been there, done that. I find it unlikely anything I say will be able to change what you believe to be true, so instead I will share what I consider two very compelling documents that explain in detail everything we were (unfortunately) not taught in school and instead even nudged to ridicularized, when we were the clowns the whole time.

1. The first is a Australian Intelligence Report, decades old, made only for government sight, which directly and in no uncertain terms clarifies what was really going on about the UFO topic then. This was a classified report that has only become available for the public in 2008. You can start and read the 50+ pages in this link below, which is the National Archives of Australia. I do urge you to at least read the 2-page Summary, which gives an overview of what was actually already know by important people 40 or 50 years ago (while the U.S. had decided for the strategy to hide and confound this subject):

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=30030606&S=7&R=0>

(...yes, these documents are real. In doubt, search and you will find only confirmations that this is truly so. Not a hoax or a fabrication of any sort. Yes, I also find it appalling that even knowing this is publicly available, the U.S. still have the gall to lie to our faces – then again, things have finally reached critical mass recently, it was slow but inevitable).

2. The second is a scientific article that argues that for the first time, we find ourselves in the peculiar position...

Quote: "While the 'We are alone' solution to Fermi's paradox was once a seemingly valid one, this answer is now incompatible with the infinite universe and random self-sampling assumption consistent with inflation theory. We thus find ourselves in the curious position that current cosmological theory predicts that we should be experiencing extraterrestrial visitation. At the same time, current

physics and astrophysics suggest that such visitation may not be as impossible as had been thought.

Inflation-Theory Implications for Extraterrestrial Visitation

J. DEARDORFF¹, B. HAISCH², B. MACCABEE³ AND H.E. PUTHOFF⁴

[Click to access JBIS.pdf](#)

Bonus

Check these interviews from the physicist Kurt Jarmungal, where he asks both scientific questions and more history background about this reality.

Channel: Theories of Everything with Curt Jaimungal <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdWlQh9DGG6uhJk8eyIFl1w>

(Recommended) Interviews:

Astrophysicist Kevin Knuth – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atntnU_baHc&pp=sAQa

Former Pentagon Director of AATIP (Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program), Luis Elizondo – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAmFLLfsZKM&pp=sAQa>

Extra Bonus

As recently as of this week, Project Galileo, led by Avi Loeb, famous Harvard Scientist and longest-holder of the Astronomy Chair, was launched with the specific intent of collecting new and government-free data to clarify what are the UAPs. Avi has gathered a team of highly-qualified astronomers and is very interested in the possibility that whatever they find has the possibility of forever changing our view of the world and our place in it.

Launch of Project Galileo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3NqRak2tjc>

Website: <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/galileo>

They also will try to (possibly) collect direct, multiple-sensor evidence of exceptional flight characteristics extensively and repeatedly observed by credible military pilots and radar operators, such as supersonic speeds without sonic booms, instant high velocity without acceleration, movement without any noticeable means of propulsion, etc. These and other traits, which are stated very seriously in the Preliminary UAP task report to the congress June 25th (the declassified portion available to the public), may possible hint at new rules of Physics currently unknown to us, possibly from technologies hundreds

of years ahead, and which we may perhaps be able to replicate or deduce if we have enough high-quality data.

Miles

And to think I almost believed you about string theory. But no, it wouldn't be theory if it weren't falsifiable.

Black Spiral Dancer

Right now, there are no experiments you can do to that would make it falsifiable. That's exactly why many scientists criticize it. Dr. Avi Loeb even said in many interviews that when he approaches them to put forward some ways in which they could actually falsify it, they make it so that whatever happens, the theory has a way of "predicting" it, and thus it keeps being not falsifiable.

But I might be wrong actually, I'm not a very deep scholar of the theory. Prove me wrong, which were the falsifiable predictions it has made in all these years and which predictions does it make right now that we can go out to prove?

Miles

No those experiments have been done. Repeatedly and successfully for decades. That's what "theory" means.

"Prove me wrong" nobody's going to bother if you can't do that basic bit of legwork yourself. I'm sure you learned how to use a library in grade school. If not, ask a librarian nicely and they might just show you.

Black Spiral Dancer

Well, then I am wrong on String Theory. That's not really the point of my text. I know it is very polemic, not something that is accepted as the scientific standard. Also it is not the single theory out there. And I have seen several String Theory defenders who admit that there are no TRUE predictions from the String Theory.

Oh, and I can prove what I'm saying. Here, Cumrun Vafa talking about it:

I found it funny that this minor point that I didn't even delve much into is what you chose to focus.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, there's the Anthropic Principle, which is that the universe we see around us is necessarily one where we could evolve, because if it wasn't, we wouldn't be here to observe it. Which plays merry hell with the usual logic of science, but we regularly see similar principles when we study evolution in general.

Vertaco

Well, it's bleak. But even if I don't want DK to win and all of Procer to die, I must say that Hanno realising that DK was not nudged to lose was ... a good moment. Because yeah, the good winning just because they are good, it's what this entire story is against.

Onos

This is fucking awesome. Really looking forward to seeing the final arc of the story with Nessie fully unleashed. Shame the Tower just got burned down, some sweet artifacts could probably have been pretty handy for the Villains.

Autochthon

I feel that both the destruction wrought by the Dead King and the Ealmal itself felt underwhelming; the chapter felt a bit rushed. I feel bad criticizing it straightforwardly like this but when I know how brilliant the author is, I cannot help but see the potential of what could have been. The chapter feels like it was written under pressure and could benefit from a rewrite later.

Autochthon

Now that I think about it, it might actually be "fridge brilliance". We saw what amazing stories the Interludes depicting the classic heroic defiance against all odds of the Lycaonese against the Dead King could be. They literally brought tears to my eyes.

This is no poetic story that flows up and down. This is just flat, mundane extermination.

Rynjin

This can't be the End Times, the Skaven...er, the Chain of Hunger haven't started killing everyone yet.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Dead King is secretly three rats in a trenchcoat, yes-yes!

Snappy

Thats kinda what I thought. With no stories theres no banter or awe inspiring last stands. This is what whould happen in our world if the undead were here. Entire cities wiped out and all we can do is retreat.

Its horrifying how many tricks we seen DK use that were overwhelming when used against Catherine every so often. But now he is spamming all of it.

I can agree with the shortness, they were really quick snapshots, just needed a longer chapter. But then again i say that about all his writing cause i just want more !

yentris

> This is what whould happen in our world if the undead were here. Entire cities wiped out and all > we can do is retreat.

I guess you're exaggerating a bit here, but even accounting for that, you're forgetting that if this were our (modern, 21st century) world, we would essentially be the Gnomes. IMO, there's a reason that nearly all "fantasy/magic/zombie" type stories always begin with humanity on the brink of extinction, or in a medieval setting, or else with the science hand-waved away: every time one brings modern science & technology into the mix, we all know how it will end.

The Dead King in our world? I give it anywhere between a couple of weeks to a couple of months before Keter is a burning hole in the ground, depending on how many casualties the DK manages to make with his first attack.

If it were standard 15th century or whatever, then probably we'd all be dead in a couple of decades 😊

David Stone

I don't know about that. Dead King summons a Demon of Madness on top of Moscow, Beijing, and Washington D.C. Or, for something more subtle, body snatch Secret Service and their equivalents in other countries to get close to world leaders, body snatch world leaders. Game over humanity.

yentris

Re Demons: If the Dead King could manage to summon that many Demons of Madness, he should've done so in this chapter over all the major cities in the Continent. After all, he's no longer limited by the story and it would cut off the enemy leadership in one blow. Given

that there are no story repercussions to be had, unleashing an army of demons would be even better.

Also, if an army of medieval soldiers + few demigods can hold a castle against 100k undead, devils, AND a pair of demons; I see no reason why a modern force half the size with artillery and air support cannot utterly destroy the same. In fact, you don't even need an army to do that: drop a bunch of ballistic missiles on their heads and see how they like it!

Going back to the issue of demons, if the Dead King really could use them as easily as you're implying, at this point all he had to do is release them at major population centres in Calernia as well. Southern Procer, Laure, anywhere where there are lots of civilians and just a few Named. Kill enough of the other species and then he could just literally throw bodies at the main characters until they died of suffocation. Problem fixed. If he can't even do that across one continent, I shan't even entertain the notion that he's capable of doing that across five continents.

"Body snatchers" requires that there are no safeguards in military or political systems in our world. Or the fact that no one will notice that the leader of their country doesn't have a normal body temperature (I presume undead are not exactly operating at 38C) and is ordering the military to not fire on the giant portal to Hell? Questionable.

David Stone

He did do basically that. I think it was implied that there were at least 5 Demons of Terror summoned within earshot of Otto and Frederic, which makes me think they showed up in every population center in this region.

[Bart](#)

No, the Dead King would bide his time, go take over North Korea or somewhere that nobody cares about, build his own secret nukes, then have undead simply carry the nukes to surround every major military place while arming all of his regular people and undead with military rifles, etc.

The Dead King is a smart person and would not hesitate to sit back and not attack, all the while building up his strength with this new modern military tech.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It occurs to me that DK might have thought that *all* stories were gone... and gotten a nasty surprise when Cordelia's heroic stand worked perfectly.

kinghaart

I think that's what he's probing.

ninegardens

See, I saw it more as a montage chapter. It's "rushed", because the things we are looking at aren't (individually) all that important to the plot. We don't really care about them, or the outcome (except maybe Cordelia).

What we care about is the overall "tone".

It's a disaster montage. It's not **meant** to be crowning moment of awesome for anyone.

kinghaart

I was expecting at least one named (lowercase) character to die though. Otto has some serious death flags.

Black Spiral Dancer

It feels short because both last chapters wer 2x, 3x longer than usual lenght, was it not?

hue hue

DK after killing all of procer: what will you do little cat?

Catherine: you got gnomed

Warships fleet warps on top of her

Shveiran

And this chapter here is why the last arc made me so mad at nearly every character I couldn't bear to write about it.

This is not new.

Procer was already collapsing, with the GA behind it. A famine is not something that gets fixed because you killed the big bad, and food production had already been crippled.

This is not new.

And though I do think they have a point, I'm not trying to add my voice to the "no escalation was needed" crowd. What I mean to say is that throughout the Praesi arc this was in the back of my mind, all the time.

Every time people made egoistic, stupid decisions that supposedly made sense in character, all I could think was " yes, but just a few miles North...". Every single time, because this is not really new.

We opened this book saying doomsday was what, a couple months after the expected timeline of the siege of Ater?
This is not new, AND YET, smart character after smart character acted like it is.

Malicia. Akua. The Matrons and Sacker. Arthur and Nim. Amadeus and even bloody Hakram.

All pursuing their petty little goals as if it was a given that the damned apocalypse would be handled without not only their assistance but even their restraint from actively, purposely rocking the boat.

Could they have predicted this? No, of course not! But my point is, they didn't need to! The situation was well on it's way to the litteral Hells, and they are all smart and in possess of all needed informations.

And yes, petty goals. Because everything is petty compared to this, and this IS NOT NEW.

It's just so very disappointing. Am I supposed to think all these characters are all suddenly idiots, or malevolent idiots?

Steven Silver

They were getting their ducks in a row so they **could** turn North. Can't do that if there's a bunch of pretty factions who don't see the Dead King as a problem.

And yeah, refugees are going to starve, but there will be more and more with less and less land to feed them if DK isn't stopped. Gotta cure the disease or the symptoms will just get worse.

Shveiran

Really now.

Akua had the war in the North as her priority.

And Malicia.

And Amadeus.

And the goblins and the Black Knight and bloody Arthur.

That was their priority, uh? I guess them never talking about it was just a coincidence.

Even Hakram, godsdamnit, deciding to side against Cat while she was battling the BARD... And to do what? There is no love for Praesi joining the GA beyond Cat, let's possio her off before joining!

Zach

Hakram and Amadeus both intended for Praes to end up contributing to the war effort in the end. Amadeus specifically engineered Alaya becoming a chancellor who would aid in the war on Keter, while also accomplishing his

own personal ambitions for Praes. And Hakram also directly planned on getting his people to join the war.

Catherine had a poorer understand of both Praes and the Orcs than Amadeus and Hakram respectively. Catherine's plans would have, at best, resulted in a less stable Praes joining the war effort and (at best) reverting back to all its old bad habits immediately after the war.

[vuthuha912](#)

Or worse, reverting to old habits IN THE MIDDLE of the War. With the bullshit that Praesi highborns had pulled in the past, I won't be surprised that they think they could negotiate with Nessie and stab their allies to save their own skins (temporarily). We all see how much power story and name have. Anything that can go wrong for or with Praes will go wrong and even worse.

Honestly, that country was cursed with shortsightedness and treachery, it is not even funny. Malicia betrayed Amadeus. Amadeus and Ime both betrayed Malicia. Amadeus went from a guy trying to implement a long-lasting system (the reforms and strategies for Praes) to a person who just tried to kill enough people so that Praes can survive for a little longer (killing heroes, foreign rulers, rebels, etc). Alaya goes from Miss "forging a common ground and achieving benefits together" to Miss "if my subordinates aren't mind-controlled/dependent on me, they aren't worth keeping".

I am convinced that just by being involved in Praes, the 'curse' of Praes applied to all of them.

beleester

I disagree about Amadeus and Hakram – while they weren't willing to bow to Catherine, they were both working to bring their people into the war on Keter. They just needed a way to make it valuable to their people, because obviously "let's put our entire army under the command of our ancient Heroic enemies to save people on the other side of the continent" wasn't going to fly with the Praesi or the Orcs.

Everyone on the side of Praes assumed that the apocalypse is going to be localized to Procer, because that's how these stories normally go. Procer would have collapsed and then a band of heroes would have risen from the ashes to challenge the Dead King, possibly using the help of angels to restore the ruined wasteland. And this wasn't even an exclusively villainous perspective – the Saint of Swords predicted the same thing. "The situation is going to literal Hells" is, from a

certain perspective, exactly what it's *supposed* to look like before the heroes win.

And sure, you can call it malevolent idiocy to ignore the fact that hundreds of thousands of people die in the process of that "rise from the ashes" narrative, but they're villains. Malevolence was always part of the package.

Shveiran

Both Hakram and Amadeus know that what seemed likely two years ago is not anymore.

Both knew the Bard would be involved.

Both knew there was no surviving for their people once Keter beat the GA.

Nothing else really matters.

If they can't sell survival to their people, they shouldn't be leading them right now.

beleester

First of all, they *did* sell it. Their respective plans worked, and the orcs and the Praesi are both fully on board with the war now. What more were you expecting them to do? Did you think that Amadeus would be able to waltz into the Tower, say "We need to go to war with Keter or everyone on the continent dies," and the High Lords and Malicia would respond by saying "Yes, that seems like a reasonable strategy and is definitely not going to get us all killed"?

You can't move an entire country to war on the other side of a continent with nothing but "because I said so." Not even Dread Emperors get that sort of obedience. And in case you've forgotten, Amadeus and Hakram weren't Dread Emperors. They worked their way up with what they had, and that meant diplomacy rather than ordering people at sword-point.

As for the Bard, even if the High Lords or the Clans knew exactly what she was planning, her plan was to use the angel-corpse to nuke everything west of the Whitecaps. Which doesn't include Praes. From their perspective, their survival *isn't* at stake – they could just sit on their hands and watch as their problems nuke themselves off the map. That's why the sales pitch from Amadeus and Hakram wasn't "we're all going to die," it was "The Grand Alliance is going to be the new world order, and we need to get in on that."

ninegardens

>>“We need to go to war with Keter or everyone on the continent dies,” and the High Lords and Malicia would respond by saying “Yes, that seems like a reasonable strategy and is definitely not going to get us all killed”?

... Honestly...

Yes, I think this would have worked.

Malicia OFFERED Cat support for the war on Keter, right back at the start of this Arc. That literally happened.

And Malicia, LOVES Black. She wanted him to “come home”. If he had showed up and said “Alaya, shit has got really serious... we have a way of being treated like a serious part of the continent, having all your dreams taken seriously... we only have to kill the dead king” – then yes, I think he could have talked her into it.

I don’t think they would have got all of Praes... but I think the extra speed, and reduced casualties would have more than made up for the reduced commitment.

I’m not convinced Black could have done that 2 years ago... but I do think that if Black was in play and communicating, he could have convinced Cat to accept Malicia’s initial deal, and he could have convinced Malicia to sweeten it even further, and He could have led the Legions (+1 general).

I don’t really understand why people think the “non-escalation” path was so untenable, given that it was something which was literally on the table earlier on.

Frivolous

ninegardens: Too many atrocities on Malicia’s part: the Night of Knives, attempting to use Akua’s Flying Liesse Artefact, the use of Still Water, replacing Merchant Prince Mauricius with a devil.

Acceding to Malicia would have been too revolting. The GA would have splintered.

And besides, Praes was not threatened by the DK. Only Procer was. Malicia would have kept leaning on that fact to force the Principate to keep giving her incentives to help. She was that kind of person.

So non-escalation was indeed untenable.

ninegardens

Let's turn the question round: given where we are now standing, do you believe that Procer would have been better off escalating, or giving in to a few of Malicia's demands (which mostly included "don't kill me" and "we want in on the accords").

Do we seriously believe that Malicia was a LESS reasonable actor than the DK?

Also: I do not give a shit about the night of knives, or merchant prince whatisname.

This clearly falls under the category of "The queens got to do what is good for the kingdom, even if the woman abhors it".

If you are going to crown yourself "black queen", then you need to get over your personal vendetta. In particular, each **single action** that we saw this chapter was measurable worse than everything we saw Malicia do combined.

Honestly, in terms of diplomacy: Cordelia would have taken the deal offered. Tariq would have taken the deal offered. Vivienne would have taken the deal offered. Hakram would have taken it, The Iron prince would have taken it. The Lone fucking swordsman probably would have taken it. Hell the only people who I can think of who wouldn't take it are; Kiaros, Saint of Swords, and Cat.

I don't care about the past, I care about the fact that refusing out of pure stubbornness and spite **while the world is on fire** is a supremely selfish act, that does nothing to serve the dead. Not Ratface, not those dead in liesse, no one.

Frivolous

ninegardens: Heavy disagree.

I do care.

So that is that.

ninegardens

Fair enough.

... that was a heavy enough "We are done here" that I feel like I offended you in some way... or maybe you just done with the conversation. **shrug**

If offence was given, I apologise.

Frivolous

ninegardens: Don't worry, not offended by you.

Just decided that talking further about it would have been pointless as well as being a temptation to write essays about it.

[vuthuha912](#)

Somehow, I don't think it will be that easy. Malicia was under the influence of her Name. If she joined the GA then, I always think she would keep some cards to ruin it for everyone at a later date. The only type of alliance she accepted was the one where she holds the leash on everyone. Isn't that the reason she put hook into Black's officers despite him being the only one who loves her unconditionally (or as close to unconditionally as possible for him)? She stabbed Callow in the back for NO FUCKING REASON Like, lady, Callow is your bread basket, the only willing trading partner that your country has, and the defense against your enemies. Couldn't you just wait a little longer to backstab them? And Malicia was like: No. It has to be right now. And, recalling the leading generals (Grem and Black) from the border (in book 4) while they were fighting the enemies was a stupid move. I know she does that to gain leverage on them and she was not planning to act on it (maybe) but won't that mess with the morale of her army? Why should I fight this war when I know that I might get killed after I outlive my usefulness? No amount of patriotism is going to negate the thought that my rulers want to kill me while I am defending her country.

What I am trying to say is that Malicia was dangerous to everyone even her allies. She might not even recognize it herself. Her Name was wrapping her vision. How safe is Amadeus in her hand? You and I both think that she would never harm him but keeping him safe and listening to him are 2 completely different things. If 'keeping him safe' means chaining him up, she would do it. He might suffer mentally but as long as he is physically safe, it is okay with her. Honestly, anything goes for these 2 people, they obviously love each other but their understanding of love is really weird.

[vuthuha912](#)

Can't we just explain this by saying that the Dread Empire of Praes is a Name and Story of its own? All Praesi are characters in the story of Praes – the story of shortsightedness, backstabbing, horrible people who doom both themselves and their enemies. Their people being ignorant of the nature of the war are perfectly in tune with the story of Praes as a whole. The story is probably

brainwashing the mass into underestimating the consequence of DK and keeping them apathetic to the struggle of others.

[anonymous4968](#)

It'd take way too long to deconstruct this. Just remember two things:

1. This is a tone setting chapter, all YA novels have the "end times" or "mind f***" moment at the end. This isn't exactly new and it doesn't exactly ruin the moment nor the novel.

2. Before the Bard released the Dead King, the dread empress was the one thing keeping them in a narrative role that could act as freely as they have. Fighting over Pres and all of the factionalism was really over that point. The **whole** plot point here is that none of it mattered in the end, the narrative win that should have meant a group of five easy access to Keter is gone. They weren't idiots, it's just that the situation has changed.

Shveiran

1, speak for yourself there.

2... What? What narrative win that gets people into Keter are you talking about? And even if there was one, half those on that list know nothing about namelore to begin with, so that would be no excuse for them.

[anonymous4968](#)

Do I really, really have to sit here and deconstruct namelore bullshit for you? I'll be here all day, I don't want to do that. Very, **very** long story short: It's narrative causality at play. How you've gone seven volumes and close to 600 chapters without learning this stuff, but it makes sense when you look at everything.

ninegardens

No need to be condescending anon.

Shiv knows that name lore exists, but presumably wants to know precisely **which** "band of 5" namelore bullshit gets activated with Praes on board that somehow couldn't have worked without Praes. If you were going to band of 5 this shit, was there any real requirement for Praes to be part of that?

[vuthuha912](#)

I thought we need mages and such to keep the rest of the continent from collapsing when our band of 5 was

fighting the DK.
The band of 5 will succeed (I am mostly sure) but the real question is where are they returning to after the war.

Miles

It's not new. It's early. They were supposed to have a whole nother season by the most conservative projections.

kinghaart

Replace "Calernia" with "Earth" and "Dead King" with "Global Warming" (or any number of modern issues).

Are you honestly surprised that people focus more on their immediate concerns than the death around the corner? It's everywhere today.

Bloop

I have read this story since the beginning and at this stage I'm genuinely considering giving it up.

The last two books and now this one have just been nothing but misery. The living have had no victories at all. Every Tuesday and Friday, it's a case of "What disaster will befall the living today?".

And maybe it has been explained but I simply do not understand Praes and Malicia. She allied with the Dead King and I don't know why. Thinking about the situation purely selfishly, if the dead win she dies. If the living win, she now will also die (and of course now Catherine has said that after Malicia's 8 years are up she will be killed, guaranteeing it). Because she sided with the bloody Dead King.

And the political bullshit in Procer is no better.

I suppose fundamentally I just struggle to see that people when faced with an existential horror like the Dead King would resort to playing political games. It is inexplicably stupid.

countyxenon

...Really? You struggle to believe that people, when faced with an existential threat, would play at politics?

Guess I won't mention the Cold War, then. Y'know, the 40-odd year long struggle that could have literally led to the end of modern humanity, that *nearly did so* (there were literally moments where a kicked wrench, or a flipped sensor, or that one guy in a submarine in Russia who could have *personally* started the apocalypse when he saw a credible-looking threat in the air and chose to have faith it wasn't missiles) multiple

times... and that was also essentially exclusively politics, escalation, propagandizing, and proxy wars the whole time.

Or, y'know, global warming. Or certain countries' reactions to a global pandemic (admittedly that one's just a nature-driven massacre, not apocalypse-level).

Politics is the human race's **only** response to existential threats, as far as I can tell – at least, those threats for which a little bit of politicking and maneuvering would improve short-term returns while hurting long-term gains. Cooperation is hard, some people are greedy, and most people are stupid.

ninegardens

Malicia allied with DK way back when, because she was like “Procer is united, and Cordelia needs a war to unite her kingdom. If I give her a big juicy DK to fight against, she won't be fighting **me**”

This was all well and good. Previously, DK has launched many tiny wars, and then zooped back into his Serenity, and nothing “bad” has really happened. Hence, Malicia assumed the same thing would happen here.

... the problem was, things escalated.

Unbeknownst to Malicia, DK is actually on a timer-technological progress means that at some point the rest of the continent **will** be able to defeat him. Hence he needs to kill all other life first.

Bard had a weapon, but Kiaros destroyed it.

That lead to one step of escalation (outside of Malicia's control). This was directly after Malicia and DK offered the grand alliance a **peace settlement**. She was in the process of putting the evil back in the can (all according to plan).

Except them Kiaros broke the choir of judgement, DK said “Sweet, now's my opportunity to break everything”, and things went to hell in a handbasket.

Okay, fine, cue two years of war, and then Cat showing up at Malicia's doorstep.

Malicia: “I will give you everything you need to fuck with the Dead King.”

Cat: “Fuck you bitch, I'mma take your head.”

Malicia: “Wut?”

Malicia sided with the DK back when she thought he was containable... and has taken action was available to contain him ever since.

She's still an idiot, and totally underestimates him, but then again, so did everybody else.

Abrakadabra

Not true. She sided with the Dead King way beyond the conference. She sabotaged the GA to get funds from mercantis. She taken over Ashur and practically destroyed it. She sabotaged a great many things, even tried to assassinate Cordelia with the eyes. I cannot fathom why you are so forgiving towards her when she stabbed the GA repeatedly in the Back while it lost lives in the hundreds of thousands.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The purpose of the peace settlement was for the countries led by people who don't age (Keter, Praes) to wait for generational exchanges of power in other lands to weaken their enemies' commitment to fighting them and unity towards that end, and then restart the conflict.

Sure, Malicia doesn't want Keter to win any more than Cat does, but the offer of peace was made in bad faith to set up one of Malicia's (and DK's) trademark "you lose or I win" moments: either the GA leadership looks stupid in the eyes of people who don't understand the ploy, or they actually go for it and, as mentioned, come to further harm down the line as a direct result.

take realism out of my fiction please

"I struggle to see why people faced with existential horror would resort to political games." See: COVID, climate change

Miles

Everyone who watches fox knows those are just hoaxes made up by the left to seize power away from hardworking citizens.

And everyone who is on the left knows that everything fox says is true, because those stories are manufactured in England.

kinghaart

Case in point.

Dr.Dragon

I don't know if this was brought up last chapter but I skimmed the replies this time and didn't see anything about it so I hope not.

After thinking about it for a while, I think it's actually incredibly fitting that the Villain stories alone were deleted. The whole wager between Above and Below was over whether it was best to have free will or determinism. Well, now Below's champions have free will for real instead of just the illusion of it, still being forced along certain paths and grooves. Above's servants still have their determinism of being in the right place at the right time but as seen above, that means nothing if their opponent is simply better than them.

Let the wager begin properly for what might be the first time since creation.

Abrakadabra

And you have won the internet.

[gbevis](#)

The Dead King, when alive, learned to work with his story to make himself invulnerable to great defeats.

The dead cannot learn anything they did not learn in life.

The Dead King's story has been erased. He is now "learning" to "live" in a world without rules.

It's not the greatest weakness, but the only way I can see to stop him is to exploit his never having learned to protect himself without plot armor.

j

The dead king's motivation for killing everyone and everything was to deny the Intercessor angles/tools to attack him with.

Now that the Intercessor is effectively disabled, why is the dead king still intent on killing everyone and everything?

Hopefully we will find out.

Darkening

Sure he lost a lot of possible story deaths, but he also lost his protection as the looming inevitable evil that will always return. His plot armor's gone. The normal story is that he causes a bunch of damage, but if he loses he gets driven back to Keter but they break on his walls there and the stalemate resumes. So now he needs to slaughter everyone before they walk through the twilight ways and raze keter to the ground. He's not gonna be easy to kill obviously, but it's possible now.

Detton

Here's my question..

Evil is no longer constrained by stories; this means that, if the Dead King goes all-out, he will no longer get reigned in by narrative counterweight.

However, good is still constrained by stories – but do they not have a similar power boost, by no longer having an evil counterweight to fight against?

The way I think about it: The only reason Good never wins totally, is because the bad guy always escapes at the end; the chancellor escapes. The story goes on because BOTH sides are countering each other.

Good WANTS to win, and win totally, but they cannot because Evil got a measure of protection from complete defeat – a measure they no longer get.

So what is to stop Cordeilia from unleashing Angel WMDs everywhere again? Other than having to water it down so it doesn't screw everyone over, it sounds like good can go all-out ... AGAINST EVIL

We saw a glimpse of this with Hanno – Good was being nudged towards victory, but evil wasn't being nudged towards defeat. Accordingly, one can say that Good will still be nudged towards victory, while evil won't be protected FROM it.

... this is all just a long-winded way of saying that Good can go as all-out as Evil can because there's no counterweight; the destruction of Evil's stories prevents the traditional narrative protection they had.

One might even say that the Dead King HAS to go all-out now, because if he doesn't, he would be crushed under Good's feet.

It's just a matter of finding out what all Good can bring to the table.

Detton

Or another way: Good still has some plot armor. Evil doesn't.

beleester

I think the concern is that the plot armor isn't strong enough. The Witch got nudged towards success, but that turned out to not be enough of a buff without the Dead King being nudged towards failure. They have to think of providence as more of a guideline than a certainty.

It'll help if they can predict the Dead King's "step one" and forestall it, and it'll help with ensuring total victory at the end, but setting up those situations will have to rely on

mundane strategy and planning. And the Dead King is really good at not leaving openings.

Alexander

He's good at not leaving openings with **stories**. When it comes to purely military strategy, he's good but not unbeatable.

kinghaart

He beat plenty of great military minds in Hainut in the last book. It was only really narrative that let any of them escape and there was a greivous price.

About the only extra strategist the GA has is Juniper, maybe also Grem.

Firstname Lastname

Time for the Chain of Hunger to finally shine. They'll sweep in and heroically-uh...**villainously** eat the undead hordes.

And the devils.

And the demons if they can figure out how.

Xinci

I must admit, I was chuckling at the grim absurdity of this. Villains are off the leash, and as such there is much potential here. Villains wont get their own perfected timing now, for good or ill. Resources will likely be harder to acquire and in general they may fail more due to their own inadequacies, but in this new pit there are far less limitations. The Drow can likely change far more, if they dont die, Cats own plans may be formented with far less fear, and stuff like using a super weapon can likely happen without it being turned against you later. Now the question is how the tide will turn if the Warden of the West(Regardless if it in the end Hanno or Cordelia) can have access to the full force of Above.

Also, I am happy that this did confirm that demons can and will use any matter for their shapings.

Lurker

Y'all, the Dead King is far from the only villain who can now take the gloves off. Hierophant can Wrest energy fields larger than his head now. Pretty sure a dead angel counts.

broadaxe

Thinking about this now, hindsight being 20/20 and all that, its actually very predictable that DK would let loose at some point in this story. Much as this story subverts the tropes by being the tropes, it still follows some of the many rules/laws/whatever that makes stories interesting. Showing how much these tropes held him back, actually gives us a very valuable and important perspective, both for story cohesion/understanding, but also of the dead king and he's actual capabilities.

letouriste

I just had a thought...it could be the return of the age of wonders. I mean, the stories about flying superfortress not working? gone. Cat's plan for making future Villian vs Heroes fight less dangerous for locals is dead now

Abrakadabra

Not dead. She can remake villains into whatever she desires. Now is the time for it.

Darkening

Eh. The stories being gone doesn't do anything to kill her plan of, "If you go over these lines we all agreed to, everyone gets together to kill you specifically."

Frivolous

I think one more reason why the Intercessor may have made a mistake destroy all of Below's stories is that it screws her in the event of any confrontation with any villain.

I mean, she's a hero, too, right? Still? Even now? For some incomprehensible reason?

If she ever meets Catherine or Masego again, Providence will no longer help her quite as much, or keep them down quite as much. Same if she ever meets Neshamah again.

That won't save Procer, but the Intercessor has no choice but to look to the long run. She may have doomed herself, too.

And if I know Catherine and Masego, they might decide to give her fates far worse than the death she craves.

Mental Mouse

I think that the Intercessor has actually been killed for good this time ... but even so she was able to make one last intervention – perhaps tapping her own dues from the gods Above and Below. That business of “the superweapon works halfway, leaving everybody screwed – that's a classic trope itself, and primarily a Villainous one. That makes it clear that at that

moment, story-logic was still working... and suggests a reason why she might have wanted to kill the Villainous stories. As others have noted, the DK is off the leash, but so are Cat and her people – now their own superweapons can simply work. And once she delivers that lance to Hanno, the Heroic stories will have a new custodian, while Cat can write new stories for the Villains.

Frivolous

Mental Mouse: Interesting possibility.

I hope the opposite, because I wish to experience the abundant schadenfreude of reading Interludes from the POV of the Bard, wherein she is confused about what to do and full of despair and fear.

I mean, surely EE will gift us with Interludes from the POV of the biggest and most enigmatic Bads of the story, like Neshie and Yara, right?

I am still aggrieved that we never got any mentions by Kairos or Tariq about what the Intercessor wanted. They had aspects that gave them direct insight into her character, and they never shared. It's very annoying.

Frivolous

Just remembered that Hanno has Recall, at least for now, while he's still White Knight.

He could, if Catherine prodded, Recall Tariq's memories of the Intercessor and what his aspect of Behold told him about her.

Miles

I don't think that would be useful. We know she can tell the choirs stories to influence their behavior. She almost certainly told them some to influence what they told Tariq about her.

Frivolous

Not Mercy. Tariq's aspect of Behold, which is, you know, different.

Miles

This aspect was literally just a way to let them tell him stuff.

[Mental Mouse](#)

He's previously noted that the recent dead and particularly strong personalities are difficult, prone to taking him over. Tariq was both, and also personally known to him. So, it might not be the best idea.

Frivolous

Mental Mouse: Hmm, possible.

Anyway, it might not be necessary. It may be Tariq already told Catherine his Beheld insights into the Bard. I think it unlikely, though.

I think it more likely that Tariq confided in Hanno but not Catherine (because Catherine just kept threatening to crush him), and Hanno stopped trusting Catherine after she raised the Red Axe, so he never told her either.

I am not sure many people the Heroic side of the Truce and Terms ever knew or learned that the Bard specifically wanted Catherine dead, so they might not have known how badly she needed to know everything possible about the Bard.

jamesc9

And there's a question here, of whether the Bard wanted Catherine dead, or Catherine preset toward conflict.

N/A

Ehhh. So far this is kind of what I was worrying about. Unbinding the Dead King from the shackles of stories lets him cut loose, but 'cut loose' basically just means lots of undead, big monsters, and big spells. He was already doing all that, at such scale that he was already winning the war. Now he's just... winning harder, with less interesting step-counterstep thinking involved.

Onos

That's pretty much exactly the point. The closest thing we had to a win was Hainaut, which... yeah, not great. So if we kept "counterstepping" we'd end up... oh right, at this exact point but over the course of several years and down however many people, Named and countries.

Clearly the war cannot be won. Sending a hit-squad after Nessie himself could still work, but beating him in war *was never going to work*.

Abnaxis

It just occurred to me:

Amadeus spent his whole life raging against the system that preordains Villains to lose. Then, literally minutes after he dies the Bard goes and destroys that same system.

Irony, yo.

AbraKadabra

Good point.

Leblanc

Ya I dont know not really into torture porn, umm looking foward to the next chapter I guess.

David Stone

“Where are the devils, Catherine?” the Intercessor said. “Where are the hosts that darken the skies, and the demons he has kept leashed for centuries? Where are the rituals that poison the land and the sorceries never before seen?”

Personally, I really liked this chapter. Up until this point, it was obvious that Catherine will beat the Dead King, in large part because that is **the** story in a story about stories. With “evil always loses in the end” gone, the Dead King might just win, and we needed a chapter like this to take the threat seriously. I still think Catherine wins, but maybe she doesn’t?

Chapter 27: Recoil

“He is never lost who has no home.”

– Orc saying

Bayeux had a reputation as one of the most beautiful principalities in Procer.

The western parts of it fed into the great fertile plains that were the heartlands of the Principate, but the eastern stretch was vividly green. It was because of the Whitecaps, I’d read, as the ice on the slopes of the great mountains melted come spring and fed a myriad of small rivers. It was all valleys and hills, greenery shining like emeralds. Even now that the Dead King’s grasp had reached as far as mere miles away from the border of Bayeux, the land had lost none of its beauty. There was probably a turn of phrase to be squeezed out of that, something about how

there could be beauty even as the world darkened. My fingers clenched. Unfortunately, I'd used too many of those platitudes to still put in stock in them.

So instead I wrenched my eyes away from the distant beauty of the valleys and put my attention where it belonged. Which happened to be a tall silver mirror bordered by runes, whose surface shimmered for an instant before revealing a still eerily beautiful woman. Alaya of Satus' beauty had not been entirely an artifice or the result of her Name. Even stripped of both and touched with the marks of aging for the first time since I'd known her – small wrinkles at the corner of her eyes, her skin being less than perfect – she remained perhaps the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. It did nothing for me. What I felt for her was hatred's tired cousin, and it swallowed too much ground for anything else to ever be able to grow there.

"Report," I flatly ordered.

Standing at my side, High Lady Abreha shuffled slightly on her feet. As always, she was straddling the line between being glad that I was able to order the once-empress and discomfort at the leader of Praes being ordered by anyone at all. Abreha was not such a complicated woman, once you learned to ignore the labyrinthine thirst for schemes and utterly amoral ambition.

"Your Excellency," Chancellor Alaya of – well, that was still being debated – greeted me, bowing her head. "The third wave will be setting out earlier than we had planned. Marshal Nim's efforts to reassemble the Legions have proved successful beyond our most optimistic estimates."

I kept my breath steady. Every week, every cursed fucking week, we found another way that my father had played us. The Battle of Kala had ruined the Legions of Terror, broken their spirit, but it'd also kept the soldiers out of the significantly more brutal throwdown in Ater. There had been masses of disaffected soldiers for the Black Knight to recruit under her new banner. That wasn't even entirely a metaphor, since the old banner of the Dread Empire had been the Tower in black on crimson.

"They'll need to set out directly for Keter," I said. "I've been in contact with the First Prince and the situation on the ground over here is... not promising."

Something of an understatement, that. The Dead King had stopped pulling his punches, unveiling his full arsenal of horrors. The fronts that'd held him back for almost three years had been torn through like wet parchment in a matter of hours and Procer had effectively collapsed as a nation within two days. The only thing slowing down Keter's armies was the sheer amount of land being set aflame, it was a full retreat everywhere. Only in Salia was

there a semblance of safety and considering how Cordelia was managing that I had somewhat mixed feelings about it.

"How bad?" Chancellor Alaya quietly asked.

"Militarily, Procer is done," I frankly replied. "The generals did the smart thing and pulled back their armies to Salia to preserve forces for the assault on Keter, but that was at the cost of effectively surrendering the country. There's not a force left north of Iserre that will be more than an afternoon's work for the dead."

She nodded, once and sharply.

"I will accelerate the preparations as best I can," Chancellor Alaya promised. "I have news from the Free Cities that I suspect have outpaced the reports from the Jacks."

"I'm listening."

"Empress Basilia took the armies of the League into the Twilight Ways a month past," she said. "For war against Keter, she claims. They've been seen in Salamans since, but I could not obtain more. The Eyes have increasingly large gaps."

"Let's hope she lives up to her letters, then," I grunted.

Basilia had been sending us – myself and the First Prince – those regularly until she marched out, to me as her former patron and to Cordelia as a fellow ruler. Most of it was just assurances of friendship and peace, but she'd also been promising to bring the armies of the League into the war. Didn't sound promising for her to have emerged in Salamans, considering half the southern princes were considering petition for entry into the League, but I'd reserve judgement for now.

"Indeed," Chancellor Alaya mildly replied. "May I ask as to the progress of the second wave?"

I'd been part of the first wave out of Praes. Gone from Ater before they even burned my father. Pressed for time, I'd claimed, and Procer was falling apart. *Fleeing*, my mind had called it, and it was the truer of the two. I'd taken with me the armies I'd brought and the vanguard of the Praesi reinforcements, a few thousand former household troops with cabals of diabolists and the first few... assets we'd raised after the dust settled in Ater. All of them led by High Lady Abreha. The second wave had set out two weeks later, the rest of the household troops – all currently auxiliaries in the Legions of Terror – and a ninety-two thousand orc warriors. The full muster of the Clans, led by their Warlord.

"High Lady Abreha has been handling communications with them," I said, flicking a glance at her.

Abreha cleared her throat, an amusing affectation considering she no longer needed to breathe. Of all the undead creations I had made of Night, she was by far the most lifelike. Sometimes I even forgot she was dead.

"Their pace has been steady and the resupply in Laure did not slow them down," High Lady Abreha said. "Duchess Kegan had the cattle ready to join the horde. High Lord Sargon swears that the Old Mothers will last until the offensive against Keter."

"Good news," Chancellor Alaya said. "If the armies around Salia are properly arrayed for war, it might be possible to begin the march north within days of the second wave arriving."

"I'll not count the cat skinned until I wear the skin," I snorted. "Proceran armies are terrible at handling supplies and Hasenbach can only fit so many miracles up her sleeves. I'm still awe at the quantity of grain and feed she's put together."

She must have emptied half the granaries in the Principate for it, which would have been impressive even if half the realm *hadn't* already seceded in all but name – and sometimes not even that.

"One hopes that the threat of annihilation will inspire unexpected competence," Chancellor Alaya said, a hint of asperity to her tone.

I doubted it. Fear sometimes made people sharper, pushed them beyond their limits, but most of the time it just made them sloppy and stupid. Juniper and I were already counting on two weeks stuck near Salia after the second wave joined us.

"We'll see," I replied, then my gaze hardened. "So what's this I hear about changes to the electorate?"

The Chancellor of Nobody Could Agree On What Yet dipped her head.

"The Green Stretch has been pushing for a vote of its own instead of being considered a joint territory with Ater, but there have been disagreements," she replied. "The argument was made that procedurally speaking an even number of votes might lead to deadlock, which led others to argue the Clans should be granted a second vote."

Which the High Seats would find unacceptable. Leaving what was effectively two votes in goblin hands – one for the Eyries and one for Foramen – was acceptable because Foramen still had a population that was human in majority and there was no guarantee Wither's dynasty would keep its seat, but if the Clans got a second vote the greenskins would become a power bloc as powerful as the Soninke. Throw in another vote for the Green Stretch into

this and the High Seats in human hands would make up only five of the eleven votes choosing the Chancellor of Praes.

"I won't ride your back about this," I said, "but I shouldn't need to tell you that if this comes to blows my patience is more than spent."

"I will not," the once-empress calmly told me. "Negotiations are ongoing, but there is progress. Alternatives for tiebreaking are being considered."

I sighed and let it go. I had neither the time nor the inclination to look over her shoulder while preparing for a campaign halfway across the continent. I'd have to *trust* that she knew what she was doing.

"It might be of interest to you that majority vote has narrowed down the name of our nation to either the 'Confederation of Praes' or the 'Republic of Praes'," Chancellor Alaya continued, changing the subject.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Republic?" I skeptically asked.

"There have been other republics than Bellerophon," the Chancellor replied. "Though I lean towards Confederation myself, should the Grey Eyries be convinced to relinquish that name themselves in favour of another."

I supposed it *would* be a tad awkward for the Confederation of the Grey Eyries to be a member-state of the Confederation of Praes.

"So long as it is not the League of Praes," High Lady Abreha fervently said. "Dakarai must have been drunk when he suggested it."

I thought, somewhat unkindly, that it was a bit much for the High Seats to look down at the League's squabbling when the Dread Empire had managed at least as many civil wars while claiming to be a single state instead of a loose coalition.

"A conversation for another day," I curtly said. "I believe we're finished here, Chancellor, unless you have anything else to bring up."

Alaya of Satus inclined her head respectfully.

"I will be arriving with the third wave," she said. "Arrangements were made."

My eyes narrowed, but I did not contradict her. I was not sure whether I was angry she was insisting on risking the life my father had died to preserve or pleased that for once the former

empress would be getting a closer look at what a real war looked like. It was a different beast, when you weren't looking at it from atop your tower.

"Then we will meet beneath the walls of Keter," I said. "I'll be expecting your report next week at the same hour."

I met her eyes.

"Chancellor."

"Your Excellency," she replied, dipping down in deference.

The formal address that had been adopted for the Name of Warden of the East in Praes was the last thing she spoke before the silver mirror dimmed. I rolled my shoulder, cracking it. My limbs always felt sore these days. From too much twisting around as I slept, I figured. I'd not been sleeping well since... I'd not been sleeping well, was all.

I could not, would not look back. The moment I did the pit awaited.

"Our confederation is beginning well enough," High Lady Abreha mused. "To think I'd see the day the Dread Empire was replaced."

I eyed her skeptically, hiding my amusement at the way she'd avoided the more common turn of phrase of 'living to see the day'.

"It will change," I said. "It'll have to. Power's being pulled in too many directions."

I was personally of the opinion that the High Seats would start by acting as I was sure my father had thought they would, by clashing against each other and bribing the greenskin and Ater votes with positive reforms, but it wouldn't last forever. At some point they'd either close ranks and try to keep the office within their families – which I couldn't see working long, given how often their dynastic interests were at odds – or they'd turn to other means to take power. That'd lead to war, one I wasn't sure the High Seats would be able to win, and in the vacuum after that defeat my bet was that the Legions of Terror would step in. Nim was zealously apolitical, but how many of her successors would be?

Maybe if she stuck around long enough preserving the sanctity of the elections would become part of the story of the Black Knight, but I wouldn't hold my breath. Besides, the Intercessor had put an end to that sort of thing. Forever or for now I could not know, and so I'd set Hierophant to the task of finding out.

"There will be adjustments," Abreha dismissed, "but the skeleton will hold. It answers a need."

"And what would that be?" I asked.

I wasn't even being snippy. Abreha Mirembé was a reprehensible excuse for a human being, but she'd stood near the apex of Praesi politics for decades. Her understanding of the Wasteland was equalled by few and surpassed by fewer. I belonged to neither category.

"Seizing the Tower by force was costly, Your Excellency," the undead aristocrat said. "In soldiers, in coin, in contracts called upon. And it was ever a risky enterprise, even when one's family stood strongly behind them. Holding the Tower was even more difficult: most tyrants were part of the Dark Council or at least the imperial court before they climbed the Tower. Ater has been the grave of many a High Lord."

"So you'll stick with the votes because they're cheaper than war," I skeptically said.

"Because eight years is not so long a time to wait," High Lady Abreha smiled, baring yellow teeth. "Why raise an illegal army and risk battles and ruination when the coming election is a better way to usurp rule from your rival? No longer are we ruled until death, Your Excellency, and we live longer than lesser breeds. We have years enough that we can afford patience."

I paused, forced myself to consider that. I'd noticed, when facing Sargon Sahelian in Wolof, that the great families of Praes tended to think over long spans. That when a High Lord could not climb the Tower, they turned instead to strengthening their dynasty. This system, with the votes, it played on that an instinct. Why should you rush into a hasty war when waiting a mere twenty years might see you elected Chancellor? Better to bide your time, forge your alliances and save up for the right bribes. You'd get your eight years, and without having risked your family. It was a system that would weed out the reckless, I realized.

Ensure the same kind of people who'd once claimed the Tower through orgies of bloodletting would never end up anywhere near the rule of Praes.

"The Carrion Lord was a vicious little shit," Abreha said. "But brilliant too, in his own twisted way. He understood the old families better than we ever knew."

I sighed. I was still unconvinced that this would not eventually turn into military rule by the Legions, but then I wasn't sure that wouldn't also be part of plan. The thought might well have appealed to him.

"We'll see," I finally said.

"They will be interesting times," the undead noble. "Should we make it through the end of the world, anyhow."

"How very hopeful, High Lady Abreha," I drily said.

"That is-"

She was interrupted by a sound I was unfortunately familiar with: a detonation. It was easy enough to tell where it was coming from. We were standing on the outskirts of a nameless village, atop a flat slope that'd been judged a good place for receiving the Chancellor's report, and from up here I could see a plume of smoke coming up from a large barn. Broad and dry and in good state, it was where Masego had set up for the half-day we would be spending in Creation before rejoining my army in the Twilight Ways. He'd had tests to run, he said. My heart clenched. Gods, let him not have gotten hurt. Already I had... my fingers clenched around a knife I was not holding.

Do not look back, I ordered myself. Else the pit awaits.

Masego would be fine. He wasn't a fool, he'd have taken precautions before attempting anything risky. I still parted ways with High Lady Abreha after only cursory courtesies and hurried limped my way down, my personal guard falling in around me. The village was little more than a hole in the ground with dusty streets between the two abandoned shops and handful of houses that made it up, so there was nowhere to get lost. I found Apprentice outside the barn and on her knees when I got there, coughing profusely. A glance through the open door revealed the shape of a tall man in dark robes moving around, which released a knot in my stomach.

I stopped to speak with Sapan, whose coughing had turned into wheezes.

"You all right, kid?" I asked.

"Fine, Your Majesty," she rasped out. "I just swallowed a mouthful of Light."

I blinked, then cocked to the side.

"And it didn't burn you?" I carefully asked.

"Scalded," Sapan admitted. "It will teach me to always double-layer my shields."

"Always a good idea," I sagely agreed.

I patted her shoulder comfortingly, satisfied she was in no danger, and entered the barn. Immediately my steps stuttered, and

not because of the limp. I'd not been able to see it from up the hill, but something a blown a ring hole right through the barn's ceiling. By the looks of the burns around the ring, had to be Light or something like it.

"Tell me," I said, "that it wasn't the artefact that made this mess."

Hierophant was leaning over a scorched stone table that'd survived the explosion and on which rested a leather-bound book. Half the barn was filled with various instruments and the enchanted trinkets he'd used to measure emanations back in the Arsenal, and a few of the former had been brought to the stone table. He was handling it with a pair of pincers, carefully turning the pages as he inspected them.

"I could," Hierophant noted. "But you always get inexplicably irritated when you ask me to lie to you and I do."

I sighed.

"Yes," he happily said. "Just like that."

"Tell me it's not broken at least," I said.

I limped deeper into the barn, making my way to his side.

"I do not believe that a single means at my disposal would be able to so much as notch the binding of the Book," Hierophant said, sounding fascinated.

I narrowed my eyes at his back. I'd felt the capitalization in that.

"We're not calling it that," I said.

"It's an appropriate and endearing name," Zeze insisted. "I have this on good authority."

"You mean Indrani," I said, unimpressed.

"I have this on authority," Zeze conceded.

My lips twitched, but slagging on Archer wouldn't be enough to win me over.

"It'd be blasphemy," I reminded him. "And we're already treading pretty narrowly there considering we've stolen all the Good stories of Calernia and made a book of them."

"I did that," Masego objected. "Which means I get to name it. It's the Book of Some Things."

Because calling the godsdamned thing a joke about the Book of All Things was going to go *great* with the Procerans. I could already feel the migraine in my future reaching backwards to me now, having grown so catastrophically large it had shattered the very laws of time.

"We can discuss it later," I lied.

He turned to glare at me, which – wait what?

"Masego," I said with forced calm, "what the Hells happened to your eye?"

Not only was his usual black eye cloth gone, one of the glass eyes he'd earned when transitioning into Hierophant was gone. I would ask *where*, but the bloody blackened mess that'd been made out of his empty eye socket answered the question well enough. The other eye had survived, but the glimmers of Summer sunlight in the glass had noticeably dimmed.

"Ah," Hierophant said, sounding somewhat embarrassed. "That."

I took his chin in hand and moved him around to get a better look at the wound. Shallow stuff. I frowned.

"Did you enchant the inside of your eye socket?" I asked.

"Of course not," he replied, sounding offended. "Enchantments laid into flesh are notoriously imprecise and prone to mutation."

His chin was released. I waited, staring at him expectantly.

"I inserted chips of bone into the flesh, which I then enchanted," Masego proudly told me. "In anticipation of an eventuality just like this one."

Yeah, there it was. He looked at me, eyebrow cocked.

"You may praise my foresight now," he encouraged.

"New rule," I said. "Before you stick stuff in yourself and enchant it, ask someone about it."

"I asked Akua when designing the enchantments last year," he informed me. "She was quite helpful. Is she our friend again now, while I remember to ask? I was never quite clear on whether we are meant to despise her or not."

"I'm changing the rule to asking *me*," I noted. "If I'm not there you should ask-"

I swallowed the answer. He was not here, he'd left me. *Do not look back*, I ordered myself. *Else the pit awaits*.

"-Vivienne," I finished. "And for Akua, use your judgement. You don't have to hate her if you don't want to."

"I don't," Masego informed me. "Useful to know, thank you."

"Speaking of useful," I said, forcing this back to the here and now. "Am I to assume you got something useful out of the hole in the ceiling?"

"That is how I lost the eye," Hierophant admitted. "It appears the Gods Above were disinclined to allow me to peer too closely at their work. They seemed quite cross."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"Well, at least you didn't get smote," I forced out. "What did you learn?"

"Several things," he noted. "The first is that the Intercessor still lives."

I cursed in Kharsum. I'd figured she did, even after losing the stories, but it was not pleasant to have my suspicions confirmed.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"The readings I have of the artefact leaving dormancy allowed me to establish that they shouldn't have interfered with the secondary enchantment we laid on the Spike," Masego said.

I frowned at him. The silver harpoon he'd used in Ater, the Spike, had been meant to do exactly two things. Extract an aspect from the Bard using the same principles that Zeze had used to cut out my corrupted aspect in Marchford all those years ago, and then ensure that even if the Bard died she would not escape. Our solution to her disappearing at every time she bought it had been, well, necromancy. If she died with the Spike in her, she was supposed to be raised from the dead immediately. Only the enchantment had failed, because when she'd bit off her tongue she'd disappeared.

"The enchantment failed, though," I reminded him.

"Not because of interference from the process of extraction, as I had originally believed," Hierophant said. "Which has fascinating implications, Catherine, because it means the necromancy was beaten out by a stronger will."

"So she refused real hard to become undead?" I asked.

"I mean will in the magical sense," Masego clarified.

Ah, so the same exercise of willpower that allowed a mage to use magic. The Trismegistan theory of magic preached that usurpation

was the essence of sorcery, that a mage was stealing dominion over the laws of Creation whenever they used magic. Which meant he was implying a stronger mage than him had fought the enchantment.

"She can't do magic," I frowned. "I'm nearly certain about that."

"There are always at least two will when magic is used, Catherine," Hierophant reminded me.

I blinked.

"You mean *Creation*?" I hissed.

"I believe it is a creational law that the Intercessor cannot die," Masego agreed. "Only conflict with a fundamental law would be able to kill her, should this theory be correct."

Which meant sorcery wouldn't do it, and neither should Names. Not Light or Night either. Fundamental laws were supposedly laws that applied to even the Gods, things like 'something cannot come from nothing' and the like, but those were more like limits. Not the kind of law you could exploit.

"Fuck," I said. "That complicates things."

I'd thought of stripping stories from her as the first step to getting her head on a plate, but that no longer looked feasible. I was going to need a new way to deal with the Wandering Bard.

"Containment might be a more realistic solution," Zeze suggested.

"We're already planning that with the Dead King," I said. "I'm not comfortable with the number of ancient evils we're going to be shoving into lamps. At the very least, at this rate we'll run out of lamps."

"I imagine given long enough I will be able to find a way to kill her," Hierophant mused. "It is only a matter of being thorough."

The mildness of that tone contrasted with the words sent a shiver up my spine. It was always good to remember how very terrifying Masego could be, given reason.

"Regardless," he continued, "before the Gods Above took offence to my polite and legitimate inquiries-"

On the other side of the table, hastily swept into a mess of hay, I noticed what looked like a set of long silver needles burned and melted by Light.

"- I did succeed at part of what I was attempting," Masego continued. "Namely, discerning the nature of what we stole."

"Her aspect," I said.

"Yes," he patiently replied, "but what does that *mean*, practically speaking?"

"Stewardship over stories," I suggested. "The ability to seen and influence them."

"Yet you've claimed she killed the stories for Evil in Ater," Masego noted. "That goes beyond mere stewardship."

"We don't know her limits," I reminded him.

"Indeed," he agreed. "Which made ascertaining the nature of what we stole all the more important. How powerful is she, to be able to kill half of it?"

I hummed. That would be useful. Strength in a certain way didn't necessarily translate in others, but it'd help scope her out.

"So?" I pressed.

He wrested sorcery from a small gem sown into his belt and began to draw in the air, golden lines like his runes, but I caught his arm.

"I don't need the equations," I said. "They're beyond me. What did you conclude?"

"That even assuming the Intercessor ended stories for Below only in Calernia, which has been your insistence," he said, pausing to allow me to interject.

I simply nodded in confirmation. I'd not been able to feel stories further than Calernia, and I did not believe the Intercessor had either. Our aspects had been similar enough she'd felt threatened, that I'd been close to stealing hers. The scope had to have been similar for that to be possible.

"Even then," Masego continued, "the amount of power involved can mean only two things."

He paused again, which was purely for dramatic purposes and I probably had Indrani to blame for.

"The first that this there is no reason to be concerned," Hierophant pleasantly said, "because she is one of the Gods and can destroy this continent with a wink of her eye."

"Grim," I appreciated. "What's in box number two?"

"She did not destroy anything at all," Masego said. "She has only halted the stories."

I let out a low whistle. If that were true, then we still had a shot at killing the Dead King. If that were true.

"And what do you base that on?" I asked.

"We have only seen one instance of the Intercessor manipulating power on a large scale," he said. "The incident with the original Grey Pilgrim in Levant that was investigated by your minions."

My eyes narrowed.

"The White Knight smote him, but the Bard stepped in and tinkered with the angel's power so it wouldn't kill him," I said. "She changed some properties, yeah, but mostly she *lessened* the power."

"Exactly," he replied with a grin. "That is a precedent. I believe that the stories are not dead so much as lessened to zero."

I grimaced.

"That's useful information, I won't pretend otherwise," I said. "But it's not a solution, Zeze. We can't kill her, so her death isn't a way to end her interference."

Masego laughed.

"That's the beauty of it, Catherine," he told me. "This is not an act of the Gods that happened, or an irreversible destruction. It is an *act of will*. And what does Trismegistus sorcery teach us about these?"

My fingers clenched.

"Will can beat will," I quietly said. "What one does, another can undo."

He nodded.

"Should we find the right lever," Hierophant smiled, "we can get those stories *back*."

[Tohron](#)

Something people might be interested in: after getting all the verses to The Girl Who Climbed the Tower, I wanted to compose a suitable melody, so I went and did a rendition of it:

It could doubtless be improved with further practice, but I think it turned out pretty well.

[Kletanio](#)

I love it 😊

Here's my very different version, to consign to the goblinfire inferno 😊

aurikdomi

Props to both of you, fanfic stuff is great!

[Kletanio](#)

You have a really strong melody running throughout!

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Tenthyr

Oh boy, Catherine straight back to her old and trusted habit of bottling up her pain until it explodes out.

And with Hakram untrusted by her, Tariq dead, and White Knight maybe not really in her wheelhouse anymore? Let's hope the climax of the ranger story has boosted Indrani's ability to handle this kinda nonsense!

Insanenoodlyguy

No. Now is Akuas time to shine! Their weird tradgedy is on pause, which means they can snuggle.

Insanenoodlyguy

It'd be blasphemy," I reminded him. "And we're already treading pretty narrowly there considering we've stolen all the Good stories of Calernia and made votes of them."

Linnus42

Typo: EE you mean Warden of the East, Not West.

I did originally think Warden of the West would get settled before Cat got back from the East. Be interesting to see how Cat impacts the story line given that doing anything messes with one of he three agreements with Tariq.

Well that is good I am glad Bard didn't delete Storylines that seemed too powerful and too much of a game changer.

RoflCat

West is correct here, they're adapting the formal address of Warden of the West when Praesi talk to them to apply to Warden of the East as well.

Sir Nil

Don't call it the Book, call it a Guide.

Nyx

"Thanks" for making me realize EE has been stringing us along for seven books to land a title drop pun.

Crash

'Two Hundred Heroic Axioms', author unknown.

Flameburst

The unpractical guide to good?

Insanenoodlyguy

I was sure her name would be Practical Guide. But yeah, she's probably writing it.

shikkarasu

Would be a good successor Name to Wandering Bard. Just shows up a pivotal moments, half drunk, and advises Named.

"I say just set it on fire. I know, I know, it's a concept, not a thatched roof. I'm just saying anytime I had a problem I'd toss goblin fire at it and *fwoosh*, right away I had a different problem."

[amit27592](#)

Cat's back to playing with Napalm again.

Tenthyr

So I think we kind of have the Bards three aspects now. The first that lets her Wander, the now bisected story map, and the final aspect that lets her change something in creation.

Oh, and we have it confirmed that the Gods wove the story of the Bard and that she's hardwired into Creation. Catherine vs. God's when?

WuseMajor

I mean, she's already Heaven's Babysitter.

edrey

so my bet is Wander, Read and Narrate, the last one creating pivots and changing the narrative. that would explain a lot.

dadycoool

So much like a classic D&D series, where the characters level up to general, king/queen, High King/Queen, and eventually god level and replace the prior deities.

Juff

Typo Thread:

my eyes > my eye (occurs 4 times. unless she grew it back in the interim)
Cordelia has a > Cordelia as a
and a ninety-two > and ninety-two
still awe > still awed
thatshe > that she
that an instinct > that instinct
parted wats > parted ways
something a blown > something had blown
exactly tow things > exactly two things
two will when > two wills when
seen and influence > see and influence
that this there > that there

daniel

possibly,
labyrinthine thirst for schemes => thirst for labyrinthine schemes

Silverking

Well, I don't know what other nasties the Dead King is pulling out of his vaults, but if he really wants to kill Catherine, all she has to do is stick her in a room with Hakram with a magical lock that easily opens once she chooses to speak to him.

She would starve to death in there out of spite.

WuseMajor

Pretty sure the right lever is either a swimming pool of booze or a crowbar to the skull.

Also, thinking on it, if the Bard being undying is an immutable Law of Creation...Wouldn't Demons be potentially something you could use there?

Alternately, what if you strengthened the law? And made it so her current body couldn't die *at all?" Keeping her stuck in one body and unable to Wander...Well, at least you could get the other set of stories out of her.

shikkarasu

I think strengthening the law was covered under the "too many lamps" clause.

Gabe Meadow

I consider this yet another piece of evidence that the Bard's goal isn't to die for good. As her existence is a Creational law, there's really nothing save the Gods Above or Below that could kill her, and if a demon could do it, she could easily have flung herself into the nearest band going up against a Demon of Absence.

No, I'm pretty sure she's angling to, as Kairos said, "shed her chains for a set more pleasing," namely a preferred apotheosis.

jamesc9

Thank you; I had forgotten Kairos's phase.

dadycool

Well, apparently there really is a light at the end of the tunnel, one that uses efforts that they'd previously expended.

Masego is a gem. An honestly terrifying one due to his utter lack of empathy, but a precious one. "I just wanted a peek!" "NO!" *minor smite* Wait, he's trying to steal her image, also being one-eyed. We've fanon-established her as Odin, but what would Masego be, as a one-eyed mage?

The Book of Some Things. It absolutely has to be called that now.

Insanenoodlyguy

This, long term, might be a boon for them. The heroes do don't take things too seriously often have more advantages.

Abrakadabra

Or the two hundred heroic axioms perhaps?

RadiantSpren

It won't be two hundred heroic axioms, because, correct me if I am wrong, I believe that we heard Saint talking about that book being an interesting read for heroes, meaning that it has already been around for a good while.

Burdi

soon High Lady Abreha would become The Secretaries or the Left Hand because Cat now is in needed of another assistant since Hakram gone and scribe dead. Because of her station as Warden of the East her business now would be very large and lot of problem would arise. even cody has Forgetful Librarian at her side

nick012000

Pretty sure that Abreha can't become any sort of Named, because she's undead, and the undead can't truly grow or learn.

Konstantin von Karstein

The Barrow Lord is a Levantine Name that undead can wear, and there was a Praesi Name called the Liche.

Burdi

So it is possible

shikkarasu

Chider was undead when she stole the Name of Squire from Catherine, and Cat was undead when she stole it back. There was also a Dread Emperor (Revenant?), who ruled a second time after they died. Has a second DE title and everything, since they lost and regained the Name.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

This whole time the story was actually about the transition from an oral tradition to a literate one.

edrey

so the Bard cant die because creation doesnt want to but wasnt the saint able of cutting creational laws, so that sword should be able to do it too right?
so what lever can be used here, the hierarch is my bet, because is utter madness to call him.

Reader in the Night

Huh. So Bard put all the stories on pause. When the stories come back, do they account for all events that happened while they were paused, or do they start anew? Because DK has accumulated shit-tons of negative story karma, if that gets taken into account...

ninegardens

I love that this chapter sort of... winds down the apocalyptic power level on the bard in a way that feels... natural? Consistent?

It successfully feels "Science", not just technobabble. Masego delivering the punchline, along with a bunch of alternatives ("Maybe she's just a God, and can destroy the universe"), is kind of great.

This was really well done.

kinghaart

Yeah it was nice to get to see Masego the scientist again. In Praes he was mostly a combat mage onscreen which made the harpoon thing come a bit out of left field for me; scenes like this make it feel more organic.

Shveiran

This... this just raises so many questions.

> If the Gods made it a Creational law that the Bard cannot die, why not make her stewardship over stories a creational law? If they could only do one, why THIS one? Why is keeping her in the game more important than safekeeping stories, when her nudging things is the whole reason for her to exist?

> Admittedly the Bard being able to destroy the stories never made sense to me; why would the Gods give her a power such as this? It runs against her role. And let's say she actually can stop them. Fine and dandy, they gave her that tool as weapon of last resort.

HOW IS THE DK ALIVE THEN?

I mean, if they are NOT destroyed, that means the Bard can jumpstart them again. Why didn't she do so before, if killing the Dk was such a priority? All she had to do was pretending he got one over her (say, while he lobotomized her) and alt the stories of Evil. It is CLEAR from his reaction that he has never seen something like that.

He commits to BBEG stuff, then she brings them back, the handsome peasant with the magic sword she groomed for the job stabs Neshamah. Boom. Easy.

> If Cat and Masego could Spike an aspect, why the hell didn't they go for Wander or whatever it is first. I mean, come on people. You could have gotten all of them if you only started with the right one. This is basic stuff.

Don't tell me her popping this way and that is not an Aspect, because that shit sure doesn't look like anything less than that. We have been told how teleportation is not a thing since book one, FFS.

> If the DK is Demons-happy now, why isn't he targeting the 100000 orcs marching north? We know what he did in Brus, we know

how few Heroes there were in Praes.

If Cat is smart and played it safe, she will have divided her heroes and diabolists, but even then... how many heroes is that? Princess, Apprentice, Silver Huntress and Errant Knight? Even two Heroes are not nearly enough. And we saw in Second Liesse that cabals of diabolists are not enough to bind three demons. Why doesn't Neshamah just pop ten demons in the middle of the horde and calls it a day? The Warlord can't kill them, and before the diabolists are done you have half the Horde made into corrupted spawn. How many orcs can you possibly be left with at the end, a third?

What about a cattle-plague, or frost? The horde has almost no magic and poor technology.

And sure, they use the Twilight Way. So what? Demons are not undead, and stories no longer bind Villains. I don't buy he cannot use a ritual in the Pilgrim-sacrifice-shaped realm anymore, because that weight no longer matters.

Even if, why isn't he targeting the cattle they send along the way to force the orcs to come out?

We know Neshamah can strike, we now he can see as far as Ater no problem... by this point every time he doesn't outside Salia it feels contrived.

I'm sorry, it just... doesn't work anymore? I don't think it does, at least. The limiter is off, and he is not bound to the logistics of walking armies anymore.

I can't really buy the "oh, he is winning just slowly enough we can cross the continent in the mid time" now.

This is Scion all over again.

Snappy270

I think it might be to do with how the bard was the first named. And all other named were imitated by that template. Basically the gods might not have known how a aspect can be usurped. They allowed it to happened cause its doable, but didnt allow mesago to look through it cause its not meant for him. Or this was their plan all along for answering the question.

The DK isnt dead cause noone Good has made it past the walls on Keter. If the heros made it to DK's throne room the sure maybe the bard might pop that to kill him. Otherwise its just letting of the chain to destroy everything without repercussion.

Well the plan was to revive the bard as undead, which has shown to be able to damage an aspect from previous undead. So i guess they wanted to quickly get what they needed before undeath started. Plus if she was undead theres a chance she would juat do what Catherine said. Also if nothing worked and they stole Wander, the bard could have died and popped to another body and they would have nothing.

DK hasn't shown to be omniscient. He had to send an undead by foot to invite Catherine to Keter. He could have agents in Ater to watch things. But there's a good chance Malicia would keep them out cause she was always going to backstab him anyway. So he might not have known what's happening in Praes. Also he could unleash his arsenal in Procer cause he had armies there to do it, doesn't mean he can do things across the world now. He ain't a God yet.

Since when did the twilight ways stop working on him. It's a land made from the grey pilgrim, if anything it's a good story. Otherwise it's just a land that hates undead, wouldn't give DK free reign in them.

Heriaks

>Because as you say, it's a game. They can start it over or abandon it if they want to, and I don't think anyone would want to make a game invincible, immortal and indestructible. Plus I think there's a lot we don't know about the Bard and its history.

>Bard can't destroy a story, but she doesn't have to stop them to kill the DK, she must have had several dozen plans for that. And she was looking to kill Cat when she is one of the pillars in the war against the Dead King, which shows that she has backup plans because of her aspect of seeing the Stories. Recall that if Cat had failed, Cordelia would have used the angel's corpse and with Bard's amplification, goodbye DK. So DK wasn't a big priority, no need to stop the Stories for that.

>It's true that Cat could have pulled off the Wander aspect, but what do we know? We're not even sure if it's an aspect (I think it is) and how it will react. And we have to find it among the 3 of Bard. Also it's possible that Cat could have helped Masego to create a weapon against the aspect of Bard's story because she is linked to it by her Name, unlike Wander. Otherwise it is indeed a beginner's mistake XD.

>The Orcs and the whole army don't go directly to Keter, but first to Salia and they are still on the other side of the big mountain range that prevents the magic from working so the DK can't attack Callow with his spells yet. But it's true that once they get out of the twilight ways in Procer, they're going to get some demons. On the other hand as long as the army is marching there, demons and undead can't attack them, even if the Evils' Stories are gone, the Goods' is whole so the Pilgrim's magic works. And the Ways will always prevent the demons from going there, I don't see the Pilgrim stopping the undead but not the demons in the Ways

Everything makes perfect sense, and even if DK has an advantage, we haven't seen the elves, dwarves, giants, drows, the Titan, the secret of the gobbelinfire that the goblins could use, the assets found in Praes, the hierarch (and maybe the dragons).

Shveiran

I'll answer to both here: aside from some nitpicks, most of what you both point out could be an explanation.

The problem is that "could".

I really feel like I don't understand the rules anymore, that I have no way to foresee what will happen. And that is a problem, for me; there is a key difference between watching random images and being surprised by a twist, and the difference is that you are blindsided by the twist and not by everything else.

Now, make no mistake: this is subjective. This is a personal problem: **I** no longer feel like I understand the world.

And... it honestly hurt to say, because I have a hard time coming up with a series that has hooked me more than the Guide. Or shown me more new perspectives, stimulated more thoughts; not about elves and magic, but about society, prejudice, people.

Or just plainly made me cry more than the Guide, when it comes down to it.

And now... I don't know anymore. This chapter made me feel nothing, and that's the best I've felt after reading one in a month or so.

I don't know. If you enjoyed the chapter, more power to you. But maybe I shouldn't stick around.

shikkarasu

I am super sorry to hear that. I hope, if you do take a break, that you come back. Even if it's just to binge the last 30+ chapters and see how it ends. It would be a shame to lose a long time reader just before the final arc!

The story is definitely different than it ever has been, but I have faith that it will make retroactive sense.

ninegardens

Peace out for a bit. Often with stories, there's a bunch of stuff that is kinda janky if read chapter by chapter, but works better (or at least faster) when read in one binge.

Also, if you are looking for something to read in the mean time (and haven't already tried them), I might suggest "All night laundry" webcomic, or "Pale" webserial. They are both just... kind of great.

Heriaks

I wanted to respond to the comment above. Sorry

ohJohN

I think for your first two points, you might be inferring motivations for the Gods & the Bard that are different from their (currently unrevealed) actual motivations.

Why isn't the Bard perfectly omnipotent? Why does she almost entirely play by the rules of Creation (her power comes from a Name & aspects, she inhabits physical human bodies), with only "no permanent death" tacked on? Why would the Gods empower a human woman to intercede some time after Creation was set in motion (if her talk about her origins as Yara are actually true), when they could have created a perfect, indestructible, unsurpable automaton to fill that role from the beginning? That, to me, speaks of either a lack of ability – they didn't predict the need for an Intercessor ahead of time, and this was the best patch they could make with their limited ability to act in Creation – or an ulterior motive: perhaps her nudging things is NOT the whole reason for her to exist, just a side benefit, and the only thing the Gods absolutely insist on is that she sticks around.

Why do you think the Bard wants DK dead? Soon before his apotheosis, she convinced Neshamah that, oh, she tried to stop him, but he was just too clever and never left her an opening – but she's the finest liar on the continent, and her laughter at the moment of his ascension certainly seems suspicious. And with her trying to destroy artifacts that could potentially kill or contain DK in the Arsenal, leaking their plans to DK in Hainaut, and generally fucking with the war effort, it doesn't really seem like his death is her main priority. And now she's completely let him off the chain – if he wins the war and there's not a living soul left on the continent, who tf is gonna kill him then?

I also think you're greatly overestimating DK's powers. He's no longer bound by Evil stories, so he can unleash his full strength without narrative reprisal, but he's not, you know, suddenly omnipotent!

- He can't open Hellgates at will anywhere on the continent. It was mentioned that he sent forces into Procer through Arcadia, which can make long journeys shorter (but it's fickle and not as fast as using the Ways). In the time it took Cat to get back, he could believably manage to get some undead diabolists

to relatively-nearby Salia so they could pop out and unleash demons, but not Laure or Ater.

- I'm also not convinced he can even *see* Ater; I interpreted his "interesting" as him noticing a shift in the fabric of Creation as the Evil stories shut off, not him directly observing the other side of the continent. Masego would likely have noticed a spell massive enough to overcome the geological barriers, at least.

- The Twilight Ways are inherently, foundationally inhospitable to undead. Not because of story weight, but because that's how the realm was shaped at its inception. If there existed the story "villain falls into a fire and dies" before the story shutoff, villains aren't now *immune to fire* – Fate just stops nudging them to lose their footing around open flames.

So I don't think he's had much of a chance to attack the orcs yet. (Also I'm pretty sure they're bringing cattle through the Ways with them, having briefly popped out in Laure to pick up some more. Like, why would they send the army's food supply via Creation?? The last leg would be crawling with undead, and it'd get there 4+ months after the army itself!)

Daniel E

'The Book Of Some Things'. I wholeheartedly support this and will subscribe to your newsletter.

Xinci

Black did play it right with his scheme for Chancellor, the High Lords have a highly in-group investing methodology and if the risk of conflict is lower by following the institutions already built, then they will do so. The only question is how to restrict them and bleed off their power so it remains as such. A probable opening for Cardinal as a school for mages, influence and general education and thus a vector of stabilization.

Mhm, yep, logically given her position, the Bard can modulate things(possibly so long as they are on/in the skein of Creation). Seems similar to Angels "deaths" then, she modulated something that cannot truly die to a state of being dead but not quite dead. Given the whole deal with Creational cascades, this seems good as more than Named would presumably be involved in Belows stories. I am curious how ripping out Aboves half has affected her and what it would enable a Hero to do with its work.

Secondarily, it would appear that Masego too will have to grow further again, as he has lost some of the power of Summer now. I still don't quite understand what happened to his eye though. Did the sight make it burst? Were the bones being used to help deal with the potential backlash of such?

OmniscientQ

So... how the hells is Abreha keeping up with Cat and the first wave? I thought the Twilight Ways were supposed to be so fundamentally opposed to the existence of undead that they straight up murdalized any who dared try to cross a gate. The opposition of the Ways to undead was so complete that nobody was worried about Trismegistus himself finding a way to corrupt it.

shikkarasu

I'm guessing since Twilight was formed (partly) by the leader of the Wild Hunt, and since the Crown of Winter was subsumed by the Night, that Abreha is inherently a little Fae. She is therefore allowed to walk Twilight.

Nessie is animated by Trismegistion sorcery, and so is fundamentally different. He and his can't access the Ways, but creations of Catherine and any necromancer Drow that may pop up can. Her undead have always skirted the rules a bit, starting when she gained the title Duchess of Moonless Nights.

hakureireimu

No. Twilight is opposed to the Dead King and his works, not undead in general.

Miles

"I'll not count the cat skinned until I wear the skin,"

You say that, yet you are a Cat and you wear its skin.

"So long as it is not the League of Praes," High Lady Abreha fervently said. "Dakarai must have been drunk when he suggested it."

I suspect anything with "Praes" in it would have been deadlocked if story shenanigans were in play. That said, for the sake of futureproofing (whenever the Bard's thing gets fixed) I would suggest an Naming this country with an old Villain's favorite trick: call it "The land of Searp."

I could not, would not look back. The moment I did the pit awaited.

As I remember, you were quite the brawler in the pit. You'll have to make this pit your own as well, if you want to get started healing. Or is this your new Evil Scar?

I cursed in Kharsum.

She's been doing this for years and I still get otaku vibes every time. This isn't a language that you speak often enough that the ol' kuso is more instinctive than a plain f-firecracker. It's an obvious affectation that screams of

childishness. It's as if she's not cursing because she feels the need to let the pain out, and as if she's cursing because the word sounds cool and a halfway plausible excuse to hear it has presented itself. Not a good trait for a leader. At least that's what I get from that. I'm wondering if it's intentional on the part of EE because I don't get the reasoning for making her character seem fake in this one singular aspect.

"Will can beat will," I quietly said. "What one does, another can undo."

He nodded.

"Should we find the right lever," Hierophant smiled, "we can get those stories back."

Is this foreshadowing of how you're going to beat the DK? Turns out all it takes to win is getting all the mages ever to pool their wills. Hopefully some Heroic Providence will manifest among them, because you can bet that the DK has his own army of mages boosting his own will too.

Miles

Sorry, did not mean to reply to a comment.

I humbly request assistance deleting this please.

shikkarasu

I think the fact that she has been cursing in Kharsum for years is a good indication that it isn't an affectation, but a genuine character trait. She also clenches her fist for a moment while weighing difficult choices. It might have been childish when she was 15, now it's just who she is.

Bear in mind the following:

1. Cat speaks 6 languages I can think of off the top of my head, albeit with a Laure accent, and would need to practise them occasionally to avoid losing them (especially after losing **Learn**)
2. Cursing in Dwarvish/Orcish/Giant is a staple fantasy trope, often explained as the harsh language feeling more satisfying.
3. Catherine is a connoisseur of cursing. She went through a Tagrebi phase before noting that it's all goat related.
4. Kharsum is a very evocative language, "well suited to poetry," and likely has some very interesting ways to be crass

All in all it feels very Catherine, to me.

Miles

>Bayeux

I hope someone takes this city name as inspiration for fanfic, to tell the story of one Named Bayeux-Wolphe

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among them, because you can bet that the DK has his own army of mages boosting his own will too.

Frivolous

I'd like to thank ErraticErrata for answering my question in the comments of the previous chapter about whether the Chancellor of Praes was still a name. Alaya's aging means it isn't.

Black Knight might be a goner, too. I wonder about Warlock.

I applaud Masego for continuing to be the epitome of his Role of delving into and dissecting the secrets of the Gods.

I wonder if the Bard's stopping the stories of Evil was a single act of will or is a continuing act of will, something she has to concentrate on.

[sengachi](#)

It might also still be a Name, but because Alaya is thinking of her life as ending in 8 years when elections and Catherine come calling she's aging now. She doesn't think of herself as eternal anymore, but as living on borrowed time.

[sengachi](#)

... oh shit they might actually be able to kill the Dead King. If the stories are still active, but their effects are just lessened, that means turning them back up will see the Dead King eat the backlash of *all the stops he just pulled out*.

The Gods Above are going to boil him like a crab and eat him with butter and salt.

Reader in the Night

Between DK setting himself up by doing a speed-run of everything the The Overlord list tells you not to so, and the GA having the literal Book on Heroic Providence... Yeah, I feel like the DK is going to eat a lot of punishment if the Villain stories turn back on.

[308924810a](#)

-“Will can beat will,” I quietly said. “What one does, another can undo.”

He nodded.

“Should we find the right lever,” Hierophant smiled, “we can get those stories back.”-

So it seems to me that the obvious solution is that, having set this problem down in front of a new Named(Cat as Warden of the East), is that the new Named with influence over villain stories could get an aspect to overcome this problem in their path. The issue with that is that it's too obvious of a solution, it seems fairly likely that the purpose of this story stoppage to cause exactly that effect in Cat, likely to prevent her from getting a different type of Aspect.

Chapter 28: Grieved

"Friendship is the sole gift both given and received."

– Free Cities saying

Even nameless hole-in-the-ground villages had a temple, in Procer.

A bare bones arrangement, of course. It wasn't like the people who'd once lived here had been able to afford bringing in stone. The House of Light was a glorified barn, with shuttered windows on the sides and a surprisingly nice thatched roof. The angle of it was gentle enough I was able to lean back into the prickly straw and leave my legs dangling over the edge. My deadwood staff I left at my side, keeping against my ribs an open bottle of wine as I looked up at the clouds. The day was waning but it was still a fair afternoon, the sun warm and the breeze lazy. I had the third of a bottle warming my belly, the taste of the red sour against my tongue, and I was half asleep already.

I'd taken to sneaking in naps when I could afford to, which was less often than I'd like. My hours were spoken for even on the road. It helped even out for my nights when I could, though. There were only so many times in a row you could wake up halfway to Early Bell and find yourself incapable of falling asleep until the lost sleep caught up to you. My Name was taking the edge off some, but it could only compensate so much: just like when I'd been the Squire, it did not prevent tiredness so much as help me work through it. Sooner or later the dues had to be paid. My fingers clenched around the neck of the bottle. And that was the very thing keeping me up at night, wasn't it? The dues I'd paid in Ater.

There were some dreams even exhaustion was preferable to.

I brought the bottle to my lips, drank deep and forced myself to close my eyes. The nap would do me good. Only there was a scent on the wind, the last wisps of smoke from Masego's work, and it had my jaw clenching. I would not be able to sleep here, I realized. At least not without that fucking nightmare, the way his eyes had widened just the slightest bit as the knife sunk into his chest. The shiver of pain as the mortal wound was inflicted. It'd been burning that night too, a pillar of green death going up all the way to the clouds.

It was a relief when I felt the magic thrum in the air. Masego had always been a prodigy when it came to controlling his sorcery, the impressively small amount of power lost when casting a spell, but he'd become something else entirely since losing his magic. Not there was not a drop lost, I thought. The only signs he was using magic were immanent – inherent to the formula, inevitable – with not a single emanation phenomenon. I suspected that his spells were now as close to perfect as was possible for a human when he was allowed to take his time.

I did not open my eyes to look at how he was coming up, but I heard him slump down into the thatch and wiggled around until he was more or less comfortable.

"I'll need thicker robes," Masego noted, "if we are to keep doing this. The straw bites at my back."

"Send a requisition request to Vivienne," I snorted.

I was going through secretaries quicker than I was going through swords, these days. I'd lost one to the Clans and the other to a blade in the back, leaving Princess Vivienne Dartwick to settle awkwardly into the role. She had duties of her own and she'd never been quite as good with details as either her predecessors, so the adjunct secretariat was having to pick up the slack. I'd have tried to borrow Aisha from Juniper if I weren't so likely to lose a hand to those pearly whites in the attempt.

"We could avoid thatched roofs instead," Masego flatly suggested. "I'll not begrudge you the habit of finding a perch, Catherine, but you could at least find a comfortable one."

"Slim pickings here," I amusedly replied. "I'll take it under advisement for the next time."

"That is all I ask," he replied, pleased.

There was a moment of comfortable silence, then finally I sighed and open my eyes.

"What brings you up here?" I asked.

"I've done as much to find our leverage as I can without my proper equipment," Masego told me. "A purely magical ritual is not a feasible solution, as I had suspected, so I am broadening the search. The mathematics are rather challenging, it is an interesting area of theory."

I glanced at the dark-skinned man lying at my side, the first Named who had joined me. He'd been Apprentice, back then, but that was no longer the mantle he bore.

"Who am I to ask about the arithmetic of deicide if not you, Hierophant?" I half-smiled.

I glanced to the side, finding his lips quirking, but my brow furrowed. His eye was still missing, the one he'd lost earlier. The skin of the socket was healed, but only one glass eye remained.

"Haven't had time to repair it?" I asked, tapping my own missing eye.

He looked surprised.

"*Repair* it?" Masego said. "That is not possible, Cat. It is not a crossbow whose parts can be swapped out. My eyes were unique, artefacts in the truest sense of the word. No, it is permanently lost to me."

I started in surprise.

"Shit," I said. "I'm sorry, Zeze. I had no idea."

He shrugged.

"You don't seem all that broken up about it," I slowly said.

"One will suffice," he said. "It serves my purposes well enough."

"You've had them for years," I pointed out.

"The loss of my eye was well worth what it allowed me to **Witness**," Hierophant said. "It is not without reason Above guarded the sight so jealously. Did I not tell you, once, that the godhead is a mere trick of perspective?"

I nodded. Hard words to forget when they'd come in the wake of him becoming the Hierophant and binding a princess of the fae standing in the fullness of her might.

"Apotheosis is not a matter of power, Catherine," he said. "Else as the Sovereign of Moonless Nights you would have been as terrible as a great queen of the fae. It is the perception of the laws of Creation, of its underpinning, that sets aside a god from the rest."

"And this helped?" I asked.

"I had a glimpse of work laid down by the Gods themselves," Hierophant said. "It did more to broaden my perspective in an instant than twenty years of uninterrupted research would have borne. Once again, you have given me a great gift."

"I know what I'm getting you for your next nameday, then," I drily said.

He looked at me, surprised but expectant.

"I'll pluck out the other eye," I grinned. "See if you learn from that."

He rolled his glass eye all the way around, which even after years of war against Keter I had to admit remained an unsettling sight.

"Lucky me," Masego sighed, and extended his arm towards me.

I cocked a questioning eyebrow.

"The bottle," he asked. "Unless you intend on drinking alone. Which is a habit common in drunks, I'll remind you."

"Well," I grunted, "if you insist on putting it that way."

He caught the bottle when I tossed it, because I'd yet to figure out how to fake out that damn eye. He wiped the rim carefully with his sleeve and took a careful sip, getting a smile out of me. He'd been overweight when I first met him. Hard to remember that now. Even through his high-collared robes – black, as always, but bordered in sharp patterns of yellow and green – I could see he was lean, though with barely any muscle to him. He was still very much out of shape. His long braids were woven tightly with enchanted trinkets whose magic he could wrest. His face had changed as he grew old, sharpened as the last of the baby fat melted away and his nose stood out more starkly, so now the braids made his cheekbones look longer.

"I think I prefer red wines," Masego noted. "Though brandy cut with pear juice remains the finest of drinks."

The Grey Pilgrim had introduced him to it while they were working on smiting ritual together. Tariq had been very fond of pear brandy but known it was rather rare outside of the Dominion and so finagled a little recipe with Proceran brandies and pears. It was so horribly sweet I almost felt nauseous just standing near a cup, but Zeze was very fond of the brew. And Indrani liked it when he drank, so no doubt in some supply wagon of the Army of Callow there would be the ingredients for it being smuggled along with actual supplies.

"Good luck getting that in a tavern," I snorted.

"Never again," he darkly said. "There was a rat, Catherine."

"Come on," I complained. "It was once and years ago. We'll take you to a nicer place next time."

Indrani and I had taken him to a tavern Docksideside in Laure before the Tenth Crusade, one of those dives we both loved. We'd yet to hear the end of that rat.

"There won't be one," Masego helpfully informed me.

I threw a few barbs his way about tender Praesi palates, he reminded me that in truth it was Callowans who had difficulties with spices, and after a while we settled into a comfortable silence as we passed the bottle of wine back and forth. I felt lighter already. He'd always had a knack for doing that, perhaps because he usually wasn't trying to. If someone were trying to move me I'd dig in my heels, but his sincerity had a way of going right through.

"Got anything else to do before we leave?" I lazily asked.

"Sapan is overseeing the last of our packing," he said. "But yes, as it happens."

"What's that?"

He turned to look at me fully instead of through his own skull, which had me frowning already.

"You need to speak with Hakram," Masego said.

My fingers clenched. So did my guts.

"It's handled," I curtly said.

"It isn't," he replied, shaking his head. "Which is why I bring it up. Indrani tried to before you sent her off to Salia, but you distracted her with sex."

I paused, surprised enough by the bluntness of that to be at a loss for words.

"She says you only do that when you really want to avoid talking about something," Masego frankly said. "Which is why she let you do it. But she was worried, and so am I. You've been putting it off ever since you left Ater."

I'd left before him. He'd stayed to watch my father and Eudokia be put to the pyre before catching up. I'd not asked what would be done with the ashes. I wasn't sure I had a right to.

"I have no time for the personal," I said, but it was a lie.

I did. I just didn't want to deal with it. Masego wiped the bottle, then had a long sip. He set it down into the thatch carefully. He folded his knees close to his chest, like a child pulling close.

"I ran, after Thalassina," he quietly said. "I could not face the enormity of what had happened there. I had swallowed up hundreds of thousands of souls, swelled with power the likes of which I had never known, and yet I still ran. There were... whispers in my ear. Procer would be where I found how to Papa back, where I could break the crusade that killed him. But deep down, I believe knew I was running."

"It's not the same," I murmured. "You know that. They died, your fathers, but you didn't..."

Kill them, I could not quite bring myself to say. *You didn't kill them, like I killed mine.*

"An argument can be made that I did," Masego said. "If I had not insisted to be out in the Maze, Father might never have reached for the powers that killed them."

Them and a city, I almost said, but held my tongue. Grief didn't work that way. You could know, in principle, that the death of a city of thousands mattered more on the scales than the pair of people you had loved. But it didn't weigh the same. Grief, it was like a wound. It hurt when it was on you, when it was your flesh split and your bones cracked. You could see someone else's wound, feel for them, but it wouldn't be the same. Our pain always mattered more than other people's because it was the only one that felt real.

"It does not matter, in the end," Masego quietly continued. "Even if I claimed all the guilt as my own, it would not bring them back. It is just digging to make the pond deep enough to drown."

"It does matter," I harshly replied. "Of course it fucking matters, Masego. *I put a knife in him.*"

My hand swept up and I flicked the wrist, some vicious part of me hoping for a flinch but finding only unruffled patience. I stabbed the knife into the straw, felt it rip through strands of straw. Like killing a scarecrow.

All men became like scarecrows once you killed enough of them.

"That knife," I told him, knuckles turning white from the grip. "Right into his heart. He was dead faster than a prayer, Masego. And he gave me the fucking thing the night we met, did you know?"

I could still hear his voice, the way the blade had glinted in the firelight as he spun the handle towards me. *How far are you willing to go, to see it done?* Far enough to kill him. Had he known, even back then? That it would end with his gift returned in red. Masego's father had hated me once, because he thought I would be my father's death and he had loved the man deeply. Wekesa the Warlock had always been clever. Masego shook his head.

"You never told me the story," he said. "And when I asked him, he was..."

"Himself," I finished, tone rueful.

My friend nodded.

"I was going to die," I said. "I was heading back to the orphanage and I saw a guard assault this girl. I stepped in, tried to stop it, but another guard got me. He was choking me, then the Black Knight appeared."

What a terror he had seemed, back then, death in unadorned plate. Not even Sabah, for all that she stood heads taller and broader, had filled the alley quite so much.

"We took them prisoner," I said. "And they were going to be turned over to the city guard, only it wouldn't stick. They'd tried to rape and murder, but they'd still get out."

I swallowed.

"So he offered me a knife," I said, "and asked me what I thought was right."

That was the moment that'd begun it all, wasn't it? There had been many crossroads in my life. That night in Summerholm where I became the Squire. The end of the Folly, when I'd embraced the depths of Winter. The battle for Great Strycht, the plea I had made to an enemy with every right to kill me. Even that nightmare in Ater, the sky burning green as I became the Warden of the East. All great pivots, days and night that had decided the lay of my life. But at the source of them all, the origin, it was that evening in Laure. The weight of the knife against my palm as I made my choice and slit two throats.

I'd begun it all in blood, and in blood was carrying it out.

"Did you find it?" Masego asked.

I was silent for a long time.

"I found something," I murmured. "I don't know if it's right, but it's something that made it worth the knife."

"He would understand."

I looked away from my friend.

"He did," I said. "Does that make it any better I murdered him?"

"I loved him too, Catherine," Masego reminded me.

The tone was calm, but there was iron beneath it. A warning to tread lightly.

"Loved them both," he continued. "Aunt Eudokia was never close to us, to anybody but him I think, but I've known them since I could remember."

My gaze was drawn to him and I found him looking east. At the distant peaks of the Whitecaps, through green valleys and heavy mists. The afternoon sun was dipping, falling out of sight. Masego's long, lean face was composed but that was only skin deep. In the depths of the east laid the graves of the only family he'd ever known. And still he looked, with an eye of shadow and an eye of gold.

"Father once told me the day might come one of them killed another," Masego said. "That they had won against the odds for long, but it would not last forever. That perhaps Aunt Sabah would fall too deep in the Beast, that Father would delve into things best left buried or Uncle Amadeus cross one line too many. And he made me swear, that day, that I would forgive whoever survived."

My breath caught in my throat.

"He said," Masego continued, "that I must. That he did not want me to lose all of my family for one death."

"Praesi," I said.

It was neither praise nor curse. Maybe a little of both.

"These are the lives we live, Catherine," he gently said. "We kill and we win until we lose and we die. We are the children of the knife. And so I still love you, even though I watched the woman who used to bring me lemon tarts bleed out on the stairs. Even though you killed the man who taught me it was all right to be as I am, that I should not be fearful of it."

It was perhaps the most loving thing anyone had ever told me. The obscenity of it made me want to throw up. I felt my fingers shaking around the grip of the knife. I'd yet to let it go.

"I thought we would win," I croaked. "That I'd get to keep him. That we'd all get to go home. And instead, Gods..."

He laid a hand against my arm, fingers warm even through the cloth.

"I know," Masego said.

"*Fuck,*" I snarled, fearing myself tear up. "We were so close, and he just didn't give me another way. It was all laid out in front of me: him, them, or everyone else. We were going to end it all in one stroke and he just *wouldn't get out of the way.*"

I tried to stay angry, but it came out more like a sob. Slowly, delicately, Masego unclasped my fingers from around the knife. I let him and left it in there. Stabbed deep in the straw. I felt like swinging at someone, like hitting the roof or Zeze or even the fucking sky if only so that momentary satisfaction of the *hit* would drown this out for just a heartbeat. Instead I choked on a sob and his hand on my arm gently tugging me forward until my head was dragged down against his leg. He ran his fingers through my hair, soothing me like a child as I bawled my eyes out. He was dead. Truly dead, no trick or scheme or last laugh. In that cruel moment on the steps we'd made our choices and I'd killed him.

I was never going to see him grow old. I was never going to share a drink with him again, sitting in a tent after dark and talking about the way the world should be. I was never again going to know someone who *got* the anger. Who'd felt it too. He was just gone.

When I came back to myself, throat raw and nose dripping, it almost felt like I'd fallen asleep. But I was still here, head on Masego's lap as he gently combed my hair with his fingers. No one had done that for me before, I thought, not like this. Kilian had massaged my back, sometimes even scratched it, but never this. And Indrani had never tried it either. It wouldn't be from her he'd learned that, I thought. It'd have been one of his fathers, both lost in Thalassina. I'd never met Tikoloshe and disliked Wekesa, but never had I doubted they loved their son deeply. I'd known that about them long before I heard of the sacrifice that had broken a city and a fleet, and their love echoed through their son still. Through the fingers combing my hair.

"There," Masego said, sounding awkward as he patted my head. "Better, yes?"

I dragged myself upright, tugging my clothes and wiping my nose with my sleeve. I would have cleared my throat, but it still felt raw.

"Yeah," I rasped. "Better. A little."

He withdrew from me, not out of dislike but because he'd never been all that fond of touching. It knew it to be a mark of great fondness that he'd kept me close for this long.

"It doesn't stop hurting," he said. "It merely... takes a step back. It will always be there, I think. That it what it means to have loved them."

I exhaled.

"Thank you," I got out, even though I didn't want to.

Even though it felt like weakness.

"That is family," he smiled.

And it was. I'd taken me years, but I had found a family of sorts. Made it, greedily clutched it to my breast. Masego and Indrani and Vivienne and all of Rat Company, the Fifteenth. I held as many ghosts as I did living, but they were still mine.

"So return it in kind," Masego said. "Hakram, why is it that you won't speak to him?"

I looked away. It was easier, when you had only the one eye.

"Vivienne thinks it's because you're afraid of ruling without him," he said. "That speaking to him will make it true, permanent."

"Talk behind my back, do you?" I said, but the anger was half-hearted.

"When you turn it," Masego said, "where else can we?"

I winced. From someone else I'd been able to take the lick and move on, just call it a good line and dismiss it, but he didn't play those sorts of games. Sincerity was harder to ignore. So I kept silent for a long time, choosing my words, as he patiently waited. The poison came to me first. It always did, for better or worse.

"He was supposed to be the one who stayed," I admitted. "When all this comes to an end."

"I don't follow," he said.

"You'll disappear into a tower, Zeze," I tiredly said. "And Indrani will keep a home wherever you are, but she'll leave. It's not in her nature to stay. And Vivienne, well, neither of us ever pretended we'd choose the other over Callow. She'll have a kingdom to rule. But Hakram, he was going to stick with me. We were going to build Cardinal together, usher a new age under the Liesse Accords."

I laughed, not hiding the bitterness.

"Only he's bound to the Clans now," I said. "If not for life, then for a very long time. Maybe he'll help, and I'm sure he'll write, but it won't be..."

I hesitated, not quite finding the words.

"It won't be *us*," I said. "It'll be me and him. And I'm not sure that's enough."

Because I was looking forward, into what lay beyond Keter, and what I saw terrified me. They'd be gone, all of them. Not only the Woe but everyone. Juniper and Aisha and Pickler, they weren't going to leave the Army of Callow for a city being built. Not when they'd given years of their lives building that army up from nothing. So one day, after they feasted me in Laure and patted my back and were well rid of the queen that had been necessary in the pit but was embarrassing now that peace had come, I'd begin walking west and found I was left only with ghosts. That, like my father before me, when it came down to it I stood alone.

"You are afraid," Masego slowly said, brow cocked.

He spoke the words like they were the most absurd thing in the world. Like he'd just said water was dry.

"I think I'm past that," I said. "I've seen it on the horizon for too long. Resigned, I think, is the better word."

"Why would you think that?" he asked, frowning. "That we'd leave?"

"Because they left *him*," I harshly said. "After the Conquest was done, when the stories were finished, they split. Captain to her family, your father to his tower and Ranger had already fucked off in the woods long ago. Only Scribe stayed, and my Scribe was supposed to be Hakram. So much for that."

"We're not them, Cat," Hierophant said.

"We carry the legacies," I tiredly said. "And the writing's on the wall. I'm not *angry*, Masego. I just didn't think it through right. I carried the mistakes down a generation. Maybe the next one will do better."

"Catherine," he said, a hint of iron in his tone. "We are not them."

It was easy to say this now, I thought, but it would not last. He was who he was. Here and now my fear brought him guilt, but guilt so rarely won out against desire.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "You want to know why I can't stomach looking at him? Because he knew all this, Masego. Everything I just told you. He knew it and made his choice anyway."

My lips quirked mirthlessly.

"It wasn't the wrong choice," I said. "He did a great good through it. And I should not begrudge him that."

But I did. Because he'd left me, and I knew hundreds of thousands would be better off for it, all of the Clans. But the Clans were far and it was my flesh split, my bones cracked. The queen saw nothing to forgive, but it was not the queen who loved him. Masego studied me for a long time.

"You are keeping something back," he said.

My eye found the knife stabbed into the straw. I reached out to touch it, but my fingers flinched away.

"That night," I said. "In Ater."

The golden eye watched me but the shadowed one allowed me my shame in peace. An even-handed stare.

"On the steps, I made the decision," I murmured. "Them or Calernia. And I hesitated, I did, but it was..."

I bit my lip.

"I knew from the moment I stood at the crossroads," I said, "which choice I would make. I hesitated the same way you hesitated before putting your finger against an open flame – knowing it'd hurt. I knew I'd kill him if it came to that. It was inevitable from the moment the choice was asked of me."

"And you think he'll not forgive you that," Masego stated.

I shook my head.

"I don't know if he will," I said. "But I think yes. Because it took the two of us to end up standing on those stairs with a knife between us. It's not about that. I guess it's about me."

The golden eye watched, impassive.

"Every time I'll look at him," I said, "I'll know. That he's probably the most important person in my life, the first and closest friend I ever made, and I still chose to kill him."

I'd have to live with that, with the scent of it hanging in their air every time we were in the same room. I'd chosen to kill him and we both knew that. How little love mattered to me when there was a war to win, an enemy to beat.

I'd thought I had lines I wouldn't cross.

Masego reached for the bottle and I handed it to him. After wiping it clean once again, he swallowed the last mouthful of the bottle. He grimaced after, for it had been a middling bottle and so the bottom had tasted strongly, and set it down into the thatch.

"It is you who is ashamed," Masego said.

He added nothing, as if waiting for confirmation. Slowly, I nodded.

"Yet it is him confined to distance, even should he wish otherwise," Masego noted.

I grimaced, echoing his own. It was as bitter a mouthful to swallow. My friend waited for me patiently, until I had finished going through all my denials and delays and settled on something I would live with.

"Salia," I said. "I'll join the briefings with Abreha until then, but I'll speak to him alone in Salia. When we can be in the same room."

"That is all I ask," Masego said.

I slumped back down into the straw and so did her. Dusk was approaching, and with it the time of our departure. Three weeks to Salia now, perhaps one more if there were troubles on the way. My fingers found the handle of the knife and closed around it. I wouldn't leave it here, much as a part of me wanted to. *Children of the knife*, Masego had called us. We'd wield them until they killed us all, that was what we'd been born to. All you got, I thought, was to choose what you did with it. If you tried to make the world bright or you tried to lessen it. It wasn't much.

But it was something.

We lied there on the roof in silence until the sun came down.

[Droughtbringer](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Sinead

Short and sweet.

I love it.

Metalshop

Catharis. Perfection.

[GoodGirlJW](#)

Catharsis more like Cat-tharsis amirite

ruduen

I'll admit, out of the people who would potentially talk to Cat about this, my money wouldn't have been on Masego for it – but his sincerity probably does a lot more to get through to her than others can manage.

It's a rough situation to read into. Honestly, I don't know if Hakram would take it personally, that Cat would be willing to kill him for her goals. Even if the oath is broken, it doesn't mean that everything they knew and understood before is gone. I wouldn't have been surprised if Hakram was willing to die to help fulfill Cat's goals, and though the clans are likely at the forefront of his mind now, I wonder if that's still true.

Things will remain a mess until they actually bother to take the time and figure out what they are to each other now. And, the same as with Vivienne's original name loss, I imagine a name change like that will need them to think about what it means, if Hakram remains one of the Woe.

KageLupus

I didn't see it coming, but Masego is the obvious best choice for person to really push Catherine to start dealing with her grief. He has also lost his father recently (and blames himself for it even if it wasn't as direct as Cat), so he can relate better than any of the rest of the Woe probably could. And while a lot is made about Masego not showing emotions or affection in the same way as most people the point is always made that he does still feel them.

Most importantly, Masego is smart enough to see that his friend is in pain and ruthless enough to force her to confront those feelings for her own good. This chapter is Zeze wielding grief like a surgeon wields a scalpel. The process might hurt but it is better than leaving the injury to fester and rot. Here we see the emotional equivalent of him carving up Cat's soul to remove the demonic corruption from it.

ninegardens

See, to me its almost the opposite of ruthlessness. It's gentleness, it's compassion. There isn't a moment of ruthlessness in their. It's not a scalpel, it's candlelight.

Something soft and warm, nudging CAT to get where she needs to go.

Notice how its less him saying things (precision,scalpel, all that jazz), and more him asking things; questions asked with compassion and innocence. It's... very very different to the ruthless scalpel (which would be more Maddie's approach)

Juff

Typo Thread:

Not there was > Now there was
wiggled around > wiggle around
open my eyes. > opened my eyes.
on smiting ritual > on the smiting ritual
yearsago > years ago
to Papa back > to bring Papa back
believe knew > believe I knew
loved echoed > love echoed
That it what > That is what
I'd been able > I'd be able
and found I > and find I
in their air > in the air
did her. > did he.
We lied > We lay

Sinead

Cat still also only has one eye.

Perhaps she can talk to Masego about the bone chip enchantment for binocular vision.

Unrecovered

Artifacts fail you at the most inconvenient moment. So she won't.

dadycoool

She doesn't have to worry about inconvenient Stories at the moment, so she might.

gbevis

That story about artifacts is just that. Is she still bound to such clichés?

Cpt. Obvious

Currently? Probably not.

The way all stories are on hold for villains but not for heroes is making it hard to evaluate the impact. But in this case, as it is something that effect only Cat i think it's probably safe.

Where it get tricky is when a hero gets involved as they are still at the mercy of the old stories.

I mean what happens when a hero attack say a revenant but gets handed their ass before managing to break off and survive to fight another day?

Before "the freeze" that would be an invitation to start a pattern of three. But now?

On one hand villains has been freed from the constraints of the stories but they've also lost a powerful tool. Question is if they are more vulnerable or less vulnerable to Heroic stories wielded by heroes with a good understanding of Name lore?

Tenthyr

This was really well written. I didn't expect Masego to be the one to pull Catherine a little bit out of her pit, but I'm glad it was him. That monent of grief was heartwrenching.

dadycool

Who'd have thought the Hierophant would be the best therapist available? But Truth is what she needed and Truth is what she got. His special ability is to see right to the heart of any matter, and he used it perfectly. You know you're doing it right when your patient falls on you crying.

But all the catharsis in the world won't restore what was lost, and they both know that. It'll take a legion to replace Adjutant, but that's what she'll have to do. She has run out of Named secretaries, having been stabbed in the back by both of them.

I think Masego always intended to follow Cat wherever she went, only leaving her side when she points to a building and says "This is where you'll do research until I call for you." She was the first person his own age to be a genuine friend to him, allowing and working around his quirks, not looking at him differently for them, and even giving him a way for her to kill him if he started slipping/getting corrupted, which basically told him "I care enough about you to not let you exist in a lesser state, your body controlled by something else." Her just being her father's daughter bound Masego to her in a way that even, in the end, was stronger than his bond to his own fathers. Hakram may have loved her more than anyone else, and Vivienne may be a fellow Callowan who loves the country as much as she does,

but Cat, Masego and Indrani are cousins. The Children of Calamity share a unique bond that will likely transcend Transcendence. In several ways, Cardinal will be perfect for the three of them almost to the exclusion of the others. Starting with Cat and Indrani wanting to be better teachers than their own and Masego wanting to improve the capabilities of as many mages as he can. Wow, this was long.

Gabe Meadow

It makes sense though. "We are not them." That's the key to it all. The Woe is not just a family like the Calamities, but they have learned from the mistakes of their forebears.

Indrani learned to truly commit to the value of bonds. Masego took up a measure of ethics and isn't going to be completely wrapped up in his own pet projects – or at least, use them to aid the broader world. Hakram, well, it may seem painful now, but honestly, better a Warlord than a male Eudokia, dedicated to her leader in a way that utterly warped her. Cat learned to surf stories, rather than the cunning, but ultimately inflexible exploitation of Amadeus.

And a key, previously unmentioned but always implied part of that, was learning to open up and communicate to each other on an intimate level. Look at the clusterfuck between Amadeus and Alaya, never really addressing how their fundamental models for Praes were increasingly diverging before they reached the point of no return.

dadycool

You didn't include the last parallel, though you mentioned it: Amadeus and Alaya, Cat and Vivienne. Rather than "I know I might be a better ruler than you, but I'm letting you have the throne anyway", Cat went with "Here's how I rule. Learn from my reign as my heir and now slowly start taking everything over while I rise above this position." Cat was also able to see where she fell short, especially regarding Nobility, and letting Vivi shine in those aspects, personally making plans and deals for the future.

Frivolous

Masego has conquered Keter's due. Amazing. Even more amazing that he only surpassed that limitation when he lost his magic. It's as by losing, he gained.

I wonder if Neshie knew he'd be strengthening the Hierophant when he ripped away his magic. He's probably regretting it now.

I wonder if Hierophant himself is aware of how much greater he has become.

And he is now that much closer to apotheosis. Twenty years of research distilled into a moment of peeking into the code book of the Gods Above.

At least now is explained why he hasn't Catherine a prosthetic eye yet, like the one he has. Explanation: He can't. Irreplaceable, unique.

I suspect that Masego really will lose his remaining Summer glass eye on the way to apotheosis, and count it cheap at twice the price. That's the theme of his Story: Gaining by losing.

He'll Sublime blind but smiling.

You could say that it's the theme of all the Woe: Gaining by losing, with no one doing it more often or with more sadism and suffering than Catherine.

Indrani gained by giving up the self-reliance she'd learned from Ranger.

Vivienne gained by losing the Name of Thief.

Hakram gained by losing, well, we'll see how much more he's going to lose.

Masego gained by losing his eyes and then his magic.

Catherine gained by losing her life over and over again, surrendering to Sve Noc and then to Tariq, then losing her eye, and probably much much more to come.

Reader in The Night

He didn't surpass Keter's due, otherwise Cat couldn't have sensed the spell. He simply reduced the Due to the smallest mathematically-possible amount of loss, the "immanent" loss of power.

Frivolous

Reader in the Night: Masego did surpass the Due.

My interpretation: Keter's Due is the inefficiency of each spell or ritual or artefact. It usually wastes at least 10 percent of the power, and often much higher than 10.

Masego has clearly trimmed away the waste of his spells so that he is getting 95 percent or more efficiency. Maybe even 99 or more.

Source: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/villainous-interlude-chiaroscuro/>

Quote: Though advances in spellcrafting and the theft of the entirely different Baalite spell formulas inherited by Ashur managed to lower that proportion, no spellcaster had ever managed to get the waste under a tenth in any form of sorcery. That tenth was colloquially known Keter's Due.

Tenthyr

That's not what Keters Due is. Keters due is the magical equivalent of entropy. Like how all mechanical systems must lose energy, usually as heat, all trimegistusan magic will lose some of the energy put into the system, the absolute limit of efficiency of a spell is stated to be around 10%, and it's also implied that the larger the spell/greater the input of power the greater the absolute percentage of waste will be.

Frivolous

Yes. I agree with most of your post. I just have doubts about your assertion that the absolute limit of efficiency of a spell is 10%.

Quote from above: Masego had always been a prodigy when it came to controlling his sorcery, the impressively small amount of power lost when casting a spell, but he'd become something else entirely since losing his magic. Not there was not a drop lost, I thought.

My comment: Does not a drop lost sound like 10% to you? It does not to me.

It sounds to me like Masego has developed his skills to become the magical equivalent of superconducting fiber. His waste would have gone below 10%.

ON THE OTHER HAND, also quote from above: I suspected that his spells were now as close to perfect as was possible for a human when he was allowed to take his time.

My comment: I admit that 'close to perfect as humanly possible' does not really go against the idea that the lowest inefficiency is 10%.

So I could be wrong. But it's fascinating to speculate. What if I'm right?

Against all precedent, Akua Sahelian made use of Keter's Due when she developed the Liesse Artefact. Maybe Masego has conquered the Due itself.

kinghaart

She said: "NOT that there was not a drop lost".

Double negative, implies there was at LEAST some loss. She goes on to say he's reached the theoretical limits of what a human spellcaster can do.

Masego paid the Due, but ONLY that.

jamesc9

> Not there was not a drop lost, I thought.

I'm reading the first word as a typo for 'now'.

Brian Cong

It may be a theme of the story, but it's also a truth of the world. Only through great loss or great gain do you really see a change in a person's character and being; more often through loss than gain, I think. (See: people winning money, gaining titles vs breakups, divorces.) That's just how people are.

Frivolous

Brian Cong: Hmm, that's true, but on the other hand, the Calamities didn't lose much, except towards the end. They just went from victory to victory.

I can't really think of any or many major characters, especially Named, who gained by losing, because mostly they didn't survive their major losses.

I think one of the truest reasons why Akua Sahelian remains the unofficial sixth member of the Woe is that she did gain by losing. Or lost by gaining. it's hard to tell with Akua. Her status tergiversates so often.

I think her current phase is losing by gaining, because she could have become Dread Empress but hated the very idea of it, but that could change again and soon.

Mental Mouse

TIL a new word! "tergiversate"....

Mental Mouse

> I wonder if Neshie knew he'd be strengthening the Hierophant when he ripped away his magic.

It does seem like a muff from the story-fu stance. But I suspected even back then that he was set up for it by the Bard.

Frivolous

Mental Mouse: I was going to say that seemed unlikely, since Neshie was working to unveil the Bard's plans using Hierophant's aspect of Witness, and scheming to have your oldest biggest enemy spy on you seemed counterproductive.

But it's the Bard we're talking about, so I guess it's possible.

Maybe the WB arranged for Neshie to kidnap Hierophant, knowing that Catherine and Indrani would do their Damnedest to get him back alive, and that Sve Noc would help, and thereby hit the infinitesimal gap between Hierophant is killed and Hierophant is rescued alive and unharmed.

In other news: I've been thinking about apotheosis.

It's becoming clear to me that, just as there are different paths to apotheosis, there are different flavors of apotheosis. In other words, gods don't necessarily have a common set of abilities. Sve Noc can do things Neshie cannot, and vice versa.

It's also clear that Neshie needed Hierophant to spy on the WB. He couldn't do it alone, at least not easily. Hierophant wasn't just a hostage.

Hierophant's powers seem to focus, as per his aspects and his history, on dissecting and replicating miracles, and combatting gods, and on divination and scrying.

I'm really curious to find out what brand of godness Masego will display once he transcends.

I also wonder if Masego will reach apotheosis even before the ending of this story. As in, it might become relevant to the wars.

ninegardens

Zeze reaching godhead during the current war seems... unlikely? In that, Nessie has had a lot longer to work on it, and was a lot more dedicated. At best, Zeze might hijack/hax one of Nessie's plans, but even then... Nessie's books and knowledge are a known memetic hazard, so... gotta be careful with that one.

Frivolous

ninegardens: Neshamah achieved apotheosis over decades, and Sve Noc over centuries. Both made great use of necromancy.

I'm not sure anymore that Masego will go the same way. He keeps talking about how godhead is a trick of perspective.

He has no particular interest in necromancy, though lots in dissecting.

If we are to believe all he says, and we know Masego does not lie, Enlightenment comes to him in epiphanies. All he has to do is learn enough, understand enough, and ways to understand more keep presenting themselves over the course of this story.

I agree that Nessie's books and knowledge are a known memetic hazard, but I don't think Hierophant is ever going to fall for that again.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, having lost his sorcery makes Heirophant basically immune to Nessie's memetic trap.

The thing about Sve Noc – they *didn't* actually reach apotheosis over those centuries – not quite, until Cat showed up with the windfall that let them cross the line. In any case, Sve Noc and Nessie are both little-g gods, and I suspect Masego has higher ambitions.

Gret

Gods, this is gut wrenching stuff. I love it.

ninegardens

It was always going to be Masego.

Cause... this isn't the first time he pulled her out of the pit (can't remember the last time... maybe around the princes graveyard?).

Because... he believes in Truth. Everyone else she knows holds *something* higher than truth, but Zeze holds only truth, and that makes him perfect for this, and god damn, I love this boy more than anyone else in the story really.

And honestly, chapters like this? The Woe are full of heavy hitters, and all the rest of them are fabulous, but seeing Masego "Algebra for Deicide" just casually chilling... I love it. There are very few stories I've seen that appropriately capture the roll of a scientist in a war effort... or hell, even in *any* larger enterprise... and to also play on the *personal* strengths that that devotion to truth brings? Beautiful.

Letouriste

I didn't expect masehgo to fill that role but it fit. I gotta, I'm always grateful of the way of the way you portrait grief and the way the characters manage to deal with that.

It's so rare to see grief portrayed as something else as a prelude to violent revenge etc...

For men, it's usually a matter of seconds and then somehow magically forgotten while for women... it's as bad given they have that cliché about being crybaby and tend to bottle up things inside too as a result.

We need more authors doing like you

[sengachi](#)

Thank you for this chapter. So much.

Burdi

I believe that Catherine now has some influence to choose someone to be her adjutant and whoever it is soon would become the Adjutant. Of course after she has some closing with hakram

[anonymous4968](#)

Would it still be Adjutant? Adjutant is a distinctly military term, and compared to when it first appeared as she was a Squire. As a warden, it would be something else I feel. Also, another term would fit her dreams of Cardinal better. Something more properly administrative than it, Provost or something would fit as well.

shikkarasu

And even if she could, I don't think she would accept it. There'd be some degree of "That is not your Name" in all her interactions with a future Adjutant which would keep them from ever being close to her.

Zach

That isn't how Names work. Otherwise there would have been a bunch of other historical Adjutants. The thing that made Hakram Adjutant was his complete devotion to helping Catherine achieve her goals. No one else is going to fill that void, at least within the scope of this story.

kinghaart

There is one name we haven't seen in the last two chapters that might, one that was quietly sitting on the steps during the final fall of Ater.

Bad@games

I love zeze so f*ing much. Who else could so perfectly call cat out of her bullshit and be so perfect while doing it.

JRogue

Grief is a funny thing. It never really goes away, always lurking, like a predator waiting for you to turn your back. You have to accept that, that it is a part of you now. Part of what makes you who you are since that event. If you fight it, you are literally fighting a part of yourself, and that never ends well.

Acceptance is hard. Because even after you recognize it and accept it, know it, the predator that is Grief will still leap out of nowhere from time to time. If you are fighting it, you end up with scratches and bites and worn out and angry from the fight. If you have accepted it you open your arms and hug that predator, know it is a part of you and while there is a struggle, in the end, the predator calms down and slowly walks away. You may be tired, but it is the kind of tired that leaves a smile on your face.

This was beautifully written. It was wonderful. Thank you again for this gift.

[Hargabga](#)

Interesting, how a personal grief of a character strikes people so much more deeply than the description of the end of times.

AbraKadabra

Because people are generally emotional.

kinghaart

Both did. But Cat said it perfectly – she's the story we've been following, here's is the flesh that we feel wounds most deeply in.

gbevis

" We lied there on the roof in silence until the sun came down."
Grammatical error or dark truth?

rwil02

Pretty much what I was going to ask.

Besso

I caught up N000000

Someperson

That really was a very good chapter.

Ashley

I lost my mom last year and this line

"It doesn't stop hurting," he said. "It merely... takes a step back. It will always be there, I think. That it what it means to have loved them."

Had me bawling. What a quote. That's gonna stick with me for the rest of my life. Thank you.

Chapter 29: Foundation

"Who sows without wisdom reaps a field of sorrows."

– Alamans saying

Travelling through the Twilight Ways was often as a hazy dream, but two days before we reached Salia the world caught up with me.

Archer found us an hour before Morning Bell, as the army prepared to decamp from the riverside where it'd passed the night. I decided to stay behind, passing command of the van to Vivienne, and asked the phalanges to prepare a decent meal for her while she went to bathe in the river. Indrani was in a fine mood for having washed off the stink of the road when she returned, her hair in a braid and her gait loose-limbed. She took her plate – bread and cheese with some cuts of pork – and brought it with her to the ground as she sat by the side of the carved table with a knife in hand. I got a look at the shape of the relief she was starting to carve when I brought her a glass of wine.

A tower aflame, with a man sitting on stairs below and two looming presences on the sides.

My jaw clenched but I said nothing. I ought to be getting used to talk of that night, anyhow. Gods knew my ear would be filled with prattle about it soon enough. I'd had a terse conversations about it over scrying ritual with both Cordelia and Hanno, the Bard blacking out half the stories of Calernia had made that necessary, but those had only been barebone talks. The meat of the information I'd passed on had been through written reports, so it was inevitable they'd want more out of me. I'd been there that night and known more about what was unfolding than perhaps anyone save the Intercessor. Would that it had been enough, instead of a bell being rang for the death of all the Principate north of Salia.

I waited for Archer to have crammed a few mouthfuls and washed them down before the questions began, which she seemed to appreciate.

"So," I said. "Salia."

"I handed back our little heroes to the White Knight safe and sound," Indrani said. "But he was more interested in having talks with Alexis. He's trying to get a grasp on the details of what happened out east, I think."

The Silver Huntress had been involved in nothing I'd not already passed on word about, so if Hanno was looking for an angle he'd be disappointed. He'd already politely asked about the artefact that had 'wounded the Intercessor', but I'd given him nothing. As was my right. Hierophant had built it from scratch, refining the lessons we'd learned trying to trap her in the Arsenal, and he had no claim on any part of it. Even the... Book of Some Things – ugh, that name – wasn't something he had a right to, strictly speaking. I'd set plenty of precedents for stealing aspects and making artefacts of them without anyone else having a claim on them.

No doubt he'd try to ask Sapan as well, if he hadn't already, but that would be another dead end. Masego had kept his temporary pupil far from the work, and though an increasingly skilled mage the girl was nowhere near close to the league needed to understand sorcery of such calibre. She wouldn't be until she either grasped High Arcana or transitioned into a Name that'd bridge the gap of her understanding.

"Let him," I grunted. "He's going fishing in a desert."

There had been a time where I would not have been so wary of Hanno of Arwad, but that time had come and gone. Calernia was falling apart, that was part of it, but there was more. While I had sworn to the Grey Pilgrim that I would reconcile with the man, the word I was getting out of Salia was making that task out to be increasingly difficult. I leaned forward towards Indrani, even as she began carving out the sides of the Tower.

"And the rumours we heard?" I asked.

She grimaced, brushing back a strand of wet hair sticking to her brow.

"You know I don't have the touch like you and Zeze do," Indrani began. "The knack for telling if someone's a claimant, how their Name is coming along."

"You've been around Named," I said. "You're familiar with what mantles feel like."

"Sure," she waved away, "but I don't have fancy eyes or whatever the Hells it is you use to get it right so often. It's just impressions for me. Not saying I don't have a guess, just reminding you it's that."

"Consider me warned," I drily said.

She rolled her eyes at me, but the levity was short-lived.

"Only met with him twice," Archer said, "but I don't think he's the White Knight anymore."

"Fuck," I said, with great feeling.

I'd been afraid of that. The point of the knife scratched against the tableside, shaving off small slivers to outline flames.

"He a claimant?"

She raised a flat palm then wiggled it, equivocating.

"He can definitely still use Light," Indrani said. "And he's got *something*. But I can't tell if it's the favour of the Seraphim sticking close to him or something else. My nose isn't fine enough to be able to tell those apart."

I sighed, sipping at the cup of lemon water I'd poured myself and wishing it were wine. There was still a day of riding ahead of me, though, and a bellyful of wine would it that a bloody chore.

"He's a claimant," I finally said. "Has to be. If it were Judgement, they'd have done something one of the three times Hasenbach used the ealamal."

Salia had been beset with demons and devils multiple times until enough mages and priests were scraped together to ward the capital and begin layering the countryside with expanding protections. The First Prince had used her angelic weapon thrice to shut down the Dead King before the need passed, when the Witch of the Woods had arrived and set down a great working that would greatly hinder diabolism within the principality's borders. Now word had it that priests were gathering to the fortified town where the artefact was kept in flocks, Light filling the sky day and night. When the ealamal was next used, Cordelia Hasenbach did not intend for its power to spread no further than Salia's borders. Given that such a power was all but guaranteed to slay any Named sworn to Below, it should be no surprise that I was less than enthusiastic at the prospect.

"So the Hierarch is still tying them up," Indrani noted, sounding admiring. "It's been years, Cat. Didn't think the man had it in him."

"Kairos always had a knack for putting the right madman in the worst place," I acknowledged.

Indrani set down her knife to drink and I sighed, massaging the bridge of my nose. If Hanno was a claimant to the Name I suspected that he was – and the First Prince had implied as much through her last letter – then we had trouble on our hands. I was dead certain that Cordelia Hasenbach was a claimant to Warden of the West as well. It was the Names of my lot that commonly saw claimants kill each other in a competition for the prize, with Above's works having a reputation for being comparatively gentler, but it was a little more complicated than that.

I doubted the two of them were at risk of swordfighting in the streets, but the growing divide between them was turning into a dangerous fault line for the Grand Alliance. The competing claims over the Name were the manifestation of something altogether more dangerous: competing visions for the West. I had been made the warden of Below's works, the guide of its champions and the arbiter of its faithful, but there would need to be another. An equal for me, someone standing on the other side. And it was beginning to look as if the claimants to the Name had very different ideas about what the Role behind it. Ideas that might be mutually exclusive.

I knew the two of them passing well, and neither of them were particularly good at bending when they thought they were in the right. The feel of the region was said to be reflection as much.

"How was the city?" I asked.

"Hasenbach is still beloved in the capital proper," Indrani said. "She's kept them fed while the world goes to shit and she closed the doors on demons. The streets are in her corner, even if there's the occasional riot. But outside? That's where the soldiers are, and there it gets muddled."

I drummed my fingers against the tabletop.

"Hanno's been out on the fronts," I said. "Several of them and from the start. He's been a lot more visible than her."

"He's been pulling miracles out of his ass left and right, you mean," Archer bluntly said. "He's popular even with your folk, Cat, and I don't need to tell you how impressive that is."

I nodded. Hanno had been part of the Tenth Crusade, fought at the Red Flower Vales under the Iron Prince, and my people were not the sort to easily forgive that. Not even in a hero. That he'd won so many of my countrymen over might have been a subject of genuine worry for me if Vivienne hadn't become the Princess. I need not worry of him having undue influence when there was a Callowan heroine for my people to look to for orders.

"This 'Prince White' business," I said. "How widespread is it?"

"Most soldiers call him that, and a fair few even in the city," Indrani bluntly said. "Nobody gives much of a shit that Hasenbach rustled up a few folk to sit in the Chamber and vote that a foreigner can't become the Prince of Brabant even if the crown is offered."

A foreigner, a growing political foe and one Named to boot. It was like some malicious deity had cobbled together a mess whose very nature was bound to make Cordelia Hasenbach see red. I'd seen her get increasingly angry at the 'Chosen' for complicating her efforts to save Procer as the war progressed, and now that the realm had shattered under the weight of horror the leader of the Chosen was being acclaimed as a prince.

"There's no longer a Brabant," I said. "The dead hold everything but the southwestern corner, and it's only a matter of time until those fortresses fall."

"It's not Prince White of Brabant they call him, Cat," Indrani said. "It's just Prince White. And they don't seem to be concerned about where his borders lie, you get me?"

Hellgods, I did. Cordelia was right to be both incensed and worried. If Hanno wasn't the prince of anything in particular, then he was the prince of everything. If people, nobles and armies, started acting like he really did have that authority? My lips thinned. That was not an authority that could live side-by-side with that of First Prince. One of the titles would strangle the other.

"This is more than just a heap of trouble," I finally said. "It's a lake of it deep enough for Calernia to drown in."

If either of them made a move against the other, there was a very real chance that the Grand Alliance would implode before we even began the march on Keter. It wasn't the thought of either left dead on the ground that worried me, since I doubted either would go that far. But if there was a confrontation there would be a clear winner, and while most of the forces would likely follow that victor the most ardent partisans of the defeated would balk. There would be a split, and we simply could not afford that if we wanted to live through the year. They'd be pushing over who got the Book of Some Things, too. Both of them were intelligent enough to know it'd be a boon for their claim and that I'd been intending it for the Warden of the West regardless.

My fingers clenched at the realization that staying out of it was not an option.

"It's bad," Indrani agreed, "but you had to be expecting it. We were never going to march north without an equal for you, Cat. This was always going to have to be settled."

"It's a choice with no good answer," I flatly said.

"Sure there is," Archer disagreed, cocking an eyebrow at me. "Put Shiny Boots in charge."

I blinked in surprise.

"You're in favour of backing Hanno?" I asked, not hiding my surprise.

"He's a twat," Indrani said, "but he's the one with the sword and the cause. I know you like Hasenbach, Cat-"

I made a noise of protest that she pushed right through.

"-but she's a peacetime queen and this isn't peace," Indrani continued. "Diplomacy's done, talks are done. We're going for the Crown of the Dead with a big fucking army and a boatload of Named, and Hasenbach's about as useful as tits on a sparrow for handling either."

"The reason we have armies and food and weapons is said titted sparrow," I reminded her. "I won't argue she's no warrior queen, but she's then queen that's kept us in this war. It's maybe not as pretty a picture as riding in at the last moment with the sun at your back, but it's done a lot more to keep us alive."

Indrani eyed me curiously.

"You like her more than I thought," she said. "Which is fine, Cat. And I know you've never liked turning on allies, that after..."

My stomach clenched. Indrani grimaced.

"Well, you won't be hungry to leave her out to dry is all I'm saying," she hurriedly continued. "But come knocking at Keter's gates, I know I'm going to feel a lot better about having the fucking Sword of Judgement in charge than I would the Queen of the Highest Assembly."

She met my eye squarely.

"And I think, deep down, so would you," Archer said.

I sighed. It was a fair speech, and she wasn't wrong. But she was looking at it through the lens of winning this war and only that.

"They stand for different things," I said. "Different Roles behind Warden of the West. And I'll need to have a closer look,

feel out the shape of it, but I'm pretty sure that Cordelia's my bet if I want the Liesse Accords to be what they should be."

Indrani drank deep of her wine, then sucked at a tooth.

"Maybe," she said. "Might be you're right there. But for any of that to matter we have to survive this war, Cat. And I think he's a better bet for that than her."

"It's how we got into this pit in the first place," I quietly replied, "winning wars and then losing the peace."

We spoke of it no further than that. She'd said her piece, and as far as Indrani was concerned that was enough. The talk moved to lighter things as she finished her meal, travel stories and scurrilous gossip. Apparently the Concocter was scheming to get the Silver Huntress laid and failing rather spectacularly, a very handsome fantassin captain having gotten sent to the healers after an offer for a 'spar' was taken a lot more literally than anyone had expected. Indrani washed down the last of her bread with cold water from the river, then gracefully rose and stretched like a cat. It did interesting things to her figure, since she'd taken off her mail.

She was hesitating, I noticed.

"Did you, uh, have a talk with Masego recently?" she asked.

I half-smiled.

"Yeah, something like that," I replied.

A pause.

"Did it help?"

I looked down at my hand. My fingers clenched, then unclenched.

"As much as it can be helped, I think," I murmured.

When I looked up there was no pity in her eyes, which was a relief. I would not have tolerated it. She was pleased, but there was nothing condescending about it – she was just happy to have been of use. I hummed, considering her.

"I suppose good behaviour does deserve reward," I mused.

"Is Vivienne going to stop stealing my salary?" Indrani drily asked.

I tugged the collar of my cloak, loosened it until it fell to the ground. She looked at me with wide eyes.

"Isn't the army leaving already?" Indrani asked.

And yet she did not look away as I began to pull at the laces of my tunic.

"We're already late," I smiled. "A little later won't matter."

I got no further argument after that.

—

I woke up drenched in cold sweat, choking on smoke and feeling warm blood on my hand.

My breath was uneven, panicked, and my hair matted against my head. I forced myself to steady my breathing, in and out until my heartbeat was not so wild. I tossed aside my covers and slid out of my coat, careful not to put my weight on my bad leg. A few limping steps led me to a cabinet where a bowl of tepid water and folded clothes awaited. I splashed my face and my hair, trying to get rid of the sweat, but it was a lost cause. I'd need a bath when we entered Salia tomorrow, I felt like I'd drenched myself in filth. At least my monthlies had stopped again since I'd become Warden of the East, we were right around that time and I'd always hated riding a horse while bleeding.

The Intercessor hadn't managed to steal that particular comfort away from me, at least, which was a close to a victory as I'd found in Ater.

The gift of the Sisters told me it was past Midnight Bell, not quite halfway to Early Bell, and I sighed as I dripped water down on the cabinet. There was no point in crawling back into bed, sleep wasn't going to come. I felt wide awake, like I'd just been in a battle for my life. I slipped into trousers and loose green tunic, belting on a sword and a good pair of boots. My hair I left loose, for once, but kept I beneath the hood of a simple grey cloak. If I lit a few candles in here the phalanges would be there in moments, asking if I needed anything, but I did not feel like answering them. Neither did I feel like reading through my correspondence for the dozenth time, so instead I veiled myself in Night and slipped out into the sleeping camp.

Even in the middle of the night there were people out and about, patrols and sentinels, but they were easy enough to avoid. We'd encamped on the shore of the same river where Indrani had found us, but much further down: it was narrower and shallower here. And a greater distance from the paths we used during the 'day' — as much as it was ever day in the Twilight Ways — but losing another hour setting out come morning was well worth access to running water. I slipped through the wards and headed for the riverside, following the light of distant stars. I found a pleasant nook there, a flat stone nestled in a dip between hills that overlooked the water.

The flowing water was a soothing sight, the way the light of the stars touched the water. It almost looked like fish swimming in the water, the way I'd sometimes glimpsed them near the shores of the Silver Lake back home. The wind was slow, gentle, and I could hear it move the tall grass like a finger stroking a spine. It was warm out, even with the breeze, and with a long sigh I closed my eye. Let the tension that had tightened my shoulder since I woke up leave with the wind. Tariq had made a beautiful realm. I thought of that, sometimes, when trying to understand what kind of man the Grey Pilgrim had been. He'd done dark things, crossed lines even I had balked at.

But the Peregrine had been a man capable of great beauty as well.

My sword belt was pressing against my side uncomfortably, so I unclasped my sheath. Opening my eye, I laid both palms on the pommel of my sword and leaned forward to rest my chin on my hands. I waited, patiently, for the last dregs of the nightmare to leave me. I did not hurry it, fight for it, knowing now from experience that only made it worse. I breathed in and out, letting the wind carry it away like smoke. And that was when I saw her.

I had been, you see, haunted by a ghost ever since Ater.

Not an apparition or a phantom of guilt, but rather a creature of flesh and blood. She had not followed me immediately out of the city, but she'd caught up when the Army of Callow halted in Laure for resupply. Vivienne had told me as much. But while the ghosts had never been far, she had not sought me out either. I'd left opportunities, made them even, but no implicit invitation was ever accepted. Whatever it was that had driven Akua to follow me into the Twilight Ways, she was keeping it to herself. But the journey was coming to an end now, as by midmorning tomorrow we would be gating out near the outskirts of Salia, and so at last my ghost found me.

She was no longer a shade but her steps were still so very light. Her dress was in gold and red, a riding cut for travelling but still ornate in that Praes highborn way – the collar and sleeves were touched with pearls. The cloak over it was grey, almost the same shade as mine, and her hair was kept in place by a hairpin of chalcedony. Shaped like a swan. She turned to me and my heart caught in my throat. How long had it been since I'd seen those lovely golden eyes in a face of flesh and blood? It made a difference, knowing the creature before me was more than smoke and mirrors. Made it more real. More dangerous. She approached in silence and I did not contest it.

My eye returned to the river even as she sat on the stone. By my side but not touching. I could feel every inch of the distance without needing to look. I kept to my silence, listened to the breeze stirring the grass.

"Nightmare?"

I could have lied.

"Almost every night since Ater."

Sometimes I slept through them, but this was not one of the good nights. I breathed out.

"You?"

"I no longer dream."

A moment.

"It reminds me too much of the Mantle," Akua said. "Nothing, then colour again."

I'd never asked her what it was like, being kept in the Mantle of Woe. Never quite dared to. I had known she was not truly awake but not much more than that. A lucid dream was curse enough, I thought, if you knew you could not wake from it. Silence continued in the wake of the words, but it was not comfortable. We had said so many things, the two of us, been so many things to each other, that there could be no such thing as an empty silence.

"I am glad he died."

I snorted.

"I never quite believed you, when you said you didn't blame him for your father," I said.

"It was what you wanted to hear," Akua replied.

I cocked my head to the side, a concession.

"I wish I had killed him myself," she finally said.

I looked at the water, at the silver glint of stars.

"I wish anything else," I told her.

"It wounded you, to wield the knife," Akua said, considering me. "Good. *Good.*"

I breathed out a laugh.

"I don't think that's one I'll get over," I admitted. "I think it'll be one of those scars that stay with you, never quite healed."

"You have dealt out many," she said, merciless. "It is only fair, Catherine, that you would bleed in turn."

And how strange was it, that I found comfort in that? In the lack of sympathy, of pity. Stone was hard and cold, but there was a constancy to that. You could make walls of it, rely on it for shelter.

"The world might be ending," I said. "Or at least our little corner of it."

"The world is always ending," Akua replied, indifferent. "The First Dawn promised a Last Dusk."

I chuckled.

"Quoting the Book, Lady Warlock?"

"Even the Book of All Things has its truths," she said. "I no longer have the luxury of blindness."

"Did you ever?"

I felt her smile without turning.

"If I had died young," Akua said. "But you took that from me. You made me a prisoner instead."

"Imprisonment was the least of what was owed."

"You made me a servant."

"You did that to yourself. There only so many fates your people allow for scrapped iron that is not discarded."

"And then you freed me," Akua quietly said.

I kept silent.

"Only you did not such thing," she said. "You taught me the prison, so that I might carry it with me everywhere I went."

I cocked my head to the side.

"Have you?" I asked.

She did not answer. She didn't need to. I had wanted, once, to make her the offer the very night she spurned the Empire. To offer her a way out, a way not to even the scales but put weight on the right side of them. To be enthroned in Liesse, keeper to a greater evil. That night in Salia had not allowed me the luxury, but it did not feel like a defeat. It was not scheme I had laid here. It was not a trick or a play or something that would need to rely on surprise or luck. I had laid a foundation, stone after stone, through years of patience. What did it matter, that a fateful moment had passed?

Fate was character, and I now knew Akua Sahelian's.

"You mean me to hold the Dead King prisoner."

I was not entirely surprised. I'd kept that almost silent and never once spoken the full intention out loud, but against the Intercessor it wouldn't have been enough. She would have been able to follow the thread of the story that was Akua Sahelian and learn it anyway. But only, I thought, if it was likely to work. If the groove was there.

"To take a broken throne in the depths of Liesse," I said, "and hold back the tide."

"And should I refuse?"

I shrugged.

"Nothing. It needs to be taken willingly."

Silence stretched out. She watched the river as well, her breathing quiet.

"I would have seen through you," Akua said, "if you were not in love with me, at least a little."

I kept my eye on the river.

"You do not deny it," she murmured. "I almost wish you would."

Then she quietly laughed.

"Will it be a wound as well, Catherine?" she asked. "Will the scar stay with you?"

It would have been wiser not to answer.

"Yes."

I'd never quite got the hang of wisdom. Neither had she. Soft fingers – warm now, flesh and blood – cupped my cheek and I did not fight it, let myself be turned to face her. I met her gaze, felt her breath against my lips. But I had my lines and she knew them, read them anew on my face.

"In matters of self-mutilation," Akua Sahelian murmured, "you truly have no rival."

Her fingers released me. She rose to her feet.

"I will see you tomorrow," she said.

I looked at the river but listened to the sound of her steps until it faded. She had not agreed, I thought.

She had not refused either.

Linnus42

Don't very much want Akua sealing DK for eternity. I only trust Saint to hold the line forever lol so its not really a moral judgment on Akua per se. But it tends to go poorly holding the Evil down as far as storylines go and I don't like it as an arc. Cause I don't especially think Akua is uniquely evil. Akua is actually Warlock now?

It will be interesting to see how Cat impacts the fight over Warden of the West. I am not sure her being Pro Cordelia does anything to help Cordelia though. I tend to agree with Indrani though better to win the War and sort out of the aftermath later then lose the war for extinction and not get a chance to sort it out. Also Cat's analysis has a flaw besides Angel Laser, the reason this clash started is cause Cordelia could no longer keep the food and weapons arriving.

Lictor Magnus

Yeah I could see how having the second most well known villain as your character reference on your hero name application might not be the best look 😂

Linnus42

Especially after her recent failure with the Bard that resulted in DK rolling over the lines. So she is not exactly popular right now I would hazard to guess.

nimelennar

While Hanno and Cordelia know about that, I don't know that anyone else would, or would even understand enough Name Lore to get why failing to kill the Bard properly has had such an impact on the Dead King's strategy.

Linnus42

The bard screw up resulted in DK smashing through their defensive lines, unleashing plagues like the one Rogue fought, trying to choke out the sunlight by making a land of eternal darkness, and forcing Cordelia to fire her laser to seal Hell portals which killed Civies. Ergo its not liable to make people to happy. I don't think anyone needs to know the details to not be fond of Cat.

Flameburst

Except that the bard screwup is known to maybe two dozen people in all of creation, if that. Maybe a hundred more saw her stab the bard, but that's not the screwup. As of now, less than a dozen people even begin to grasp the implications of what happened.

nimelennar

Why would they blame Cat for any of that, though?

We know it's because of what Cat did, because we watched it; Cat knows it's because of what she did, because she saw it happen; a few of Cat's closest friends, allies, and advisors know, because she told them. Who else would possibly connect "Cat killed the Wandering Bard" with "the Dead King smashing through their defensive lines, unleashing plagues," etc.?

Even if the secret leaked out, maybe some few people would be able to understand that the Bard was somehow keeping the Dead King in check and Cat screwed that up by killing her, but, IMO even that would sound far-fetched to someone who doesn't know a lot of Name lore.

Imagine someone telling you that the Chicago Cubs had caused Donald Trump to be elected by defeating the Cleveland Indians, who had been holding his power in check, in the 2016 World Series. Sure, the timing more-or-less lines up, but there just doesn't appear to be a mechanism by which A could cause B to happen.

Insanenoodlyguy

Plus you can beat this one with the truth, even without the details.

"We've all known for some time Bard was a great enemy who's trying to destroy the alliance. Cat set a trap for her, and it hurt her but she was able to get away. Then the bitch did something and made the Dead King even stronger. The Black Queen was obviously right to try and kill her, only thing wrong with that is she couldn't quite finish the job. It's Keter all over again, shits on fire and the bad guy wasn't quite dead, but it's a good effort."

Shveiran

I mean... that **is** pretty much the truth. Stopping the Villains' stories was something Bard did as retaliation and out of spite, not a direct

consequence of Masego's actions. It was a choice on the Bard's side, I mean.

nimelennar

Sure, but if it gets that far, you kind of have to take Cat's word for it. The Bard is (ostensibly) a Hero, and no lesser a personage than the Grey Pilgrim himself has stood up for her in the past (even if he later recanted that support). Contrast this to Cat, a known Villain; if it looks like Cat tried to murder the Bard, and then lay the blame on her for the Dead King's sudden resurgence, that could backfire if the Bard is, even in silence, deemed more credible.

I really don't think anyone is going to make that connection between "Cat attacked the Bard" and "the Dead King ramped up the slaughter" unless they're told by someone already in the know (which is mostly a circle of people who Cat trusts), and then gets a hefty dump of Name lore to make the connection make sense. Especially when a seemingly much bigger event happened at just about the same time (the end of the Dread Empire of Praes and the fall of the Tower) for the Dead King to react to.

Insanenoodlyguy

Except at this point every hero in the grand alliance knew her as an enemy.

Link Ness Monster

I don't think Cat's going to be able to nudge this story, regardless. She might not even have a chance to announce support or make any moves.

I believe that the Warden of the West will be the one that realizes that there's no value in the Good half of the stories and destroys the Book of Some Things.

kinghaart

I'm not sure there's NO value, but yeah I could see someone trying to destroy the book.

But the problem then is that Above doesn't really care for that since in their Wager, they are the side that represents following rules.

The more I think of this – I think Neshamah is trying to win or break or outlast the Wager, but maybe the answer for Cat/

GA is to convince both Above and Below to start a new, different Wager *in the current world*, without having to wipe the board first. A Wager that's more about Calernia's ability to regulate itself.

stevenneiman

On the subject of Warden, I think Hanno is the better choice because he's the one who has relevant expertise and competence, where Cordelia is clueless about stories and seems to treat them as a superstition to indulge in to keep her Named happy, the same way a skeptical theater manager wouldn't say "Macbeth" in earshot of their performers. Much like Malicia she's great at politics but doesn't really understand the depth, importance, or non-transferability of her skillset for story-fu or the wrangling of uncooperative Named.

On the subject of Akua, I think it's a bad idea specifically because Akua got into this situation by being psychologically malleable. Her current state might be more stable than she was before (maybe), but I wouldn't bet ten bucks of my own money, let alone the fate of the world, on Neshamah not being able to manipulate her into abandoning or failing her duty given an unlimited period to work.

ISiejek

No this all started back at the Arsenal where, as it tends to, good as written by a story refuses to bend and makes everything worse than it needs to be (in other words Hanno was an arse based entirely upon his beliefs and then failed to keep to those beliefs and so now he's being an arse in a totally different way)

kinghaart

Agreed that Hanno has broken down over time but at the same time people are allowed to change. The question is whether it's a helpful change.

Now, back at Arsenal he was bad *from Cat's PoV* but I personally agreed more with him that executing someone who killed a serial rapist to attack the system that protected said rapist, and then resurrect them for pure political theater was unambiguously Evil and worth fighting against. What sort of future is the GA really fighting for if that's the sort of thing that's acceptable?

Yes, those horrible actions may save the world. Or they might not have, and they just did horrible things out of fear. Kind of like how Neshamah does horrible things for a "greater purpose" in his own mind – yes, most of Calernia might die but he can make it all better after so it will somehow be worth it. Or like that Villain Saint let go who was

experimenting on people to find a way to make people immortal.

Linnus42

I argue it started when Cordelia put her Ideals first by turning down Warden of the West. She refused to give up her ideals to save a Nation, she claims to love. If she won't do it to save Procer then quite frankly why should Hanno give up on his to save Procer?

Hanno's position has changed on Civilian Leadership because Civilian leadership has failed to deliver the stream of troops and resources to win this war. Cordelia has a hate boner for all Heroes except her cousin because? Well so far it seems because Saint was mean to her once and told her Procer was rotten. And also cause GP solved a problem in a way Cordelia didn't like despite Cordelia having no solution of her own to the Black Knight Problem. Ironical given Cordelia's angel laser is also killing civies left and right lol. And Hanno wouldn't put Procer over his Ideals despite Cordelia doing the same.

If the argument is pragmatism then I am all for it but let's apply that consistently.

Dredcor

I'm pretty sure Cat is just using the Praesi title of Warlock here. Not the Name.
Akua hasn't done anything particularly worthy of the Name Warlock recently.

Shveiran

I'm with you there, but she is the Warlock nonetheless.

Snappy270

I mean stripping the twilight ways, paralysing an army, homing in on night when used, being a match for heirophant and that lightning spell that took out spiders yeah she has done some things.

[DC](#)

You know, there's one other person I'd trust. I'm just not sure how to get Anaraxes of Bellerophon sufficiently pissed off at the Dead King.

Sir Nil

I swear Catkua is a ship that just refuses to sink.

erebus42

It has the tenacity of its component parts.

[sengachi](#)

What is dead can never die. XD

Raved Thrad

And with strange aeons, stranger loves may together lie. 😊

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Politics and then a brutal emotional gut punch, it's perfect.

[Liliet](#)

Dang.

Well, this is not what I WANTED, but it's most definitely better written than my fanfics, so.

Hell yeah.

ruduen

Looks like it isn't up yet, sooo...

Boost!

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

Benjamin Huang

oh god the catkua fans are coming. HOLD THE LINE!!!
H00000LLLLLLDDDDDD!!!!!!

burlindw

No southern song for your ear
No pretty lass or merry cheer
For you only night and spear

Hold the wall, lest dawn fail

Axel Rafael

Shield Wall, Activate!

Miles

The warden of the West should be Abigail. She's way more qualified than these 2 twaddle dees and both being retired(-ish) Callowan military leaders has a nice symmetry to it.

erebus42

I always do enjoy an amusing dark horse victor. It would be particularly funny since it would be the logical conclusion to her story -every attempt to escape only digs her in deeper and further up the ladder until she's left in one of the most prominent and dangerous positions around despite her intentions.

kinghaart

She tries so hard to escape her prison that she ends up as its Warden, I like it. 😊

But there are other options too, like one of the Levantine lordlings since Levant is basically half of the west at this point with Procer so devastated.

nimelennar

That's too humble an ending for her. She's going to end up the unwitting, unintended target of Masego's apotheosis spell and end up as a new deity. If there isn't already a Choir of Providence, she'll create one.

Bad@games

No it'll be the Choir of Practicality.

Jokes aside i think that if Abigail does get a name it'll have something to do with foxes. We know Callowans like their foxes, even have a whole song about it.

kinghaart

She's already being referred to as Abigail the Fox so it's really busy a matter of time plus whether or not Names keep working.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That would be hilarious, but alas, it's the wrong story for a Callowan.

[sengachi](#)

I mean, a Callowan is currently Warden of the freaking East.

therealgridlock

Yeah but they're east of the dividing line, east of where cardinal will be built.

Not to mention they've been part of the dread empire for, what, 20 years?

I just think your confusion arises from assuming "good" and "east" are exclusive terms, they're not.

It's like saying someone from the east most province of the principate couldn't become warden of the west, when ultimately it doesn't matter even if it was the west-most province.

I agree Abigail probably has something in store for her, warden would be hilarious, but everyone is right. Callow is in the east, not the west.

Actually, now that I think about it, isn't white from the south? The DK is in the north...

What if we made akua warden of the north, forever trapping the DK, made Cordelia warden of the west, and Hanno warden of the south?

Then all the Cardinal (hur hur) directions would be covered



kinghaart

I think Basilia is making a strong claim for Warden (and Empress) of the South.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yup, that's it exactly.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Right... and as other have noted, Callow is part of the East! Even before the Conquest, their national story featured that cyclical war with Praes, binding them together...

aurikdomi

Oh man what an upset that would be. But I can't really see it happening. well I guess maybe I could but the chances are so slim

kinghaart

Like 1 in a million you mean?

In other words, all hail Warden Abigail.

nimelennar

I think Hanno is the right choice, but not Hanno as he is.

Hanno, as he is now, is an arrow pointed at the heart of Cat. As soon as the Dead King is pent up again, he'll flip a metaphorical coin and find that her usefulness no longer excuses her misdeeds. He may not intend to kill her, but he won't stand for her continued exertion of power in Calernia, and that'll put the two of them on a path to a fight to the death.

But Hanno still hasn't had the turn that the Grey Pilgrim foresaw; he hasn't learned the lesson he needs to learn to become a true hero again. And I think that the lesson that he needs to learn is the same one that would allow him to coexist with the Warden of the East, to support the Liesse Accords. I don't know that I can put the lesson in words, but something to the effect of "The ends don't always (or even usually) justify the means, but sometimes lesser evils need to be chosen for the greater good."

A Hanno that can internalize that idea, THAT Hanno will not just march with Cat into Keter, but would stagger back out supporting her, and help her realize her dream afterwards.

But we may not meet that Hanno for a while.

Reader in the Night

The problem is, that's already the Hanno we've been seeing. The Hanno who is willing to sacrifice his personal ideals for pragmatism, who's paving a road to hell with good intentions.

But that won't make him more willing to bend or compromise with *others*, only with himself. The moment he decides Catherine's or Cordelia's evils are unacceptable, he will do however many lesser evils he needs to to see them gone. Because the nature of Named is being a bunch of uncompromising jackasses with their principles, and Hanno's principles at the moment seem to be "winning whatever the cost".

nimelennar

So it's not the lesson itself that he needs to learn; he just needs to learn how to apply it non-hypocritically. That tracks.

Gabe Meadow

It might also be fair to say that he's figured out that his habit of disengagement and lack of pragmatism will do way more harm than good in the *current situation.* He has not, though, appreciated or acknowledged that it did just as much harm before – instead he figure what he did at the time was the right thing.

shikkarasu

I think what he needs to learn in forgiveness and a different type of humility than the one he normally has.

For forgiveness, he needs to get over the Red Axe trial. He trusted a Villain and a Politician and while he *needs* to keep trusting them he did get bit for it. Once bit, twice shy. I can't blame him, but if Calernia perishes due to him not working with Catdelia I think Judgement will be very disappointed.

For humility, he thinks his opinion is always right, even when that opinion is 'I cannot possibly make the right choice.' Like Reader/Gabe were saying, he went from upholding the Law without interpretation to deciding that only he can do it right. It wasn't a fast change, or unwarranted, but is doing just as much harm.

He needs to admit that he can't do this alone, but that doesn't mean that he can pick a few Laws and stand by them rigidly. Rules are guidelines, they can't predict future circumstances nor account for them. That is what the Sword of Judgement ought to do: Judge the Laws, not the people. If he can get to that point? Warlord.

kinghaart

To be fair that's exactly how Cat things and acts too. She stabbed her own father and would have done the same to her friend to achieve her personal view of what would be best.

Arguably the Liesse Accords will only be able to stick around if she abdicates this role too after Cardinal is up and running. I vote Keegan for next Warden because she has run Callow as regent for years now as a wartime recovery ruler while Cat and Viv are off playing with Swords and the whole East needs someone more like her once the DK is dealt with. Also Daoine is meant to become more independent and her being Warden would help ensure that.

john

To be fair to Cat, she didn't exactly set out intending to stab Amadeus as Plan A. He put a knife in her hand and then more or less threw himself onto it.

Juff

Typo Thread:

being rang > being rung
have crammed > cram

washed them > wash them
would it that (something missing here)
spread no further > spread further
about what the Role > about the Role
much of shit > much of a shit
It's lake > It's a lake
she's then queen > she's the queen
tomorrow, I > tomorrow; I
West, we > West; we
bed, sleep > bed; sleep
and loose green > and a loose green
kept I beneath > I kept it beneath
I woke up leave > I'd woken up leave
now form > now from
There only > There's only
did not such > did no such
night in Salia (should this be Ater)
was not scheme > was no scheme

Xinci

Hm, honestly I can sorta see why Cat would overtly think Cordelia would be better for the Liesse Accords, since she is a pact maker. Ironically though Hanno is likely the best possible diplomat, institutional law checker, and general aid to planning long term institutions on the continent, with the addendum of him needing time to properly build up perspective with Recall. The question I suppose is if he lost that ability completely as a claimant or not. If the strength of Above is coalitions then one can see how either would be useful in making and growing ties amongst Good. Perhaps it just comes down to who can make such ties with more immediacy?

Also given the Bards earlier comment on the Accords, Cordelia would probably help make em end quicker but be more practical while Hanno would probably help em last longer but potentially be more risky. Very similar to what happened at the Arsenal.

It is good to have further confirmation on what being inside of the Mantle was like for Akua. I had presumed that her training aided her greatly in dealing with it, presumably alienation training especially given the description of consciousness in it.

ninegardens

So... fun chapter, but also it draws attention to something that makes me feel confused. Not in a bad way just in... a way.

Back in book 5 (five?), Cordelia refusing the name of Warden of the West was a ****huge fucking deal****. It was kind of a defining character moment of awesome, for both her, and her cousin. And it was super important, because it kept the angle weapon from being used, and out of Bard's hands.

Cool.

And Kairos breaking the angles, and thus "saving" them from Bard, while dooming them to the Dead King was **also** a HUGE FUCKING DEAL. And one of his dying lines "What happens if an angel weapon is used while the choir is unavaliable?" "That's the point Cat, finding out?"

Cool. I loved those character beats. Great.

Now, we have Cordelia grasping for the name, and the angel bomb going off once per week, and we have Kairos's final question answered, and well... we have found out now, and I mean, the answer seems to be "The weapon kind of works how you'd expect". Cool. I **get** that circumstances have changed, and Bard is... off (???) the board and hence can't (???) mess with the angel weapon, and Hasenbach is getting desperate. I do get that.

But it just feels weird from a storytelling perspective having multiple major character moments, and then the Arrival of the DK just sort of... crushing all that stuff into irrelevance.

Or, maybe that's the point. The story prior to this shit literally **isn't** relevant any more. I don't know, it just feels weird, because a bunch of those moments were like literally some of my favourite parts of the story, and now it feels like there's this big shrug. I'm not sure if this is a bad thing, or just like... just a thing, but it's something that sticks out, and I'm trying to figure out how I feel about it.

Shveiran

You and me both, mate.

Reader in the Night

I totally get it. In hindsight, I think one of my biggest complaints about Amadeus' plotline at Praes was how he absolutely won everything and crushed everyone else into irrelevance.

For example, the Battle of Kala was supposed to be this huge thing where the brightest military minds of Praes gathered and Juniper cemented herself as being a military commander on par with Nim...

Except that Amadeus completely overshadowed them by predicting the outcome of the entire battle plus the mass desertion at the end that no one else managed to predict, while acting through **two** layers of proxies, via correspondence, from hundreds of kilometers away.

Then again at Ater, where he ran circles around every big schemer in Praes, from Malicia, to Cat, to Hakram, and even the *Bard*, predicted their every move, and maneuvered them like chess pieces. It's not like anybody underestimated him, he was just that good.

What was the point of the rest of the book if Amadeus rendered everyone else's efforts meaningless at best and all part of his master plan at worst?

Snappy270

See I don't think Amadeus predicted who would win Kala. He expected it to be a shitshow the legions will kill too many of their brothers and sisters. That was what he needed to get them to give up fight too much death for no real reason. Anyone could of predicted that given there was always going to be a confrontation, he just spurred on the legions under "his" command to make the situtaion worse.

ninegardens

Eh- yes and no. Like... the story has *always* been about gambit chess and all that jazz.

The Princes graveyard was 3 way gambit chess, and the end of that didn't feel bad, it felt awesome. Salia was gambit chess, and Auger beating out Bard was glorious.

Gambit chess is a central part of the story, and I am totally okay with it, and honestly, kind of expected Amadeus to win the gambit chess in Praes. Him playing Cat, and the rest of Preas makes sense: he *knows* cat, and he knows his homeland. I have reservations with how he went about it, (discussed previously, and hence will not go over them here), but I'm honestly totally okay with Maddie outgambitting everyone and everything when on his home turf, dealing with known enemies, with 2 years to prepare. Especially given that his opposition was Malicia (slowly going crazy), Cat (who doesn't ACTUALLY understand what she is dealing with) and the Nobility (who aren't even playing the game).

I also wouldn't claim that he "beat the Bard". I mean, he got dead, which to me is a pretty strong sign of losing to me. The Bard got (most of) what she wanted, which was fucking over Cat. And, right now, Cat is well and truly fucked. Unfortunately(?), Bard also got messed up, so we got a two way loss.

In some sense I would argue that Maddie won in the "Soul of Preas" game, but then got killed as collateral damage in the entirely seperate "Bard vs Cat" game... which was a game he

wasn't even really involved in or playing, and just happened to be standing next to at an unfortunate time.

ohJohN

Huh, good points. I'd forgotten about Kairos's question, but that was definitely a great moment and the payoff is pretty anticlimactic (at least for now – there could be subtle or imminent consequences, or even just a more satisfying in-universe explanation). And, tangentially, with how the Name of Black Queen got permanently wrecked after Cat refused it once, it's kinda strange that Cordy gets another crack at hers, after arguably refusing even more adamantly than Cat.

With the sheer size of the Guide and it being released serially, I think this class of problems is near unavoidable. I'm constantly impressed by how many plot threads EE is able to pull from previous books and tie off satisfyingly, but like, there's a limit to how many things a single person can juggle without dropping *something* – especially across multiple years! I'd imagine editing passes in a more standard publishing process would make it easier to notice and fix these, but that's got its own downsides (namely, not getting multiple chapters a week).

shikkarasu

I have to disagree. Cat did not refuse Black Queen, the Name was **Destroyed** along with the Hellgate and the deal that she was making with Malicia. No deal, no formal recognition from the Empire: no Name. She was pissed that she was un-Named, even if she later changed her mind and thought of it as dodging a bullet.

The Black Queen's whole story was about an orphan becoming Queen by trickery and guile, very Callowan, but with an Evil twist on the classic formula. Once diplomacy was off the table she was just another rebel and lost the Story.

Cordelia was offered a Name twice in 30 seconds and told literally every God in Creation to get off her lawn. She's still in demand, but it was only when she took Augur's advice and started acting like a Queen instead of a First Prince that she started inching toward being a proper Claimant.

shikkarasu

I think we are still waiting for the other shoe to drop, here. There is going to be something wrong with the Angel weapon, but like most Artefacts it works well enough for people to become dependant on it before it hecks up its wielder. We are not in the 'well thank the Gods that nothing went wrong' part of the story, the noose is closing around Cordelia's throat and she

hasn't noticed because of all her *other* desperation. (*cough* and her Namelore illiteracy *cough*)

It's worth noting that we have only a general idea of what has happened over the past month in universe and we also don't know the ramifications. Maybe Judgement gets free and kills all the Priests who dared shackle the corpse of an angel? That would explain why Bard didn't want the seal on Judgement as well as why DK would see this has a boon for himself. House of Light crippling itself? Yes, please.

Not saying any of this is correct -we never know what EE is up to- but I'm sure the answer existed in their notes as far back as 2016 and just needs to be written out in detail.

kinghaart

I think Bard is still around, turned off the stories to make the Ealamel seem safe to use and also required, but will turn them back on at the end once it's fully charged and use it to literally glass Calernia to wipe the board and start over. Like an emergency reset button.

She basically turned off the traffic lights, the DK is speeding and she has road blocks set up ahead... Shame the resulting collision will be explosive enough to wipe out any pedestrians the DK didn't already run over.

I think Bard is a creational law, safeguarding the Wager, and she's trying to call it in early.

Reader in the Night

I realized something about Cat's thoughts on the Book of Some Things, which led me to realize that Cat may have shot herself in the foot by succeeding too hard:

The Book should obviously go to Hanno. He's the ultimate authority on Heroic Named according to the Truce and Terms, so giving the book to anyone else would basically be undermining Hanno's authority and weakening the foundations of the Accord.

However, if he gets the Book, he gets closer to being the Warden of the West, and the Warden is a role that is responsible for both the geographical West and the Heroic stories. Only, the Truce and Terms has no provision for that, because it was designed to separate political authority and Named authority.

Except that Cat had both, so her Name formed with both, and now her counterpart's Name needs both, and neither Hanno or Cordelia can **have** both without running roughshod over the other's office. Basically, the very nature of the Name "Warden" fucked over the T&T.

Personally, I think the best idea would be just giving the Book over to the Oracle as a compromise option (nominally under Hanno's authority, Hasenbach's family), because the Oracle actually has the best godsdamn shot figuring out how to *use* the damn thing and doing it effectively to boot, but... That's probably too convenient a solution when the Hanno X Cordy fight has been set up for an entire book.

AbraKadabra

There is ONE solution to all this.
A dangerous one.
Political marriage.
Hannelia forever!

kinghaart

But poor Antigone 🙄

ninegardens

I am all for Agnes Of All Things.

Supping her up with the book would be a MASSIVE power boost... but at the same time, I wonder if she would accept it? She kind of hinted that one day she would look too deep and then not come back and...

Oh.
Ohhh....
Oh fuck.

Okay, here's a question: Kairos described the role of Bard as being a "trap" in reality- yes? (see chapter Book 5, Chapter 8 "Poison made into remedy. A trap inherent to the lay of Creation. It made, I thought, a horrifying amount of sense.") What if Bard *can't* give the stories to Cat without turning Cat into the Bard.

I don't know if it makes sense or checks out, but what if allowing Cat the stories would have instantly imprisoned her the same way Bard is imprisoned.

... at which point the only choice is to "destroy" all evil stories, so as to prevent this.

The good stories are preserved so as to give Cordellia and Hanno *some* hope of survival, and because Cat has no candidate to give The Book to, but the moment she hands over that book... I don't know, all this could be wrong (Bard did try to shunt Cat into the role last book... probably), but...

Kairos's theory about the role of bard being a trap should perhaps be a warning to Cat to not steal *too* much from that particular well.

Shveiran

The problem I have with this (and all the “Bard is secretly a good guy” theories) is that apparently the Bard has the power to stop stories at will.

Her having this much control over the “trap” really doesn’t sound like someone stuck in a cage.

After all, the main difference between a castle and a prison is who controls the door.

Deworld

I don’t think Bard could stop stories “at will”. She had done it as her last act of spite, only after she lost to Cat and the latter started bragging about it. Remember: Named power and capabilities is heavily dependent on the story they’re in right now, and Bard is still Named, even if she stands above others. I believe it were circumstances around her loss in Ater that allowed her to do something like this.

kinghaart

I don’t think she wanted to do that; I think she planned to have Cat killed to doom the world (via Scribe) and deleting the stories was a contingency (since she is described as being in a rage while doing it).

I don’t know that Bard is good or evil per day, she is just the show runner for the play that is the Wager. Kairos probably did it best, playing along for the most part with just a few minor tweaks to set up his own show; with himself being insane and playing HARD into stories, and Anaxares being fully mad, he basically did a Trojan Horse on the whole thing.

Frivolous

I enjoyed Indrani referring to Hanno as a twat. Delightful.

Now if only she could be persuaded to say that again in front of people not of the Woe.

I find it interesting that Hanno can still use Light even though he may not be White Knight anymore.

In contrast, Hakram lost every power granted him by the Name Adjutant during the short time he was a claimant for the Name Warlord.

This chapter reminds me a lot of Interlude: Paragons. Conflict between heroes, but different because in Interlude: Paragons, Hanno was the steady moderate, whereas here, Hanno is almost the active upstart.

Shveiran

I can't believe I'm doing this. But every time Amadeus is mentioned, it makes me actually, physically angry.

His plan for Praes has so many holes I could mistake it for a sieve, and that makes it impossible for me to buy the green-eyed, gear-brained monster angle.

In no particular order,

A – Now that military strength is concentrated, what prevents the Legions from playing kingmaker? Even if one trusts Nim, the conflict of interest is there. As soon as we have an ambitious, charismatic Black Knight in charge, the system will be overthrown.

B – The clans have one vote and the largest army besides the Legion. It won't be long before a Warlord (maybe even Hakram!) decides to grab himself a new seat and vote. As soon as that happens, the civil war will spark anew.

B2 – Even if that doesn't happen, the High Lords won't stand for Withering Foramen, so yeah, civil war is a certainty.

C – The system does nothing to address the hunger problem.

Amadeus being Chancellor could have maybe set the foundations for that, but Alaya? The Grand Alliance will not say "welcome to the table" after the war, because they have no reason to and several to do otherwise. That leaves a private treaty with Callos to regulate trade of foodstock. But Procer is starving too, and I have a hard time imagining Vivienne telling the Procerans the food they need is going east instead. Even if they manage, the problem is still there for the future Good Kings and Chancellors: as soon as relationships break down and famine strikes, Praes will invade again and the wheel will keep on turning.

In the long run, it really feels like nothing changed aside from Ater's skyline and maybe a few titles.

And I could buy that the monster lost to the man and that is plan was informed (and flawed) by love, if only I... no, sorry, buying that for a moment actually hurts.

NO ONE THAT LOVES SOMEONE ELSE WOULD DO THIS TO THEM.

Forcing your daughter to kill you, and depicting this as an act of love on your side? I can't even... that's so fucked up I'm at a loss for words. Oh, he told Catherine he's proud, didn't he? Oh, that changes it then. It's not like this will haunt her as long as she lives!

Which might not be long, considering you put her on a collision course with A) the Scribe and B) the Ranger, AKA, supposedly, two more people Amadeus loved!

MY CROWS. Bleeding-heart Amadeus ensured the outcome of his plan would be either Catherine's death OR the death of his lover and of one of his last remaining friends. Can you feel the love tonight?

And it would be ALRIGHT if this was depicted as the act of the same man that back in the Free Cities begun to plot how to kill his loved ones to ensure his legacy, but supposedly that changed when he lost his Name. If this is described as motivated by love

it becomes actually grotesque. This ending retroactively turns one of the best mentor-apprentice relationships I've ever had the blessing to read into something disgusting.

That is where my biggest problems come from, but honestly, it's far from the only one.

I'm supposed to be interested about who becomes the Warden of the West, and I'm just... not. What does that matter? It's the mirror to Cat's Name, and Cat's Name has no weight whatsoever.

After two narrative years and over one Book of build-up, we get Ater. The coalescing of her Name is a gigantic failure, where she gets everything but what she wanted. Her enemies survived and are beyond her reach, and what they lost or changed is because of Hierophant or Amadeus and not Catherine; Ater either hates her guts or thinks she was repelled by Alaya or Amadeus or Akua; the high lords laughed in her face and lived to tell the tale; she lost or killed two allies (Amadeus, Scribe) and two more buckled her authority hard (Arthur, Hakram); the Black Knight certainly doesn't acknowledge her authority and even the Warlock now feels entitled to chastise her.

Does this look like Warden of the East mean anything, to you? Not to me, sorry. Catherine has been failing ever since the Arsenal; that she has enough authority now to coalesce her Name is... something I can't buy.

So yeah, Hanno and Cordelia need to be addressed. But the Name is an afterthought. It doesn't feel like it matters, because Cat's certainly doesn't.

And yes, Villain stories are on pause. But so what? This is the first instance of the WotE: if it weights this little, I doubt it can get us a grove.

Akua... I've ranted enough so I won't start over, but suffice to say I was on board with this redemption story when it was, apparently, fake, and I can't buy it for a moment now that it is supposedly real.

I really don't like seeing every villain of the story getting away with it in the end, when the story started with Catherine wishing for a sword to cut down the bastards.

I really don't like reading a story that feels more and more only about the named characters and not the unwashed masses in the background, because I was sold in the first books by the large scope of the perspective and the long term view over the issues. And I really don't like alternating between the chapters where I'm hit over the head with how dire the situation with the Dead King is, and the chapters where nearly every character can't be bother to contribute, as if this was just Catherine's, Cordelia's and Hanno's problem. Random people being egoistic and blind, that's realistic; smart characters with all the information doing as much and systematically not being called out on it, is not.

I guess what I'm trying to say – beside venting – is that I'm leaving.

This webserials meant more than I can possibly explain to me, for several troubled years.

It was a refuge, and a spark for my imagination.

It was food for thought, helping me see several things in a light I'd never considered.

And it made me feel so very invested; it moved me to tears and to exaltation, and it gave me so very many characters I love to hate.

I couldn't be more happy that I've read it.

But the current book is affecting me in an unhealthy way. And honestly, that is on me.

But even if I never thought I'd get to this point, I can't deny the writing on the wall: leaving is the only healthy thing to do.

Good luck, everyone. And thanks for everything, EE. I really mean that.

Linnus42

Yeah the Praes plot was a mess. Cause Cat basically got the deal she could have got at the start lol if she wasn't hellbent on revenge. Amadeus showed up everyone and Akua had a truncated arc. But yeah what stands out to me is none of Black's Reforms addressed the core issue with that issue being not enough arable land to feed the population. That is the root cause of a whole lot of Praesi Issues in scarcity.

medailyfun

I suppose they will "steal Callow's weather" right second time, as was foreshadowed, but I agree with you in general

agumentic

Because it's not the core issue, as Amadeus learned over the years. Praes had forty years of solid food supply, it remained a murderous shithole that distorts everything in it to the point that one of his best friends decided that wiping a city to get a superweapon is a good foreign policy. It became clear that as long as you do not destroy the Dread Empire, it doesn't matter whether they have enough food or not, they will remain the same stain on the world that either takes or is taken. So, destroy the Empire first, then what's left will have a chance to secure a food supply through better field rituals or trade or whatever.

Shveiran

If I read you correctly, you think the hunger issue was no longer a priority.

I would refer you however to the points made above about how the plan doesn't prevent civil war (B, B2) or the Legion from electing a new de-facto emperor in a couple years (High Chancellor? It worked in Germany...)

Your perspective may be valid, but I just don't see how a starving, ram-shackled collection of people biting each-other in a civil war can end up as anything but a new Dread Empire.

Abreha explained the high lords may have an interest in keeping the game going, but the high lords are no longer where the power is.

Why would an ambitious Black Knight not choose to conquer it all, or a Warlord for that matter?

A Dread Emperor by any other Name...

agumentic

If you do wish to argue instead of moving away from the story, alright.

B: First, a lot of the strength of the Clans will be in the Legions in the first place, plus a lot will be in the mercenary armies all across Calernia. Both of these would not be all for waging a war against Praes for the ambitions of one Warlord. This flows into a second point – even if the Clans were all united, they don't have the strength to win against the Legions, especially when they are backed up by the mages of the High Seats. They might have the numbers, but they lack equipment, mages and munitions, which means they would be defeated on the field even without accounting for various magic WMDs. Taking this into the account, the Clans are very unlikely to try and grab a seat through war.

B1: I am not seeing why they wouldn't accept it. And even though I am sure they are not fans of the arrangement, the High Seats also no longer have the armies to wage an offensive civil war with.

A: Nim will shape both the institute of the Legions and the Role of Black Knight in her image – very apolitical, not interested in grabbing power. Besides that, even though the High Seats no longer have armies, they are far from powerless – they have enough wealth, mages, old artefacts/contracts and such that should a Chancellor/Black Knight try to override the elections, they can force a very brutal civil war that no one would want.

But even if the combination of Nim's influence and the strength of the High Seats (and other electors, let's not forget them) fails and Praes turns into a Legion-backed dictatorship, it will still be a very different beast from the Dread Empire of old – Legion-ruled Praes means Legion's philosophies, means and approaches become the ways of new Praes – and Amadeus was the one who created all those. As Cat said in the last chapter, it is far from impossible that he considered this outcome a good one.

Shveiran

I started a discussion; I'm not going to leave until it's over. That feels kind of rude.

Regarding A and B, I don't mean to sound argumentative, but you can't have it both ways: either the High Seats are powerful enough to oppose the Legions backing a dictator, or they are weak enough that the Legions could curb-stomp them if they tried a civil war. It can't be both.

Of course, I'm not saying that the Legions couldn't be a powerful powerbloc, I'm just saying that even if there is a power invested in neutrality in a civil war, it either is strong enough to keep all others in check (and thus powerful enough to elect its own chancellor if they want) or another faction in the game of thrones that could, potentially, be cornered by a strong enough opposition.

As for the neutrality of the institution and Name of Black Knight, that is clearly Amadeus' gamble. It just sounds like a very poor gamble.

Institutions can change; Callow was occupied for twenty years, then changed everything under Cat, and now will be de-centralized by Vivienne. What the Legions will be in ten years, no one can say.

And Roles can't be curtailed like that. Alaya was the first Dread Empress of her kind, so was Amadeus for Black Knight. It doesn't matter what kind of grove Nim leaves, her successor could change course dramatically anyway.

Sure, these things could help, but it is not a guarantee even if nothing else happens; and things will happen, that's true in our world, let alone a narrative-driven one.

As for the Clans, again, is possible, but far from granted. I certainly don't think it's likely. Most orcs deciding they'd rather raid in a far-off land for money, rather than fight the neighbors they hate for the direct gain of their kin? Sure, it's possible.

The orcs in the Legions being more loyal to the Legions than their people and sticking the course in case of a conflict? Sure, it's possible.

Every Warlord choosing not to conquer, or the Name just dying out after being reborn after who knows how long? Sure, it's possible.

It's just that the chance of it all happening seems frankly slim.

agumentic

I can have it both ways because I am talking about different kinds of civil war. Without armies, High Seats can no longer easily march on Ater to climb the Tower, or suppress their political enemies by defeating them on the field, or landgrab from their neighbours. All those mundane things need mundane troops to occupy territory and take the prize without burning it down. However, if the Legions go to support a lifetime dictator, then the High Seats are suddenly in existential danger, which means all stops go off – all those ancient contracts and artefacts and rituals that every High Seat was preserving for the dark days go out in the open and they start causing massive damage, which, even if can't bring them victory, can cause untold damage. Considering that every other elector will also back the High Seats and the possibility of the Legions splintering over the betrayal of their cause, that war suddenly looks much less winnable.

Institutions can change, but let's look at what it took to change the institutions of Callow – complete defeat and decades of brutal occupation, then wartime measures that concentrated powers in the centre behind a popular dictator and still the heir of said dictator will reestablish some of the institutes of old Callow. Should an institute be properly established, the change becomes quite difficult, and the same goes for Roles. Neither Amadeus nor Alaya went against their Roles all that much – he still murdered heroes and lead Praes's military to victory, she still ruled the Dread Empire in pursuit of her ambition. The details were unusual, true, but the core was largely the same. If Nim manages to establish non-intervention in politics as the core of a new Role of the Black Knight in the new Praes, going against it would be quite difficult for any holders – not in the least because anyone likely to do so wouldn't become a Black Knight in the first place. And, in the end, "maybe things change and Amadeus's solutions become untenable" is a largely meaningless argument. Sure, it's possible, but it's possible for

every solution one can offer. I don't think it's very likely to happen for this one.

I don't see the chance of it happening as slim at all. In the end, the Clans can't win against the united Praes, and it doesn't take a military genius to understand that. So why would the Warlord lead them into an unwinnable battle, and why would their supporters follow them? They now have better ways to both earn glory in battle and increase the wellbeing of their race.

Modgor

For your issue about the comparative strength of the Legions and the High Seats, I would think it goes this way :

- If one or two High Seats take arms, the Legions stomp them into the ground, so no High Seat can try a coup.
- If the Legions try something, they get in a hard civil war with ALL the High Seats, so it's not sustainable, especially in Praes, where almost all the wealth is in the cities.
- If all High Seats try something together, well, they have majority, it's actually democratic...

Zach

The argument against a civil war arising is that all the other factions in Praes will unify against any faction that tries to seize power, and that "attempting to win the election in <7 years" is far less costly than attempting to directly seize power. If any particular power decides they want to take over the country, they'll be facing recourse from all the other powers.

The Legions can't seize power themselves because they don't hold enough power to defeat all the other major Praesi powers (who have their own armies/cities – the Legions would need their cooperation for the country to continue to function) and are comprised of people from all those powers.

Also, unlike in real life, in the world of this story patterns reinforce themselves. Creating a new "pattern" for Praes will cause that pattern to preserve itself as long as they can both destroy the old pattern and maintain the new one for a while. Amadeus/Alaya attempted to do this with the Reforms, but it wasn't enough to redefine "what Praes is." Amadeus ended up coming to the realization that it's necessary to make Praes into "something that isn't the Dread Empire."

The rest of the complaints seem to be variants on "I'm mad that characters do bad things and don't get their comeuppance," which seems to be a mindset that plagues the readers of YA fiction. Amadeus is not a good person and anyone who is confused at him doing what he did had a poor grasp of the character.

Shveiran

If any particular power decides they want to take over the country, they'll be facing recourse from all the other powers.

Yes, aside from those they bribe or otherwise coerce into joining their own faction. Which is kind of how bids for the Tower worked to begin with. If you can get a majority, you have an election; if you can get a majority of the strength, you have a civil war. I'm not sure a lot changed since before, that is my point.

Regarding groves, you are right. But groves can be escaped or broken. It happened regularly in this story, and I don't see why this one will hold. Whatever happens up north, I think it's fair to say that the next century on Calernia will be very different from the one before, no?

*The rest of the complaints seem to be variants on "I'm mad that characters do bad things and don't get their comeuppance," *

Let me clarify it, then.

My problem is not that there isn't karmic justice delivered to all bad characters.

My problem is one of tone.

The number of characters that are actively orienting their choices to counter the apocalypse are not the majority. When the other characters don't call them out on it, even in their thoughts during POV chapters, creates an emotional dissonance when one reads about how the continent is ending.

This is a tone problem. It runs contrary to the theme of personal responsibility that is one of the foci of the books.

Amadeus is not a good person and anyone who is confused at him doing what he did had a poor grasp of the character.

Indeed. Which is why my problem is not with what kind of *person* he is.

He is being presented as a good *father*.

It is not the same thing, and that is the part that disgusts me. The "I love you so much I'll let you kill

me" doesn't work if the father figure organizes things to ensure his daughter HAS to kill him. Then it's just a very weird suicide crafter to emotionally scar your loved one. Which is FUCKED UP but still being depicted as an act of parental love.

kinghaart

Who aside from Cat (who is obviously unfit to judge) has called Amadeus a good father?

I mean Masego liked him but Masego is maybe the only other character with as messed up a parental bond.

I get where your posts come from, but to me it reminds me a bit of the same concerns with Romeo and Julie, which when you look at it fresh is clearly a cautionary take about how young love is fickle and dangerous but has been twisted into somehow being "romantic". I don't think we can blame Shakespeare for the gross misreading of his works when frankly it's just so OBVIOUS that it's loaded with criticism not just of the wars between houses but of the shortsightedness of the protagonists. Tragedy often plays out in a way where we feel like there was thoughtless or needless waste of life or resources but that's really the essence of what Tragedy **IS**.

Abrakadabra

It was solved by the Conquest, and is addressed by the Dread empires death, since it won't be in constant war with everyone who could provide its people with food anymore.

Shveiran

Whyever Praesi suddenly won't war with their neighbors, exactly?

And the Conquest is... over? They can't import food from Callow, they need to trade it. Only Callow can trade food with its allies instead, and a limited stock now. The bloody Green Stretch is considering secession by this point.

If the food situation is handled, that sure is news to me.

shikkarasu

I wouldn't say handled, I agree with you there, but Callow is normally in the hands of a King or Queen with more grudges than sense. Occupational hazard. They have clearly

refused to trade with Praes and/or Praes has refused to trade with them. (I'm going off of Amadeus' notes that he gave to Cat, but admittedly the finer points of Calernian Economic History are not spelled out in great detail) Otherwise there would be more food in Praes and luxuries in Callow. They may both trade with Mercantis, the 'necessary fig leaf' of international embargos, but that isn't sustainable for either party.

More than the new election, having Alaya and Vivienne willing to give each other less than highway robbery rates is what will start mending both countries. Future Chancellors may suggest returning to Conquest, but once the people see how expensive it is, and how hungry they get until the war is over, there will be riots in the streets until a new Chancellor is chosen.

Handled? No, not for another 10 years at least. Certainly not until Procer's fields start to recover from DK's blight. But I truly think it is a solid Step 1, and enough that the Conquest will become an outdated model in time.

MoreBeer

I think it's dealt with by inclusion in the alliance. The story of Praes' hunger was solved by conquest and blood. The new story can solve it with trade with more than just the Free Cities. Praes is rich after all, but few were willing to countenance trade with a nation of literal backstabbers.

Abrakadabra

Amadeus sacrificed himself because that is the bargain he struck with the gods below. He killed the stories of Praes and sacrificed himself to make the new pattern stick. There is some thing called paying attention. It is out of fashion these days, I know.

Shveiran

Sick burn. Only, we don't really know what Amadeus asked the Gods Below. And we never saw an instance of the Gods intervening directly to "make patterns stick", especially in the.

Maybe, instead of being catty, you could explain why you came to your own conclusions; the text only confirms that the Gods were involved.

Abrakadabra

What else could he have asked for? An appleuse? That was Kairos.

AbraKadabra

Anyway, the KILLING STORIES part is a pretty big thing in my view, that is almost the same thing the Wandering Bard did. Only he killed the stories of the dread empire. At least that is what he claimed.

shikkarasu

On the topic of paying attention:

"I reached for Night. Tried to stop the damage. It did nothing, as if some force was devouring the power. He had, I remembered with horror, called in his dues to Below."

We don't know what he asked for, but it seems much more narrow than 'break Evil's stories'. There was a flippant comment an update or two ago that he just said 'please let this work' and I really do think that was the meat of whatever he requested.

If you want to disagree with someone, and Crows know I've needed to be corrected countless times in these comments, please try to be respectful.

AbraKadabra

Eh. I saw literal pages of hating on this story over several chapters. Let me be a little less objective, since my respect already is lost towards such tendencious, 'everything is bad' even the way the characters are breathing hot air wasting.

shikkarasu

Yep, and you probably noticed me disagreeing with Shveiran in those threads. Politely, and with points that are grounded in the story. Lashing out at someone who is lashing out accomplishes nothing except starting a flame war.

And again, not to belabour the point, but you can't ask someone to pay attention and then make wild speculations. If your headcanon is that Amadeus asked for the stories to break? Cool. I won't begrudge anyone their personal take. If you want to tell someone else that it is clearly what happened? Prove it.

Based on the text he asked that no-one be able to save his life to put Catherine in a corner. His reflexes might have been part of that, or might have been from being a Claimant. Killing the stories? That is pure Bard and I'll want proof otherwise.

AbraKadabra

I could quote the relevant lines for you, but Why bother... You know I am right whether you admit it or not. And matters to me not that much Anyway, so I just end it here.

ninegardens

"And I could buy that the monster lost to the man and that is plan was informed (and flawed) by love, if only I... no, sorry, buying that for a moment actually hurts."

His last act was an act of love... *for Alaya*. He knew it wasn't a loving act towards Cat. He knew it would hurt her. He simply viewed it as the only way to keep both Alaya and Cat alive, a sacrifice worthy of the goal. Honestly, I don't even think he gave a damn about Cat's name bullshit at the time, he was *purely* going with "How do I force Cat's hand to preserve Alaya's life".

>>"Catherine has been failing ever since the Arsenal; that she has enough authority now to coalesce her Name is... something I can't buy."

This is... actually a really good point actually. I hadn't thought about it that way. And, in some sense part of it was because throughout the entire book so far, I've been running on the assumption that Cat losing "authority" was THE POINT – and not in a bad way. I was reading it as her being an enabling name, building up Hakram, building up Akua, building up Arthur, and all the rest of it. I was reading the story as being a story of Cat realizing that *she has no authority here, and isn't supposed to*. With Maddie and Akua and Hakram, the actually *people* of Preas being the ones to choose their own story. And that was a story I was so down for. I was okay with Cat losing, because I thought that that was the lesson we were aiming for.

Hmmmmmm..... Thinks thinks thinks...

>>"I guess what I'm trying to say – beside venting – is that I'm leaving"

Oop. 😞

Sorry to hear that? But also glad that you are doing good things for your health. Take care, stay well, hopefully you find more things to read in the future.

Gabe Meadow

I think that's rather the point though. Cat – fueled by revenge and Name-obsession to beat the Bard – missed the

emerging story, the indications that it would have been better to let Praes decide for itself.

Basically, she literally defied the meta-story of the arc, where she **should** have lost and acknowledged a lack of authority. Instead, she won, but paid a high cost for doing so. That's it's all so messy.

kinghaart

Yep she climbed her own tower and forgot why. She is definitely having control issues not unlike Alaya did.

Tuvarkz

Honestly, Rogue Sorcerer should be Warden. He knows about magic and politics, keeps a composed demeanor, and is simultaneously 100% Good and willing to deal with those on the Evil side.

[Mental Mouse](#)

But he's not driven to "take care of everybody", and neither his current Name nor his actions feature that level of leadership.

Sinestere

As Cat has a history of joining in matrimony opposing forces, as she did with the Fairy Court, one would think she would join these two in a shotgun wedding. The fact they might privately hate each other would only add to the sacrifice they would both be making "for the good of the East". I can't remember if she has forced any other marriages to make this a pattern of three. Either way, it would unite the East and resolve a lot of political issues. Being familiar with nobility, both of them would see the benefits even as they might just unite in resenting Cat as she stands over the union ceremony. Cordelia and Hanno, Lady and Lord of the East.

ISiejek

I like the not so subtle reference in this chapter that the grey pilgrim was just straight up the most ruthless fucker in this entire story, hell if ever there was a hero that should've been a villain

kinghaart

I don't know if he is strictly more ruthless than Amadeus or say Saint, but yeah he's a good study of how Good and Evil can become indistinguishable at the extremes.

WuseMajor

"A foreigner, a growing political foe and one Named to boot. It was like some malicious deity had cobbled together a mess whose very nature was bound to make Cordelia Hasenbach see red."

Bard very much did that on purpose, yes. Glad you're paying attention.

kinghaart

I thought this too though I also like the idea that is really creational laws doing all of this, and Bard is sentient but not fully in control of how her nature interacts with stories.

Tom

> "He's been pulling miracles out of his ass left and right, you mean," Archer bluntly said.

Great mental imagery

I vote Akua for Warden of the West

KiltedBastich

OK, so this is sort of random, but Cat's comment about her menses stopping got me thinking. If becoming a Named Villains stops a woman's menses, how did Captain have children? It's rather directly related. No menses, no ovulation, no children. Seems like a plot hole to me.

Darkening

In much the same way that a named's appearance is a matter of self image, I imagine that sort of thing is related to intention and desire. If a named wants kids, it's very likely they'll resume being fertile, whereas if they don't, like cat very very much does not, then their body won't bother with it.

john

Same way Named can burn poisons out of their own bloodstream but also still voluntary get drunk.

[setrein](#)

setrein a0814cc162 https://wakelet.com/wake/HQbx5Qzse_I32YqVuYEup

[GoodGirlJW](#)

I really hope Catherine and Akua become a couple at some point before the end of the series. 😞

Chapter 30: Salute

"It is tempting to think of history as a tide, for it excuses our being swept by it. I cannot agree to such defeatism, and so instead I will claim that history is a rope. It may be pulled the other way, despite the labour of your life, but that is never a reason not to try."

– Extract from the prisoner's memoirs of Princess Eliza of Salamans

Some dark, petty part of me enjoyed that the war had finally reached Salia.

The First Prince had rustled up a proper welcome for us, cheering crowds and soldiers in shining armour, but it was like painting over a cracked wall. The impressive numbers that'd turned up were not enough to hide that the streets beyond them were deserted, that people barred their doors and closed their windows. Fear had finally reached the capital of the mightiest realm on Calernia and it was making its people hunch. Huddle in like a child awaiting a blow. I allowed the vicious little twist of satisfaction to linger a while before chasing it away. I had not forgotten the Tenth Crusade, but these days Procer was probably my closest ally. Creation liked its little ironies.

I smiled and waved as we rode down the broad avenue, a company of knights around us. A fourth banner had been added to the three that were customary – mine, Vivienne's and the Order of Broken Bells – as my heiress had formally founded her Order of the Stolen Crown and ordered its banner sown. I rather liked the look of the heraldry – a golden crown clasped by a white hand, set on Fairfax blue – as it contrasted nicely to my own silver-on-black as well as the Broken Bells' bronze-on-black. The Order of the Broken Bells had been my creature, forged out of rebellion and the compromise of traitors, and so it bore my marks. My shadow.

Let the Stolen Crown take after their mistress' instead, sharing the same gold as her Summer sun resting on the same Fairfax blue. Let them be to her what Brandon Talbot and his unflinching knights had been to me: a sword and a shield, my will made into a thousand thundering hooves.

"Huh," Vivienne murmured. "Would you look at that? She came out personally."

I abandoned the almost maudlin thoughts and returned to the here and now, following the Princess' gaze down the avenue and to a grand plaza. My brow cocked. As Vivienne had said, Cordelia

Hasenbach had come to bid me welcome in person. She was astride a horse of her own, one of those great chargers Lycaonese were fond of, and dressed as regally as if she intended to hold court here in the streets. She'd chosen a sweeping gown in dark blue, her riot of golden curls going down her back and held back only by a circlet of white gold, but it was the ermine-bordered cloak over it all that drew the eye. It was almost entirely cloth of gold, bright in the noonday sun.

Clever, that cloak. It drew attention to her height and straight back while hiding away the squareness of her shoulders. I'd never considered the First Prince to be particularly beautiful, but she'd certainly mastered dressing to her advantage better than anyone I'd ever met.

"A beautiful cloak," Akua Sahelian mused. "Yet chosen, I think, more to contrast the other being worn than to add lustre to her hair."

When the Doom of Liesse had returned to stand among my council this morning and I had not cast her out, none had spoken a word of it. Vivienne made it a point to rarely speak to her directly and never offer more than frosty hostility, but this once she let out a small noise of agreement. I could see why. Taking in the party that inevitably followed someone of Cordelia Hasenbach's rank should they go anywhere in public, I saw more than just the expected assembly of nobles and generals. There were Named, too, and only one of them wore a cloak.

Hanno's suit of plate was simple but beautifully made, the work of his Bitter Blacksmith, and the cloak pale as driven snow that he wore over it only added to the elegant austerity of him. His dark hair was cut even shorter than usual, little more than stubble, but it suited his plain and honest face well. With the sword belted at his hip and the ease of his carry, he looked like a warrior-king of the old breed. I could easily understand why people had come to call him Prince White. A man like that would have drawn a following even if he'd not whelped miracle after miracle in the defence of Procer as Hanno of Arwad very much had.

I could not help but note that while there were two people just behind the First Prince – dear Frederic of the pretty curls and skilled hands was one, so the solemn man whose helmet was painted with a red crown had to be Prince Otto of Bremen – the Sword of Judgement was not one of them. He'd been left in the general party, a dozen feet behind.

"By rank, he should be standing at her side," I murmured. "He's a high officer of the Grand Alliance."

"What Grand Alliance?" Vivienne asked. "Procer is divided and dying, the Dominion is far and spent. This coalition lives or

dies on our say. If it does not offend you, Catherine, what can anyone do about it?"

I grimaced. Razin and Aquiline were further back in our column, leading their company of riders, so at least there'd been no risk of them hearing that. It wasn't that the Levantines had taken that many casualties, since practically speaking Procer alone had lost more soldiers in the first year of the war than the Dominion had fielded throughout it. It was more that, unlike my Army of Callow and the wealthy principalities of Procer, the Levantines had not reinforced the forces they sent north. It was a large army by their standards, involving most of their trained warriors, and if Cordelia hadn't begun feeding them and paying for their equipment halfway through the war they would never have been able to afford fielding it this long.

Lacking reinforcements and grounds to recruit, their losses had accumulated even as their fund ran out. The end of the Isbili dynasty had only worsened their internal issues, according to the Jacks – who had stolen Proceran spy reports, since we had no eyes that far south – since even though they'd essentially been figureheads they'd still been a stabilizing influence. Now the Dominion of Levant lacked a reason to be anything more than a pack of squabbling petty kingdoms and it was only the First Prince's intervention that'd both prevented civil war and kept some manner of commerce going on even as tensions rose. While it was underselling the Dominion to call it spent, in my opinion, Vivienne wasn't exactly wrong either.

With every battle they had less strength to bring to bear, and there was no realistic way that trend could be turned around.

"That is the very reason such a pretty trick will fail," Akua idly said. "When the order of things collapses, what does a man like the Sword of Judgement care for traps of courtesy?"

Her words turned out to be prophecy. I spurred on my horse, my knights parting for me, and Cordelia broke away from her two companions in the same gesture. So did Hanno, riding past a glaring Prince Otto and blank-faced Prince Frederic to catch up to Cordelia as she approached me. I rather admired that the First Prince's face betrayed not a hint of her feelings, though I'd bet rubies to piglets that she was coldly angry. The people in the cheering crowd, shouting her name and mine and Hanno's, they wouldn't realize what had just happened. The nobles would, though, and they'd also see that there was nothing Cordelia could do about it. Some would instead choose to take from the sight that Hanno was rude and gasping beyond his rank, but this wasn't peace time.

Like Akua said, courtesy mattered a lot less when the world was ending.

"Your Majesty," the First Prince greeted me, a warm smile on her face. "Salia is brightened for your return."

Her voice carried, all the more since the crowd had been made to settle since she'd begun riding forward. I'd never actually seen Cordelia have a genuine warm smile about anything, certainly not one that wide, so it always amused me to see how she used their like to play up our rapport in public. It helped her keep her princes in line, though, so I didn't particularly mind.

"Your Most Serene Highness," I replied in Chantant, smiling back and pitching my voice to carry as well. "I return with good tidings: Praes is settled, and now joins us in war against Keter!"

There was some surprise, but soon after the crowd began roaring in approval. Ah, the times we lived in. Who would ever have thought that a mob in the streets of Salia would ever shout themselves hoarse celebrating Praesi? Not me, and I'd lived a stranger life than most. Under cover of the shouts I nodded my greetings to Hanno, who had been waiting for us to finish tolerantly.

"Lord White," I said. "I hear you helped General Abigail pull the Third Army out safely. My thanks for that."

"Your Majesty," Hanno replied, offering a nod. "I could not have held Hainaut had she not been the anvil to my hammer. It's me who thanks you for lending such a sharp sword to our efforts."

His own friendly smile was not fake in the slightest, I thought. He was not the sort of man to feign amity where it was not. I offered him a quirk of the lips, but little more. We had yet to reconcile from the aftermath of the Arsenal, the odd friendship we'd once had long in disrepair. I had sworn an oath to Tariq to mend that bridge, but I had to be careful of how I did. A misstep here in Salia could have grave consequences. With the first round of greetings done the ceremony could proceed and it began in earnest. Under the eyes and cheers of the crowd the great nobles and commanders in Salia greeted the ones I had brought, Razin and Aquiline reunited with their fellow lord and lady of the Blood for the first time in over a year.

It was all very civil and friendly – I winked at Frederic when he caught my gaze, getting a roguish grin in answer – and every inch of it had been put together so the sight of us would reassure the people of Salia that the world was not ending. It very much was, of course, but considering that with the amount of refugees we'd seen camped outside the capital had likely swelled to entail a million souls the last thing we needed was a panic. However deserved it might be. The procession continued on together, showing off how friendly and allied we all were, until we began

to approach the Lineal and its bevy of palaces. There we parted ways, though not before Hasenbach took me aside for a short talk.

"I have had word from the dwarves," she told me.

My fingers tightened.

"About time," I angrily bit out.

The anger was not directed at her. It was the Kingdom Under that'd been taking its time, its representatives insisting that the Grand Alliance's request for talks was not within their mandate to arrange. While it was true that in principle the half-dozen dwarves were there only to negotiate sales of arms and the granting of loans, in practice they'd been ambassadors of the King Under the Mountain. Vivienne and I suspected they'd been putting us off because they were waiting for the result of some military push they'd made underground, while Cordelia had instead suggested internal divisions.

"Indeed," Cordelia tightly said. "Though they now act swiftly. This morning I was granted an audience with a formal emissary at noon tomorrow."

I frowned.

"They knew I was arriving," I noted.

"Most likely," the First Prince agreed. "Naturally, I would request your presence."

"Naturally," I echoed with a smile. "I'll dust off my courtesies in preparation, then. We doing this with a full Grand Alliance roster or appointed representatives?"

"Lady Itima and Lord Yannu have agreed that representatives would simply the talks," she said. "It will hold, unless the other half of the Blood disagrees."

"They won't," I said.

The lordlings trusted me enough to speak for the Grand Alliance, at least, though no doubt the Dominion would want a seat at the table the moment things began to get formalized. The First Prince nodded. There was a short moment of silence.

"You have, I think, grasped the lay of our troubles from that scene at the greeting," Cordelia finally said.

"I had something of an idea even before," I neutrally replied.

"Perhaps we ought to have tea tomorrow evening, then," the First Prince lightly said. "It has been too long since we talked."

It'd been like a week, actually, but I got her drift. She wanted an opportunity to speak a little more freely in private, and she wanted it as soon as possible.

"It better not be that horrible bitter stuff you love," I warned. "I've drunk actual poison that tasted better."

She smiled the smile of someone who was going to thoroughly enjoy trying to bully me into drinking it again.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Cordelia Hasenbach smiled.

Lying, like a goddamned liar.

—

It was not unexpected that I'd get visitors not long after settling into the palace, but to be honest I'd expected it to be either officers from the Third Army or Procerans. Instead I was genuinely surprised when a servant announced the name of my first visitor: Secretary Nestor Ikaroi of Delos. Considering that as far as I knew the League of Free Cities did not yet have a formal presence in the city, I hadn't anticipated anyone from there calling on me. Last I'd heard, the armies of the League had just begun to reach northern Iserre. I'd always liked the old man, though, and since I had no reason to turn him away I had him brought to me.

I'd been granted this palace as my lodgings every time I visited Salia and Vivienne had used it in my absence, so I had a place in mind to receive him. It wasn't actually one of the dozen salons that infested this place, a winter palace meant to accommodate large balls, but rather one of the smaller rooms adjoining the great ballroom. See, all these fine Proceran folk come here for dancing and debauchery liked a drink. It was only natural there'd be a bar in one of the side rooms, where a wild spread of wines and liquors could be asked for. The place wasn't fully stocked, since Cordelia had been cutting costs everywhere, but it had enough left to make it worthwhile.

Besides, there was something pleasantly familiar about standing behind the counter with the drinks.

Nestor Ikaroi was announced by a Proceran crier and allowed in by legionaries, giving me my first look at the man in quite a while. His hair was striking: long and pure white, it was kept in a ponytail going down his back. The pureness of the colour contrasted with his wrinkled skin, which had the look of old leather, and made his blue eyes stand out. On each cheek he bore two tattooed stripes, one blue and one black. The old man was a Secretary, as high as one could rise in the ranks of the Secretariat. There were only ten askretis of that rank in all of Delos and he was said to be the oldest. He looked, I thought,

rather vigorous. Like the war had spared him, unlike the rest of us.

"Secretary Nestor," I said, leaning against the counter.
"Welcome."

"Queen Catherine," he replied, bowing low. "It is a pleasure to be in your presence once more."

I waved that away, but I was smiling. His genuine friendliness had long kept him my favourite of the high-ranking League diplomats.

"Can I offer you a drink?" I asked. "There's a bit of everything in here."

"All the more luxurious," the old man said amusedly, "for having a queen pouring them. Is it perhaps true, as your subjects claim, that you once ran a tavern in Laure?"

I scoffed. *Ran* a tavern? I'd been much too young and poor to own anything but the clothes on my back and the coin I'd saved up for the War College.

"I asked first," I said.

"Are you perhaps familiar with *isitos*?" he asked.

"Heard of it," I said. "Fig liquor, usually cut with water and leaves of mint."

"The custom in Delos is to use a quarter orange instead of the lime," he replied, "but either way would be fine."

I went looking and though there were lemons there did not appear to be limes. There was mint, however, and two bottles of *isitos*. I presented them to the old man, who without hesitation chose the smaller one. From Penthes, he told me, which for all its many sins made excellent liquor. I made two tall cups of it, one for each of us, and handed him his own.

"I was a waitress, at a place called the Rat's Nest," I told him. "The first roof I ever owned was when Malicia granted me Marchford as my demesne."

Blue eyes brightened. Nestor Ikaroi has close ties to the scholars of Delos' famous libraries, particularly those whose duty was to chronicle the history of Calernia as accurately as possible. Their histories were said to be the finest of the continent bar none. As a result, rather like a magpie the old man tended to be delighted whenever I tossed a few details about either my life or my campaigns his way. He sipped at the drink and smiled, praising it, and I tried it myself. It was actually pretty decent, I thought. Not smooth in the slightest, the burn

was still felt in the throat, but the water and mint eased the taste of liquor. I could almost taste the figs.

Some idle talk was had, but I was a busy woman and he knew it. Soon enough he got to the reason he'd come here.

"I was instructed by Empress Basilia to approach you in private," Secretary Nestor frankly said. "With the assent of the League."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"That sounds like foreign politics," I said. "Which are the sole province of the Hierarch."

The Republic would be furious if they learned Anaxares the Diplomat was being circumvented. Not that, as far as I knew, they were ever *not* furious.

"Ah," the white-haired man smiled, "but this is a different matter. On the behalf of the Protector of the League, I am approaching an ally to discuss a common enterprise."

Meaning they'd finally found a way to work around the absence of the Hierarch that wouldn't send Bellerophon on the warpath and damage the foundations of the League. Basilia, as Protector, was charged with the *defence* of the League of Free Cities. Anything that could be made to fit under that aegis was fair game, even if it meant walking a very narrow line with the powers of the officer of Hierarch.

"That's a lot of power you're giving a hereditary office," I noted.

He smiled like an old, patient shark.

"Should she overstep, a majority vote is all that is required to declare a matter under the jurisdiction of the Hierarch," Secretary Nestor said.

Ah, so that was how they were going to keep her in line. The League wasn't a kingdom like Callow, its laws didn't really care for precedent. If a king was allowed a power in Callow once, it pretty much became a power of the royal house unless civil war pried it out of their grasp. In the League, though, all that was needed was enough of the cities agreeing a right did not exist for it not to. No doubt common ground was already being found behind closed doors between cities worried by Empress Basilia's ascendancy. It'd be a struggle to the death, I thought, until either the office of Protector was reduced to a ceremonial title or the opposing cities were slowly stripped of their independence.

It was also, at least for now, not my fucking problem. For once.

"That'll get interesting," I said, meaning it. "I'm all ears, Secretary. What can I do for my friends in the League?"

"Given your understanding of the powers and prerogatives of the Hierarch," he said, "you will understand, I think, that it is not possible for the League to sign onto the Liesse Accords."

"Not at present, yes," I said, frowning.

It'd count as foreign policy, so only their long-lost madman could actually put a quill to parchment to bring the League into the fold.

"That is an unfortunate situation, given that Empress Basilia is an ardent partisan of the Accords and many of us share her opinion," Secretary Nestor said.

I almost smirked. Say what you would about Basilia Katopodis, but she'd not forgotten who had backed her when she'd gone off to campaign around the Free Cities. I'd been her patroness and while my leverage had weakened with her rise to prominence she had not cast aside her old debts. She'd back me for the Accords and the war on Keter, which had been what I wanted most from her.

"I do not have a reputation for patience, I know," I said, "but you would be surprised."

The old man bowed.

"Yet we would offer a gesture of goodwill within our means," he said. "The members of the League, save for Bellerophon which is still putting the matter to vote, have adopted laws of the same text."

I hummed, reluctantly impressed. That was certainly an alternative. It'd lack the teeth of the actual Accords, of course, which laid down provisions for its enforcers to be able to hunt Named breaking the terms across the territory of all signatory nations, but it would still be a great step forward. Neither villainy nor heroism would be allowed to be made illegal and there would be limitations on the use of both diabolism and angel-calling. I was, I decided, being courted. Or my goodwill was, anyway. Which meant the League was now going to ask me for a favour.

"A greatly appreciated gesture," I said. "It shows adherence to the spirit of the Accords, which is perhaps even more meaningful than ink on parchment. Though it seems it my friends from the south helping me, instead of the other way around."

I ended that on a smile, thin as it was. Nestor Ikaroi took my hint that I'd like to see the bill for the goods now and did not dance around, which I appreciated.

"While the League is committed to ending the threat of the Dead King," the old man said, "concerns have been raised about the feasibility of such a deed."

I sipped at my drink.

"I won't pretend it will be easy," I said. "You know better. But I wouldn't be leading my armies into the storm if I did not believe victory possible."

If it came to that, if all was lost and Calernia beyond reclaiming, I'd hole up behind the Whitecaps as long as possible while building a fleet to lead an exodus across the Tyrian Sea.

"The concern," he delicately said, "is not of a military nature. It is our understanding that you have mustered great armies in the east and brought back the greatest sorcerers of Praes."

I nodded, frowning.

"It is a political concern, then," I said.

"Swiftly tires the horse with two riders," Secretary Nestor quoted.

I kept my face calm. Yeah, perhaps it'd been too much to hope that the League wouldn't have noticed the tensions rising at the heart of the Grand Alliance. Now they were wary of bringing their armies in what was beginning to have the shape of a schism just as the Dead King began devouring the Principate. That was, I grimly admitted, a fair concern to have.

"A temporary state of affairs," I said.

"We share the opinion," he said. "I am simply charged to express the Empress' curiosity."

"About?"

"Who you believe will be sitting the saddle," the old man said.

Gods. That was what the entire reason he'd come here today, wasn't it? They wanted to know who I'd back, if it came down to it. The First Prince of the Sword of Judgement.

"That's not for me to decide," I said.

A pause.

"May I be frank, Queen Catherine?" Secretary Nestor said.

I waved him on.

"While you show wisdom in not standing too close to the flame," he said, "it is an undeniable truth that it is not possible for either to rise with, if not your support, then at least your tacit approval. Your influence is too deeply entrenched."

And he wasn't wrong. I'd done it on purpose, too. Being the representative for Below under the Truce and Terms, standing as Queen of Callow and First Under the Night. Warden of the East, now. I'd accrued so much authority that, while I might not be able to make the choice of who rose to command Good for the end of the war on Keter, I would be able to refuse that choice and very possibly make it stick. I'd seen this as a conflict between Cordelia and Hanno, but in the eyes of everyone else I was just as much of a danger. If I refuse to work with whoever won and took my armies home, it would not be a stretch to say that the war was lost. *And trying to approach either of them might be seen as a foreign nation back a horse, so I'm actually safer for the League to talk to.* Ikaroi was not, I realized, the last envoy who would approach me over this. There would be others, and beyond all the courtesies and the flattery all of them would be addressing me using the same title: kingmaker.

I sipped at my drink, hiding my dismay. I'd wanted to keep my distance as much as was possible, but it was now clear to me there would be costs to that. Would the League keep supporting the war if Procer seemed about to tear itself apart again and I was unwilling to step in? That Nestor Ikaroi was here at all spoke to hesitation. He was not so much invested in my answer as in my having an answer: someone I'd back, a designated winner. That was what Basilia and the League really wanted, the assurance that this would not get messy. Who long before Praes asked the same, or the Clans? I set the drink down.

"It has not come to that," I finally said. "Nor will it. I intend to mediate."

"Of course," Secretary Nestor said, politely unconvinced. "Yet, I must ask, should mediation fail. If a choice must be made?"

I clenched my fingers, unclenched them. It was playing with fire to get too deeply involved. But I wasn't sure it was an option *not* to.

Necessity, as always, was queen.

"If it comes to that," I quietly said, "I will let you know who's to sit the saddle."

Anomandris

Let you what, Cat? "know"? "decide"? "choose"? "lick"?

I have to know!!!

[Liliet](#)

I think it's "know", since that's the least committing option.

edrey

lick, the mental picture of that....you dont need to know

lsdf

Lick, of course. The secretariat must have the flavor of the Warden of the West for their histories.

Flameburst

Gods below, I can just imagine the secretariat ranking world leaders by taste...

[Mental Mouse](#)

That sounds more like a greenskin standard of diplomacy.

MrRigger

The Secretariat is desperate to record some of their only direct and official knowledge of orc governance, and it's a ranking list of how good various orc enemies taste. All the breeds of Praesi, Callowans, Deoraithe, Procerans, Free City Leaguers, Fae, etc.

Bruh

Number 15, Dead King's foot tastes like lettuce

jamesc9

Number 16, the Dead King's hand tastes like chalk.

SaveOurSquirrels

"Be"????!?????

*Daniel E
Miles*

Neither. Abigail for warden!

Linus42

Setup. Though I am not sure why Nestor would think Cat would tip her hand on the matter.
The Dwarves are finally going to do something about time lol.

Though I am not sure the analysis holds, I am not sure active support is good for Cordelia (makes her look like a puppet) but it might be the only way she can win quite frankly. Whereas tacit support alone (as in Cat will stay out of the way) probably carries the day for Hanno. Do we know the consequences if Cat breaks her Oath to Tariq? I assume it be bad in normal times but with story-lines paused for Villains ...though a death Oath might transcend normal story limits. Good luck on mediation Cat.

If it comes down to a fight though I don't think that is a win route for Cordelia. If Frederic the best you got. Well this is man who wouldn't even kill the Red Axe after she tried to murder him so if it comes down to a fight that is not a Horse I bet on. Maybe her cousin can weave a route through for her. But I don't see a way Cordelia wins a combat situation.

Anomamdriis

Have Hanno mate with Cordy – declare the unborn child new Warden....easy peasy...Hell, throw in Cat in the process for good measure.

Though that brings a question – do Names work on babies or kids? I am thinking something like a prophecy which clearly applies to a specific child to born – would said child have a name from conception?

Reader in the Night

Pretty sure Captain was born as The Cursed, so I think yes, you can be born with a Name.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The more serious problem is that the Warden title has never been even close to hereditary, so the Name certainly shouldn't be.

kinghaart

Though it's a Proceran Name and even though First Prince isn't hereditary, regular Prince titles definitely are. So there's SOME precedent.

Biggest issue is they need a WotW like, yesterday.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat won't want to break the word she gave to Tariq for non-supernatural-consequences reasons. Every choice one makes

defines who they are as a person, and Cat has been cognizant of that wrt herself for a while now.

I think the point might not have been to ACTUALLY get Cat's opinion here, but to signal that they would like to hear it and, ah, put themselves in line on who gets to know. Besides, for all they know Cat's already decided and wants to inform everyone who'll ask. No downside to asking, all in all.

Did Frederic every say no to holding the blade to kill Red Axe? He refused to file a complaint about her, but he never said no to being an executioner – he was never asked I believe.

Linnus42

Its defacto I don't think he can swing the axe to execute her if he doesn't bring charges in the first place. He have a lack of standing.

nimelennar

"Though I am not sure why Nestor would think Cat would tip her hand on the matter."

I don't think it's tipping her hand they want: "He was not so much invested in my answer as in my having an answer: someone I'd back, a designated winner. That was what Basilia and the League really wanted, the assurance that this would not get messy."

This wasn't about learning who the winner will be, IMO; this was about making sure she was ready and willing to intercede, one way or the other.

shikkarasu

Greetings your Majesty, lovely bar. We were looking forward to joining you in Grand Enterprise -fast friends, us- but just wanted to inquire, a trifle really, as to whether there is, in fact, a plan?

In the works? Yes! Of course, we don't want to rush these things. Takes time, plans. But, erm, without putting too fine a point on it, you do plan (heh) to *share* the plan? After due consideration? Please?

[Liliet](#)

Blessed and accurate.

Zach

As mentioned in this chapter, Catherine is essentially a kingmaker here and can, if not outright decide the winner, at least prevent one side from winning if she wants.

So there will never be a direct White Knight vs Cordelia fight. Catherine (and allies) will be involved if it comes to that.

I'm genuinely curious how this situation will be resolved. I'd normally assume that Cordelia ends up with Catherine's support and ends up winning in the end, but it's hard to imagine that Catherine doesn't manage to reconcile with Hanno in some way (since she pledged to Tariq that she would do so and I just don't see a situation where he becomes 100% antagonistic and is killed or something).

Linnus42

Sure my point is more this. Cordelia is going to need far more active help to win this clash than Hanno is. Cat is going to have to invest capital to get Cordelia over the line whereas if she stays out of the way then Hanno is going to cruise.

[*Liliet*](#)

SO PRIVATE TALKS WITH CORDELIA AND HANNO NOW PLEASE

AND THEN A PRIVATE TALK WITH ALL THREE OF THEM IN THE SAME ROOM, FEATURING A ROLLED UP NEWSPAPER

Anomandris

Rolled up newspaper? Thats what the kids are calling it these days?

[*Liliet*](#)



Insanenoodlyguy

I forget you also come from homestuck sometimes. God how the mighty fell there.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly, the mass fandom freakouts were kind of fun to eat popcorn to.

The vriskourse, not so much.

[DC](#)

Bad Dog. Worst Enemy.

Insanenoodlyguy

A few more details. The room needs to have a bed, scented candles, and Akua in the corner playing a saxophone. It's time to settle this the fun way.

The newspaper should still be there though.

shikkarasu

Hellgods, but the irony of former Praesi nobility playing Careless Whispers.

Miles

Should have known better than to leave my friend.
These guilty thoughts have got no rhythm.
Now I'm never gonna scheme again,
unless I scheme with youuuu boo hoo

[*Liliet*](#)

Yes.

tithin

““If it comes to that,” I quietly said, “I will let you who is to sit the saddle.””

seems to be a word missing here

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

“Sit the saddle” is perhaps a bit archaic, but valid phrasing.
And especially apropos for a “saddle” that’s pretty close to being a throne.

[*irritantseraphim*](#)

Nah, the word that is missing is behind “I will let you ...”.

A “know” or something is missing there.

nimelennar

Maybe not. “Let” can also mean “Lease” or “Loan” (e.g. “Room for Let”).

So, maybe Cat is saying that she will allow Nestor to borrow the Warden of the West. For a fee, of course.

Sir Nil

Welp, crabs in a bucket once again.

Sir Nil

I’ll have to admit there must be a sick sorta of irony for Cat to now hold the power of deciding which crab gets to escape the bucket.

Jay

Awww the missing word in the last sentence really matters. Is it “I will let you *know* who is to sit the saddle.”

Or

“I will let you *decide* who is to sit the saddle.”

edrey

now i want the hierach madness and force elections, just for the laughs of it.

erebus42

He's not the most exciting or influential character in regards to the story's plot but I must admit I've always quite liked Secretary Nestor.

letouriste

An old learned man with wisdom, keen understanding of social cues, no real arrogance seen and knowing more about history than anyone in the books? One open to entertain anyone to get to know more about...anything?

Yeah i love him too

ohJohN

I want a chapter that's just him desperately trying to squeeze any nugget of drow history out of Rumena, who is characteristically obtuse about it.

Ethan Lavene

"If it comes to that," I quietly said, "I will let you [—] who is to sit the saddle."

Missing word here.

Kiara

I don't know how many Salia chapters I can go without the Hakram conversation...like this was gold, but under appreciated because I can't handle the tension of Cat continuing to avoid this convo.

letouriste

Given prior similar situations (killian,vivienne), it will take a while

letouriste

And i personally can't wait to see Abigail report after so long 😊

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Speaking of her, Abigail should be the Warden of the West. Just because.

[shimizubad](#)

It's Callowans all the way down

nimelennar

"She smiled the smile of someone who was going to thoroughly enjoy trying to bully me into drinking it again."

Well, I guess Cordy is about to make Cat's decision for her. One sip, and then she'll put her backing for the Name behind Hanno.

I mean, there may APPEAR to be more important considerations, like leadership qualities, political reputation, combat abilities, but what is any of that next to the integrity of one's tea?

[Liliet](#)

God, Catdelia friendship. Of course it looks like this, and it's the utter fucking best.

ohJohN

Put them in a room with Akua and Indrani and you risk it collapsing into a singularity of pettiness.

[Liliet](#)

To be fair, Cordelia would be distracted by, ah. *Watching*.

Juff

Typo Thread:

banner banner > banner
banner sown > banner sewn
entirely cloth of gold (strange wording)
fund ran out > funds ran out
simply the talks," (missing word)
folk come here > folk that came here
Ikaroi has > Ikaroi had
seems it my > seems like my
refuse to work > refused to work
back a horse > backing a horse
Who long > How long
you who > you who (missing word)

[pirateddesigns](#)

"simply" should be "simplify", I believe.

Reader in the Night

Really, at this point, I think it almost doesn't matter who Cat picks, as long as she picks quickly? Dragging out this matter and

letting people see the internal divisions only hurts everybody, so just pick one, tell the other one that they can settle this between themselves after the War is done, and get to work. I don't think either Hanno or Cordelia would actually pull their support at this point if Cat picked the other one.

Reader in the Night

Huh. I guess the decision ends up being of how much absolute control she wants to have over the push at Keter: At this point, it is almost guaranteed that whoever gets the Name of Warden gets the Book, and the heroic stories are basically their only weapon against Keter at this point.

If Cat gave the Book and command over one of the most powerful and complicated Names in the continent to Cordelia, who is a complete story virgin, it is almost certain that Cat herself would be the one dictating the plays.

Cordy is smart enough to know when to delegate, and she wouldn't go to Hanno for counsel because they hate each other's guts, basically ensuring Cat has even more unlimited authority.

On the other hand, if she actually wants her opposite number to be capable of helping her when shit hits the fan, then the answer is Hanno, 100%. Hanno is probably the greatest living expert on heroic stories, even more than Cat who only ever subverts them or hijacks them on occasion.

Snappy270

Surely that's the auger so most knowledgeable hero of stories. Who I would pick as she helps Cordy and Hanno respects her abilities.

Bad@games

We need to remember that heroes have access to the axioms I hope they make an actual physical appearance as a book.

[Liliet](#)

The problem is, the best solution is for them to reconcile somehow, with Cat's pushing or without. Cat *ordering* one of them to withdraw their claim, while she *can* do that, is an inferior outcome immediately.

Xinci

The obvious solution here is for Hanno to become the Arbiter since he actually has a extremely broad understanding of various cultures laws and their precedents. Then let Cordy be the Warden of the East and make some laws with his aid.

stevenneiman

Should that say "let you decide?" The last sentence is unclear.

Earl of Purple

How did Cat wink at Frederic when she has one eye? Named bullshit?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Deniably. 😏

Bad@games

She had zeze put an illusion of a eye on her. Or she kept her promise and took his other one already

[julienbrightside](#)

Or Indrani painted one on the eyepatch.

shikkarasu

I feel that she has enough sass in her minuscule frame to wink without having eyes in the first place. Like how the Dead King grins evilly with a bare skull, or Masego glares at people through the back of his own head. A lifetime of practise let's one's signature expression transcend the traditionally required facial features.

Bad@games

All im saying is that after what cat called him fredrics name should change to the King-Finger Prince

Alex

> I'd never considered the First Prince to be particularly beautiful

Really now? I'm pretty sure Cat was was caught looking at Cordelia with too much interest before. =)

Isi Arnott-Campbell

No one has ever accused her of having stringently high standards, it must be said.

[Liliet](#)

That specific phrase is also something Cat used to say about Indrani, so really, if anything, it's a tell.

Insanenoodlyguy

Remember this girl stares at Akua all the damn time, who cannonly only loses to Malicia as far as looks go. But just cause it's not that pretty doesn't mean Cat wouldn't hit it.

Miles

Cat ogles pretty much everyone, all the time. Akua called her out on it at some point.

Vetrom

Just waiting for Cat to bop Hanno AND Cord and make Arthur do it. (... or Abigail! Ha ha ha ha!)

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Barrow, Bradley, an Napoleon all agree, "Amateurs discuss Tactics, Professionals discuss Logistics."
Cordy-Cat.

kinghaart

Not for this chapter, but it just hit me... Amadeus rescued Alaya from a Tower. Where she was prisoner (to the Name, "will devour whole a liar, aka Alaya, and we all know that characters who are devoured whole can be saved sometimes by cutting open the beast). Some real chutzpah to ride a heroic story there... :0

On this chapter, one big question is whether the WoTW Name will make either Cordy or Hanno do something dumb with the Ealamel. Cordelia is kind of on path for that. But Hanno might destroy it to try and get Judgement back which could be even worse...

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus has been Alaya's white knight from the start.

kinghaart

And the Tower was his fire breathing dragon.

Which does make me wonder where that one draconic general ended up... If we have Titans joining the final push, will we get to see them talk to and make alliance with their foes of yore?

Insanenoodlyguy

I mean from what we've seen of the dragon, they can probably just tell him "you conquered your enemies of old sir, now they fight for you." And he'd probably just figur "yeah that tracks."

shikkarasu

General Catastrophe also had the highest density of necromancers in her Legion, on account of killing so many of her own legionaries and needing to raise them from the dead to remain an effective fighting force.

I feel she would be very valuable right about now.

Insanenoodlyguy

I mean from what we've seen of the dragon, they can probably just tell him "you conquered your enemies of old sir, now they fight for you." And he'd probably just figur "yeah that tracks."

[DC](#)

Every time someone praises Abigail the Fox's military ingenuity I have to hold back a laugh.

Combined with the DK victory contingency plan, I am now imagining a future where Cat is forced to evacuate Calernia and Abigail's contingent is cut off and presumed dead...then they return years later in a reclamation effort, and she's just still holed up somewhere and has somehow managed to keep a pocket of the continent running despite literally everywhere else being overrun with the dead. Probably because both her own attempts to flee overseas run into hilariously improbable setbacks and not even the Dead King's attempts to stamp her out can undershoot her relentless pessimism.

An army attacking from literally every direction at once, with fliers blotting out the sky, tunnelling undead collapsing the ground as they advance, the biggest land army in Calernia's history and a new breed of zombie specialised for emerging from the ocean at her back? Well they're not attacking out of the Twilight Ways too so that's better than we expected, really. Plus there's only one hellgate, and Dread Empress Triumphant isn't even emerging from it!

I'm also interested in that we haven't gotten her POV for a while. I wonder how she's feeling about the whole situation now.

(On a completely unrelated note, I have a soft spot for the idea that Triumphant turns up at some pivotal moment and saves the day, whether intentionally or not, perhaps by attacking the Serenity or something, then disappears again...and "may she never return" gets changed to "may she ever return")

KiltedBastich

So, random thought unrelated to this chapter, what did Cat do with the undead city-sized spider? Seems that might be handy for the assault on Keter. Undead Kaiju battle, anyone?

Miles

Zombie the and first.

Kept in the stables until the right moment, when Cat finishes going through 8-11

Theo Allen baptista

So, the end begins.

Chapter 31: Premises

“Thirty: while it is a viable tactic to swing using a chandelier or a rope, it is significantly less viable to wear armour when doing so.”

– “Two Hundred Heroic Axioms”, author unknown

You couldn’t use the usual sort of table when entertaining dwarves, not unless you wanted to offend them by stacking cushions on a chair.

The First Prince was a graceful host and unlikely to be the first of her office to have received envoys of the Kingdom Under, so the neat little salon where we were seated did not make that elementary mistake. Over a floor of warm-coloured wood, thick and plush Arlesite rugs had been thrown for us to sit on. Even with my legs folded – I’d drunk a brew to take the edge off my bad leg – I wasn’t all that uncomfortable, and the low table we were both seated at was a work of art. Intricately carved and painted, it depicted the making of Creation as described in Proceran texts. The scenes spiralled inwards, ending in the moment where the Gods had taken their rest.

Unlike the people of the Principate, Callowans put no real stock in Arianna Galadon’s ‘Truths of the Shore’. Which she hadn’t even written herself, anyhow, as they were a collection of her teachings written down by her followers. Callow’s own House of Light was the oldest on Calernia the way most people saw it, with only the priests of Atalante having a legitimate claim otherwise, so my people tended to dismiss anything come out of Procer as empty posturing. I largely shared that opinion, even though many

of Galadon's teachings had been sensible, but for all that skepticism I would not deny that some of the hymns written down in the book were quite beautiful.

The painted depiction on the table did them justice, not that the two dwarves seated across from us seemed to care in the slightest.

I could tell because I'd met the pair of them before. The Herald of the Deeps remained the tallest of his kind I had ever met, at least an inch over five feet and bare of armour. He yet wore the same dark green – so deep it was nearly black – colour I had always seen him in, but his clothing had grown more elaborate. I could see five different layers to the folded cloth, one almost like a tunic at the bottom while the others crisscrossed over each other at different angles and cuts. I could not quite tell where it began or ended. His beard and eyes matched the cloth, unlike the braided dark hair, and looked like strands of green set in a craggy face whose skin was as hide. In the light of the day, his eyes were unsettling large.

It was the lack of iris, I thought, it made them look even larger than they were. Owl-like.

The lieutenant seated half a foot behind and to his left hadn't changed in the slightest, though. The deed-seeker I knew as Balasi still had so many skulls hanging off him that I could hardly see the armour beneath them. Some taken, some earned, all trophies to raise his rank. His hair and beard were yet blond, though the elaborate thick tattoo – I'd once thought it face paint, but now saw otherwise – looked different in daylight. It depicted a Horned Lord's head and fangs, the ink still black but looking iridescent when sunlight hit it at the right angle.

I'd learned they would be the envoys within half an hour of Cordelia learning it, this very morning, which had been long enough to share what little I knew about the pair before the talks were had. The Herald of the Deeps, whose name was Sargon, had been the leader of the dwarven expansion into Everdark in both a religious and military sense. He definitely had enough pull to talk for the entire Kingdom Under, since he had when striking a deal with Sve Noc through me, but there were limits to his influence. I'd long suspected he had volunteered to lead the Fourteenth Expansion in part to get away from internal enemies, heading out to the fringes where there'd be no rival.

Unfortunately for us, that was very little to go on. The politics of the Kingdom Under were not so much opaque as fucking invisible to the nations above. We heard of it when they were making war against other underground nations – though with the drow exodus, there were now none left – and they visibly kept an eye on affairs near dwarven gates, but no one had eyes below the ground. We didn't even know if there was truly a King Under the Mountain,

whether it was a ceremonial title or one of genuine authority. Even the span of their empire was mostly speculation, with only the wildest of guesses made at their total population.

What we did know was that the Kingdom Under fully mobilized would almost definitely win a war against even a fully united coalition of surface nations. When my father had once called it the only nation of Calernia that was more than a regional power, he'd not exaggerating. Even Triumphant had been satisfied by token gestures of submission and promises of tribute when she'd been conquering Calernia. When it came down to it, if we wanted to have a real shot at beating Keter we needed the dwarves. Their armies, yes, but even more importantly their *supplies*.

The only way it would be possible for an army the size of the one needed to take Keter to be fed was through their tunnels, and to be honest they were probably the only nation capable of moving that much food so quickly anyway. We wanted their soldiers badly, since they had creations up their sleeves that made goblin work look like children's toys and the heaviest foot this continent had ever known, but the supplies were even more important. We could possibly win without the help of their armies. Without a deal for supplies, though, our only choice would be storming the walls of the Crown of the Dead repeatedly until our food ran out. Formalized suicide, in other words.

So we needed the Kingdom Under and they knew it. The question that remained was, what would they ask in exchange for their help? That was the question on my mind and Hasenbach's as the Herald set down the cup of Merovins golden wine he'd been served. There was exactly one vineyard in all the world where that wine was made, the same one where most of the ancient rulers of Salia was buried. The handful of bottles it made every year were worth a small castle each, and by custom only drunk by royalty.

I actually thought it tasted kind of sour, but it would have been impolitic to say as much.

"A rare drink," the Herald of the Deeps said.

In Chantant. Mine had gotten good enough I was comfortable even in talks like this, and theirs was better than their Lower Miezan. It always startled me to remember that Chantant wasn't the First Prince's native tongue either. Lycaonese spoke Reitz. Mind you, as a princess she'd probably been taught the language as a child anyway. I'd been my own mistake to start picking up languages so late in my life.

"Bettered for the company it was poured in," Cordelia Hasenbach replied with a distant but friendly smile.

I put my elbow on the table and rested my chin against my palm. Hopefully we'd stop with the courtesies soon, I felt like we were all more than ready. Balasi must have agreed.

"It is our understanding the Grand Alliance has been seeking to come to terms with us," the Seeker of Deeds said.

"The Grand Alliance desires to negotiate several arrangements," Cordelia smiling corrected, "regarding the war prosecuted against our common enemy, the Dead King."

Balasi was unimpressed.

"We see little war," he said, "and much retreat."

"We've done a lot of dying, it's true," I said. "Tasteless of you to complain, Seeker Balasi, since it will have bought your people time to make your move below."

The dwarf turned to match my eye, but I stared him down. My face was blank as a mask. After a moment his jaw tightened and he looked away.

"We have achieved much these last few years," the Herald said. "Absent conflict in the Everdark, the Fifteenth Expansion began early and colonization has begun. After a thousand years of trials, the great encirclement is finally finished."

I breathed in sharply.

"You've surrounded the Kingdom of the Dead entirely," I said.

He looked pleased, green eyes wide.

"The fortresses still lack cities, but the circle was closed," the Herald of the Deeps said. "Seven rings of stone and steel now contain the Dead King and his works."

Fuck. That was bad news. Part of why the Kingdom Under had been selling us cheap weapons by the wagonload and keeping the Firstborn fed had been that we were useful to them: by drawing the Dead King's armies to them, we allowed them to expand and fortify around him uncontested. Only my calculation had been that they'd not finish the encirclement this generation, not when their current expansion – the Fourteenth – was aimed at the Everdark. I'd badly miscalculated how capable they would be of taking advantage of Sve Noc ceding their old territories. And now, with their circle of rings of steel in stone standing, they were coming to speak to us again.

Having significantly less use for our continued survival.

"If I were to ask," Cordelia mildly said, "when the last fortress was finally raised, I imagine it would be a recent day indeed."

"Eight days," Seeker Balasi said.

Yeah, the First Prince had seen it to. They'd put us off until they were sure their defensive position was solid underground, and now they were coming to talk when they had the upper hand. Hells, more than the upper hand. As far as they were concerned they had all the fucking hands, and they weren't entirely wrong either.

"What a strange happenstance," Cordelia said. "I must congratulate our ally on the swift completion of its defensive works."

"All is possible in the service of the King Under the Mountain," Balasi replied.

"Indeed?" she said. "How pleasing to hear, as we mean to discuss a bargain regarding the sale and movement of supplies."

"You want us to feed your desperate offensive against the Crown of the Dead," the Herald said, voice even. "Without coin to pay for it, even as your empire falls apart around you. A bold request. Some would call it *insolent*."

"Nah," I smiled, wide and without mirth. "Insolence would be offering meat to the butcher and then whining it got chopped, Herald. *Surely* that's beneath everyone here."

Cordelia's shoulders tightened at my side, but she did not try to intervene. She trusted me to back off if I pushed too far.

"The efforts of the Grand Alliance in fighting our enemy are remembered," the Herald finally said. "Yet much is demanded while little is offered."

"If payment is the trouble, then there is no trouble," the First Prince said. "Though the Principate may lack the immediate means to pay and I cannot speak for our allies, we are willing to sign a treaty of repayment and even give you access to our books so that an agreeable number of years can be found."

"That is-" Seeker Balasi began, but she cut him off.

"Which leads me to believe, Your Eminence, that it is not coin the Kingdom Under wants of us," Cordelia Hasenbach continued, staring down the Herald.

It my turn to tense. I could feel the Herald of the Deeps through my Name. Only dimly, and I could not trace out the manner of stories that were his bread and butter, but what I could tell was that he leaned Above's way. Not that I was certain I would have authority over him even if it were otherwise. His Name felt... strange to me, as if it was made of crystal instead of the usual

starlight. Either way, even if he was one of Above's that did not meant he was not dangerous. When the Fourteenth Expansion had been planned, the dwarves had thought they'd end up needing to kill Sve Noc.

And they'd sent the Herald of the Deeps without another Named, which meant they had thought he had a genuine shot at killing a pair of goddesses.

Power like that married to the dwarven contempt for other races was for an unpleasant interlocutor to deal with. The green-eyed dwarf studied the First Prince for a long moment, then snorted.

"It is so," the Herald said.

This time when Balasi spoke up, Cordelia did not interrupt. There was no reason to, since she'd already made her point: the deed-seeker might be subordinate to the Herald, but she was not subordinate to me. She spoke for the Grand Alliance just as much as I did, if not more. Sargon did not seem convinced, but he'd seemingly not wanted to argue the point either.

"There are no guarantees that the attack on Keter will end in victory," Balasi said. "Or that nations signing treaties now will survive the coming decades. A considerable expense would be undertaken on uncertain grounds. The Kingdom Under requires more practical and immediate payment."

Whether they actually thought Procer would splinter even if we won or if they were just pushing I couldn't be sure, but I honestly couldn't argue with the uncertainty there. The Principate had lost massive amounts of farmlands and been depopulated in a way that'd shift around where its traditional centres of power had been. It might very well blow up even if we did beat the Dead King.

"And what might its nature be?" Cordelia calmly asked.

"Creusens," Seeker Balasi said. "Holden. Penthes."

I'd been a long time since someone had surprise me so utterly I could not even begin to think of an answer. They were serious, weren't they? The Kingdom Under was asking for cities. Creusens, the capital of the principality of the same name out in western Procer. Penthes, to the very east of the League and already near a known dwarven gate. And Holden, the seat of the former barony of Holden. A city in Callow. *My fucking city*. After it sunk in, it was not surprise that held my tongue. It was the certainty that if I began if I opened my mouth, I would say things and it would only end when there were corpses on the floor.

"You require that we cede three cities," the First Prince said with admirable calm. "One of which is, I might remind you, not

from a nation signatory to the Grand Alliance or in our power to deliver."

"Yes," Balasi replied without batting an eye. "We will provide formal terms, but I can give you the essentials before then."

"Please do," Cordelia smiled, hate cold in her eyes.

"The cities and attendant lands will be ceded to Kingdom Under and annexed to the territory of the nobles ruling below them," the deed-seeker said. "Their inhabitants may stay as sworn subjects or leave. There will be no restriction of goods coming in or out."

My eye narrowed. It wasn't even a loose protectorate like Refuge or a close relationship like with Mercantis they were aiming for. These were permanent footholds for them on the surface. It occurred to me, suddenly, that the Kingdom Under might be thinking further on than any of us. Should the Dead King be destroyed, would it not be the master of all the underground? It would take generations to settle it all, I thought, but in time they would. And when they did, where else was there to go but *up*? My fingers clenched.

"A straightforward affair," the First Prince said. "We thank you for bringing the offer."

Balasi looked like he might have wanted to stay and talk more, but the Herald's eyes had found my own. Whatever he found there convinced him not to linger. They briskly made their goodbyes and were ushered out. It left the two of us seated together. My fingers closed around my cup of wine.

"Do you have any particular attachment to the cup?" I calmly asked.

She shook her head. I *smashed* it against the table, crushing crystal and spilling gold on the painted wood. I would have torn the fucking table apart too, but it wasn't the furniture that was responsible for the rage in my belly.

"Those fucking rats," I coldly said. "I ought to have ripped their goddamned heads off."

"For the better you did not," Cordelia noted. "It would have taken them at least a sennight to replace the envoys."

The petty act of destruction had brought just enough satisfaction that I mastered myself. I breathed in and out, pushing down the anger. It wouldn't help me here.

"They can't believe we'll accept that," I said. "That the *League* would accept that."

"I imagine they believe we will refuse them at first," the First Prince said. "And then we will lose another third of Procer as well as a few armies and return to them appropriately chastened. Time is on their side, Catherine. The longer the Dead King devours us, the longer they have to prepare their defences against him."

"He's also getting stronger," I curtly pointed out.

"It does not matter," Cordelia tiredly said. "They are calculating, accurately so, that we will bend to their terms long before Keter becomes beyond them. I imagine they will offer to send troops as well in exchange for a fourth city, either Bayeux or Vaccei."

Eastern Procer, right up against the Whitecaps, or the northernmost city of Levant. A loose line across Calernia, allowing them to trade for what they wanted without any possibility of a common front to check them emerging between the powers of the surface. Fuck.

"I cannot accept that bargain," I honestly told her.

There was a long moment of silence.

"We have not yet seen the full terms," Cordelia finally said. "They have promised to provide them promptly and I see no reason to disbelieve them. Let us not speak of this blindly or in the throes of anger. We are meeting for tea tonight, it can be seen to then."

I jerkily nodded. She wasn't wrong that angry as I was there'd be no point in actually discussing anything. We parted ways soon after, and I had to put a spring to my limp.

I'd gotten a lunch invitation.

—

I got ambushed.

Didn't almost get shot this time, it wasn't the assassin kind of ambush, but I didn't see it coming either and I should have. When I was invited to have my midday with Razin and Aquiline, I'd expected that a couple of their captains would be there but no more. We'd had similar enough meals on campaign, they bringing their officers and me mine, and I'd thought it a nice gesture of the lordlings to do the same even here in Salia. A sign of continued fondness even now that they were no longer under my direct command. Instead, just past Noon Bell, I found myself seated with the full roster of the ruling Blood and two Bestowed.

My ducklings I knew well enough by sight. Lord Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood, dark-haired and sharp-faced with the last touches of youth to his cast burning as he turned into the man he wanted to be. Lady Aquiline Osen of the Slayer's Blood, every inch of skin painted in green and bronze as she moved with the grace of an exceptional killer. The other two I knew less, but of the pair it was Lord Yannu Marave of the Champion's Blood I was more familiar with. Careful Yannu, they called that mountain of broad-shoulder muscles. At least in his forties, and his unnatural calm put truth to the sobriquet. Lady Itima Ifriqui of the Brigand's Blood was the last, oldest and lean and whip-harsh. She and her sons were a cunning and vicious bunch.

That left only two. The Barrow Sword, Ishaq, who stood not much taller than me but much broader. His dark and well-groomed beard was as much a signature as the two streaks of ash-grey beneath the eyes that were his face paint or the ancient bronze scale he'd robbed from a barrow along with the sword that had seen him Named. And a woman I still hated like poison, for she had killed Captain: the Valiant Champion, Rafaella. Tanned skin, like all the others, and with a braid of brown hair going down her back. She had the face of someone who smiled often and easy, like Ishaq she was a picture of classic Alavan good looks: short, stocky and built like a brick wall.

The lordlings were the ones hosting, so they were the ones to greet me and offer hospitality – which was probably the only reason a fire was lit in the hall. Like the Taghreb equivalent, Levantine guest right was heavily bound to the symbolism of sharing a fire. The serious, formulaic greeting that Razin and Aquiline had offered petered out into silence as I kept standing and did not answer. Tension rose, then I sighed. I raised a finger, telling them to wait, and went fishing through the pocket of my cloak until I had my pipe in hand. I smoothly stuffed it, passing a palm over the wakeleaf to light it. I breathed in deep, the acrid smoke burning my lungs pleasurably, and blew out.

"All right," I finally said. "Lay it on me."

A moment of silence.

"Can I offer you a drink?" Aquiline tried.

I flicked a glance at the Valiant Champion.

"No."

It would be a cold day in Levant before I drank with that one. The lot of them was seated on the other side of the long table, and I drew back my chair with an eye to scraping the wood against the floor to make as much of that horrible noise as possible. Whatever their intentions might be, I'd make it clear that springing this on me by surprise was not putting me in the finest

of moods. Dropping into the seat, deadwood staff leaning against the side, I leaned back and blew out a puff of smoke.

"Lords and ladies of the Blood," I mildly said. "Ishaq. The rest. It appears this is a larger gathering than it'd been implied to me I would be showing up for. Should I have put on a crown?"

Lord Yannu shook his head.

"It is not as Queen of Callow that your presence was sought sought," the Lord of Alava said.

They wouldn't care about my being First Under the Night either, so that left only one hat. I rolled my shoulder and smiled. Night came to me, the power sluggish and slow in the day but never entirely beyond reach. The room cooled, its shadows deepened.

"Then standing courtesy for the Warden of the East," I calmly told him. "Is 'Your Excellency'."

His eyes met mine, but I'd chided harder men than Careful Yannu. He conceded with a nod.

"Good," I cheerfully said. "Now what can I do for you fine fellows?"

Eyes flicked to the left end of the table, where the Barrow Sword sat. Opposite of the Champion.

"I asked for your arbitration, Your Excellency," Ishaq said. "The Dominion has agreed to entertain my demand for my deeds to be added to the Rolls, but I have some... concerns. As my representative under the Truce and Terms and a trusted mediator, you are uniquely suited to help."

I cocked an eyebrow. The one on my dead eye, though sadly the people here were all too hardened to be moved by anything like that.

"It would be pointless for me to accept the role if all parties involved don't agree I should hold it," I said, an unspoken invitation.

"Malaga endorses your presence," Razin said.

"So does Tartessos," Aquiline dismissed, as if it had been a given.

My gaze moved to the right side of the table. Lord Yannu inclined his head.

"You have always dealt in good faith with us," the Lord of Alava said. "Alava agrees."

Itima Ifriqui, to his right, sucked at her teeth. The Brigand's Blood were known for their viciousness and dislike of foreigners, though ironically enough Lady Itima was Cordelia's closest ally in the Dominion. There was no love between us, though, and if a no was going to come it'd be from there.

"You carried the Peregrine back to us," the Lady of Vaccei said. "Honour was earned. Vaccei agrees."

And that left only one. Rafaella of Alava, the Valiant Champion. The woman holding the same Name as one of the legendary founders of the Dominion, what they called an inheritance in Bestowal – as opposed to the inheritance of Blood, which all here carried as descendants of those same heroes. The rare few who inherited both Blood and Bestowal were raised above all others by Levantines. Tariq had been the last, and of the greatest of the lines of the Blood too. The Valiant Champion was, in principle, *Lady* Rafaella yet I'd never heard the title granted to. I'd never heard of her being close to Yannu, the lord of that Blood, either and I could not recall ever seeing her wear face paint.

That did not speak to influence, I thought, but with Levantines you never knew.

"The White Knight should here be," the Champion said.

Not a trace of a smile to be found on that face.

"That was not the question asked," Lord Yannu said. "Answer, Lady Rafaella."

The broad-faced woman grimaced.

"Not my placement to argue," she said after a moment.

And that was that. Only she wasn't exactly wrong, I thought. If I was here as representative for the villains, then it would be proper for Hanno to be here for the heroes. That he was not was... interesting. And worrying in some ways. Ishaq wouldn't have the pull for that. I'd thrown him at the lordlings repeatedly during the Wasteland campaign, forcing them to work closely together and share dangers, but while relations there had definitely thawed there were limits. Asking to toss out the Sword of Judgement on his behalf would be crossing those, which meant it was coming from somewhere else. More interesting yet, wherever it had come from enough of the Blood had agreed that it'd actually happened.

We'd all missed some undercurrents in the Dominion.

"Then we are in agreement," Razin said. "And the talks can begin."

He offered me a nod, ceding control of the proceedings. If Procerans had done that I would have hesitated, but Dominion ways were refreshingly blunt. So long as I wasn't too rude, I didn't have to worry about fucking up some kind of obscure point of etiquette.

"Barrow Sword," I said. "You made a demand of the Blood. State it fully and without deception."

Ishaq's face was calm, but his eyes kept flicking to the others. It was telling. *He doesn't know how this ends*, I thought.

"I ask for my deeds to be added to the Rolls," the Barrow Sword said. "For my honour to be seen as honour in the eyes of others."

Except it wasn't that simple, of course. Sure in theory all he was asking for was to be recognized, but in practice he was asking the Dominion to make him a noble. Not a high-ranking one, more a landed knight than a duke or even a baron, but still very much a noble still. And, there was the pinch, while openly keeping faith to Below. There wasn't a way for him to be on the Rolls and not a noble without the Majilis, the ruling council of Levant, to change the laws of the land. And there was not a way to change those without violating the Liesse Accords, which forbade nations going after villains simply for being villains.

"When this matter was last brought to me, in Hainaut, it was decided that a record of the Barrow Sword's deeds in Hainaut would be sent to the Blood for consideration," I said. "Was this done and was it read?"

Nods all around. Good.

"Now," I said, "before we continue, I require classification. In the absence of a Holy Seljun, are the people in this room – the four sitting members of the Majilis – able to settle this matter lawfully?"

"They are," Aquiline said. "There may be challenge-duels, but our decision will be as law."

"Good," I said. "Then we can continue. The Barrow Sword's request has been aired. Which of you would answer it?"

Some glances were traded, then Lord Yannu spoke up.

"Worthy deeds were done, this is not denied," the Lord of Alava said. "Lord Razin and Lady Aquiline speak to yet more honour being earned out east."

Ah, so that very blunt ploy *had* paid off.

"Yet it remains that you do not keep to the Ashen Gods," he said, "and no man or woman was ever added to the Rolls who kept to the darkness."

I cleared my throat.

"On what basis would you deny him addition to the Rolls, if he has done worthy deeds?" I asked.

That would be where this conversation would make or break, because the Liesse Accords only gave so much give there. If they dug in their heels and said worship of Below was the problem, then this was going to get nasty. Yannu glanced to his left, passing the torch.

"To be Blood is to be more than simply Bestowed," Aquiline said, straight-backed.

I knew that look on her face, I thought. She meant every word of this.

"It is a burden and a blessing, a duty to the Dominion," the Lady of Tartessos. "Through the Founders we inherited the charge of protecting Levant from all that would see it destroyed, and though lesser lines have since sprung they too took up that duty."

A very idealistic way of looking at it, I thought. Mostly Levantine Named stabbed each other, went adventuring in the Brocelian and sometimes joined bands of five wandering the greater continent. When a villain became very famous some of them might try to go and claim their head, as a few had tried with my father after the Conquest, but that was not frequent. Aquiline, though, put a lot of stock in both blood and Blood. She was known as being pretty cutthroat in Levantine politics and supposedly had once almost gotten Razin killed, but that didn't mean she wasn't an idealist in some ways. On the contrary, it meant she was the most dangerous kind: the one with a fucking sword.

Ishaq was visibly itching to talk and the other side had been doing so for a while, so I gesture towards him.

"I have warred in the defence of all Calernia, and done so ably," he said. "What is this, if not protecting Levant?"

It was Razin who spoke up this time, a good sign for the Barrow Sword. Razin was a lot more sentimental than his fiancée, he kept strongly to friendship when it was given. Aquiline was colder, but that wasn't always the right choice. Razin was better at making allies for a reason.

"This question was asked of us, of the Majilis," Lord Razin Tanja said, "and we had no answer. In shunning the Ashen Gods, did you

become less a son of Levant? We cannot know your heart, and so cannot speak to that. There is only you deeds to behold, and they speak in favour."

I cocked my head to the side. It sounded like they were going to agree to add him to the Rolls, but they weren't actually going to do that. It would be a deeply unpopular decision back home and they'd need to allow the same of every villain who came after Ishaq. People who were likely to be a lot less reasonable and controlled than the Barrow Sword was. So what was the workaround?

"There is a lack," Razin said. "Yet it lies not in you, Barrow Sword. It lies in those whose lesser deeds filled pages in the Rolls without ever living up to the charge they inherited. We have lessened what we are for not asking more of those who would stand high among us."

Ah, I fondly thought. I underestimated you, Razin Tanja. Not just you but your fellows as well. I thought you lot would either bend or break, but you found a way out of it that gives him his dues without breaking what you are.

"No longer will the Rolls be open to all of the Blood, all who are Bestowed," Razin said. "Only to the worthy, those who prove willing to take up the charge that raises us above others."

"You would make access to the Rolls conditional," I said. "Am I to understand this would be for all of both Blood and Bestowed?"

"It is so," Lord Yannu calmly replied. "It was once the duty of the Isbili to keep the Rolls, but the Isbili are ash. It is the duty of the Majilis now, and so this is our decree: all who would enter the Rolls are to stand before the Majilis and ask for a duty to discharge for the good of all Levant. Only when that duty is fulfilled will one be added to the Rolls."

The four of them and their descendants were going to send all those hotheaded killers, Named and not, to go on glorious adventures. And those that returned, that proved worthy and capable of protecting the Dominion's interests, those few would get to be nobles. They'd not lowered the bar to become one of them, they'd raised it for everyone. Including their own families, so Ishaq had no leg to stand on if he wanted to object. Sure the children from the great families could inherit rule of their territory without being added to the Rolls, the matters weren't legally bound, but if the choice of succession was between someone in those and someone who wasn't?

Yeah, that decision would make itself for most Levantines.

"Do you propose to set such a duty for the Barrow Sword now?" I asked.

"We do," Aquiline said. "And request your arbitration in doing so, that the charge might be fairly chosen."

Meaning they didn't want to get accused of asking something impossible of him so he'd get killed and they wouldn't have to add him to the Rolls. Fair enough. There was one detail here that might come back to haunt them though.

"You set a precedent in doing so," I warned them. "Those who follow in my wake, bearing my Name, might claim the same right of arbitration I was granted today."

Meaning someone unlikely to be a Levantine might get a say in their affairs, which they were unlikely to like. None of the Blood seemed particularly eager at that, but Ishaq wanted a word.

"I believe in the good faith of all here," he said, "but I won't extend that trust to all those who'll come after you. The Warden spoke it like a warning, but I say it is instead a promise: should those who come in *my* wake be cheated, they will have someone to appeal to."

Ah, cleverly done. If the Warden of the East could be *appealed* to, it implied I wasn't in the room when the duties were given. Which, to be fair, I would not want to be and my successors were likely to feel the same. Levante wasn't where I wanted to spend the rest of my days. No, instead villains would be able to complain to me if they thought the Majilis were being unreasonable. Which was fair, and difficult for the Blood to argue with. They discussed among themselves, but I was given a reluctant agreement. Which took us to the last part of it. Itima Ifriqui broke her silence to offer the first duty that might get the Barrow Sword onto the Rolls.

"Avenge the Grey Pilgrim," the Lady of Vaccei said. "Slay the Dead King."

I almost rolled my eye.

"That sets too high a standard for those who come after him," I said. "Who could match such a deed? It is not reasonable."

The older woman didn't look entirely displeased, though. I wondered what it was she'd actually been after. Was she softening me up for another ask, or had she just tried her luck at making it pretty much impossible for anyone to ever be added to the Rolls again? Razin suggested killing a Revenant, but it was considered too easy by the others. Aquiline instead suggested that one of the Scourge be slain, and that resonated with the others. It was, Yannu noted, not dissimilar to asking the slaying of a champion from a nation the Dominion was at war with. Honestly I thought it was a little costly, and unlikely to be matched by most who'd follow Ishaq, but he pulled me close.

"I would agree to the terms," he murmured.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Could lower them, I think," I told him.

"I am to be the first, Black Queen," Ishaq smiled, showing teeth. "The honour I earn must be beyond question. I break the path for those who come after."

I studied him, making sure he was certain, and when I was satisfied I drew back. It'd do.

"These are good terms," I said. "I have no objection to them."

Good humour all around, save for the Valiant Champion who had been seated at the right end of the table and not spoken a word all this time.

"Though I am pleased with what was done here," I idly said, "is there a particular reason the matter had to be brought to me this way?"

Rafaella laughed, a harsh bark.

"Fool," the Champion said. "You help them, you be part of it. Now you have to make Hanno and Grand Alliance accept it for them."

Shit, I thought. I always hated it, when someone I despised was right.

[Droughtbringer](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Linnus42

We are building the setup, I guess next for Cat is that meeting with Cordelia? Or does she have time for one more meeting... On the actual chapter, Hmm interesting this just makes Cat's job harder.

I am not sure how Cat really extracts much of anything from Hanno. She needs a whole lot of favors (especially given Cordelia's weak position) and she wants Cordelia as Warden of the West. What is she offering in the exchange to Hanno that he give a crap about?

Also I be surprised if Barrow did much against DK, his narrative relevance is lacking. Barrow is lucky Hanno turned down his offer to duel though that could have ended his chance at this a long

time ago.

As for the Dwarves they might be the next big threat. I wonder how the Giants or Elves making moves would impact their decisionmaking. Interesting DK has not bothered to attack them but I suppose he is not worried if they are mostly in a holding pattern. Also once again Cat and Cordelia not willing to make the major sacrifices while wanting others to do so. I don't think three or four cities is all that high of cost in the face of extinction.

I do like Champ being much smarter then she lets on its a nice though. Funny enough Indrani and Rafaela seem pretty similar. And Cat is still salty I see. I should state again for the record her father opened those hostilities not the other way around. But Cat is a hypocrite so nothing new there.

dadycool

It's not so much that they're not willing to sacrifice three or four cities, it's that each of those cities belong to a different nation/federation, so the cost isn't actually on just them. Not only that, but those cities are a way for the Dwarves to finally have actual territory on the surface, granted to them willingly by the surface-dwellers. If they give up those cities, they're gone forever.

They're not attached to the buildings or locations, they're attached to the "Dwarves belong beneath the earth" concept, which is at this point the only thing keeping them from ripping everything out of the ground and saying "Everything belongs to us now!"

Zggt

> Also once again Cat and Cordelia not willing to make the major sacrifices while wanting others to do so.

I don't know if you've been following the story, but Cat specifically has always been asked to make painful sacrifices, from as early as the first book, and has always done so when required. Cordelia, once the Crusade failed, has been making sacrifice after sacrifice in order to do the best she can for her people. We're talking major ones; friends and family, self-respect, hopes and dreams, and their / the nations / the people's own future.

There isn't much left to sacrifice anymore – they've already sacrificed nearly everything they can in order to survive, which is why something like "conquer a human nation to fork it over once the war is over" is so horrible. The Dwarves have basically been sitting back and profiting from these sacrifices, and if they give in to this, then what future exactly are they offering their people? Serfdom to the Dwarves in all but name?

> And Cat is still salty I see

The Valiant Champion is wearing the skin of her cool aunt. What is wrong with you?

[Liliet](#)

Well, she hasn't been *wearing* it since apparently the first time Cat met her. Went over it at the start of Book 6.

But yes.

shikkarasu

Yeah, Cat gets to be salty until Rafella has no longer killed her aunt. Since time travel is beyond even most Named I feel that is unlikely to happen. Like how Malicia is still on Cat's s*** list for Ratface and the others who died on the Night of Knives.

I maintain that Rafella is no worse than Sabah was, just on a different side, but that doesn't make Sabah less dead, or Catherine grieve any less.

Linnus42

No worse? Sabah was massacring civies lol. Raf has never done that to our knowledge. Not equivalent at all.

shikkarasu

I didn't say they were equal equal, I said Raf is not worse than Sabah. I am 100% agreeing with you on that. My point is that, as Cat said herself, it always hurts more when it is your own loss. It always feels more real.

Sabah was a monster, not because of the Curse, but because of her actions as a Calamity, but that doesn't make her death any less tragic for her family, Catherine included.

(Although, now that you mention it, Raf did insist that the Book of All Things permits drinking the blood of your enemies. "...*maybe not in lame Free Cities version...*" That might have been her trolling, it's hard to tell, but if she was serious then the conversation gets slightly murky.)

[Liliet](#)

Yep, agreed.

I HOPE that Cat starts acting otherwise, but like, she 100% GETS to not.

Raf is a treasure and I love her, but Catherine is under no obligation to see any further than the skin cloak.

Sinead

"Hey while you all fight for your survival, just give us a few cities so that we can further manipulate all of you because you are all a bunch of insects to us."

And before you state that this is hyperbole, Dwarves have casually robbed people and had to have their stuff bought back by the people they stole it from because 'nonDwarves cannot own property'. At that point, the Dwarves want to be treated with high honors, but see no need to extend anything other than paper thin regards to others in return.

They are all fighting the same enemy, and they already have a strict upper hand over the surface nations when they just destroy a city for mining 'too deep'.

As for Cat hating Champion, I think she could probably swallow killing Captain in time (even though Sabah seemed to have been a dear aunt figure for Cat). However, Rafella walking around with the wolf pelt is probably what took that grievance over the edge for her. Yes Cat wears the banners of her enemies, but that is still a symbol rather than anyone's actual skin.

Yes Cat has also done terrible things. But choosing only bare courtesy is still not a crime.

Linnus42

Dwarves not doing anything special besides trying to get the best deal for themselves.

Cat put Akua's soul into her mantle and tortured and had her as slave. So yes I grow tired of Cat complaining about Captain because she done far worse to enemies who have wronged her.

Sinead

People do not change emotional trajectory once they are set.

The fact that she doesn't state that Valiant Champion must leave (as in Book 6) is probably going to be the best of what she will ever be with Rafella unless Cat does any explicit work on that. This issue is going to be the fact that we are in Cat head so we will always catch that association.

As for the Dwarves, the frustration I have is that they already have a shit ton of advantages with regards to the surface if they can just undermine an entire city if motivated.

To me, them getting the surface cities is the start of them conquering the surface, since I cannot see what else they get out of this that they do not get with original trading arrangements with the surface.

Reader in the Night

Yeah, and the Dead King is not doing anything special besides trying to get the best deal for himself, either. Sometimes, the best deal for your enemies means your people stop existing.

And sure, Cat has done some awful stuff. Does it somehow make her a hypocrite for being angry at Raphaela? It's not like Cat has hard feelings against the people trying to kill her for the things she's done either.

Abrakadabra

These are not just cities. They are states with their own adjoined territories. It is like they were asking for New York state, Ireland, and Florida. Though I agree, better robbed Than dead.

Halinn

Ireland, Florida and Quebec more like. Land from three separate nations

shikkarasu

I'd offer them one of two options:

1. Treat with us so that you never need to face the Dead King.
2. We will die on his walls. We will not flee. And then you will face us on his lines. Our bones part of his war machines. Our Goblin Munitions spewed from his Drakes. Our Aspects wielded by his newest Scourges.

It is not an investment, it is a wager. Bet on us, because the thought of losing that bet should *haunt your every thought*.

[Mincheriit](#)

Well... does it really matter who started it when it comes down to people being dead? The valiant champion killed captain, its not unreasonable for Cat to hate her for that, doesnt matter

who started it, also its not like captain started that fight either as you said.

Frivolous

Maybe Catherine and Cordelia can foist the problem with the dwarves on Hanno. Let him talk to Sargon, hero to hero.

dadycool

Is the Herald a Hero, though? I always figured the Dwarves were essentially as neutral as a Calernian civilization could be, with Above leanings. Simply leaning towards Above doesn't make them or their Names Heroes any more than the Drow's Below leanings giving them access to Villainous Names.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's how I read it too.

shikkarasu

Known:

- He has a title with political/military sway. Herald of the Deep sounds very much like the Dwarven equivalent of the Black Knight. Whether as General or Ambassador, he is responsible for the the first impression made on outsiders.
- He also gives the impression of a crystal to Cat; something rigid and inflexible, but considered beautiful and valuable.

Wild speculation:

I think they value efficiency and Law over individuality and Chaos. Blue-Orange morality. They likely have 'Heroes' and 'Villains', but they are simply not aligned with Good or Evil. Much like how Cat gets on well with Lawful Heroes, but not the Chaotic ones. She, herself, values order and farsightedness more than what gods you pray to.

Conclusion:

Herald of the Deep is a 'Hero' to the dwarves because he epitomizes Order. This makes him culturally one of Hanno's, but unlike any Hero on the surface of Calernia. Cat can register that he isn't one of hers, but can't quite place what he *is*.

Frivolous

I must admit I'm a little surprised. The reason I believe Sargon is a hero is right in the chapter above.

Quote: Only dimly, and I could not trace out the manner of stories that were his bread and butter, but what I could tell was that he leaned Above's way.

Leaned Above's way = hero. Yes?

Frivolous

Also, I don't think Order versus Chaos really applies to the Guideverse. This isn't Elric's universe. It's all Good and Evil. That's it.

aurikdomi

on Calernia. It's been pretty heavily implied things are different elsewhere.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Then let us say instead that the principles of Good and Evil seem to be filtered through culture to a certain extent— not totally, but there is a clear effect. And dwarven stories are as disconnected from surfacer stories as they can be without a total absence of interaction. Thus, dwarven manifestations of Good such as heroic Names differ more from human ones than those human ones do from one another. Make sense?

shikkarasu

Yep, I am 100% confident on that part. The bit that is wild speculation on my part is that the Dwarven version of 'Good' is more to do with order, efficiency, and industry, as opposed to Callow's righteous vengeance and charity. That what Dwarves consider Good and Heroic would not be recognisable as such to surface folk.

Sargon is definitely what Dwarves call a Hero, but Cat's difficulty placing him makes me think that he is not what *she* would call a Hero.

dadycoool

Wow, Cat must be feeling claustrophobic, with the floors and ceiling joining the walls in closing in on her.

jamesc9

This was a meeeting with the floor people. Have we had a meeting with the ceiling people?

[Liliet](#)

This is beautiful.

Technically, by asking for Hanno's presence, Raphaella was being easy on Cat!

Kind of want these two to interact peacefully more. Might this be a sign?...

dadycoool

Ah, if only Cat weren't so stubborn.

I keep hearing from others about how bad Cat is for holding onto Captain's death, but I'll say here that Captain was the subject of many firsts for Cat. The first trainer she had, the first friend killed abroad, the first of her father's friends killed, and the first break in the illusion of the Calamities' untouchability. And people hold on to their firsts more tightly than all the others combined.

Sorry, you weren't the real target of that rant, but it was triggered by my initial reply.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I honestly agree with you.

I do WANT them to start getting along, and I'm hoping this might be the start of that, but it's not like... because I'm JUDGING Cat for having found it impossible so far.

Zggt

That ship sailed when Raphaella skinned the Captain in order to make a cloak which she wears everywhere

[sengachi](#)

Yeah there's some room for forgiving, or at least looking past, the killing of one's friend in battle. When someone important to you goes off to make war on a people and one of their enemies kills them, that anger is not a torch easily set down but it **can** be set down.

When your friend is slain in the manner of an animal, and then their killer skins them and wears their skin as a trophy and denies their humanity, that's a bit harder to let go of.

Frivolous

I wonder if the stories of the underground were under the control of the Wandering Bard.

Catherine as Warden of the East doesn't seem to have any authority over any possible dwarven villains, but the Intercessor went to talk to Sve Noc when they were still mortal, so there is

at least a chance that she has authority over dwarven stories, too.

Given that, when she suspended all the stories of Evil, does that mean that dwarven villains are empowered in a similar fashion as surface villains are?

I'm considering this because I'm not so sure that the Herald of the Deeps would be such a powerhouse in any confrontation with a villain. Not anymore.

And the situation is pointing towards a confrontation.

ohJohN

Thank you for articulating this, I was wondering exactly the same!

Cat's ability to sense villains doesn't seem to be limited by distance, region, or recognized authority over them: she could see DK's star in Keter, which is very far away, decidedly not in the East, and he's currently winning a war of extermination against her side. And if she could sense dwarven villains it would, almost definitely, have come up this chapter. That's too useful an insight into their society to not mention, either to Cordelia or just in narration, especially since she bemoans the fact they have essentially no information on the dwarves.

So **why** can't she see them, and does that mean they weren't affected by the shutoff? I'd expect it to cause great upheaval in any affected mixed-alignment society not currently fighting a desperate war for survival (which at this point is, like, basically just the dwarves), so I was surprised they didn't come into the talks *really pissed off about that*. Perhaps there's a lot of dwarven politics happening that we aren't aware of, and the Herald, who leans Good, is making these demands in part to address newly-uninhibited villains?

ninegardens

I'm sorry, but I don't speak Rafaella;
What the heck is Champion trying to say with that last line? Why would Hanno or Grand alliance have to accept anything? Its Levantine business: they set the task, Barrow sword accepted it, that's all there is too it.

Presumably, once they have a warden of the west there might be a "Oh, btw, Levantine heroes might come to you for appeal".
But, ummm... that's it.

Also: dwarves are bastards, and I kind of love it.

Reader in the Night

This, basically. What do the Grand Alliance and Hanno have to accept here? They don't actually have any particular reason to care what Levant does with their Rolls.

King G

If this method is to be the standard going forward, future heroes of Levant will no longer be granted noble status and a place in the records simply for having a Bestowal. That's a marked step down for them, from the previous policy; leader of the heroic half of the grand alliance's Names will need to sign off on it.

Grand Alliance needs to be approving of it for the point Abrakadabra makes; it's an expansion of influence for the Wardens; they'll have some say in the affairs of nations, and that's going to fall under some part of the Accords that's meant to protect a nation's right to self-determination independent of foreign Named influence.

Loin

Yeah, I got nothing. If someone could explain this one to me as well, I'd appreciate it.

Martin Hrádela

Same here, I don't understand Raphaella's line. I appreciate that in this story there is an effort to present

Martin Hrádela

the character conversations similarly as they would have been, not saying things that would be obvious in context, you know, doing the Captain Exposition schtick. But when it comes to complex implied political implications of a fictional world in the midst of big transformative events, it would help to have those explained a little more.

shikkarasu

My read on it:

The entire Grand Alliance is barely on board with Villains having rights, and now Cat wants to make precedent for any Villain who is discriminated against being allowed to come to her for arbitration.

Cordelia already had trouble with that regarding the Red Axe case, where laws around Named came before laws around Nobility. Now if anyone wants to kick out Villains from their ruling caste the Villain in question gets to make an appeal. It's like trying to introduce an

entire continent to the concept of an HR department. No-one currently in power is going to like it.

Rafella is smug because if Cat had listened to her at the start it could have been an open conversation instead of "Hey, Hanno, I took this authority while you weren't looking kthxbye" which is going to be harder to sell while she is mending bridges.

It is, all around, a complication for whoever she wants to become Warden of the West and will sour relations with both candidates.

MoreBeer

They have to accept that heroes can be refused in the rolls now and they can appeal to the leader of the heroes, by virtue of Villains getting to appeal to the warden of the east. And that they had absolutely no say in this process. That their consent was literally taken for granted when a major precedential decision was made. That they weren't even notified before it was a done deal.

Cat is speaking for the GA and the heroes as if it's her right, making decisions they might agree with but not considering their situation because it solves her personal crisis of accountability to Villains. It's the Red Axe all over again and Hanno's going to be pissed.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, they could raise a stink about it, say it goes against pre-existing agreements, etc. They have no LEGAL ground to stand on here, but Hanno has long gone past legal ground with his whole Lord White career. Factually they could push back, even if it's not a "right" they have.

ninegardens

I mean yeah, sure, he COULD push back here, but what's it going to be:

"Yo, Hanno, Cordy, this Barrow sword dude who has been an exceptionally reliable villain for the past two years and has defended multiple cities asked for recognition"

"Okay...."

"Yeah, Razin and Co are giving him recognition, once he stabs one of the scourges. Thought you should know."

"Cool. Sounds like you have everything under control"

MoreBeer

If it was just giving the Barrow Sword recognition then no one would complain, true. But it also affects all Levantine heroes going forward too. And those heroes will be coming to Hanno to protest.

Evgeny Permyakov

If Barrow Sword succeeds, part of the metaphysical weight of the story of the Dead King will be added to the story of Barrow Sword. Besides, dealing the final blow would be a matter of political prestige, surrendering it to Barrow Sword will grant him heavy political weight.

Lady Serpentine

No, they went down to just killing a Scourge.

And it's not like you can exactly whinge about "Agreed to kill the dude we are literally fighting a war to kill" – if Hanno makes any noise about it, Cat would be entirely in the right to point out that SOMEONE has to get the boost to their story, and insisting it has to be a hero completely undermines the entire premise of the Accords. Not to mention using it for politics is not remotely practical, his cup of tea, or sane.

billstewartmt

But if somebody else has a shot at the Dead King, for instance whoever holds The Severance, does Barrow Sword lose his chance?

Alex

Because now Levantine heroes will have to rise to the higher standards to be added to the Rolls without a free pass to becoming essentially a minor noble. Cat has to sell that to Hanno and the rest of the heroes.

Abrakadabra

What Cat probably missed is that she also made a precedent for the warden of the east to speak up for villain in non-villainic nations.

Which also implies that the warden of the west will be allowed to do the same for heroes in Praes for example. She just expanded Both of those authorities.

Reader in the Night

She was invited to participate by the people in charge, though. Even if it does set a precedent that Villains in Levante might ask for arbitration from the Warden of the East; and by proxy, that Heroes can ask for the same from the not-currently

existant Warden of the West, that's a matter of Levante politics specifically.

Though I do guess that Cat's heavy-handed and unsolicited interference in Praes means that the authority of the Warden of the East effectively extends as far as they can force it to extend.

Sinead

The basis of the Rule of Law is in the violence to enforce it, so I don't think the last point is particularly groundbreaking as far as the extensiveness of her Role.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, broadly, that was the entire point.

Juff

Typo Thread:

thought, it (should be semicolon or em-dash)
I'd been my own > It'd been my own
Cordelia smiling corrected, > Cordelia corrected, smiling,
to them, we > to us, we
seen it to. > seen it too.
It my > It was my
was for an > made for an
I'd been a long > It'd been a long
broad-shoulder > broad-shouldered
easy, like > easy, and like
sought sought > sought
him. "Is > him, "is
Rafaella yet I'd never heard the title granted to > Rafaella, yet
I'd never heard the title granted to her
Sure in theory > Sure, in theory
Levant, to change > Levant, changing
I gesture towards > I gestured towards
fiancée, he > fiancée; he
you deeds > your deeds
Sure the children > Sure, the children
Levante > Levant
considered too by (missing word)

Sinead

'Levante' is the capital city of Levant, so I think that works here.

Bakkasama

Wait, when the dwarves said that there would be no restriction of goods coming in or out of ceded cities, did they mean that those surface cities would be as advanced as the Kingdom Under or did they ask that trade with those cities must not be restricted?

[anonymous4968](#)

This chapter was like a sucker punch to the gut. Particularly the dwarves. Never liked them in fantasy stories.

Silverking

In a perfect world, the Dwarves would eventually, for the first time in forever, encounter a problem with the Dead King that they can't solve on their own. Maybe the Dead King sends out a plague, or causes gold to evaporate, or just destroys the ring of fortresses around him because he's got nothing holding him back anymore. Cat says that she has a Crown that will make the Dead King limited, but they need time and supplies to prepare. The Dwarves are willing to throw money at the problem, but then Cat smiles and tells them that she wants the cities back.

As for the implied issue with Hanno, I think the matter is something like "When you're accustomed to privilege, equality feels like tyranny/" Up until this point, getting a Name from Above was an automatic win in Levant, getting a noble title just for showing up. However, these new rules mean that a Hero's entry into the Rolls requires completing a quest (which Hanno probably has no problems with) whose target and difficulty may be influenced by squabbling politics (which Hanno may have VERY big problems with). As the representative of Above under the Accords (and potential Warden of the West), Hanno may have a few words about this arrangement.

Reader in the Night

But Hanno's opinion really shouldn't matter. I get that Levantine Heroes are getting a stepdown (unless they actually put in the work), but who the Levantine government decides to ennoble really isn't up to discussion by foreign authorities. Hanno has no actual grounds to argue in.

If Hanno were a Levantine named, that'd be a different story, but he isn't and that's exactly why they had Raphaela sit in on the meeting: to represent Levant's Heroes.

shikkarasu

Rafaella was not representing Heroes, in this context; she was joint representing the Champions, along with Yannu. he is a descendant of the original, she has the Name. Hanno is still the Representative of all Heroes under the Truce and Terms.

If he or Cordelia winds up Warden of the West it is their right to object to anything Cat says or does. As it stands Cordelia gets to object on the basis of a Named influencing politics and Hanno on the basis of a politician influencing Heroes.

Sinead

It'll be interesting because a 'council' to sell this idea to the GA and T&T is just a meeting between Hanno and Cordelia, as those two encompass all of Cat's sphere of influence between them.

Abnaxis

"Fool," the Champion said. "You help them, you be part of it. Now you have to make Hanno and Grand Alliance accept it for them."

Wait, why does the Grand Alliance care and/ or have any say about the Rolls?

RoflCat

Levant is part of Grand Alliance, and it's also a Good nation.

The new rule would allow for even Villains to be glorified by being recorded in the Rolls, which in the eyes of the Gods would shift its standing from overall Good towards being more neutral.

Which obviously means both Grand Alliance (or rather, the other nations of it) and Above won't be amused at that.

Someperson

It did seem like everything was going really very smoothly for Levant. Of course there was a catch. Of course Cat now has to go explain to Hanno all of the Important Decisions that got resolved while he was absent.

aurikdomi

I think a pretty good counter offer to the dwarves is we will retreat and set up a defensive barrier outside of what you have sealed up, essentially giving the DK access to your area outside of your fortifications. Thought I guess that would require more knowledge of the Kingdom Under than they actually have.

shikkarasu

Use the same Miracles that made the Stairway (modified with Masego's help) to carve a tunnel down to the Dwarves in the Everdark and/or Chain of Hunger. Let the Dwarves enjoy the War on their own fronts if they don't want to pay the surface to

deal with it for them. Toss some goblin fire down the hole when you're done as a 'to whom it may concern.'

No chill for Praes; no chill for Dwarves. We are all in this together, like it or not.

Someperson

Counterpoint: possibly this persuades the Dwarves to join the war on the Dead King, but once that war was more or less over, they would have every reason to declare war on the surface nations of Calernia. And in the course of said war, they would potentially succeed in taking over the lands they asked for in the first place, plus interest. If only by sheer dint of numbers compared to the already decimated surface armies.

Mind you, I am sure the Dwarves aren't quite as strong as they think they are. Clearly they are threatened by the Dead King, otherwise they wouldn't build a fancy barrier to protect themselves. And if the surface nations of Calernia defeat Keter in one last desperate push on their own, well... I am pretty sure what's left of the armies and Named of the surface nations would **not** be defeated easily.

ohJohn

I don't think the dwarves' position is as strong as they're making it seem: if the DK takes over any appreciable chunk of the surface, they are at serious risk. They just finished the Fifteenth Expansion and finally encircled Keter, after a millennium. But those circles of stone and steel, those centuries of work, are pretty much worthless if he can just pack up his terrors, waltz on over to Salia, and start digging there. And also in Rhenia. And Tenerife. And...

Like, sure, that takes time, which they could spend preparing. And, as Cordelia says, they've correctly assessed that the GA would most likely take their deal before it got to that point. But they clearly see containing the DK as a strategic goal, and that'll be impossible if he can get to them from an arbitrary number of points across a third of their empire, his ranks freshly swelled with millions of corpses and some exceptionally powerful Revenants. (Frankly, even if the war ended tomorrow and DK kept only the territory he currently controls, I'd say that's more than enough to kill the notion of containment for good.) They really need him either destroyed, trapped in the Ways, or pushed back into his kingdom on the surface.

So essentially, they're wagering that the GA is not suicidal enough to call their bluff. Funny thing about Cat, though...

Chapter 32: Claimant (Redux)

"Love is a powerful thing, Chancellor, but it only moves you when it is threatened. Hate is ever the bloody spur of progress."

– Dread Emperor Vindictive II

"Not that I'm complaining," I said, "but I'm not sure that counts as tea."

The First Prince emptied the bottom of the flask into my cup, leaving it filled almost to the brim with the pale liquor she'd called *bergmilch*. My Reitz mostly wasn't, but I was pretty sure it meant something like 'mountain milk'.

"There are tea leaves at the bottom, Catherine," Cordelia serenely said. "Ashuran greenleaf. It adds a bittersweet tang to the taste."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Didn't take you for the liquor type," I said. "Much less going for exotic stuff."

"I am not," the fair-haired princess admitted. "It was my mother's favourite drink."

I hummed. It was rare for Cordelia to speak much of herself during our little talks and even rarer for there to be a mention of her family. Rumour had it she was fiercely protective of her cousin, the Augur, and had been like a daughter to her uncle Klaus Papenheim. I'd only met Agnes Hasenbach the once and been closely supervised by her all the while, which put true to half the talk, but I'd only ever known the Iron Prince as keeping some distance from Salia and his niece. Her mother and father, though, I'd heard almost nothing about save their names and causes of death as written in ledgers. Going by the dates her father had died while she was very young and her mother while she was still shy of womanhood.

Even royalty had a way of dying early, in Lycaonese lands.

"Must have been expensive to get the tea leaves all the way up to Rhenia," I mused.

"Princess Mathilda have her a large bag as a wedding gift when she wed my father," Cordelia said, eyes faraway. "They were close friends as girls, rode together against the Plague."

That'd be Mathilda Greensteel, I thought, the Princess of Neustria who'd died at the Battle of Hainaut. The Hawk had gotten her. I'd not known the woman all that well, having dealt mostly with Princes Klaus instead, but she'd been popular with her soldiers and fairly pleasant in war councils. Still, it was strange to think that all these people I'd only ever known as allies against the Dead King, soldiers sharing my war, had lived entire lives before we crossed paths. That there'd been invisible ties between people I knew I'd never even thought might exist. I leaned forward in my seat, tasting of the drink, and hummed in pleasant surprise.

Creamy and a little sugary for my tastes, but the tea *did* add a pleasing twist to it.

"Your mother had good taste," I complimented.

Cordelia laughed.

"Mother had absolutely *horrid* taste, Catherine," the blue-eyed princess denied. "Her notion of a ballroom dress was rabbit fur lining instead of bear, and she was obsessed with cabbage soup. She had tried one in a Lyonis roadside inn that she insisted was the finest soup ever wrought by mortal hands, so the poor cooks had to try a different recipe once every month."

She was smiling, I thought, more genuinely than I'd ever seen her. Her eyes still had that distance to them, almost dreaminess, but there was joy on her face as I'd rarely seen in the First Prince of Procer. What kind of a life she must live, I thought, that she found more to smile among the dead than the living. Best to change the subject, perhaps. I squinted at her.

"So that's why you're so tall," I accused. "Years of cabbage soup."

A glint of amusement in her eyes.

"Our family physician used to tell me fish made people short," she idly informed me. "Something about their oils and the Gods having cursed them to live on their bellies."

"I didn't even eat that much fish," I noted. "Bread and soup in the morning, meat and beans once a week and fish from the docks whenever it was under a silver the pound."

She looked at me in fascination, which might have been interesting in different circumstances but in these served to remind me that Cordelia Hasenbach had never been anything but

royalty. She'd been born to rule, and her silver spoon might not have been quite as silvery as those of southern princes but no piece of it had ever been broken off to buy fish.

"Besides, fish oils? Ridiculous," I snorted. "Everybody knows it's horse meat that does it. Atrophies the muscles, you know, bunches you up like a goblin."

I was joking, but it was an old and common superstition. It was bad luck to eat a horse, even at war.

"Your people and horses," Cordelia drily said, "have a most interesting relationship."

"Please, like you Lycaonese won't slap a wolf onto anything given half a pretext," I snorted. "I once saw a soldier from Hannoven use a laundry stick with a wolfhead on it."

He'd gone after that tent cloth like it owed him money, half the reason I even remembered it.

"I am told," Cordelia said, arching an eyebrow, "that Callowans do not eat poultry when geese are flying overhead."

I glared at her. That was only once a year, when they headed back north to Daoine after winter.

"The soul might go up and entreat its cousins to vengeance," I replied, a tad defensively.

She eyed me a long moment, then her lips quirked.

"If a woman eats a billy goat on the last day of the year, a son born in the new year will have horns," Cordelia shared.

I let out a low whistle, impressed. I sometimes forgot that Cordelia Hasenbach wasn't Proceran because there was really no such thing as a 'Proceran', practically speaking. She was a Lycaonese princess who'd adopted many of the ways of her southern subjects to better ruler them, but it wouldn't do to forget she'd been born far from the places she now ruled. Places now all fallen to the Dead King, even if many Lycaonese had fled south to temporary safety. The King of Death's long shadow once more soured my mood, bringing me back to the tasks at hand.

"My thanks for the tea," I said, "but we will have to spoil it by talking of grimmer things as it is drunk, I think."

"The curse of all affairs, these days," the First Prince sighed. "I assume you have read the terms as proposed by the dwarves?"

I made myself drink. It was either that or cursing and I'd already lost my temper in front of her once today. The silver cup

went down and I licked my lower lip clean of a droplet of creamy liquor.

"I did," I said, tightly controlled. "They're not asking for the entire barony of Holden, just a few miles of land around, but that's already bad enough. It's coppers to the gold they're asking for Penthes and Creusens."

Holden would barely qualify as a city in Procer, barely fifteen thousand people lived there. The amount of land needed to feed them was nowhere as much as a city the size of Penthes or the capital of Creusens would. The Kingdom Under had, accordingly, demanded much more of their surrounding countryside.

"They want Penthes for the water," Cordelia said. "That is my conclusion. They want the trade up the Wasaliti and access to the sea. Dwarves do not sail, but they will have a large population of human subjects to draw on for the work."

"Creusens so they get the western roads that go all the way down to the Dominion," I said. "And Holden for Callow. That's one a weaker gain for them, all things considered."

"They want Callowan grain," the First Prince said. "Though I would not be surprised if they began tunnelling through the Whitecaps within moments of owning Holden. A pass through the mountains would open eastern Procer to them."

And do so right at the height of some of the richest parts of the heartlands of the Principate – Cantal and Iserre – which also happened to be regions of Procer the Dead King hadn't reached yet. They wanted their finger on the pulse of the surface trade.

"This is a foothold," I bluntly said. "They're looking upwards."

"In the long term," Cordelia noted. "The preoccupation with commerce implies that in the immediate they will seek to consolidate their gains underground. A massive undertaking, one that would be made much easier should they have unrestricted access to all our markets."

They'd hit us up for resources, food and cattle and wood, and when they'd drained us to expand their empire they'd turn their gaze in our direction. They weren't even being subtle about this, though from where they stood I supposed they didn't *need* to be. What we were going to do about it, let the Dead King kill us out of spite? We had no real leverage on the Kingdom Under to speak of.

"I'm not comfortable with kicking that problem down the line to our successor," I said. "Look, I know that first we need to be able to *have* successors-"

"I absolutely agree," Cordelia cut in. "I do not need to be sold on this, Catherine. I would have swallowed being taken advantage of in a time of crisis, as indeed the Principate has done to other nations many a time. It would have been legitimate, if infuriating. This, however, is beyond reason."

Tension left my shoulders some. Hasenbach was arguably more farsighted than me in many regards, but Procer's back was a lot more against the wall than mine. I'd been afraid that it might make her inclined to folding whatever the terms, figuring that anything was better than annihilation.

"I wouldn't be able to sell it back home anyway," I admitted. "Even if Vivienne backed me, which I'm not sure she would, a lot of my people would rather see everything west of the Whitecaps burn rather than surrender a city."

"My grip on Creusens is loose at best," Cordelia replied. "And I would lose all influence should I agree to these terms. No doubt they are aware of both these facts. Their interest is in having the signature, the right. They will then have leave to exercise it at their leisure."

A pretext to swing at us if we didn't roll over whenever they got around to taking control, huh.

"That makes more sense than them expecting us to be able to surrender those cities right now," I admitted. "I'd figured they might expect us to keep the treaty a secret until the war was at an end, but if they're mostly after the signature that explains why they're comfortable pushing so hard."

Cordelia nodded in agreement.

"Though that does raise an interesting question," she said. "Why would the Kingdom Under need such an excuse in the first place?"

I sipped at my drink, considering that very thing. I had never particularly got the impression that the dwarves were more than slightly wary of surface powers, and only distantly worried about the prospect of a unified front emerging to face them. Which meant it wasn't about us at all.

"They want it to overcome internal problems," I murmured. "The Herald is an expansionist, but his faction might not have the pull to just drag the Kingdom Under into war with the surface without something solid to brandish as a pretext."

Like a treaty promising three cities that was never fulfilled and which Cordelia and I's successors might not be all that interested in honouring after the horror of the Dead King had passed.

"It might also be that a war of unprovoked aggression against us would be unpopular with their commons," Cordelia noted, "but I share your conclusion. Which is good news in the sense that it shows their position is not as strong as they have been pretending."

"If we had another interlocutor on the dwarven side we could try to go around them," I suggested.

"It might cause the very sort of diplomatic incident that would sink our chances," the blonde princess replied. "I am not dismissing the idea outright, but we should acknowledge the risk."

I grimaced. Yeah, it might be the dwarves would react very poorly to even the perception of us uppity humans trying to play their internal factions against each other.

"I'm not seeing a lot of other options on the table," I said. "We don't have a lot to bargain with."

Cordelia smiled.

"I have heard diplomacy compared to a game of shatranj, Catherine, but it always struck me as weak comparison," the First Prince of Procer idly said. "I have found cards a much more fitting game."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm not great lover of shatranj comparisons," I said, "but I'll bite. How are cards the better fit?"

"Because at cards there are two ways to win," Cordelia said. "By reading the cards, and by reading the players."

My brow rose even further.

"You think the Herald is their weak point?" I asked. "I might be able to take him in a brawl, Hasenbach, but it'd not be an easy ride. I'm pretty sure that unpleasant type that gets stronger the longer they're kicking around."

"Use of force here would be a defeat already," she said. "What draws my eye here, Catherine, is that you told me this Herald was appointed as the head of the Fourteenth Expansion."

I nodded.

"Which must have been a feather in his cap after I mediated Sve Noc's withdrawal," I said.

"Indeed," Cordelia agreed. "And his influence must have further spread with the success of this Fifteenth Expansion, the ring of

fortresses around Keter. Yet both of these are massive, generational works rather far from finished."

I cocked my head to the side, following her line of thought.

"So why is he *here*?" I murmured.

My first thought was that he'd dealt with me before so he was a good fit, but that was the wrong way of looking at this. For a surface nation, in all humility that'd be a valid reason to choose a diplomat if it were certain I'd be part of the talks. I had enough power and influence to warrant that. But for the *Kingdom Under* to make its choice because of that reason? No, that would be hubris. I was not nearly important or powerful enough for the dwarves to bend their politics around me.

"If these talks are viewed as important," I slowly said, "then his appointment might be a reward for those two successes."

"There is likely a degree of that," Cordelia considered, "but it seems backwards to my eye. Why reward success at the frontier by a diplomatic assignment in the heartlands? Especially when the work is not finished. No, Catherine, I don't believe he was appointed to this assignment at all."

I frowned.

"You're betting he fought to get the position," I sussed out.

"That is my instinct," the First Prince agreed. "And there may lay our lifeline."

"If he burned favours to get this position, it's to get something out of it," I said. "So if we figure out what..."

"Then by finding a way to deny it, we gain leverage," Cordelia finished.

How many people in all of Calernia, I wondered, would have been able to figure this much out from less than an hour sitting across from the dwarven envoys? A handful at most, I thought, and most of them long dead. It was easy to look at the way that Procer had spent the last few years breaking apart and take from the sight the lesson that the First Prince was not so skillful a woman as her reputation implied, but that was looking at it the wrong way. Cordelia Hasenbach was the very reason the place had spent years crumbling in good order instead of brutally snapping after six months.

It would not do to forget how dangerous this woman actually was.

"I don't even have a decent guess at what he might be after," I said.

"I have some notions, but I would not venture them in haste," she mused. "Best to let time pass and consider the possibilities with a rested mind and the help of advisors."

I conceded with a nod. I wasn't sure it would help, but given that I was currently drawing a blank there was no harm in trying. We weren't supposed to meet with the envoys again for a few days anyway.

"You'd think with our armies routed on every front there'd be less of this song and dance," I sighed. "But ever since I've set foot in Salia it has been all schemes and politics."

"Indeed?" Cordelia idly said. "Then which of these did your luncheon with the Blood happen to be?"

I rolled my eye at her.

"You could at least *pretend* you're not spying on me," I reproached.

"We came by that information coincidentally, I assure you," Cordelia politely lied.

I weighed my options for a moment. I'd need to get her on board with what the Blood wanted anyway, and there was no real point in not beginning those talks now. My only reason to hesitate was that the matter smelled to me like a pivot. So did this business with the dwarves, for that matter. While it might be true that I was leaning Cordelia's way in the matter of the Warden of the West, giving her the first bite at two pivots out of – well, I couldn't be sure but three was usually a safe bet – might be seen as openly backing a horse in that race. *If I bring in Hanno quickly enough it shouldn't matter*, I finally decided. Both issues were large enough that a single night of forewarning wouldn't make all that much of a difference.

"I was invited to mediate a dispute between the Blood and the Barrow Sword," I said.

She straightened in her seat.

"The request to be added to the Rolls," the First Prince immediately replied. "They agreed?"

"In a manner of speaking," I hedged.

I laid out the compromise that'd been reached out for her. That Ishaq as well as all Bestowed and of the Blood after him would need to undertake a trial assigned by the Majilis to be added to the Rolls, that the Barrow Sword's in particular would be the slaying of a Scourge. And she knew, without my needing to spell it out, that by mediating the solution I had tacitly endorsed it

– and so it was now on me to sell it to the Grand Alliance and whoever ended up filling the seat of Warden of the West. Because whoever that was would very much need to consent. If villainous Bestowed could appeal to the Warden of the East over unfairness by the Majilis, then it became necessary that heroic Bestowed would have the same right of appeal to the Warden of the West. If they refused to take up that duty, then it would sink the entire compromise by making it unacceptably uneven.

I had wondered, in private, if that was not Itima Ifriqui's gamble here. Her silence had not betrayed open dislike of the arrangements, but it had certainly not been a strong endorsement. She might have been hoping this entire affair would collapse without the Blood ever taking the blame for it, keeping good relations with myself and Ishaq without needing to actually let him into the Rolls.

"Ah," Cordelia murmured, eyes glinting with interest. "An interesting manoeuvre on their part. It solidifies the power of the Majilis by taking over a responsibility that used to belong to the Pilgrim's Blood. They are aware of the risks of Levant splintering and acting boldly to prevent it by filling the hole left by the end of the Isbili."

"It's also a way to harness Named in ways that will be useful for the Dominion," I said. "Which I don't particularly mind, so long as it doesn't get out of hand."

If anything, it'd serve as a check on the excesses of more powerful Named. If you wanted to get onto the Rolls you'd need to at least not irreparably piss off the four most powerful people in Levant, which ought to provide a measure of restraint.

"I do find it fascinating that you speak of Named as oxen best put to harness when you are one yourself," Cordelia said, studying me.

"Most of us aren't all that more powerful than other people in most circumstances," I said. "It's the tenth that has too much power and too little sense that needs checking. I can live with another Fields of Streges, but I will not leave behind a world where another Folly would be tolerated."

"Arguably you are of the tenth," the First Prince calmly said.

"So I am," I frankly replied. "And I have done monstrous things, I won't pretend otherwise. Were I facing another woman like me instead of standing in her boots, I would want her dead."

I snorted.

"And that's why we'll have Wardens," I said. "One in the East and one in the West. To curtail the worst of both sides, to keep the Game of the Gods a matter for the Gods and Named."

"The proposal of the Dominion would grant the offices more authority than that," Cordelia said. "It would allow either Warden to overturn a decision made by the ruling council of Levant."

"Only regarding Named, and not even in a general sense," I argued. "The right of appeal would be specifically over the matter of the assigned trial."

"It sets the precedent of an authority standing above nations regardless," Cordelia said. "And puts that power squarely in the hand of a pair of Named."

She wasn't wrong, I grimly thought. I wouldn't be able to assign a trial of my own to another villain, but it was pretty much giving me right of veto on a decision that'd be made by literally the four most powerful people of Levant. The thing was, I was comfortable with that principle. I liked the idea of being able to step in if the Majilis were shafting a villain for no good reason, and the more subtle power that there would be in *not* stepping in should they assign something suicidal to a truly horrid Named. But that comfort came from being raised in a land where Named had the run of the roost: Good Kings and Dread Empresses, Black Knights and Shining Princes.

Cordelia had not been raised in such a land and she did not share the comfort. Procer was the land of the Highest Assembly, but also the realm where people taking to the streets could end a prince. Where priests had told royalty their wars must be just or never waged at all, where Named were honoured but never allowed to *rule*.

"It grants Named power over Named," I replied. "And only influence beyond that where it intersects with more earthly powers. The Principate would not be affected."

"I have not sold the Kingdom Under three cities for salvation, Catherine," she gently said. "Why would I then sell you all of Calernia for the same?"

Yeah, I'd been afraid of that answer. Pragmatic as she was, Cordelia was no less an idealist than Hanno. It just showed in different places. If she had no principles she held to, I thought, she likely wouldn't have been in the running for Warden in the first place. Above had little love for those without conviction. The Sword of Judgement, I thought, would not so much as bat an eye before accepting the deal I'd laid out. Of course he wouldn't. Hanno had broken with me – with us – when defending the independence of heroes in the face of what he saw as

encroachment by the Principate. To him, giving that power to the Wardens would only be a natural extension of what we'd begun with the Truce and Terms.

"The days where I could worry first of Procer are coming to an end," Cordelia said, finger tracing the rim of her cup. "I have worried and worried until it all came to ash, and I regret not a moment of that. Yet I will not slip into the depths of my grief and drown. If these are the end of days, I will spend my last trying to leave behind a better world than I was born to."

"We've been leaving the duty of checking Named to kings and emperors for centuries," I said. "Millennia, even. It hasn't *worked*. Maybe you can pretend otherwise in Procer, where so few of the great monsters rise, but that's not a luxury Callowans and Praesi ever had. There needs to be a check, Cordelia."

"And so you would hand the keys of the madhouse to the mad?" she smiled.

"Is that really," I said, "something someone trying to become one of the mad should say?"

I saw no point in trying to pretend this was not a conversation about her being Warden of the West just as much as it was about my talks with the Dominion. Maybe even more the former than the latter.

"If it must be done," she quietly said, "let it be done right. Let us not unleash a creeping calamity on our children and their children after them."

I gestured curtly, irritated at the implication *I'd* want that unleashed.

"I hear much disapproval," I said, "but little alternative."

"Keep the Wardens out of it," Cordelia said. "Let the hopefuls be given the right to appoint an advocate when seeking a trial that can serve the same purpose as the Warden would have. Better yet, let the hopeful and the Majilis agree on an impartial arbiter should there be disagreement. The power does not *need* to be in your hands, Catherine."

She met my eye with her blue ones, unflinching.

"It is simply where you prefer it to be."

I tamped down on the flash of anger. Instead of leaning into it I made myself consider what she'd proposed. It was, I thought, our differences laid bare. Cordelia Hasenbach, the princess who believed in good and rightful rule, in the might of laws and the virtues of order. Me, I recognized the power in those but I just

didn't trust them the way she did. She'd been born on the good side of them, but I'd not had that luck. My world had been a crooked city watch and a governor strangling his city, an occupying army more likely to give the people a fair shake than our own guilds. So when I had the choice between putting the power in the hands of a Role instead of a pack of greedy princes and their descendants, the choice was clear.

Cordelia believed the Majilis and the arbiters would do right by the people, because she believed that good governance was the rule and corrupt rule the aberration. I believed the same lot would fuck it all up because that was what people *did*, when they got to wield power without having earned it the hard way. So she put her faith in the Blood, and I put mine in the Wardens.

I didn't argue with her. There would be no point, not when where we came from was so fundamentally apart. I could sense, dimly, that this was it. The bone that we would spend our lives picking if she ended up in the seat opposite mine, the prize we'd be fencing over so long as we had blades: where power ought to lie, between kingdoms and Named. So it would not do, I thought, to begin this half-heartedly. If she was going to lay her claim, to draw her line in the sand mirroring my own, then it must be done properly. Let her speak her words and Creation hear them, that she might stand or fall on the merit of her convictions.

"And what is it, Cordelia Hasenbach, that you would make of the Warden of the West?"

She felt it too, I could see it in her eyes. In the way that pale face hardened, those cool blue eyes burning with the same implacable that had once seen her refuse a Name. Her fingers touched a small bracelet hidden in her sleeve, a simple slip of leather set with sharp teeth. I saw them dig into the skin of her wrist, like an apple about to be bit, and she straightened to her full height as tresses fell down her back like a shower of gold.

"The First Prince of the Chosen," Cordelia claimed. "The court of their justice, their captain in the war against ruin. And when that is not enough, when right bends and the way is lost, the wielder of the blade of mercy."

The world shivered and I with it. And somehow, somewhere, I heard it begin. A flicked thumb, the coin going up. Spinning, spinning, spinning.

Gods help us all when it landed.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Linnus42

Ah so its finally started. The coin flipping has interesting implications.

I am still impressed Cordelia thinks Names especially Heroes need to be checked when one looks at the state of Procer. I argue the Princes and Nobility have been the far bigger problem in Procer then the Chosen. If anything one could argue that the problem in Procer is that the Princes have not been checked enough. I suppose growing up as a Noble and Saint being mean to her is what started her down this path. But I don't see how anyone looks at the state of Procer and goes yeah the real issue is that the Heroes (Named) have too much power. That is a decent thesis in Praes but in Procer that is rather laughable.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Procer was brought to this state by villains having too much power.

Linnus42

I have the advantage of the real world Lil so with or without Names I think smart political leaders would absolutely say foment a coup and civil wars in a rival nation? Do you disagree? Granted DK is a bit beyond the scope of the real world but you could liken him to a certain leader of a certain European country from the 1930s to the 1940s....

Also she is in charge of the Heroes not the Villains so she need to point to examples of Heroes being the main issue and not the Princes and Nobility. The way I see it Cordelia by dent of being a Noble thinks the system has it is works pretty well. So she is doing everything she can to limit Heroes especially from challenging powers of the Nobility. Cause you know inherited privileges is great when you get to be at the top and the one inheriting.

dadycoool

She was also born with the privilege of having a positive light shown on nobility. She never really interacted with someone the system had failed until she was an adult, so she naturally expects the failing to be the the exception rather than the rule.

"Oh, the system works for me, so anyone for whom it doesn't just needs to git gud. Hey, stop waving that sword around, you might damage the way of life that benefits me."

caoimhinh

Ehmm... sort of, she actually grew up being shown how the southerners schemed and abandoned the Lycaonese in their fight against the Dead and the Ratkin, and became First Prince after seeing the whole Principate eat at itself in a civil war for nearly two decades.

She knows firsthand that the ruling class of Procer is corrupt, selfish, and scheming, only ever brought to heel and behave by greater force and necessity.

So this is just her being a hypocrite and defending her way of life because it benefits her, Cat is just thinking too highly of Cordelia given her impressive record of keeping order in the middle of the apocalypse. But Cordelia is doing what she has always done: defending the system that benefits her while proclaiming it a beautiful and effective thing, despite knowing full well that it's the opposite.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

You only lose (per Godwin's Law) if you state your interlocutor is Hitler, or a Nazi, not just by mentioning those reprehensible b@stards.

If only he were as short sighted as those losers.

shikkarasu

Not how Godwin's Law works.

a: *"Sooner or later in any online argument, someone will bring up Hitler."* Godwin posited that any debate slowly approaches the point where someone references Hitler, that it is just part of our culture now, but should not be. His Law was never about losing arguments be technicality, that was appended to him after the fact.

b: While Godwin did think that comparisons to WWII made light of one of the greatest tragedies in history, and certainly of the past 100 years, he fully admitted that such comparisons need to be made when they may sense.

Quote: *I urge people to develop enough perspective to do it thoughtfully. If you think the comparison is valid, and you've given it some thought, do it. All I ask you to do is think about the human beings capable of acting very badly. We have to keep the magnitude of those events in mind, and not be glib.*

The comparison by Linnus42 was not being glib. The Dead King has a fascist (dis/u)topia and is waging war on the

world to expand it. This is a parallel, likely intentional on the author's part, and it deserves to be brought up

Sparsebeard

Ok, I'll bite. How is Keter a fascist utopia?

shikkarasu

Not Keter as a whole, but the Serenity in whichever Hell it was that DK took over. I mean, we later learned that the guide describing it was Malicia in disguise, but I don't think she was lying about it, so much as repeating what she had learned from either the Tower's records or in her stay before the Woe arrived. The parts of Keter in Creation is more analogous to the frontlines of the war.

You can compare this to a lot of IRL locations. There is the Good part, where the rich and/or tourists are found, and the Everywhere Else. Nothing is a 1:1 comparison, of course. This *is* a fantasy setting.

caoimhinh

Yeah, the Augur also mentioned how even more horrifying than the madness of death that surrounded the Dead King, was the voices actually worshipping him as a god.

Sykomantis

The correct phrasing, fyi, is "As an online debate goes on, the probability that Hitler will be mentioned approaches 1." which is a slightly weaker assertion, in that the small amount of probability still left on him not being mentioned means it's still possible he won't be, though increasingly unlikely.

caoimhinh

Ironically, the names Keter, Sephira, and Neshamah, are Hebrew

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

True, dat.

The Dead King is deeply anagolulous(sp?) To the Nazi regime.

I was being "Glib". He vaugebook referenced 1940's Europe. I grokked his take, and then joked about Godwin's Law.

I appreciate your feedback. It's always nice to read a well thought out response to one of my flippant/

intoxicated posts. And I know a little more about our consensual hallucination (reality) as a result.
Yay! Non-zero-sum interaction! Everybody wins (ymmv!)

therealgridlock

The difference in this argument is fundamental to the experiences of Cat and Cordelia.

Cat grew up where the *government* was evil, where everyone was evil, (or morally grey) and only the individual could be good or justified.

Cordelia grew up where the government was *good* and all the *people* were good, and the governments were therefore held to higher standard and could be good or justified.

They're technically both right, and that's why this dichotomy exists.

On the east, evil reigns, and the maliciousness of government is apparent, hence why Cat expects a single person to have a better moral compass than an entire country.

On the west, good reigns, and the government is held to a high standard by the people, because every single person has a good moral compass, and that system is inverted from the East.

Democracy works when the majority are good. When the majority are evil, only a sufficiently good tyrant can change things.

I do not have any idea of what a third form of government would be, there is only ever either democratically elected positions, or autocrats, so short of forming Cardinal and giving it a constitution and a tripartite governmental system (judicial, executive, legislative) I have no idea how this conflict will be resolved.

—

Furthermore I don't think the DK is a certain national socialist, because it would be easier to describe him as an allegory for the other branches of socialism. He might run a fascist regime, all within the state, nothing outside the state, everything for the state, or however that goes, but his universalization of resources and use of a serf class (the undead) sounds more like the USSR or Mao's china than a racial socialist expansionist empire. He might be putting on a show, like Mussolini though.

He's only technically expansionist because he wants to achieve some goal of world domination, and kill everyone to do it. I don't believe for a second he's doing it because he thinks undead are a superior man than the living. There's no untermensch for him to persecute, he doesn't even hate man I don't think, he just can control undead, and therefore all must die who do not follow him/worship him (and being dead you still follow him, perhaps more useful dead even)

Besides, theres too much roman history involved in this story for me to see recent European conflict. All the characters, places, conflicts, and stories are all Greek and Roman etc.

I mean, they literally march footsoldiers in legions and envy cavalry 😊

The place with the democracy may as well be Athens lol.

Sinead

Also, is the undead really an 'underclass' or more akin to mechanisation? It does depend on your perspective on what undead are, but my read is that the only undead that seem to have sentience are the Revenants, with the Binds being a shade with limited sapience similar to a lesser version of Assassin, and the Bones being essentially automatons.

aurikdomi

Do you mean the dead king specifically or other villains generally?

[Liliet](#)

DK and Malicia, most specifically.

erebus42

Those were outside actors taking advantage of the flaws inherent to proper though.

caoimhinh

Yeah, let's not forget that the Princes of Procer have continued to bicker and scheme even while the sky is collapsing over them and the world burning around them.

[Liliet](#)

They were actors internal to the system that is the continent.

Gabe Meadow

Well, it means Cat's going to have issues either way with her potential candidate. On the one hand, Cordelia isn't going to hold a bias in favor of Heroes. On the hand, it just means Cat will have a different kind of problem than she would with Hanno.

She'll have to decide which is more manageable in the long run.

shikkarasu

I like Cordelia's issues, though. She is cordial with Catherine, but also has very opposing viewpoints. This is good. The Wardens should always try to see eye to eye, but must always require each other to compromise. Otherwise why have two Wardens?

Hanno seems like the sort that would gleefully work with Catherine to consolidate power right up until it was time to wage a holy war on her. I could easily be misreading him, and I'm not fully convinced until we get to see the next meeting, but I am afraid of what the Name would do for him at this point in his life.

I will also call out that this isn't fair. That Hanno has been very tolerant of Cat, and genuinely wanted to work with her as early as their first meeting. My hesitation comes from the fact that he is in a dangerous headspace right now and we haven't had a lot of concrete statements about his plans going forward. I think he is a good person and may very well become a great Warden. I'm just not convinced he will become that in the next 2 months. Not yet.

Salt

It doesn't really make sense to attribute holy wars to Hanno, when the only holy war we've seen so far was started by Cordelia, and for no other reason than political convenience at that. It's the other way around – Cordelia is the one that'll work with you when there's a common enemy and start a holy war on you if it's convenient for her.

IMO the main difference between the two is that Cordelia is all about big picture systems. Nations, laws, armies, politics, but not so much the individual people affected by the systems. She sees numbers and concepts, she sees prominent figures, and the people close to her. She doesn't see the nameless soldiers or faceless civilian, and doesn't care about them the way she cares about bigger things.

Hanno sees each individual person, and sees systems in terms of how they affect individual people, not the other way around. He lived his whole life with his feet on the ground, seeing firsthand how those systems affected the people

living underneath them – from his time in the courts, to his mother and father's tragedy, to Judgement looking through the lay of each individual person's past, future, and every possible branch in between for every choice before passing a sentence.

If you are a noble, a ruler, or if you care about nations or overarching systems, you want Cordelia in charge. Because she cares more about those than people, and will sacrifice entire nations full of people to get to an ideal – just like she tried to do with Callow. The nation will endure, but she might sacrifice you to do it without your consent.

If you're an average civilian, a powerless orphan, or anyone who isn't rich or powerful, you want Hanno in charge. If politicians and rulers want to harm you for the sake of the nation, their own convenience, or some nebulous greater good, Hanno is the one that'll step in to hold up the sky from falling on your head. He'll watch those greater nations or systems burn, just to make sure something so Unjust won't happen to you – the person.

Cordelia is the kind of person the current Catherine would feel more at ease with, near the end of the journey. Hanno is the kind of person the original orphan-Squire Catherine wanted in charge, when she set out in the first place.

sloodles

I love this summary of their positions. I'll just comment, since it seems to me (and this judgment may just reflect my **own** bias) that you favor Hanno's way of thinking: Cordelia's way of thinking **does** sometimes produce better gains for the common people than Hanno's.

Now, Hanno has been seen to be on a path toward making greater choices of his own in leading men, etc, but even presuming some progress in that direction, he thinks on the individual level and **sometimes that's a problem**. "If you care about overarching systems, you want Cordelia" – okay, but overarching systems **matter**, and they matter to **people**. Hanno thinks of the destitute orphan, but I don't think he'd be willing to choose between policies that balance orphans made, crops harvested, money gathered and spent. While I won't go so far as to say anything can be justified for the sake of a minor gain spread over a million people – I'm sympathetic to utilitarianism, but not really willing to give it that much slack – I will say that I think Hanno wouldn't even be willing to consider the choice. I trust Hanno's judgment on a low-level, but I don't think he'd be willing to really think about the broader good at a scale of nations.

Sacrifices for the good of the many are sometimes necessary. Really, I think that summarizes best the positions of the three Wardens: to make overdone chess analogies, Cordelia sacrifices others, like chesspieces to keep the king (or queen) alive; Hanno would sacrifice himself, or those he knows, but is unwilling to look at the broader game; and Cat mutilates herself but has grown increasingly willing to sacrifice others as well.

Salt

I actually do like Hanno a lot more as a character, but I agree Cordelia is a better ruler. She has the necessary skillset to be a queen or a prince in a way that Hanno simply doesn't, simple as that.

However, I don't know if that's the most relevant question when talking about how fit they are for the position of Warden. From what I'm seeing, the Wardens aren't kings and queens, reigning over the land like an emperor of the west. They're similar to how the Bard was describing it – holding wardenship over good and evil – the concept of it, not the nations, politics, or armies. They're holding dominion over what, conceptually and morally, Good actually is, as well as how Above's ideals translate in practice. They're not so much planning economies or balancing the budgets of nations.

At which point for the Warden of the West, the question imo ends up being what matters more, when push comes to shove? Maintaining the individual rights of every person, regardless of status, or sacrificing those rights for the greater good of society, even if the means may sometimes be unjust?

It's actually kind of an interesting question with strong arguments on both sides, my personal preferences aside

jamesc9

One way of focussing the question: in a sufficiently bad crisis, which of these do you sacrifice first:
<https://www.greens.org.nz/charter>
Social responsibility, ecological wisdom, appropriate decision-making (subsidiarity; non-facism), non-violence.

caoimhinh

Yeah, I can't help but get the impression that Cordelia has been a massive hypocrite in her actions and statements for quite a while now. For all that she is portrayed as different

than the rest, she's still defending Proceran political bullshit the same way Malicia kept idolizing the madness of the Old Tyrants despite portraying herself as a new breed. Even now as Cordelia argues Catherine wants to keep power in her hands, she is being a hypocrite. Cordelia has spent her entire time in the story scheming and political maneuvering to keep power in her hands, every single one of her interludes showing her worrying about being deposed from the position of First Prince.

In the end, Cordelia's Role would be marked by stubbornly refusing to bend while being strangled by the letter of the law instead of enforcing its spirit. Arrogantly claiming to have authority due to birthright and political moves while pretending that the law is just and is executed in its theoretical perfection, even when she has spent her whole life seeing otherwise.

Linnus42

I don't think Cordelia is a hypocrite. I think she is what she is and that is a Noble whose main concern is protecting the power of her fellow Nobles from ever being checked. Inherited rights are great when you are the one doing the inheriting. Not only would her wardenship put Named under the thumb of their local governments much more directly. It would massively raise the bar of difficulty for any peasants protesting and trying to get reforms because a government of Nobles can just vote to send a Named Strike Force. You want to be the mob staring down some of the more powerful Named during a protest.

I argue if Cordelia's Wardenship was a reality some Damned would do what the one Saint killed tried to do and succeed. I think there is enough corrupt Nobles to bribe with immortality and other concoctions to get some pretty good protection since Saint thought he end up running at least half of Procer. And even if you get one Rogue Named like Saint well they be staring down the barrel of some sort of Elite Named Strikeforce trying to rectify that issue. That seems like a tall order even for Prime Saint.

Abrakadabra

Wut?

Sinead

Laurence gained the epithet 'Regicide' when she killed a Prince that was under the control of a Damned that brewed life giving potions. The idea that the overwhelming shows of force like Laurence did with killing the Prince in his throne room would be retaliated against (since the goal of

the Articles of Strife is to keep the battles between Named focused on Named). In this case, said Damned would have political influence from said Prince to vote in their favour in said institutions.

AbraKadabra

I get that part. What I dönt get is where the speculation about nobles using the named to suppress the proletars come from?

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, that's bound to make a « Protector of the Smallfolk » or whatever appear.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Yeah, Chosen aren't Procer's problem. The Heroes are the only reason Procer held on for as long as it did. The problem was the rulers.

caoimhinh

Agreed.

I mean, remember the Arsenal Arc? Cordelia was angry at Mirror Knight when he was just a pawn of the Prince of Cleves and his daughter scheming to use him against the Drow, or hating Hanno for not agreeing to let her break the agreement she had signed of letting Named be judged by Named, a hatred that still persists to this day and in Cordelia's head likens Hanno to the Saint of Swords. Hypocritical, selfish, and ridiculous to an impressive degree.

Konstantin von Karstein

Her problem is with Named having too much power, not just Heroes. Here she opposed Cat, a Villain, having power over another nation.

AbraKadabra

Oh, but besides Saint, there are Chosen like the Mirror Knight, and his little group in the Arsenal and the Red Axe and let us not forget our grandfatherly Grey Pilgrim WHO killed a village with a plague to stop the Black Knight.

Besides there is historical precedence too. There was a hero that decided it is acceptable to kick off a crusade by mind rapeing the city of Salia by the help of an angel, and making hundreds of thousand man woman and children take up a sword and fight against the Dead King and his armies. That is the thing Cordelia fears. Named above the laws by way of their overwhelming power.

Linnus42

I mean Saint got her career started by stopping a Prince who was letting a Damned experiment on peasants for magical concoctions. Under Cordelia's system who stops that? Red axe got recruited by Bard at the very start. Cordelia didn't have a solution to stop the Black Knight so its a bit rich of Cordelia to complain about GP when the other option was Amadeus starving the populace. Lets not act like GP much like Saint hasn't stopped plenty of monsters. Mirror's Knight main issues were also caused by Nobles who had a plan to backstab the Drow and take all their land. An issue on which Cordelia slow rolled Cat and Sve Noc and had no plan to stop without MK's folly at Arsenal.

Abrakadabra

Salia mind raped?

Sinead

The reason they know what the effect summoning Contrition into the city will do is because a Chosen had done that previously to start a Crusade against the Dead King.

Abrakadabra

True. So?

erebus42

I believe the point they're making is that the act was truly monstrous even if it was perpetrated by a Hero and as such is an example of the horrific ruinous consequences of leaving Heroes entirely unchecked.

caoimhinh

No, what they are trying to show is that those things happened in extreme cases, scenarios where there was little to no other option. Desperate situations where the authorities had failed to give an appropriate response to the problems.

Salt

Seems hypocritical of Cordelia, since the Tenth Crusade that she started for the sake of political convenience has caused more deaths than every Hero that was mentioned combined.

Cordelia fears individuals having too much power and too little reason, but thats exactly what essentially all of Proceran ruler ship is – herself included. Individuals with too much power and too little reason, concerned more with

etiquette and political maneuverings than the fact that their own petty actions are piling up civilian bodies faster than most Villains, let alone Heroes.

The Saint, while being an unreasonable cunt, got the title of "Regicide" in the first place because she never put rulers above the common people as somehow having more worth. Even during the Princes' graveyard, her motivations were completely pure and selfless – she genuinely believed (regardless of whether her belief was correct or not) that taking a stand would simply lead to less people suffering in the long run.

The Pilgrim is similar, in that whatever deaths he caused were all for the sake of preventing greater deaths. He killed a village to capture Black yes... while Black was quite literally in the middle of burning and pillaging his way through the heart of Procer for the explicit purpose of causing as much damage as possible. Black wasn't innocently taking a stroll on vacation.

At the end of the day, both rulers and named tend to be extremely powerful individuals that cause a lot of collateral damage and often make gigantic mistakes. The difference is that heroic Named at the least always have positive motivations, which is more than you can say for politicians and rulers.

Hargabga

Because in the end of the day, in Procer and to a smaller degree everywhere, the noble is a subordinate to his subjects. His rule is a compromise between what he wants and what the people he rules over will allow. Did you miss the bit about "where people going to the streets can end a prince"? That is the core of the issue. She is against leaving power in the hands of a position which is decided by the eldritch entities that are out of contact with reality, literally. In a way, she really is more like Hierarch's Above mirror, like Hanno is to Cat.

Which is why, I believe, in the end she will be the Warden. Not just to contrast Cat's claim on the Villains, but her views on where the power should lie.

erebus42

I mean attempting to basically sacrifice her entire nation on an altar to Good is admittedly a little more than "mean", so it's a bit understandable that she'd be wary of the excesses of Heroes and Named in general.

Cicero

The Sword Saint.

That's pretty much all that needs to be said there. I mean, Cordelia didn't become hostile to Heroes until a hero decided to use her trust to back a plot to destroy Procer. (In the belief that through that destruction the seed of a better world would be planted).

I think it's pretty obvious why Cordelia thinks there needs to be a check on Heroes.

Dredcor

In Cordelia's eyes, rulers can be checked by laws and courts. If you give Names authority superceding that of rulers, the Named would have nothing checking them.

In her eyes, presumably.

Salt

I think the main counterpoint to the idea that rulers can be checked by laws and courts is Cordelia herself. There isn't a court or law in existence that can truly check her, if she really felt like overturning it or getting around it. Ironically, she herself is the best proof that mortal rulers need a check on them that goes beyond mortal systems of government.

Arguably that's also why so many name tropes come from orphans, or people of otherwise humble stature; because normally the system doesn't actually work. Most of the time, people with political power do what they want despite what laws are in the way, and everyone else has no recourse. The very few people of average origin that actually manage to rise above their station and challenge that trend are so unbelievably rare and exceptional, that it's an origin story worth being Namelore in and of itself.

[onedollargum](#)

Ohhhh no. Not Mercy.

dadycool

Well, Mercy seems reasonable, especially in comparison to the other two choirs we've seen so far. They're still Angels, but they're the best of the lot presented.

[Hargabga](#)

It really doesn't give much credit to angels that the "let's suffocate a child in their sleep or kill a village to catch a villain" are the best of the group.

shikkarasu

Yeah, never mistake Mercy for Compassion. You can justify *anything* with Mercy, just look exactly far enough into the future to the day where your actions will have a net positive on the world. No earlier, no farther.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Huh. You just pulled out the fundamental flaw with utilitarianism.

erebus42

I suppose it would still be better than Contrition. At least Mercy will still choose the lesser evil instead of spreading pointless suffering. Granted, it would be more ideal if the Choirs would fuck off and stay out of Creation where they don't belong but I suspect that would be a hard sell.

dadycool

Mercy: wielders of the coup de grace.

caoimhinh

Mercy definitely has a better advertisement department than other Choirs, but let's not forget those are the guys that will not move unless there's a sacrifice already.

It's like a Catch-22. They abhor unnecessary suffering, but it's necessary for suffering to be happening for them to act. At least if we go by their interventions through Tariq, each one of their interventions demanded a lot of suffering and sacrifice before they got to move.

erebus42

To be fair, traditionally the side of Good tends to be a bit more reactive than proactive in general.

Forum Explorer

Well because in an ideal world, no one would ever call on Mercy. Same with Contrition. Or even Compassion. When people are being good, when things are going good, people don't need Angels, so the Angels don't act. It's only when things have gone wrong that it is time for Angels to step in.

Konstantin von Karstein

I think it's just a way of saying that the WotW will kill Heroes who step too out of line. Mercy wasn't capitalise like the Choir is.

Rey d`Tutto

True, mercy, not Mercy.

The coin flip being caught is what almost gave Cordy the wife Name to begin with. Then the whole Choir was Stalled by two Mad Men. Is That the Coin flipping now? Judgement?

Rey d`Tutto

Damned Autocorrupt!

WotW, not wife.

Hargabga

She is the best waifu though...

Konstantin von Karstein

I think it was just a figure of speech, not foreshadowing 😊

shikkarasu

It is, ironically, Hanno's coin. Swords on one side, Laurels on the other. They just represent different things, now.

The Sword of Judgement versus the First Prince's Crown.

Rey d`Tutto

And I think her palm was branded by the Laurels.

Anybody care to check?

beleester

"Killing the corrupted to prevent them causing further harm" is very much a Choir of Mercy sort of thing, so it could be either.

Konstantin von Karstein

It wasn't capitalise, so I doubt it it. Guess we shall see.

caoimhinh

Ironically, we already have a Blade of Mercy (the young man with huge sword that acts like Mirror Knight's sidekick) who is not associated with the Choir of Mercy.

Juff

Typo Thread:

Mathilda have > Mathilda gave
Princes Klaus > Prince Klaus
smile among > smile about among

A glint > There was a glint
a silver the > a silver a
ruler them > rule them
That's one > That one's
What we were > What were we
successor," > successors,"
"I'm not great > "I'm no great
that unpleasant > that unpleasant > that he's the unpleasant
didn'tttrust (missing space)
same implacable (missing noun, or implacability)

Liliet

...kind of don't like that Catherine didn't lay out her arguments about not trusting law and about Cordelia's privilege making her see otherwise then and there.

Sinead

Fair point. I wonder if Cat is doing private audiences with the claimants, and then we will have meeting with the two of them where she lays out her arguments to both their positions and mediates the final outcome.

I think Cat's trying to be a bit hands off here in the spirit of Tariq's warning during Hanno's crisis of faith.

aurikdomi

Tariq's warnings and I feel another hidden reason to be revealed later.

ninegardens

Yeah- this doesn't feel like an argument between Cat and Cordelia in some sense.

Like... the battle like Cordelia just put down is a... point of debate, (probably an implacable one), but it **isn't** a point of violence.

Cat is really saying "Okay, here's a problem, as warden of the west, how would you go about resolving this problem"

She isn't interested in winning the argument, this is simply part of the exam.

Sinead

Exactly. Cat isn't choosing who is Warden. She is attempting to facilitate a peaceful enough resolution of this conflict. So if she collects the first reaction that the claimants would have to an issue that would fall within the sphere of influence of the Warden of the West.

If Cat keeps her thumb off the scale it should be well enough.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

agumentic

Cordelia knows Cat's opinion and arguments perfectly well.

[Liliet](#)

Does she though? Does she really? This is the kind of thing where a timely reminder goes a long way.

[Hargabga](#)

Yeah, she does. In so far as words can convey, anyway. To repeat those would change nothing, it's their experience that differs.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

One was an Orphan Pit fighter in a conquered land, raised in the City where Good was pious healers and Evil kept the Streets safe-ish.

The other was Royalty in a Land Besieged. If the Dead King was quiet, the Ratlings would be around by Spring, unless it was Spring, or Summer, or Autumn...

One lived with a corrupt governor, and the other lived where the nobility kept their folks alive.

It doesn't get much more different.

hakureireimu

If Cat can figure out Cordy's position and where she came, so can Cordy with Cat's positions. They have a fundamental difference in value that isn't amenable to debates.

[Liliet](#)

Not quite. This is a matter of privilege, aka, Cordelia simply hasn't had the same life experiences as Cat and doesn't have the same perspective. We got a vivid reminder of that during the "I didn't even eat that much fish" part of the conversation.

She actually genuinely cannot easily get into Cat's mindset the way Cat can get in hers.

[Hargabga](#)

I feel you are mistaken about Cat being able in any way to get into Cordelia's mindset.

[Liliet](#)

Perhaps.

Linnus42

I think ideally Cat should explain her world view and really flesh out where she and Cordelia stand. She made assumptions about Bard and that really messed things up in Praes.

Granted I think she doesn't want to talk too much to Cordelia right now because she doesn't know who she wants to win over Warden and doesn't want to tilt the board too much without sketching out both sides.

shikkarasu

This. Liliet's conversation needs to happen, but only with the Warden of the West. I think arguing (in the sense of debate, not a shouting match) about the nature of Wardens would be good for all of Calernia, with Cordelia having Cat's old "keep Names out of our politics" stance. The problem is that having that argument is effectively tipping the scales prematurely, and picking a Warden is also picking struggles between the two Named.

She CANNOT have that conversation before feeling out her alternative. For all Cat knows, her struggle against Hanno would be a better fit for the world, even if it he would be worse for the Name. The pair of her and him might be better for the Role, even if she hates his politics.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, true.

I just wish Cat would assume less and talk more, yeah.

SpeckofStardust

Eh Cordy cant be the warden, if only because the point of the Wardens is to control and have final authority over Named, and her argument is that they shouldn't have that. It's a decent argument to be made, butt her argument leads to that wardens shouldn't be needed in the first place.

So Cordy shouldn't be one in the first place.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia thinks that they SHOULD have authority over Named, but not over EVERYTHING THAT MIGHT HAPPEN TO A NAMED, aka over actions of civic governments

[sengachi](#)

Eh, this is the kind of thing with webserials where I *always* see it resolved eventually, so I don't bother picking a bone over it. Sure it's relevant to this chapter and not in this chapter, but it'll still be discussed eventually.

aurikdomi

Coin flipping huh? so likely no surprise candidates for Warden of the West unlikely though that may have been.

Sinead

Alas, I won't get Razin stabbing chucklefucks to establish order.

Best dark horse Warden of the West in my opinion.

Linnus42

I don't think this will be decided by swordplay but if it was at we are looking at Cordelia, Frederic, Hanno, Razin and Rozala as the prime candidates. Well Hanno is washing all of them in combat.

Sinead

I was more meaning Razin walking into a Council of the Chosen and stabbing people who get out of hand.

One can dream, though.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

There may be Deputies...

Bad@games

Forgot Abigale as best dark horse candidate

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Abigail is best!

Darkening

The coin will land on edge with Abigail as the warden obviously.

shikkarasu

Abigail: *Wakes up in a cold sweat as Warden of the North*

"WHY WHY WHY"

receives correspondence from Empress Basilia, protector of the league, and Claimant for Warden of the South

"NO WHAT WHY NO"

dadycool

The difference between these two calls to mind many other complimentary pairs. The one I feel is most accurate is Magneto and Professor X. One born in luxury and granted the privilege of believing in the best of people, while the other was born low in the streets and only shown the worst in people, especially authority figures. Cat wants to be an advocate against authority because she had none growing up, while Cordelia doesn't believe that such an advocate is/should be necessary, especially if it grants that advocate any power over state authority.

Abrakadabra

A good point.

ninegardens

I mean, I think Cordelia makes a valid point of "You don't trust authority, but then you trust in giving *yourself* authority"... the issue is that that argument can be thrown back at her "You are still giving people authority, just people who are similar to you".

Neither one of them is proposing a situation where authority ceases to exist. It's just... Cordelia claims to trust that, Cat claims she doesn't, so her position is harder to defend.

Abrakadabra

Yeah, that is the thing. There has to be some kind of authority. Even if they both let it go and raise up a medieval peasant democracy (as Linnus seems to prefer) there are no guarantees that the power will rest in competent and uncorrupted hands. Because there is no such thing as guarantees.

Linnus42

Oh I don't think Democracies are incorruptible or anything far from it. Just that the corruption is inherently built into the system in my book if you have Nobles inheriting

Power, Prestige and Wealth because they have the correct Parents. Democracies needs safeguards.

dadycool

I once read a YA novel where one of the protagonists, a young noble raised to inherit control of the city, visits a democracy and basically wonders how anyone can know how to rule without being trained for it the way an inheritor is. I mean, think about it. A king has a son, he shows the new crown prince how he rules, shows him why things are the way they are, teaches him not to abuse his power, basically apprentices him, handing off more duties the older and more responsible he gets, eventually the prince is the real ruler with his father as an old figurehead, the king abdicates, and the new king takes care of his kingdom until his own son is old and responsible enough, and the cycle continues.

Granted, this scenario only works in a vacuum and doesn't account for outside influence or personal greed or other corruption, but that's the biggest problem of any system of government. People like having power and not sharing power. The only real difference democracies make, or at least democratic republics like America, is spreading the corruption to hundreds as opposed to just the king and nobles. There's a reason why everyone associates politicians with corruption, after all. And true democracy is simply mob rule, which is honestly worse in a group of more than a few dozen to a hundred. Bellerophon, anyone?

[Hargabga](#)

This is why we have bureaucracy: why train a man to do everything he may not even have the drive or talent, if you can just sharpen each person into a smallest cog in the service to the whims of the public?

AbraKadabra

But burocracies were built up by the monarchs, to manage their lands better, that is to say, damocracies just chose to keep them around. And sadly this is still dont give a convincing answer to incompettent people getting to the top.

[Hargabga](#)

Sure, they were birthed as an apparatus to realise the unlimited power of an absolutist monarch, but they are also the only reason republics can function at all, as they allow the whims of the public to be realised with the same unerring certainty as they realised the whims of the emperors. And yes, it is

the best current solution to incompetent people rising on top, because bureaucracy is meritocratic – if utterly divergent from whether the merit will actually help the people it governs.

Rey d`Tutto

And then we get a paper government ruled by the bureaucracy, with voting and elections that work to put folks in power who are powerless before the unelected bureaucrat who knows the rules a department instituted because congress couldn't be arsed to write laws about some piddly bs.

Hargabga

Yeah, but it is also the only reason even the appearance of democracy can be achieved. Or just go all the way back and break down into anarcho-syndicalist communes.

Konstantin von Karstein

What I think makes democracy superior to monarchy is the fact that if a leader is bad you can just vote for someone else next elections. Sure it's not perfect, but that's better than having a tyrant ruling alone and doing whatever.

And you can't compare Bellerophon to a real-life democracy. It would have collapsed or be destroyed already.

dadycoool

Another fiction I read where the protag was royalty was of the opinion that all those elections also mean that 30-year plans never happen because, in the US, that would mean eight elections where four to eight presidents each have to decide to go through with it, which doesn't ever happen. Contrast that with a monarch that either rules for forty years or teaches their kids how important that 30-year plan is. "Why should I spend money on this loser's pet project" v "How's the progress going on my important project that I've been putting time and money into for half my life?" It goes double if the project is about the environment, education, or any public works.

Konstantin von Karstein

I never said democracy hadn't its downsides. What I'm saying is that those downsides still don't beat the

fact that it's much more difficult for someone to abuse their power in a democracy. Sure if the ruler is very good that's a bad thing, but if he is bad (#Caligula, Nero) or outright mad he can't do too much damage.

jamesc9

My impression is that big things can be done, but only if each step is incrementally beneficial.

My public works example is the federal highway system.

My success and failure example in telecommunications is wireless/cellphones vs airline seat phones:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20121009095140/http://shirky.com/writings/permanet.html>

Xinci

The main advantage of democracy is honestly variantiability in method due to so many people being in it. Generally its goal is supposed to be, being far better at bouncing back or having contingencies if parts of its institution are hurt. Whereas Monarchal types tend to have the weakness of a singular method and being fairly easily snuffed out(not that it cant be effective but a lot of focus is on the individual steering the ship actually being there and being somewhat effective plan wise).

[Kletanio](#)

I think there is something being missed about Cordelia's focus on mercy. It seems to suggest she will be the type to choose when **not** to wield the sword. Both Hanno and Cordelia will do what they think are necessary. But justice and mercy are not the same thing at all. And this is where I find things really interesting. Cordelia, the believer in the power of the System to do the right thing, is the one supporting the importance of the System **not** always punishing the guilty. It is a much less absolute way of doing what is right. Hanno is learning the same lesson, but he will be more inclined to do the right thing at all costs. Both will protect the West and Good.

Bad@games

I don't think she meant **Mercy** in the way some think. She said mercy, not capitalized, basically saying that she would do what she can to save people. She also said she would be "the court of their justice" but that doesn't mean shes in with the Sepharim; just like how her wielding the blade of mercy does not mean the

Ophamim have their hooks in her. I dont think WotW will be tied to one Choir, because it would kinda be like, oh all heros answer to this one power now over the others. The warden is separate from those powers, the middle ground, and therefore cant or wont chose one power over the other as far as the goodly powers go. I jist don't see it happening. If it did tho I would love to see more of the other Choirs

AbraKadabra

On a side note, HannoxCordelia= Hannelia is still a possibility, for Political reason, which for Procer is in keeping with the traditions.

[Hargabga](#)

I mean, Cordelia is right. You can't wield supreme executive power just because some nebulous entity threw a sword at you. Supreme executive power arises from the mandate of the masses, not some farsical narrative ceremony bending reality to the rule of cool. Granted, the accident of birth is a poor replacement to the anarcho-syndicalist commune, taking turns to acts as an executive officers, but at least actual people have some degree of say in who happens to be the big guy, unlike with Named.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The quote is "watery tart", as in a moist maiden, or a spoilt dessert. I mean, all the tarts I've had were flaky and moist, be they sweet or savory, but " watery" implies tastelessness, bland, mush. Like a mouthful of nope.

[Hargabga](#)

I know the quote...

Konstantin von Karstein

I should watch that movie!

shikkarasu

Everyone should watch that movie, at least once to get the references. I recommend the subtitle option for "translated to Japanese and then back to English". It's hilarious to see what makes it through the the double translations.

Konstantin von Karstein

I watched the peasants scene and the vache, but that's all. Incidentally, as a French speaker it was hilarious to hear 😊

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I didn't know that existed. Now I must find it!

Thankee Sai.

Xinci

It is interesting to note Catherines dietary regime. Not too many vegetables other than beans, which is mildly surprising given the orphanage but then again they had limited resources and beans are cheaply grown year round.

Cordelia reminds me of Cleopatra. A ruler from a foreign bloodline who adapts to their subjects traditions enough to be thought of as one of them. The reformation tendencies are there too. I suppose both are brilliant, the question is if it will be enough for Cordelia to shape things as she desires.

The Callowan practice of not disrupting a geese migration is actually just good ecological sense. If one wants to eat well over time one doesn't disrupt major cycles of renewal. Given the nature of souls I do wonder how hard it would be for enough deaths to spread behavior amongst the living of an animal population. How many would need to die without moving on? Regardless it's nice to learn more of their superstitions. Does it make me curious about how often Cordelia got access to fish though and if that was a joke or not by her physician.

It is good that Cordelia is looking outward beyond Procer even if she doesn't quite grasp how big the currents of fate are still.

I would also say I still find it hilarious that Cat thinks the Game of the Gods can and ever will be limited to just Named.

An interesting difference between Cat and Cordelia is their use of advisors. Cordie seems generally have a wider panel of advisors in institutional roles what she may use for long term planning. Cat is similar in that she will brainstorm with a personal troupe for ideas along with various other entities who are part of the plan. However she is far more freeform in that she looks at it through the Roles and how the situation has been shaped by and shaped those Roles in turn. Both can calculate based on the objects in motion of the system they are in but one focuses on mortal institutions while the other goes for a wider view. If Cordie makes a Court of the Chosen then she will need adjudicative Named to act as her interlocutors to arbitrate the various stories that will be a part of it. It seems to have potential Summer Court vibes where a malfactor infiltrates and drives them to ruin.

Given Procer's term for effects of the Due was the Desolation her being the blade of mercy seems quite symbolic.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, we got a Folklore Episode here... but in a magical world, you don't want to be *too* confident that "it's just a superstition". Especially when the magic includes a version of Niven's Third Law Of Magic (The Law of Poetry: If everyone believes something is so, it is so).

john

Citation for that one? I've never heard of it before, at least not formatted that way and attributed to Niven.

[Mental Mouse](#)

My wording probably isn't exact (I have trouble with that), but Niven introduced it in his classic novel "The Magic Goes Away", and I think discussed it in one of his essays as well. (Yes, Niven has done fantasy too.)

jamesc9

I would love to have a link to all of Niven's laws of magic. I have failed at searching for it on the Internet.

Zach

I'm confused about why Catherine is so confident that future Wardens of the East will be more reasonable than random countries' leadership. I'm inclined to agreeing with Cordelia here, mainly because the harm caused by a bad Warden of the East would be much greater than the harm caused by the bad leadership of a single country.

I imagine she probably thinks that future Wardens will be regulated by the Roles established by her and whoever ends up Warden of the West, but it's not like Roles can't change over time. Catherine would be putting a lot of power in a single position.

The whole idea behind the Accords is for the affairs of Named to be separated as much as possible from those of non-Named (and for their potential power to be limited by the institutions set up by said Accords). Cordelia's idea is actually more consistent with this than Catherine's. The institutions (the Accords themselves + Cardinal) in question would already exist to deal with situations like the Folly.

Xinci

Considering Role changes in many ways stay the same or to have a exact shift have to happen over centuries, one could honestly say they tend to be a more solid model than mortals alone. Especially if one applies the logic on frameworks Akua noted, so long as everyone benefits from a particular mode, it will be

continually reinforced by most parties, so anyone trying to shift would likely get crushed or simply have it reoccur. Similar to what happened with Amadeus's attempt at breaking the story of Callow and Praes.

jamesc9

@Zach, I wonder if that's the right solution; that the arbiter has to have the right connection to Cardinal, so it will be hard to find an arbiter who is as biased toward the Majlis as the Majlis might sometimes want.

Abnaxis

Cordelia's idea doesn't work on the face of it. If the Majili's don't want someone to be added to the Rolls, they just have to assign them an unreasonable quest, put forward an arbiter they know will rule on their favor, and refuse to agree to compromise with the person seeking admission on who the arbiter will be.

If both sides have to agree for an appeal to happen—and only one side benefits from the appeal being granted—then there is no real appeal process.

SuitorShooter

In Cordelias mind, Catherines way doesn't work either. If the Warden of the East, a villain, gets to veto judgements made against other villains, it's easy to imagine someone less idealistic than Cat playing favourites.

Someperson

This may be a backwards way to make the decision, but in some way I feel that a decision for Warden of the West could be made on the basis of what sort of future struggles will come to define the peace after the Dead King.

Struggle over the boundaries of Named compared to mortal authorities is honestly a very valid subject of debate, and I don't think it would necessarily be a bad thing for this to be a recurring point of contention in the future.

Judging by the way things are going, I would expect we will get to see more of Hanno's side of things soon.

[DC](#)

It is impressive that she manages to want to be a jailer so much more than Cat does that it functions as a breaking point between them.

Sylfa

She can't be both "The court of their[Chosens] justice" and not allow the chosen to appeal to the warden at the same time.

When the Barrow Sword succeeds he'll be in a great position to make a power grab, being the strongest to be added to the rolls, the first who proved themselves, and the first villain on the scrolls.

What then will the Warden of the West do if a villain controls the trials? When she comes to check why so many heroes have died they say, "oh but they asked my friend The Undertaker to choose their task, and they chose that they must survive being beheaded and burned on a pyre. They failed."

While if the warden is the one to receive the appeal they can ensure a suitable task. Or confirm that they are killing the chosen since the task was impossible and would have been appealed.

At the very least the wardens must be present when an appeal is made or they lose all control to the current leaders, leaving the worldly leaders, again, in control.

Chapter 33: Claimant (Repeat)

"Eighty-three: while it is true that tiger pits and acid floors are generally laughable, that does not mean they stop being lethal when stumbled into. Ludicrous does not equate harmless."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

I'd had enough to drink that I didn't want to head to bed immediately.

I could have burned out the last bits of inebriation with my Name – and what a luxury it was, that I could do that again – but I preferred leaving things to run their natural course. It did things to your mind to habitually ignore your body's limits. Whether it was no longer sleeping or going from drunk to sober in a heartbeat, I suspected that the more Named estranged themselves from their mortal foundation the more their Name gained purchase on them. You couldn't use that power constantly, bathe in it, without being changed by it in turn. Better to grow used to the occasional bout of patience instead, even when it felt like all the world was running out of time.

The palace had beautiful gardens, one of which the servants had called a 'night garden' in Alamans, and curiosity drove me to limp my way down that very path. The air was fresh but pleasantly without bite, which made the stroll a pleasant enough way to let the last of the drink fade away. Like so many beautiful things in this beautiful city, the night garden was a work of art. Small glass lanterns in purple and blue had been lit, revealing perfectly cut green grass and low hedges. The paths were circular, half-hidden by deep flowerbeds in wine red and golden yellow. They led to a gazebo that was all wrought iron.

Even the chairs, which seemed made entirely out of a single exquisitely folded piece of iron wire. The skill that must have taken attracted my eye just as much as the plush cushion someone had laid out on it, which spoke sweet nothings to my aching leg. Sitting at that low table with the dwarves this morning had taken a toll and the herbal brew I'd drunk only worked for so long. I still took the time to enjoy the strolls before sitting under the gazebo's roof, looking out over the edge of the garden and onto the still-lit streets of distant Salia. I'd laid my staff against one of the iron pillars, but that didn't mean I was unarmed.

When I felt the attention settle on me like a pinprick between my shoulder blades, I discreetly flicked my wrist under the table and felt my knife, *the* knife, fill my palm. I pricked my ear to try to pick up on the footsteps, but what I heard instead was a sigh.

"Fresh back to the Name, and already you've picked up all your old tricks," Vivienne said. "It's a mite unfair, I must say."

"Fair is for children," I quoted, watching as she came into view.

Slinking out of the shadow with the grace of the thief she had been for many years, Vivienne Dartwick did not cut a figure so different as before she had taken up her Name. She had grown no taller since becoming the Princess, and though perhaps the cut of her chin was a sliver sharper and her eyes grown a little more grey than blue, I could point to no other visible change. It was just in the way she carried who she was. The milkmaid braid on which her circlet rested could no longer be thought of as anything but a crown, and the calm she had found while I trawled the depths of the Everdark had gained... weight. Gravity. She no longer needed to frown to look serious, it was something she wore as much as her clothes.

"We're in a pleasant mood, I see," Vivienne drawled, drawing back the chair across from mine before sitting. "Did it go that badly with Hasenbach?"

I grimaced.

"It went well enough," I said. "She pushed back on the Dominion's proposal, but she did it in a way that can't possibly be seen as Procer meddling in their affairs – she's making sure they have more power, if anything."

Not that a diplomat of her calibre would have made so elementary a mistake.

"So it's the grass under your feet she wants to cut," Vivienne mused. "Not exactly a surprise, Catherine. She's been an advocate for keeping Named away from the levers of power since the start, and the Wardens as you're pushing them have their hands on more than a few."

I grunted, waving it away. I wasn't interested in going over my talks with Hasenbach when they were still so fresh. Better to divorce myself from the moment first, let the emotions calm.

"You were looking for me?" I probed.

She nodded.

"I've received reports," Vivienne said. "Masego and the Rogue Sorcerer sent word."

My eye narrowed.

"And?"

"They've 'proved the fundamental principles behind their theory to a satisfactory extent'," the Princess quoted. "Which is a relief, I'll admit. I don't see a way for us to win the war without setting loose Below's stories."

Neither do I, I thought.

"If they proved the principles it just means that Zeze's theory that the Bard is muting Below's stories is true," I said instead. "Not that they've figured out how to undo the muting. Did they get any further?"

She shook her head. Not good news, then, but far from bad news.

"Reports, plural," I invited.

She half-smiled.

"The Severance is in the city," Vivienne said. "Unless Hanno has another artefact that needs to be carried around in a sealed enchanted coffin."

"Official correspondence did mention he'd sent for it," I noted. "Best to have it here, I agree, with the Arsenal being closed."

"I thought I'd mention it," Vivienne idly said, "because an old acquaintance is on his way to Salia as well. Christophe de Pavanie was seen on the main northern road, summoned south."

I drummed my fingers against the iron table, the cacophonous clang of it oddly satisfying.

"Let me guess," I mused. "The Jacks also caught sight of the Blade of Mercy and the Bloody Sword obeying the same sort of summons."

She smirked, I sighed. With the Valiant Champion already in the city, that meant all the heroes most likely to be able to survive wielding the Severance were soon to be gathered in Salia. Hanno was looking to settle who was to wield it, I thought. And he'd decided to spring that on me without warning. *Anyone but a hero touching that sword will lose their hand and maybe their head with it*, I reminded myself. *He might not have seen it as something to warn me of because no villains can be considered candidates*. I'd be brought in when the decision was to be made, not for the footwork. Or so the most charitable spin I could put on this went.

"I'm not pleased he's looking to surprise me," I admitted.

Vivienne studied me a long moment, loose-limbed but sharp-eyed.

"You sound almost resigned," she finally said. "Like you're preparing to make your peace with that and a hundred more insults."

"There need to be a Warden of the West," I sighed.

"And it's either Prince White or Princess Blue, yes," Vivienne frowned. "Yet they're both in the running for the prize, as I understand it. So why does it sound like you think Hanno already has the bird in hand?"

"We need to win the war, Viv," I quietly said. "And I like Hasenbach for the peace, I genuinely do, but I don't think she's the woman to get us to it. Indrani was right when she put it to me: when we hit Keter, it's the Sword of Judgement we'll want leading the charge on those walls. Not the First Prince."

I believed, honestly, that for all my differences with her Cordelia might make the better Warden of the West. She was better suited to the role in a world where the Liesse Accords had been signed. But now that I'd walked away from the room where I had shared a drink with her, I could see the... fragility in her candidature. Cordelia was too bound to Procer and its ugly games, was not respected as a military leader and most of all she knew too little of namelore. The Book of Some Things might help there,

I thought, but giving it to either claimant would be an open endorsement on my part. Something I was rather hesitant to risk.

"Indrani's smarter than she pretends," Vivienne finally said, "but she still thinks through Refuge."

I cocked my head to the side.

"I don't follow," I said.

"It's about the individual for her," the Princess said. "What they can personally do. That's enough to assess most Named, and I think she's sharper than either of us when it comes to reading people, but it doesn't apply to something like the Warden of the West."

"They're in opposition, Viv," I pointed out. "They bring different things to the table, and when one is chosen what the other would have brought is lost. It's the same as when I became the Squire, only with more politics and a lot less stabbing."

"You're underestimating the both of them," Vivienne bluntly replied. "They aren't *villains*, Cat. They're too proud to take a loss easy, either of them, but this doesn't end with a tantrum or a corpse. If Hasenbach takes the Name, you still have the Sword of Judgement leading the charge against the walls of Keter. He'll just be doing it at her order."

My lips thinned. My experiences might have coloured my understanding of this, I thought, she was right there. But she was giving too sunny a shine to the whole affair.

"That's not how pivots work," I replied, shaking my head. "If you don't really *lose* anything by the choice then there's no weight and it's not a pivot in the first place. Something's at stake, Vivienne. Maybe we won't see it immediately, but the choices we make always come back to haunt us."

Two Wardens, I thought, and the Dead King. Trying to end the Hidden Horror and use his bones as the foundation of a new age. That story would not end the same way for Hanno and Cordelia, my instincts told me. It felt like I was trying to catch a fish swimming underwater, seeing only the faintest hint of a quick-moving thing in the dark. I was afraid, I could admit it in the privacy of my own mind, that making the wrong choice here might lose us the war long before we ever saw the walls of Keter.

"Fate will not change their character," Vivienne quietly said. "Don't throw away the peace for fear of losing the war, Catherine."

I drew back in genuine surprise.

"You think it should be the First Prince," I said, taken aback.

My friend had never been all that fond of Cordelia Hasenbach, and though there was respect there it had always been tempered by the memory of the Tenth Crusade and who had instigated it.

"Even for the war, it should be her," Vivienne said. "We've plenty of people who can lead the charge, Catherine, you not least among them. What the Grand Alliance is though, what the armies being led against Keter will be, is a continent-wide coalition."

She paused, choosing her words.

"Most of the nations involved have been at war with each other in the last decade," the Princess said. "Leadership will not just be swords and hope, it will be keeping the army from collapsing under the weight of its own feuds. Hanno of Arwad is respected, and even beloved by some, but charisma will not be enough to keep the wheels from coming off the cart after we take our first few punches in the stomach. His way is to lead by example, but what we're going to *need* is someone who can bring disparate forces together, wrangle and move them."

And it was not the Sword of Judgement, she did not need to say, that had spent the last decade and a half doing that with notable skill. The Grand Alliance wasn't something I'd made, after all, it was something I'd joined. I hummed, eyes returning to the distant lights. She wasn't wrong. Not entirely right, either, but her words rang true.

"It is all wind before I've seen Hanno," I finally said.

This was too far-reaching of a decision for me to make it in haste. But if I did end up choosing a favourite... well, there were ways to nudge while mitigating the risk. Like, for example, giving the same boon to both while knowing one would benefit more than other. Vivienne softly laughed, drawing my attention. She was looking almost wistfully at the city.

"Even five years ago," she said, "who would have thought we'd ever sit here? Scheming the fate of nations, dreaming a new order."

"We've come a long way," I smiled, "since the Thief and the Squire."

And, I realized in a moment of aching clarity, those same paths would eventually see us part. After the war, should we win, she would reign in Callow and I would sit in Cardinal. I'd have to leave the kingdom for years, I knew that. Too many people would look to me over Vivienne for orders otherwise, no matter who wore the crown, and she must have the chance to begin her reign

without standing deep in my shadow. My smile turned bitter as we stared out at the city. It was not the last night we would sit like this, scheming and dreaming, but time was running out.

Sometimes I feared the peace more than the war.

—

Cordelia Hasenbach had called me to palaces, but I found Hanno of Arwad in a small farm.

It'd seen better days, the paint on the wooden shutters flanking, but it was not there that my eye lingered. The muddy path led me around the house to a cattle-wall, one shoddily made. More stacked stones than anything, and unsurprisingly large swaths of it had collapsed over the last two winters. A tall man was kneeling in the dirt, the sleeves of his grey tunic rolled up to the elbows as he stacked the stones anew. Hanno of Arwad was tall and built like a working man, muscled and calloused. The fingers he'd lost to the Severance had been severed at the phalange, leaving stumps, and he had to be careful when gripping with them.

He must have heard me coming, since I'd been hailed by soldiers in a mix of colours – Brabant and fantassins, mostly – before getting anywhere near the farm, but he kept working as I hoisted myself up on one of the parts of the wall that still stood. We'd been here before. I had first met him here at this very farm, though it had been night and instead of a white cloak hanging on the rusty hook outside the house it had been a lantern. There was another change, though, one that surprised me. As Hanno stacked the stones, he reached for a wooden bucket at his side. Wielding a spade with surprisingly skill, he slathered mortar between the stones as he rebuilt the wall.

The barest trace of a smile quirked my lips. That first night, in the dead of winter, he'd just been stacking the stones again. I'd warned him that it wouldn't stick without mortar, that he was wasting his time. Say what you would about Hanno of Arwad, but he was not one to repeat his mistakes. I waited as he finished a row, settling the stones in the mortar carefully. When the spade went back into the bucket, at last I cocked an eyebrow and spoke up.

"So, is it me or you *definitely* used Recall to pick up some masonry?" I teased.

A small laugh as he rose to his feet, dusting the dirt off his knees. The Sword of Judgement was more than simply tanned, darker in skin than a Taghreb but still short of the Soninke. His mother had been one, he'd told me, but his father had been Ashuran. Hanno's brown eyes had always given off a sense of steadiness, all the more reassuring when paired with his plain but honest face, but while they still did there was something missing now.

The calm, I thought, that'd always lurked beneath. The serenity born of certainty. It was gone.

His gaze, I thought, was warmer for it.

"I asked the Sculptor," Hanno told me. "He spent half an hour reminding me he is an artist and not a mason, but he had some very useful advice about mortar anyhow. Good man."

He wasn't. The Arlesite was very much one of mine. Murdering the woman who'd killed his wife had been somewhat excusable, sacrificing half a dozen people to animate the impossibly lifelike statue of her he'd sculpted significantly less so. He probably did know his way around the mason trade, though, I wouldn't deny that part.

"He is certainly a man," I casually answered, then cast a scrutinizing look at the wall.

Hanno smiled.

"And?"

"Won't be holding back a Crab anytime soon," I said, "but it looks solid. Should hold."

He looked pleased.

"I have been meaning to repay the lending of this house," Hanno said. "A few afternoons of work and I should have the entire wall back up."

I snorted.

"Do make your guests help," I suggested. "You're bound to be swimming in nobles by now and I'd pay good silver to see their like kneel in the dirt."

"A fine idea," Hanno said.

His eyes were amused, I noticed.

"You can hang your cloak over mine, if you'd like," the dark-skinned hero continued.

Ah, I grimly thought, the classic Callowan blunder. Shot in the foot by my own spite. I coughed.

"I have a bad leg," I argued. "Surely you wouldn't make a sickly maiden like myself kneel."

He eyed me consideringly, as if deciding whether or not he wanted to unpack any of that.

"You can hold the bucket," Hanno finally said.

"Eh, I'll take it," I shrugged.

It was pretty heavy, so naturally I cheated. I put my staff across my shoulders and hung it off the edge, moving around the angle until it was easier to bear. Hanno looked more amused than anything, beginning to work again as we talked.

"Rafaella tells me you've helped the Blood come to terms with the Barrow Sword," Hanno said.

His hands moved deftly to spread the mortar, but I knew better than to think that meant he was not listening to my words.

"It's a little larger than that," I said. "But it went well, I would say. They've kept what matters to them while giving Ishaq and the others enough rope."

"Rope?" Hanno asked.

"Rope," I repeated. "Whether he uses it to hang himself for pull himself up is for him to decide. Either way, he has his shot now."

The short-haired hero – it was cut even closer than last time I'd seen him, barely more than stubble – let out a noise of agreement.

"It is a reasonable compromise," Hanno said. "And holds all those who would enter the Rolls to a higher standard, which the true gain of it all as far as I'm concerned."

"Are you?" I asked.

He paused, turning to meet my eye.

"Concerned, that is," I elaborated.

A moment passed.

"You wield ambiguousness as deftly as Tariq ever did," Hanno finally replied, which was not entirely a compliment. "It was fairly bargained and no law was bent. I would have liked to be seated at the table, but I understand why I was not."

"That is your own doing, Prince White," I mildly said.

His growing conflict with the First Prince was, I had come to suspect, why he'd not been invited. The Blood liked him, I knew that well. As was only natural considering he was a famous warrior, Bestowed and the Tribunal's own champion. But Cordelia had done much for them, and they had sworn oaths of alliance to her. It would have toed the line of dishonour to turn on her now

and bringing in Hanno would have been an endorsement of him. Too close to betrayal for comfort, I figured. He'd begun working again, but at my words his movement stuttered.

"You disapprove?"

A simple question, calmly asked. It carried more weight than any two words should bear. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, balancing the bucket against my shoulders.

"Haven't decided yet," I said.

Which was, if nothing else, true. His hands began moving again.

"I did not seek it out," Hanno said.

"Didn't fight it either, the way I hear it," I noted.

He breathed out a laugh.

"No," Hanno frankly admitted. "I did not. I could do more, so I did. I will not put on a crown, but neither will I refuse the authority when I can use it to do good."

It was my time to pause, taken aback. The once White Knight had spent the last few years making a point out of staying out of anything resembling politics unless dragged into them. It was a very different song from the one I'd heard in the Arsenal that he was now singing. I had not, I'd admit, expected this much of a change in him even though the reports from the Jacks had hinted otherwise. Named were, for better or worse, set in their ways. Was that why he was no longer the White Knight and instead claimant to another Name entirely?

"It's not just doing that," I finally said. "You're not a fool, so let's not pretend that the struggle between you and the First Prince isn't a crack spreading across the Grand Alliance."

"Our differences can and will be resolved peacefully," Hanno said. "But they exist for a reason. I do not believe that Cordelia Hasenbach should lead us against Keter, and even less that she should shape the nature of Good in the coming era."

"That sounds," I mildly said, "rather like a judgement."

A pause.

"Yes," the Sword of Judgement said. "It is. My own."

Not the same song I had thought, like a fool, finding only the shallowest part of that. It was hardly the same fucking singer, by the sound of it. No wonder he'd lost his Name, he'd essentially discarded the central tenet of the beliefs that'd turned him into the White Knight. *I bet you couldn't even use*

Light for while, I thought. *Until Fate could decide if you were turning villain or not*. I rolled my shoulder. This wasn't a claim, not quite – I'd not given him that opening the way I had Cordelia, the opportunity to define himself in the face of the Other – but we were on the road there. Best I even the grounds before we got there, though, else I would be seen as backing a horse.

He'd need to be brought in on the pivot the First Prince knew and he did not. He'd taken the talks with the Dominion as I thought he would, but there was another conversation happening in Salia that he'd know very little about.

"There's something you need to know about," I finally said.

Almost reluctantly. I knew, objectively, that I was not breaking Cordelia's trust by speaking of this. He was a high officer of the Grand Alliance, he had a right to the information. And still the reluctance lingered. I forged through it, laying out the demands the Kingdom Under had made in exchange for supporting our attack on Keter. He listened carefully, finishing another layer of stones and beginning the mortar work. When I finished, he kept silent for a while. Considering the situation.

"The treaty you brought back from the Everdark includes an obligation for them to provide foodstuffs at cost for any force engaged in warfare against Keter," Hanno noted. "Are they not breaking the bargain?"

"Toeing the line," I replied. "We need reserves of food with the armies before we set out for the Twilight Ways, and they're not technically obligated to provide that even if we could pay for it. Which, for the number of troops we're marching north, we cannot."

It would be the single largest army fielded on Calernia in my lifetime, if the League truly joined its forces to ours. Largest living army, anyway.

"So while they might be bound to provide foodstuffs at cost should we lay siege to Keter, by then we would have consumed our own reserves and stand completely at their mercy," Hanno summed up.

I nodded.

"So it needs to be seen to here, before we march out," I said. "At the latest a few days after the second wave of reinforcements from Praes arrives, which is in a week and a half. Any later than that and we begin damaging our chances of taking Keter."

We'd be eating through our reserves without being on the march, making us ever more dependent on dwarven help which they would

charge us all the more for. That and with every day another few miles of the Principate were lost, the Dead King's armies swelling with the dead they had butchered. If he devoured enough of Procer, there was a real chance that even if we mustered the entire continent against him we'd still lose in a pitched battle. Keter was our only real shot at ending this in time, decapitating the snake. Neshamah knew that as well, of course.

He'd be waiting for us, and every day we waited his defences grew more terrifying.

"I agree that the Herald is in opposition to others in the Kingdom Under," Hanno slowly said. "You are certain he is of Above?"

"Leaning that way, at least," I replied. "Dwarven Names are harder to read."

"Indeed," Hanno gravely replied, eyes dancing, "how dare your largely unprecedented and very useful power not be universally applicable. Most unfair."

It was hard to flip him off while holding the staff and bucket, but I was motivated enough to manage it. He laughed but turned serious soon after.

"The Herald is acting boldly because the odds are against him," Hanno said. "I recognize the instinct, I've seen it many a time. By striking first and early you prevent the greater force from mustering against you. There is our solution, Catherine."

"Going over his head?" I said. "It's been considered. There's a risk of pretty brutal backlash if the dwarves take offense to our trying to play their factions against each other."

"There won't be," Hanno firmly said. "Already the Herald is using great misery to bring about some design, which must be benevolent if his Name has not balked. For him to turn to vengeance after being caught out abusing his power would surely see him fall from grace."

"Those are thin grounds to make so important a bet on," I frowned. "Not all heroes are saints, and they're certainly not all above burning those who burned them."

"You assume he cannot be reasoned with," he pointed out. "I would speak to the Herald myself. Whatever work this is all in the service of, I am sure he can be helped to find another way to it. And if he will not compromise, then there are those standing against him."

I sucked in a breath.

"If he's warned we've figured out he's after something, we lose our only advantage," I said. "He'll cover his tracks, maybe even poison the well with the rest of the Kingdom Under to make sure we can't go above his head without paying for it. That's a lot of things risked on faith in a man who is actively using the prospect of the annihilation of the entire surface as *negotiating leverage*."

"If he did not intend the betterment of Creation, the fighting of an Evil, he would not be a hero," Hanno calmly said. "I understand your hesitation, for you have fought heroes for much of your career, and the Herald of the Deeps has not earned trust."

He laid his hand on a stone, turning to meet my eye.

"Yet does not mean it should not be given," Hanno of Arwad said. "Plots will not see us through this, Warden of the East. The answer lies not in forcing his hand but in freeing it to do good."

Hanno knew his namelore well. I had not needed to offer him the opportunity: he had made it himself, by bringing my Name into this. And in the same breath, as Cordelia had revealed where she and I would struggle should she rise, Hanno had done the same. The man who had once been the White Knight believed in Good. In heroes, in the champions of Above. He believed, genuinely and deeply, that they were forces for good and that *their good* was a force of nature as real as the wind or the tides. It wouldn't be over laws and rules and treaties I fought him, because Hanno didn't particularly care about any these.

If he believed a law unjust he would not follow it, and would not expect anyone in his place to do otherwise.

That was not something he had it in him to compromise over. When he said he would speak with the Herald of the Deeps, it was because he because there was not a doubt in him that the dwarf would do the right thing once helped into it. And even if that failed, Hanno would not abandon that principle. It was the bedrock of who he was, the belief that people *wanted* to be Good. That they would do it if you helped them. And the thing was, he was right often enough that I couldn't just call him wrong. I'd clash with him a fraction of how much I would clash with Cordelia Hasenbach, I thought. But on those occasions where he *did* choose to fight?

He would not bend. Not a mile, not an inch, not a hair. Every single time we faced each other it would be a fight to the knife, bloody and raw, a chance that the whole edifice might come falling down on our heads.

"That is," Hanno of Arwad said, "what the Warden of the West must be. Not a king or a judge but the intercessor between necessity and faith. Neither leash nor lash, a guide to the lost and hand to faltering. And, when there is no other recourse, the sword against Evil."

The world shivered. He would not rule them, I thought. The heroes. He would not bind or marshal them to a cause or purpose, because he trusted them to follow their own. Hanno trusted heroes, believed in them in a way that I simply could not. I had cut too many of them open to believe them anything more than men. There would be no centre under him, no throne. The Game of the Gods would have rules of engagement, but it would not change: the same old war would be fought, a hundred obscure skirmishes at a time. Hanno of Arwad stood tall in the morning light, calloused hands resting on stone. Workman's hands, tireless in their work.

And the coin kept spinning, spinning, spinning.

[*Droughtbringer*](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

KiltedBastich

Well now. Hanno's just sunk the whole project as far as Cat's concerned. Now the question is whether she chooses to meddle.

Frivolous

I don't think Catherine can meddle directly. It would be seen as intruding upon something not her purview.

If Catherine does meddle, it will be through Vivienne, who does have a say and a stake in the matter.

I wonder if Warden of the West might end up a shared Name, with Cordelia handling executive functions and Hanno handling pastoral and battlefield functions.

It would be unprecedented for two people to share the same Name, but the Warden Names are pretty unprecedented.

Also, I have a lot of trouble believing Hanno is still trusting enough to believe in the essential Goodness of heroes, even after the horrible fiasco of Interludes Paragons and Epitomes.

[*Liliet*](#)

I'm thinking shared, too.

They both suck at this! At different parts of this. Badly.

dadycoool

"You don't see the world for ho it is!" "Well, neither do you!"

It feels like that one metaphor where five blind men are asked to describe an elephant, but they're each only able to see a small part and completely misinterpret what's in front of them.

M0och123

I believe they made a song of that, a good one too!

[Liliet](#)

Mood.

[Hargabga](#)

Wait, if they are able to see, how are they blind?

shikkarasu

They touch the elephant and "see" with their hands, but no two of them touch the same part. It's a colloquialism, like how people still refer to Sign as "speaking," even when speech and sign are considered distinct in both languages.

Snappy

They could only describe what they feel. And since an elephant is big they each felt very different things.

Albert Wen

They don't actually see, they just feel what's in front of them with their hands.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The blind men find an elephant, and each one feels something different. The one feeling the tail describes a snake in his hands. The one feeling a leg describes a tree trunk. The one feeling the ears describes a palm leaf (just go with it.) etc. Etc. Etc.

Bad@games

Ah yes. The classic have multiple good guys to match the singular bad guy approach

Big Brother

It's not unprecedented for two people to share a Name. The Bitter Blacksmiths are siblings, one Heroic, the other Villainous.

shikkarasu

True, but there is already a split of two Wardens. Splitting the West as well waters down the broth a bit much. I'm still waiting for the Dark Horse candidate that shows up and steals the show, probably while Cat curses loudly.

Vetrom

Abigail, Warden of the West, HERO OF THE ALLIANCE!

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, Warden of the East is new... but Warden of the West is not, I don't think it can be shared.

Konstantin von Karstein

Warden of the West as a Name is new. It was a title of the First Prince, but no one was Named WoTW yet.

therealgridlock

Actually, they've both been names before. We heard way back at the beginning of this story that there hasn't been as Warden for decades, and that's the most comment we got for a long time.

It was later revealed it was a really old wizard guy someone killed, but I could swear he was from Callow, so idk if it was East or West but I remember them being names before.

braxen1

I would have to double check this one when I have the time. So can't say for certain. But I'm pretty sure you're thinking of the Wizard of the West who got killed at either the field of sterges or when summerholm fell during the conquest.

Arror

That was the Wizard of the West, not a Warden.

Definitelyagoblin

You're thinking of the Wizard of the West, that was the name, not Warden.

Konstantin von Karstein

What? No, they weren't any Warden before. Cordelia never was.

It was the Wizard of the West, not the Warden! And he was killed by Wekesa.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not currently, but ISTR there was mention of prior Wardens of the West.

Konstantin von Karstein

No, there weren't, not Named anyway. It is a traditional title of the First Prince, like Tyrant for DE, but was never a Name.

Linnus42

I don't think Hanno's wrong about the Herald. Even if the Dwarf was a Villain. It's hardly in the Dwarves' interest to be the only force left around fighting the DK. That just raises their casualties and the risk for them.

Fundamentally, the issue with Cordelia's approach is she doesn't get Named or Heroes. Being the Judge and trying to bind them to government is not a good approach for all names. For some sure who are tied into countries but saying well the Civilian law says this ain't going to stop them. Because well I don't think I need to make a list of bad laws that historically people were right to ignore.

dadycoool

Cordelia being Warden almost seems like what would happen if Cat was Dread Empress. She doesn't come from that world, so she simply doesn't have any clue as to how it works. She looks at what they're doing and sees problems to be fixed when all they're doing is living their lives in a way that works.

KiltedBastich

Remember that the bigoted, genocidal elves of the Golden Bloom are counted as Good, too. There's a lot of wiggle room in Good. It could very well be that the Herald honestly believes all those poor simpleton surface dwellers would be better off being guided by the benevolent will of the Dwarves, to keep them from

all the silly mistakes they keep making as free people. Why, being enslaved is for their betterment! (*retch*)

Remember that was an actual real-world ideology held by people who believed themselves to be good, moral, righteous, upstanding people.

Hanno is making a very large mistake here, assuming that Goodness is a consistent enough thing not to contain a multitude of conflicting ideologies. It's a shockingly naive position, considering what he's been through already. I mean, just the fight with the Mirror Knight where he lost fingers should have been enough to disabuse him of that bit of simplistic nonsense, yet here we are.

Sinead

He has commented on having the perspective through Recall to not have this view of Good. This reads that he believes those that have not proven themselves entirely faithless (the worst of the Damned and the extremists Heroes) are worthy of an extended hand. Not saying there isn't any issue for what Hanno is doing, but there is a very solid core to his reasoning. His faith and ability to trust still has the elements of striking out at the faithless. Contrast with Cordelia who would keep the large waves from forming in the first place, but cannot do anything if something blows up out of nowhere (to the same degree as Hanno).

Zach

But part of the point Catherine makes in this chapter is that, under Hanno, nothing would fundamentally change about the "game of the gods." What constitutes "understanding Named" can change.

I don't think Cordelia is wrong in her objection to the Wardens having power in the relationships between Named and nations. It's one thing for the Wardens to have authority over the Named in their purview, but Catherine's idea (in the context of the proposal arrived at with the Dominion leaders) would effectively give the Wardens indirect authority in matters of nations (in situations where Named influence nations/governments, such as being added to the Rolls in the Dominion).

I think Catherine's current preferences would give too much power to future Wardens (and Hanno's preferences would just take that even further). Under Cordelia's ideology, the main problems the Accords are meant to address would still be addressed (since Named that are trying to build doomsday devices, etc, would still be cracked down upon; all the "regulating the behavior of Named" elements would be unaffected). I feel like Catherine's objections to Cordelia are

largely outside the scope of the Accords themselves. Hell, Catherine is the one who initially wanted the Accords to have a "no Named heads of government" rule (and only accepts it now as a necessary compromise). Giving the Wardens indirect authority in matters of state goes against that principle.

George host

Not all Names are created equal. Cat is okay with the Wardens having that power because she fully intends to shape the Roles those Names represent. If she gets her way, the people with those Names are going to be some of the most trustworthy people to hold that power on the continent by virtue of their capacity to become the Wardens in the first place.

Cat is against random names with doomday-weapon-making Roles getting to express that Role, not the raw concept of Named having power. Random Names getting to rule creates that risk, giving Wardens a degree of power is very unlikely to.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I get where you and Cordelia are coming from, but consider: should the Names of greatest sway over how Named and Nameless treat one another, those Names which concern rulership in some way, really be exempt from the primary check and balance in the system? How exactly is a Name defined by the desire to protect the interests of the Nameless a less reliable influence on politics than a Name defined by whatever desire happens to motivate someone to claim a throne?

Let me put it this way: for every Kingfisher Prince or Good King, there are a lot of Tyrants.

elanevensong

Omg it's happening

Linnus42

As for Viv's Analysis, Cat pointed out one flaw. I say the other is how likely someone is to compromise also depends on how close they think they are to winning. Given the forces behind them at this time and the state of Procer. I argue Hanno is in the far stronger position than Cordelia. Ergo that is going to impact how the compromise works out. Still Cat gets most of it right in that you are not going to get the best from both. Though I don't know I have seen this world, a high CHA score goes a long way and well when you add military prowess lol historically that is an effective plan.

Anomandris

You know, I cant help but think that if Tariq were still alive, there would have been no issue.

So on one side of the decision, you have pragmatism, on the other side idealism. Both anchored in Good.

It is an impossible choice because ultimately the weight one has on either side of the scale is a personal choice. Not a universal one.

The pragmatic might argue that what is the point of ideals if they don't end up working, the idealist might argue whats the point of working if you aren't aiming for an ideal.

Also, Cat seems a bit heavily biased (at least from the last 3 chapters) by her own experiences. I get PGtE is where Heroes are 'bad' and Villains are 'Good', but that is not the case in a vast majority in Calernia. I actually don't think her hand should be on the scale (and if not for the kerfuffle with Bard, one that Angels would have shut down hard already)

'Ladi Williams

No.

PGtE is where we are shown that there is good in Evil and there is bad in Good.

That no one has the monopoly on being good or bad.

[Hargabga](#)

It's almost like inhuman eldritch entities have no business defining human morality.

dadycoool

It's so nice when Cat and Hanno are friendly. They have such fun banter. The trouble comes from when they get even the slightest bit misaligned. I don't know how she'll make the choice, but then again, she might not necessarily have to. What if she makes the Hierarch do it? Have Alaya summon him as the elected ruler of Praes, hand him the book, and follow Hanno's example, letting Judgment make the call.

Anomandris

"We need to attack the Dead King and save Calernia!!"

"Not without filing Forms 16B and 19-2a in triplicate and waiting for the mandated 3 month opinion-canvassing period, you don't."

[Liliet](#)

Oh my god they both fucking suck. So much. They're both idiots!!!
Get the both of them in the same room and make them talk TO EACH OTHER and not just to you Catherien!!!

dadycoool

But then the coin would land on its side, and she thinks she needs to make a heads-or-tails decision!

[Liliet](#)

Oh noes, what Catherine thinks is a problem! What a NEW, ENTIRELY UNPRECEDENTED situation!

stares at the Ater arc

shikkarasu

lol, so true. This is a Claimant situation. Even when Black had a favourite Squire he didn't just go around knifing Cat's rivals; he gave her a knife -the knife- and trusted in her abilities. Come on, WotW, learn from Dad's example one last time.

'Ladi Williams

You mean WoTE right? Cos Black was dad to her and no one else.

shikkarasu

Yep, ignore me. I am very bad at proofreading.

Anomandris

I have mentioned this elsewhere, but Cat seems being dragged by her own bias here. I mean from a Villain perspective, it basically flows that two claimants can't co-exist peacefully and resolution cant be short of blood. She is doing what seems to be in front of her, not what a reader of the story would. In many ways, this is quite similar to the Saint's story – doing what HER experiences have taught, not what is blindingly obvious to the reader.

Hanno's belief of inherent goodness would surely extends a lot towards Cordy.... And likewise for Cordy believing Hanno can pull her people out of this gigantic apocalypse.

hakureireimu

I dunno, Cordy isn't Named right now...and why would Cordy believe that Hanno can do anything he's not already doing?

KiaraTurtle

I endorse this plan. And while they do that Cat can finally go talk to Hakram.

Hargabga

Wait, you mean calmly discuss and sort out your differences like some kind of... adults? Get out of here. What if they accidentally cooperate and it turns out they never needed Catherine in the first place?

Liliet

Catherine jolts up from the nightmare, then realizes she has to make it come true.

Anomandris

Why would she dream of negotiations and problem-solving with Hanno and Cordy, when she could, ahem, be dreaming of something else with them?

Why would anyone?

Hargabga

Hey now, don't kinkshame. Geopolitics is sexy.

Liliet

I said it's a NIGHTMARE.

Zach

The problem is that Named don't "sort out differences"; they're defined by their convictions. As Catherine mentions in this chapter, Hanno will never be willing to bend on any issue that overlaps with what he considers just or unjust.

I think that Hanno is unacceptable as WotW because he'll inevitably end up directly conflicting with nations and likely even the Warden of the East. His principles won't allow him to limit the scope of his Role to "regulation of Named affairs."

Cordelia, on the other hand, has a set of principles that don't really conflict with the Accords. She is firmly opposed to Named having power in matters of nations. Catherine is unhappy with this because there will always be a part of her that wants to be able to take action to right wrongs (she's even admitted to this desire to "be in control"). But the point of the Accords isn't to prevent all bad things from happening; it's solely intended to limit the harm caused by Named (and Cordelia's convictions don't conflict with this in any way, while Hanno's do).

KageLupus

Unfortunately I feel like the time for getting in a room and talking has long passed. If that was going to work it would have been months or even years earlier, before the pivot came to a head. At this point there is too much narrative weight behind one of them getting a new Name for mundane conversations to really solve anything.

That said, I feel like Hanno and Cordelia were never going to be able to resolve this on their own. They are both just too different with their fundamental world views. Hanno thinks that Heroes just need to be guided and they will do Good naturally on their own. He also think that objective morals are more important than any rule or law. Cordelia is the exact opposite, and thinks that Named should not be able to hold themselves above the law. She has also seen what can happen when a "Hero" goes off the rail, since she was present when the Saint of Swords decided it was better to torch the entire Principate rather than work with Cat.

As much as I agree that getting in a room and talking things over is an underutilized solution, in this specific case I have a hard time seeing how those two are going to come to an agreement when they are polar opposites on how Named should be governed.

[Liliet](#)

Well, they do both respect and like Catherine, so there's that.

Juff

Typo Thread:

I trawled > I'd trawled
There need > There needs
you still > you'll still
have the change > have the chance
flanking > flaking
himself for pull > himself or pull
which the true > which is the true
"Yet does > "Yet that does

nick012000

Calling it now: the issue with the Dwarves is going to be the pivot that selects the Warden of the West.

[Hargabga](#)

We have probably three pivots like what someone said. Probably one would be won by Cordelia, one by Hanno, and the final one breaks the tie. Could be Hanno wins dwarves, Cordelia wins Levant, and Cat makes final call.

edrey

they both fuck at this and their lack of experience is so obvious that is painful, cordelia doesnt understand how Named and stories work because Procer lack the history with those monsters, and that can backfire in a very ugly way. Hanno simply cant understand how normal people act, that they act on concor with their own personal concept of good and morals, and normaly for petty reasons, not ideals. he simply loss contact with normal people outside the war.

in one side we have a person that think law can stop an angelic brainwash, and the other side a person who think the good of the nazy elves, the greedy dwarfs and petty humans can be guided to the greater good.

so we have three pivots, the warden of the west, the dwarfs and below stories, so how can they be solved with one move?

Kildare

Oh yessss they would both fuck. That would be a way to end this



[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Nope.

Autocorrupt. Suck and Fuck are only a D away.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's clear now, Cat has to take both Jobs. And in doing so, becomes the Arbiter Dread Empress Benevolent the Second Practical Guide.

Someperson

Guys guys guys I've figured out the big brain move to deal with Wandering Bard's last act of spite.

Catherine needs to write her own book. A second book. Like the Book of Some Things, but a guide to villains instead of heroes.

She can call it...

The Practical Guide to Evil.

[Sugar Roll](#)

My money is on Hanno. I think he's going to be the Warden of the West.

Rey d`Tutto

Taking a stand! Yay!

masterofbones

So either way we are going to have a massive thorn in Catherine's side.

Cordelia will always put Procer first, will always choose her own power over any other concern, but knows how to compromise. She would be a constant annoyance to Catherine, but threaten her enough and she will give ground.

Hanno is an actually good person, which creates a different set of problems. He will work with Catherine for the betterment of the entire world, unlike Cordelia. However, he isn't okay with being evil to do so, also unlike Cordelia.

—

Personally I think the choice is easy. They will both be annoying and frustrating, but only one of them actually cares about the world aside from Procer.

'Ladi Williams

The problem is whenever they do have a single misunderstanding....Hanno would rather burn the house down than give an inch.

Hargabga

I don't think this is the case? Like obviously Cordelia cares about the Procer, but not to the degree you describe. I struggle to see where your opinion of Cordelia as "not a good person" comes from, honestly. Her core idea is to ensure that Heroic principles are actually good, besides being Good. Like William calling onto Contrition to brainwash a city. Like Pilgrim killing a village. Like Saint of Swords writing down hundreds of thousands of people for the sake of better world. Like Red Axe putting her personal vendetta over literal apocalypse.

She wants to curb the worst excesses while Hanno wants to nurture the best intentions. It's the typical statistical dilemma of quality control. Only instead of products we have Heroes. She trusts in law and rules, while Hanno trusts in people and Heroes.

Zach

The key difference here is that only one of their goals is actually connected to the supposed goals of the Accords. The

whole point of the Accords is to limit the harm caused by Named and to prevent normal peoples' lives from being completely at the whim of the big pieces in the Game of the Gods. Cordelia's goals are 100% consistent with this. Hanno's are not; his principles will require that he directly endorse or oppose Named action on the basis of whether he thinks it's good or not.

Catherine is falling into the trap of thinking "but if I don't have this power, I won't be able to stop bad things from happening." But that has nothing to do with the Accords, and this desire "to be in control" is something Catherine has acknowledged herself.

Mental Mouse

> So either way we are going to have a massive thorn in Catherine's side.

Well, yes. The Warden names represent moral, theological, and political divides. Conflict is fundamental to the arrangement. And even *before* the WoTW Name came in, neither Cordelia nor Hanno could avoid deep and significant conflicts with Cat; this *despite* the fact that she actually likes and admires both of them, and vice versa.

beleester

Yeah, I kind of think that Hanno would make a better fit for the Warden of the West because he's **more** opposed to Cat's philosophy.

Cordelia and Cat have a little bit of debate on "what's really more important, Named or mortal institutions?" but Cat is a big fan of institutions too, she just doesn't trust Procer's specifically. Her split with Hanno is much more fundamental – "How do you improve the world, by compromising on the things you can't change or by trying to change them anyway?"

sengachi

Cordelia just recently made a series of decisions which guaranteed Procer would end up dissolving as a political entity in the long run to ensure she could keep the war going against the Dead King. I don't think she's as married to the idea of Procer over everyone else as you think. She just takes her responsibilities, whatever they happen to be, very seriously.

Tenthyr

I like that I can't decide either. Because Hanno is right, people are essentially decent when given the chance, given a good place

to grow in. But Catherine and Cordelia are right that there's always someone who will abuse trust, always. What is more important to enshrine for good now? The trust that people can be good, or the assurance that abusing the power of Good will be punished properly?

frederic

Given the rule of three, I wonder if there will not be a surprise candidate for the post of Warden of the West. A surprise, Dark Horse candidate not one is expecting, which will step in at the last moment.... I know we haven't seen rule of three apply to competition for names before and it doesn't apply to everything (for example, there is Heaven/Good and Below/Evil but no Neutral side and only 2 wardens, it seems) but given the importance the post...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Indeed, not everything is is threes! The Wardens are an old-fashioned duality, Above versus Below.

A third Warden candidate would technically be possible, but there's been no foreshadowing whatsoever of such a thing, and that by itself argues against it.

Anomandris

I vote Abigail!!

Xinci

Mm, so unless theres a twist and it becomes a situation where the Warden of the West has a adjutant or a split in power held its probably going to be Cordelia. Unless the other Named vote on it maybe, but then still may be her. She wants to make a centralized powerstructure mirroring somewhat what Cat already says she wants to make for Villains. While Hanno wants to make a decentralized one with dispersed Heroes, focusing on nurturing Good. The issue though is that the Age of Order isnt a victory for Good. Its one for Evil, where the regulation of powers for stability is its key focus, and if a power or structure can't be regulated it must be expunged.

It is easier to see how Above supports Cordelia as a prospect here, her methodology is a Good mirror, to Cats own when it comes to regulation. She preponizes their notion to rule instead of guide(it is funny that Hanno's line is the actual one to mention guidance), compared to Hannos proponence of decentralized guidance. Both support their philosophy since in either case they both support the creation and continuation of fascimiles of Good at various levels, but one iterates a more "contemporary" approach.

I do admit Cat thinking about Name alienation is fair, if possibly somewhat shallowly wrought in how it was framed, given the nature of their power compared to things like Devils.

Mental Mouse

“preponize”?

Xinci

Ah, I meant propounds. I messed up the grammar

Reader in the Night

The Age of Order is a win to the common people that have to live in a world where Good and Evil duke it out. If one side can be said to be more limited by the Accords than another, it's not Above: Below is the one that loses most of it's oldest, most powerful stories. Stories that usually end with them losing, it's true, but their stories nonetheless.

jamesc9

So loosening those stories might lead to winning more.

MoreBeer

I suspect it'll be Hanno. Agreed with the first bit but I don't believe this will resolve based on the accords. I think it can't, and that this being framed as which is better for the accords is a red herring which confuses the true issue.

WotW is the mirror to WotE. It should rule the heroes the same way Cat rules the villains. By understanding their nature and wielding a big stick. As the former sword of judgment, Hanno understands this and would be accepted by the heroes. Cordelia wouldn't.

The accords will come or they won't. Hanno's stubbornness doesn't sink them, though he will make compromise difficult. I can't see him going to war against the continent though, not to defend a hero that violates them. He already executed the Red Axe. He made the right choice, but did not bend on the political expediency of her sentence.

Likewise though, the war against Keter doesn't turn on this. Hanno won't fail to lead if he isn't the WotW. Cordelia won't fail to do what she must either, even if not WotW.

The final factor for me though is Hanno **is** transitioning. He will have a new name soon. Cordelia will either become WotW or remain unnamed. Either is possible but it seems far more likely Hanno becomes WotW than that he reverts to White Knight or assumes some other unforeshadowed name.

Daniel E

At a base level, I feel that Hanno's differences are easier to work with. The Warden deals with Named, simple as that. Trying to intertwine the Role with mortal laws is just asking for trouble. Which is not to say there can't be some overlap, but I don't see how the latter can ever supersede the former to the degree that Cordelia wants.

JRogue

I think that is part of the problem, and maybe one we are overlooking.

Cat found out when she was becoming Warden of the East, that it was not just authority over Named, but also over the East, over the nations themselves. That is what a Warden is, they are more.

Here we have Cordy wanting Nations over Named, and Hanno wanting Names over Nations. There is no balance, they lean heavily toward one or the other. Cat balances both and knows that. Cordy and Hanno have no interest in balance.

Regret

Maybe the solution is for Cat to cease being balanced, thereby creating space for both a Names-Warden and a Nations-Warden in the East. Then, for balance's sake, the Warden of the West must split too.

Or maybe Hanno and Cordy need to marry, and "become one". If any story has power, it's that one. Or maybe magically merge them? We haven't seen any magical atrocities in a couple chapters, we're about due.

SpeckofStardust

And that comes from the fact that nations in the east normally have Named rulers.

Preas was quit literally ruled only by Named.

Callow for most of history was also ruled over Named.

The west dont.

Procer which rarely has Named in positions of ultimate authority.

Levant which has Named rulership but not nearly as constant as the east. After all the four current rulers not 1 is Named.

This further matches the biggest divide in Good and Evil.

Evil might is right. Good right is might.

As such the warden of the "West/good" doesn't need to hold authority over all in order to be the influence to do the

job.

While the warden of the "East/evil" needs to be the biggest stick to do the job.

Zach

The problem is that Hanno wouldn't *avoid* mortal laws – he'd *ignore* them (and inevitably come into conflict with them). He considers morality to be above laws/institutions, and this means that he would directly conflict with nations/leaders that he thinks are bad.

Cordelia wants nations to have authority in situations that are directly connected to them (like the current situation with adding Named to the Rolls in the Dominion). This is a problem under the Truce and Terms (since amnesty needs to be enforced, meaning you can't let nations punish Named – this was the problem in the Red Axe situation), but as far as I'm aware the Truce and Term are a temporary thing during the war and will give way to the Accords after it's over. I don't see any problem with letting nations judge Named for their actions post-war (which is what Cordelia would want and Hanno would be strictly opposed to). It's only a problem currently because they need to ensure high Named participation in the war.

Reader in the Night

The main problem I see with Cordelia is that she fundamentally fails at Namelore. Heroic Names aren't built of people who will respect the law if they feel the law is wrong. Cat puts the differences between Hanno and Cordelia in terms of what conflict they would have with her, but she really should be thinking about what conflict they will have with their charges.

Cordelia wants to be a Judge to the Heroes, like Cat is for the Villains. Except that that's not gonna work quite as well for her; when Cat was working up to the Name of Warden, she essentially got asked multiple times "By what authority do you boss us around?" And her answer was: "Because I'm stronger than you." And that's fine for Villains, since they already function on the premise that might makes right anyways. If Catherine can quash all challenges to her authority, then she deserves to be in charge, right?

But that's not how Above works. Most of them would rather break than bend on their principles, and there's very little Cordelia can actually do short of killing them to dissuade them from doing what they think is right. Do you think the Saint of Swords, the Pilgrim, heck, the Mirror Knight, even Hanno himself, would stop ignoring any law that gets in the way because Cordelia asked them to, Warden or not? Cordelia's reign as Warden would be, frankly, very messy.

Zach

This isn't really true, though? All Named have strong convictions and things they're unwilling to bend on, and both Above and Below have examples of people who are more or less accommodating. It's important to remember that the more "pragmatic" villains like Black or Catherine herself are exceptions (in the same way as someone like Rogue Sorcerer is an exception among heroes in terms of his attitude).

Also, Namelore is something you can learn and there's no reason that Cordelia wouldn't be willing to learn it. She just grew up in a situation where she wasn't exposed to it and the only Named she knew personally was her cousin who has trouble communicating.

The most important thing here is mostly unrelated to the skill/capabilities of the people in question – it's their ideology. Hanno's ideology fundamentally conflicts with the goals of the Liesse Accords. The main intent of the Accords is to divorce the affairs of Named from the rest of society so that normal people aren't at the mercy of the players in the Game of the Gods. Hanno's ideology would force him to directly intervene to whatever extent necessary in order to uphold his ideas of right and wrong; he would only cooperate with the Accords to the extent that they didn't interfere with this. Cordelia, on the other hand, has convictions that are consistent with the Accords.

Catherine herself originally wanted to ban Named from being rulers (before realizing it wouldn't be practical). The current Dominion proposal would essentially give the Wardens authority in situations where the affairs of Named intersect with the affairs of nations/governments. This is something Cordelia is opposed to (and correctly IMO). Catherine would prefer to give the Wardens more authority so that they can circumvent poor decisions on the part of nations, but this is short-sighted (albeit short-sighted in a way that is 100% consistent with Catherine's character – she's acknowledged herself that she has a tendency to fear losing control). Deciding how to deal with this "grey area" is important to defining the post-war society, and the choice about who becomes Warden of the West will essentially answer that question.

beleester

I don't think Cat has an accurate read on Hanno at all. She's saying that he absolutely not bend to a law he considers unjust, but that's like... a central character trait of his. He's willing to bow to the law of mortals, even when it ties his hands. Even now, he expects that this dispute with Cordelia is going to be settled peacefully. He'll take the crown if it's given, but he won't take it by force if the decision goes against him.

And sure, the change to Prince White has changed his views on justice quite a bit, but that makes the idea that Heroes Never Compromise seem even more bizarre. Cat is literally seeing Hanno explain how he changed his mind and saying "this is proof that Hanno will never bend."

Shade

I agree. It doesn't seem like Cat is seeing this through a clear, non-villainous lens. It's almost like how she perceives villains and her role with them will directly impact the shape of heroes that contest them because she won't see otherwise. I hope she learns to.

I really think this chapter is partly about showing how much Hanno has been willing to change. Fixing the wall with brick and mortar being an example of his willingness to change after mistakes are pointed out and also as an example of his resolve to continue the course. He will do right, he will do good, and if he's wrong he'll learn from it and try again. What was the use of Recall without the willingness to learn from mistakes and change? Hanno even talking and working with Cat after the Red Axe incident is a show of faith and willingness in change, I believe.

AbraKadabra

My take on this is that Cordi is too grounded in reality to be a named, not idealist enough, while Hanno is the opposite, he is not grounded enough in practical matters. They are good for each other.

I can just imagine that Cat (or Robbers ghost 😊) would separately inform the two that the other is marrying before the attack on Keter, and they would only realise before the altar that everyone expects them to marry, only they were not informed. 😊😊😊

jamesc9

So this is a sort of geopolitical shotgun wedding.

What is the appropriate shotgun for persuading each of them?

Sulo

#TeamHanno

Sykomantis

Hmmm... you know, there's another "ruler" Named kind of hanging around that a lot of people look up to, and whose story is all about protecting the people from the evils of both people AND nations, and who got along pretty well with Cat. I bet if she gave him the Book, he'd get caught up fast enough to be worth it. I'm talking of course of the Kingfisher Prince. He also displayed

a great ability to control himself while escorting the Red Axe in Arsenal, and showed the ability to bend to custom in that mountain pass with all the nails. Dark Horse anyone?

Amostyx

I think it's safe to assume that whoever is Warden of the West will also have the Book of Some Things, either because they get the Name and then the Book or getting the Book gives them the Name.

So what does that do to each of them?

If Cordelia gets the Book, then that would cover up her weakness on Namelore by giving her direct access to 50% of all stories. You can't ask for a better crash course on Named.

If Hanno gets the Book, that would make Recall stronger and firmly push him into the "wise mentor" role – he knows everything about everything.

From that perspective, I don't think it's good to dismiss Cordelia because of her weakness with Namelore, and I think that she would push the Wardens into a closer mirror of each other, which would be better for both Names. Two Wardens, equal but opposite.

If Hanno turns into a Grey Pilgrim v2.0, then it feels like the Warden of the East is more likely to slide into a Dread Emperor/ess v2.0. Opposing, powerful but in different ways.

ActionKermit

Abigail for Warden of the West \o/

Forum Explorer

Someone brought up Rozala as a better candidate than both and I have to agree on that. She's got the experience with politics to handle that level of things, while also having the idealism to just say flat no to stuff that goes too far.

Cordelia is way too flexible. She was willing to sacrifice Callow as a nation to ensure peace by starting the Crusade in the first place. Or to take whatever action necessary to keep Procer in the fight against the DK. It's useful in the short term, but I feel like Cat needs a hard mirror, someone who draws a line in the sand and say 'you're going too far'.

Also people don't give Hanno enough credit. He handled the Mirror Knight. Yeah, it cost him a few fingers, but considering the mutilation Cat goes through in order to win, that's nothing. He did agree to the Red Axe being executed. His disagreement was in

letting the Princes of Procer get their pound of flesh to assuage their pride.

RoflCat

Reminder:

"It was never only Named or nation, I realized with dim horror. I'd always needed to have both."

This is where the current Warden of the East stands, and to be that equal Warden of the West must wield at least similar capability.

Both Cordelia and Hanno are currently failing to be an actual equal to Catherine's Warden of the East because they have only Named or nation, not both.

This means either they need to share the post and split their focus (i.e. pretty much how they functioned before the crack at Arsenal) or someone else who can handle both need to step up to the plate.

A certain Named prince comes to mind...(some people have mentioned Rozala, but I feel she's on her way to a different Name from that declaration she made at the Graveyard)

Chapter 34: Movements

"At this point, it's a matter of principle."

– Dread Emperor Abominable, the Thrice-Struck

I knew myself to be dreaming the moment I saw the tall trees of the Duskwood.

The city stolen from the depths and brought to the surface like a haphazard pile of loot still stood, I saw, but it was no longer the spirited lakeside capital I'd once glimpsed. The labyrinthine streets that snaked through the finest pieces of half a dozen of the greatest cities of the Empire Ever Dark were no longer filled with busy drow, its rough canals nearly free of the strange stone barges that had sailed them. Serolen was not empty, behind the half-empty streets there was still life and energy, but its vigour had been muted.

"Too many went south," Andronike murmured in my ear, voice deep and smooth as a sleep from which none woke. "We are bleeding dry."

I breathed out shallowly, the presence of half my patronesses grounding the loose dream into something altogether more solid. My feet touched the air, which was as solid as if I stood on a pane of glass, and my fingers closed against my yew staff. The length of dead wood followed me everywhere, even in my sleep. Andronike stood at my side, draped in the long shimmering silk robes that had once been the mark of the Twilight Sages. Her hair was long and dark, and at her hip rested a silver mask. We stood side by side, my gaze following those silver-blue eyes in contemplating the city below.

"You still hold the outskirts of the forest," I said.

"We lose more every day," Komena scorned from my right, voice ringing of steel on steel. "The Gloom will not hold."

Where the eldest sister wore the mark of her days as a sage, the youngest had kept into apotheosis the marks of her years of war. She wore the ancient ornate armour of the soldiers of the Empire Ever Dark, and at her hip a long blade of obsidian lay sheathed. Her grip on it was tight, her long fingers almost as claws.

"The demon-traps have not served?" I asked.

After the Arsenal, where the mere presence of a demon of Madness had been enough to send the Night into disarray, Sve Noc had understood the dangers in what they might face. Much sweat and blood had been spent finding an answer to the abominations, many weapons being made but none half as useful as the demon-traps. Simple cubes of obsidian, they had been crafted using the memories of the finest enchantments of the Twilight Sages with the sole purpose of entrapping and containing demons. They would only do this for ninety-nine years, but that was quite enough. We would be victors or dead by then.

"After we caught the fifth demon the Dead King ceased using them directly against the Gloom," Andronike said. "Yet it does not matter. He has found ways to pierce it, built bridges through. It is a war of attrition now, Catherine Foundling."

And no one won wars of attrition with Death.

"There are no reinforcements to send from the south," I admitted. "Things have taken a turn for the worse here. We're gathering all our strength for a strike against Keter but there's trouble. The dwarves are turning the screws on us."

I didn't bother to spell out exactly how, knowing that the feather-light touches against my mind were the Sisters taking up my invitation to have a look.

"Greed is set in the bones of the nerezim," Komena darkly said.

"We may be able to free a sigil for the assault on the Crown of the Dead," Andronike said, "but do not expect much of us. Enemies beset us from without and within."

I grimaced.

"Kurosiv hasn't been brought to heel?" I asked.

Komena's anger was like an open flame, warming the world of the dream around us. It was not her who answered, unsurprisingly.

"The leech learned more of power than we ever knew," Andronike said. "It cannot be destroyed without bringing about the collapse of a great part of the Night."

Which would be disastrous, after having lost so much of it in Hainaut already. Frankly it was a miracle that the Firstborn were holding off so well against Keter so far. Mind you, part of that had to be sheer numbers and the fact that the Dead King had to march his armies north. In time he'd mobilize strong enough forces to overwhelm Serolen, none of us were deluded enough to believe otherwise. It was just a question of whether or not we could bring the war to a close before that.

"Kurosiv refuses to fight," Komena harshly said. "The insipid maggot. It will know agony without end for this."

"Yet we will not strike first and begin a civil war as we fight for survival," Andronike said, her anger subtler but no less deep. "Its sigil is as a kingdom, now, and worships it as a god equal to us. It would be costly to end them."

I nodded. I'd taken the same gamble they now balked at, but that made me understand their reluctance all the more. It had been an... expensive thing, settling the East. I forced aside the thought before my fingers could dig too deep into my palm.

"Is there word you would have me pass to the rulers of the south?" I asked.

I fell, not fearfully but into a warm and welcoming darkness. I felt arms wrap around me, great wings flapping around us, and the whispers were spoken into my ear.

"Hurry," Sve Noc said. "Else you will face the armies of the north as well as the south."

I slept deeply, after that, and without dreams. It was the best night of rest I'd had since Ater.

—

"You know," I said through a mouthful of pastry, "it's a little screwed up that the best breakfast I ever had was when I was a prisoner in Wolof."

Vivienne aristocratically wrinkled her nose at me from across the table.

"It's a little screwed up that the Queen of Callow never learned not to talk with her mouth full," she retorted.

In the spirit of love and friendship, I crammed another pastry into my mouth and leaned over so my chewing would spill crumbs all over her plate. She forced me into retreat by swatting away wildly at my head with official correspondence from Duchess Kegan, which I magnanimously allowed since I was busy choking. I swallowed it all down with cough, then drank down a mouthful of water. Alamans loved to have flaky little pastries for breakfast, often with fruits and fresh cream, but I usually found it too sweet a fare. These had been good, though, maybe baked without honey. The palace's cooks had remembered my tastes.

It was characteristically Proceran to provide fine cuisine even in the face of the end times, I mused.

"Now that you've returned to pretending to be civilized," Vivienne tartly said, "can I brief you on yesterday's reports?"

"I was waiting for you to," I smugly smiled.

I saw in her eyes that she considered throwing cutlery at me for a moment before reminding herself that she'd probably be seen doing it. She settled for a glare instead before she began speaking.

"The First Prince is behaving unusually," Vivienne told me.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"How so?"

"She spent nearly all afternoon yesterday cloistered with every prince and princess in the region," the dark-haired woman said.

"Which is only to be expected, considering her position," I pointed out. "She needs their support if she's to keep her hands on the reins of the Proceran armies."

If it came to popularity with the rank and file, Hanno would likely win. That wasn't how it worked, though. While he was

popular with soldiers and officers, ultimately these were still very much private armies. Those men and women had sworn oaths to serve a crown or a company, and many would balk at following the Sword of Judgement if it meant breaking faith with their prince or captain. If the remaining royals publicly backed the First Prince, it'd turn the tide of opinion. It wasn't like Cordelia was *unpopular* with the soldiers. She just hadn't won the kind of loyalty you could only get from fighting with them in the thick of it.

"The meeting is nothing surprising," Vivienne agreed. "The amount of time she spent on it though, is."

I let out a noise of belated understanding. While I'd seen little of it myself – in all humility, these days when I needed to speak with someone they made the time – all reports from the Jacks agreed that Cordelia Hasenbach was an exceedingly organised woman. She measured the hours of her day and doled them out with as much precision as she could. It was out of the ordinary for her to just throw an entire half day at anything.

"You think she's having a hard time wrangling them?" I asked.

"Maybe," Vivienne frowned. "She's got loyalists in that crowd, but it's true there are those with little love for her and she has much less leverage to keep them in line now."

"Otto Reitzenberg and the Kingfisher Prince will back her," I said. "Our people in their army are sure and I've no reason to doubt Senior Mage Kilian."

Vivienne gave me a look as she decided whether or not to make something of that, then wisely decided not to.

"They're her only two solid supporters," Vivienne said. "Beatrice of Hainaut has been fighting side-by-side with the White Knight for two years now and has warm relations with the man. It's the same with the rest of the lakeside crowns: Cleves and Hainaut see him as the best bet for getting back their lands."

That and the current Princess of Cleves, Carine Langevin, had a history of enmity with Hasenbach. She'd been the Mirror Knight's lover, part of the plot to backstab the Firstborn after the war, and that'd been before both her father and older brother were buried by the First Prince. For good reasons, mind you, but that knowledge wouldn't anything to lighten up the graves.

"They're also the weakest and least influential," I bluntly said. "They've lost their lands, their troops got mauled and they're reliant on the supplies Hasenbach gives them to keep eating. They're not going to strike out on their own to back Hanno, not if the actual players are leaning the other way."

Partisans of the Sword of Judgement or not, they'd side with whoever had troops to pledge to get them their lands back. If that was Cordelia, like her or not they'd kneel and kiss the ring.

"And I am not convinced they will," Vivienne said. "Rozala Malanza might have a working relationship with her, but there is no fondness there. Alejandro of Segovia will follow wherever Aquitan goes, and between the two of them they command the loyalty of the army that defended Cleves."

There were other principalities that were still part of the Principate, of course. Arans, Bayeux, Aisne, Cantal and Lange. But those crowns were pretty much weathervanes. All of those princes and princesses were currently in their own lands, preparing their defences when they weren't already fighting the dead, and their interest in the going-ons in Salia was minimal. Meanwhile further south Iserre, Creusens and Salamans hadn't *officially* seceded, but they had stopped listening to any orders coming out of Salia so they were effectively nonentities. No, the power here laid where the armies did: on one side Prince Frederic and Prince Otto, on the other Princess Rozala and Prince Alejandro.

If those four couldn't agree on supporting the same Warden of the West, this had the potential to get ugly.

"They have to know how fragile the situation is right now," I said. "I have serious doubts Rozala Malanza would gamble with the fate of Procer just because she hates the First Prince."

Vivienne grimaced.

"It's not that I think you're wrong," she said, "but that I have no other explanation for why that meeting kept going for so long. They had two meals, Cat. *Something* was happening there."

I grunted in assent.

"We're missing something," I said. "What has she been up to since?"

"Going through the Salian archives," Vivienne said. "Or so we're assuming, the Jacks don't have eyes inside. She went in there and hasn't come out."

I couldn't actually recall ever seeing Hasenbach read something for pleasure, so I doubted it was to indulge curiosity she'd gone in there. She must be looking for something.

"She take in anyone with her?" I asked.

"The usual servants and also the Forgetful Librarian," Vivienne said. "The two have developed something of a rapport over the last few years, I'm told."

Mhm. I'd left the Librarian in Salia for a reason: she had prodigious capacity to read and piece together disparate threads of information that would be but to better use in the Principate's capital than anywhere else. That and the scope of her talents was narrow, for all that it was deep: there wasn't much else she was useful for. So Cordelia was definitely looking for something in those archives, not using them as cover for something else she was up to. Or at least not *just* that.

"I want to know what she's up to," I said.

"As would I," Vivienne said, "though we must be careful. Now is not the time for a diplomatic incident."

"It's not the time for timidity either," I replied. "She's beginning her move to become Warden and I need to know if the method is a problem. We'll pull at the thread from both ways, Viv."

I paused.

"I'll look into what was discussed that afternoon with the other princes," I informed her, "but I need you to find out what she's doing in the Salian archives."

"Those are very well guarded," Vivienne reminded me.

I smirked.

"I'm sure they are," I said. "Why, if only I had a professional thief I could pawn this off to."

"*Former* professional thief," the Princess objected.

"I'll take your word on it," I replied with a pleasant smile, "what with you being my royal expert on theft and all."

Our conversation devolved into name-calling for a bit, but it was eventually settled that she'd handle looking into what the First Prince was looking for in those archives. We were both done eating by then and our tea had cooled, so before we parted ways I heaped one more task onto her plate.

"If Cordelia is making a move," I said, "then Hanno will be doing the same. I know he's much harder to follow around, but..."

"I'll have the Jacks look into it," Vivienne seriously replied. "I don't want to be blindsided by him any more than you do."

Good, I thought. Now I just had to look up an old friend and see what I could get out of him.

—

It took me a while to find where Prince Frederic Goethal was, though after I did getting to him didn't actually take all that long.

Like all the royal lines of Procer, the House of Goethal had a luxurious manse in the nicest part of the city that wasn't the Lineal – which was mostly palaces and old Merovins holdings, and as such could only be entered at the invitation of whoever then ruled Salia. Frederic's ancestors had been rather tasteful, I decided when I got my first look at the manse. Though it had that inevitable Alamans dip into the ostentatious, the property was essentially a large four-story mansion in stone surrounded by beautiful gardens. Sunny ponds and carefully tended wildflowers were the order of the day, with the touch of luxury being half-hidden sculpted kingfishers made entirely out of precious stones.

They were startlingly lifelike, I found. Also each was probably worth enough to arm a company of legionaries, which I suspected the Principate would much rather have than the pretty birds right now. There were wards in place, old magic deeply anchored in the stone wall around the property, but they were nothing too tricky to get around. The easy way through was to dump all my presence into the Night so I wouldn't even register to most boundaries, but the top of the wall actually had a nasty little enchantment set that'd burn anyone touching it so I had to slip in through the front door. Counter-intuitive as it might seem, that was actually where most wards tended to be weakest.

You couldn't have people going through a place all day and expect the boundary to be as firm.

I slipped into the gardens in the wake of a messenger boy leaving through the door, veiled in shadows, and took the time to enjoy the walk through the little coves. It was a restful place, all water and shade under tall weeping willows. Frederic himself was outside, on a small terrasse by the side of the manse. It was beautifully done, all sculpted wood under a roof that was a grid of wood covered in climbing ivy. The sun peeked through in dappled spots and even the slightest wind had the leaves shivering. The Prince of Brus was not seated at the glass dining table but instead in a long seat by the edge of the terrasse, overlooking the gardens.

There was a small wooden table at his side, redwood, and on it there were three things: a thick sheaf of parchments, a glass and an open bottle of brandy. To my surprise, as I slipped up the stairs and got a better look at him I found that he'd just knocked back a glass and was already pouring himself another. The

papers lay abandoned as he pushed back his long blond curls, hand coming to rest on his forehead. He was just as handsome as he had been in the Arsenal, but he looked tired. Tired and haggard. I quietly limped my way behind him, hand on my staff, and leaned forward to speak into his ear just before dropping the veil of Night.

"Rough day?"

Sadly, he didn't drop the glass. He almost choked on the brandy he'd been sipping, though, which I took as sufficient entertainment. Prince Frederic coughed, then half-turned to offer me a woeful look.

"Was that entirely necessary?" he asked.

"Nah," I grinned, drawing back. "Just keeping you on your toes."

I limped my way around his seat, at which point Alamans manners kicked in and he realized I did not have a seat laid out for me. The blond prince rose without batting an eye and insisted I take his seat, which was an even split of charming and annoying. Instead I nudged him back into the chair with the tip of my staff and stole his glass of brandy.

"I'll take my tribute differently," I said before taking a sip.

If my voice had come out a little flirtier than usual, well, there were no witnesses. He was graceful enough in defeat not to argue the point any further.

"It would be as heresy to deny any whim of yours," Prince Frederic easily replied, a smile tugging at his lips. "You are ever welcome into my home, Queen Catherine."

Last time he'd called me that he'd been on his back and rather dishevelled, so I probably enjoyed it a little more than I should. I sipped at my drink again. Best not to get too distracted, I reminded myself. I *had* come for a reason.

"Don't make promises too quickly," I warned, wagging a finger. "I didn't come here just to have a look at your pretty curls, Goethal."

"Sweet flattery by a black-cloaked woman come in secrecy," Frederic grinned. "I do believe you might be the very sort of woman my uncle warned me about, my queen."

I grinned back, though in the back of my mind I did not he'd said his uncle. Not his father or mother. I'd known him not to be the son of the last Prince of Brus but instead his nephew, but the exact circumstances that'd seen him rise to the crown remained shrouded. He'd been the formal heir to his uncle even before

Cordelia forcefully put him on the throne after smashing through Brus during the Great War, though, which smelled of an interested tale. Maybe another day.

"I was Arch-heretic of the East for a bit," I conceded.

He laughed.

"Knowing my uncle, he would have minded that less than your being Callowan," Frederic ruefully admitted. "He was an admirable man in some ways, but he did have... arrested ideas."

An opportunity to moved the conversation towards what I'd actually come here for, and smoothly offered enough that I had no doubt he'd done it on purpose. I had a lot of unflattering things to say about Alamans highborn, but I did have to conceded that they exquisitely trained in certain regards.

"Lots of those going around, these days," I nonchalantly said. "Makes a girl curious."

I sipped at my drink. Blue eyes considered me. Frederic Goethal had never been one of the greats of the Highest Assembly, but he'd been far from inept at the Ebb and Flow. He was a fair hand at games far subtler than those I played.

"Curiosity is no sin, I would think," the Kingfisher Prince said. "Especially between friends."

"Good," I smiled. "Because I have been wondering, you see, at what might have kept so many of my... friends busy for half a day in a room where no others were allowed to enter."

The fair-haired man looked faintly amused.

"Princess Rozala," he said, "believed you'd wait at least two days before approaching one of us. The First Prince replied she could not be certain she would not be visited that very night."

"Had other irons in the fire," I said. "Went to have a look at the latest prince of Procer."

A pause.

"You know, the one in white."

"Hanno of Arwad," Frederic said, "is a good man. One of the pillars keeping this war from coming down on all our heads."

But not, I read between the lines, someone the Kingfisher Prince wanted to follow as Warden of the West. Considering the Prince of Brus had been one of Cordelia's most ardent partisans since the Great War, I was less than surprised.

"Takes more than a pillar to keep the roof up," I agreed. "Thing is, we're all riding the Principate these days. It goes, so do our chance. So when that many crowned heads disappear for an afternoon, questions need to be asked."

"The First Prince availed us of the situation and shared her intentions for the future of the Principate," Frederic candidly told me. "Though her claim on the Name of Warden of the West was discussed, it was not the heart of the matter."

My eye narrowed. I'd used that trick before: speaking the truth, but just the right angle of it. Something was being left out. *They want to keep something from me*, I thought. Which meant something in that room had been agreed to that I'd object to. I sipped at the brandy, considering how best to wheedle this out of him. Concern, I decided. That it was a genuine concern would make it all the sharper a tool.

"I need to know if there's going to be a split in what's left the Highest Assembly," I bluntly said. "We can't afford the three largest Proceran armies left being at each other's throats."

He opened his mouth, but I raised my hand to silence him.

"This isn't me being nosy, Frederic," I said. "I've been approached by others who are worried about this mess blowing up in all our faces, and it's not going to help when your people disappear for half a day and I have no goddamned idea what was being discussed."

Secretary Nestor had been more concerned by the potential blowout of a confrontation between Hanno and Cordelia, but I wasn't even stretching the truth all that much: we were *all* concerned about the Principate. We were well past its breaking point and it was not the kind of realm that would make for a peaceful corpse. Grimacing, the fair-haired prince conceded the point with a bob of his head.

"Your unease is understandable," Frederic said. "There is, however, only so much I can say without breaking confidence."

I eyed him for a long moment, then nodded. He wasn't the kind of man who bent his morals even when it might be convenient, which I tended to admire more than not. There was only so far he could be pushed. I let him choose his words carefully.

"Accord was reached," the Kingfisher Prince finally said. "We are of one mind."

I did not hide my surprise.

"My people weren't sure Malanza would stick with you," I admitted.

He looked, I thought, ruefully amused.

"Princess Rozala is respected among her peers for good reason," Prince Frederic said.

I hummed.

"So I can expect a common public front?" I asked.

He nodded decisively.

"As I said, accord was reached," the fair-haired man said. "The main concern of the talks was how Procer must be forged going forward, which is not something I can share with a foreign crown – however charming the head on which it lies."

Well, I did like the occasional bit of flattery. Especially when it was matched with the kind of genuine attraction I found in his gaze when he looked at me. That said, I was not so easy to distract. He was talking of Procer being reformed, but it could not have been a small sort of reform if it'd swallowed up an afternoon of the most powerful people left in the Principate. And it did nothing to narrow down what it was that Cordelia was trying to find in the archives. Some kind of precedent for the Highest Assembly? She shouldn't *need* one, if she had the right people behind her. A simple vote would get anything she needed done.

So what was it that'd been decided in this room and they were keeping from everyone else?

Yet I had pushed Frederic, I thought, about as far as I could. If I tried to get more out of him he'd start pushing back, or more likely simply change the subject. Mhm, I'd not gotten as much as I wanted out of this conversation but I had gotten enough. The First Prince wasn't about to lose her seat and key royals of Procer were willing to back her openly. That'd put Hanno on the backfoot, considering how much of his strength as a claimant came from popular support. *It's also not what she's actually up to*, I thought. Hasenbach would not be satisfied with just cutting the grass under his feet. She'd want to go on the offensive, push her claim.

I still had no idea how she'd do that, but it wasn't here I'd find out. Time to make my exit, then, I figured. I sipped at the cup again, noting a third of it was still full. He must have filled it nearly to the brim when he'd poured, which seemed unlike Frederic.

"Dare I ask what kind of reading was enough to make you drink brandy like water?" I asked, gesturing towards the papers.

He looked startled.

"You have not heard, then," Prince Frederic slowly said.

I cocked my head to the side.

"Heard what?"

"I only just got word from the First Prince," he said. "Segovia has fallen."

My fingers tightened.

"How bad?" I quietly asked.

"They had enough priests gathered in the capital to hold back the demons and evacuate," the Kingfisher Prince said, "but this morning the army lost a pitched battles in the northern plains near Leganz. It was disaster: they were encircled, then slaughtered and raised to the last man."

Meaning the principality was effectively finished. Even more worrying was that a great many of the northern refugees – more than half of the Lycaonese that'd escaped the death of their lands – had been sent there.

"The refugees?"

"Fleeing further east, towards Creusens," he said. "They mean to reach Lake Artoise and take barges further south."

I let out a small breath. Cordelia's entire people were not to be ground to dust yet, then. Thank the Gods. Still, Segovia. Fuck. That was one principality away from the northern border of the Dominion. The Hidden Horror was moving south even quicker than we'd thought.

"We're running out of time," I murmured.

The Kingfisher Prince sadly smiled.

"We already have, Catherine," Frederic said. "Now we can only hope that victory will buy us back a dawn."

[Droughtbringer](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Reader in the Night

We already have, Catherine," Frederic said. "Now we can only hope that boosting will buy us back a dawn."

Linnus42

We finally got a Drow Update. And its predictably not going great.

I am going to assume Dawn is some reference to Cordelia's Super Weapon.

I am not sure Frederic is right to think its going to work that way or that Cat is right we are that point where Nobles telling you do something matters much. I see Christophe's Ex is relevant. As for Frederic well lets hope he doesn't need to fight a rematch with Christophe lol. Frederic was never going to be a third candidate in my book. I am getting the distinct feeling the swords are going to come out eventually.

WuseMajor

I think Dawn is just a metaphor for a new day. Another day of life. Another chance to rebuild their kingdom.

Because they've already run out of time. Unless the Dead King is destroyed or contained somewhere without access to magic/dead bodies, the whole content is fucked.

aurikdomi

I think dawn is literal. They are out of time, and are hoping killing/beating the dead king will let them survive.

nimelennar

There's a Proceran song with the refrain, "Hold the wall, lest dawn fail"

I think that's the kind of dawn here talking about, not a weapon.

asazernik

IIRC it's a reference to one of the bonus chapters about his years on the walls – I think his inspirational speech was along the lines of "we're all due to die by sundown, but if we win today we buy another dawn."

[Liliet](#)

And the pace slows down again, bringing us a whole chapter without overt development of the central local plot.

We do, on the other hand, get some flirting between Catherine and Frederic!

Linnus42

You think its a deathflag for Frederic. If Cordelia, Frederic, Otto and Rozala push too far the swords can absolutely come out. And Dear Frederic aint going to do much in a fight. If there trying to do something that Cat would balk out well it raises the stakes.

[Liliet](#)

"Is X a deathflag"
For any X, no.

Anomandris

How about for the.....Dead king??

I imagine he has a literal deathflag...

Isi Arnott-Campbell

If that pun were any worse Cat'd punch you through the fourth wall. Well done.

Anomandris

Mark of good writing that – make you waddle through pretty much nothing and still leave you just as eager as you were at the start of the chapter for the next.....

I don't mind padding books out if writing them is done well. Sub-plots that pretty much lead nowhere or are threads of their own end up still being fun to read. Prolonging my entertainment (which is basically why I read in the first place)...

Just don't go full Robert Jordan....

dadycool

I like sub-plots. I just personally have less to say about them. "Drow, ooh! Cordelia's plotting something, ooh! Cat and Freddy and flirting, kappa!" Chapters like this are like small-ish puzzle pieces. As part of the whole, they're important, but as themselves there's not much there. The edge of a leaf and a glimpse of asphalt, enough to leave the picture wanting if absent, but just another piece.

Santiago A Duarte

Although i like these chapters, I think they would be significantly less frustrating in a traditional novel. If a chapter is a puzzle piece with little value on its own in a regular book, you can just...turn the page and get to where it

matters. Here we have to wait 3+ days for a chapter that's likely to be unrelated to this one

Rey d`Tutto

Hey, some of us love Tolkien-esque style super-epics. I mean Battlefield Earth is only 1600+ pages, and that took me 3 days when I was 16.

Thank Deity I found web-seirials.

Cpt. Obvious

1600 pages? I had to check that. Turns out it's more like a thousand pages, and even that's far more than I expected. I could have sworn it was closer to 600 and was dead certain that it couldn't be more than 800...

But then I guess that depends on the format. I have a paperback edition. A hardcover edition might be a lot thicker as they tend to use larger typeface and more generous line spacing.

Frivolous

I've been wondering what Kurosiv would do. Long ago at the beginning of book 6 I predicted either betrayal or flight.

Inaction is an interesting and odd compromise. I wonder if it's out of fear of Keter or desire for power over the Night.

In Kurosiv's place I wouldn't want the Night very much. It's been proven to be weak in the face of Keter's magic. Thus I'm guessing fear is its main motive, but I've been wrong before.

Demon-traps are a fascinating innovation.

So Carine, Princess of Langevin, the Mirror Honey Pot returns.

Raved Thrad

I laughed at "Mirror Honey Pot." It's so very accurate, and yet it also speaks to the worst parts of Christophe. Cordelia probably wants to tear her hair out at even the thought of him. Sure, he's one of, if not the most high-profile Proceran Chosen currently, but he's also a walking, talking diplomatic disaster waiting to happen.

naturalnuke

Hopefully it was a reminder of the Mirror Knights character in the past so we have a reference for how he's changed

Frivolous

It must have been really weird for Christophe when he learned and assimilated the fact that he lost his virginity, and thus broke the oath that protected him from glamours and illusion, only because his girlfriend's father wanted land and political power.

And then he got reamed out about his sex life and poor choices by the high officers of the Grand Alliance.

Juff

Typo Thread:

their reluctant > their reluctance
down with cough > down with a cough
wouldn't anything > wouldn't do anything
be but to > be put to
it to I > it so I
did not he'd > did note he'd
interested tale > interesting tale
to moved the > to move the
conceded that they > concede that they were
availed > apprised
pitched battles > pitched battle
was disaster > was a disaster

WuseMajor

Given how useful Cordy has found the Librarian to be, you should be amazingly worried right now Cat.

The First Prince has a plan at this point and managed to make the most important crowns in the nation fall in line and now she's gone looking for something with a living compass.

She's gonna find what she needs and she plays procedural tricks in a way that few others can.

Hopefully it's some kind of precedent that she thinks she can use as leverage against the Dwarves, because that's probably the least dangerous thing she might be looking for.

Frivolous

I would agree that Catherine should be worried about the Forgetful Librarian, except for one thing: She can command the Librarian, and the Librarian can't hide from her.

I suspect Catherine can, if she tries, even communicate with other villains across a distance.

Speaking of villains: I wonder what the Pilfering Dicer is doing. He's dangerous, too.

re: Cordelia's gambit: I wonder if she has schemed for all the princes of Procer to submit completely to Hanno. It might be the her Good choice, especially since she once knelt to Catherine.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine is, right now, full on shared primary objectives ALLIES with Cordelia.

There's only so much worry she has to spare on something Cordelia is plotting.

jamesc9

Depending on how badly it blows up, and in whose direction.

edrey

i really was curious about the drow, if kuroisiv gets too problematic, just send ranger, she would gladly have a conversation with him and solve the division.
so now its time for a reversal, i have some ideas but all are nucear-type, i welcome theories

Anomandris

Yep, Ranger would definitely work with Cat. No questions asked.

Specially about the knife in her dead lover. Or kinda leaving her for dead.

aurikdomi

work for absolutely not. but I suspect she will show up again in the final charge against keter in some capacity.

edrey

your sarcasm would have worked in any other topic really but here i would say is foolish.

you are putting your modern point of view on ranger, if Ranger wanted cat dead, she would be dead, ranger expected the possibility of amadeus dying, i wont be surprised if ranger want to make contac with.

i would say this dont put your modern point of view in a middle-age fantasy story. its foolish

Anomandris

Thanks for the kind words! Makes the start of my day so better.

Still, if you want to continue the discussion aspect, my sarcasm was based on what has been established in story already. You know, the chapter where Malicia and Ime discuss Amadeus being captured by the Heroes in Procer, and where they didn't outright kill him cause it "would have Ranger come out swinging". I am very surprised that Malicia & Ime too have such a modern viewpoint of life, mirroring my own.

Look, if you still think my earlier sarcasm was more malicious (pun definitely not intended) than funny, then apologies. Costs me nothing.

edrey

you are a very sensitive person, i don't feel that my words are too harsh, really. and your reply didn't offend me either. but that is the problem of internet and different cultures. anyway, i welcome any kind of reply that has a good argument and logic. and i apologize for any misunderstanding or cultural shock.

dadycool

The biggest problem with text-based discussion is that conversations, debates, and sarcasm are verbal languages, not written ones, and so the tone of voice, inflections, and all nuance are erased, leaving nothing but the words and their face value. It's also why comment sections like this one are the worst places for them. And I mean that at face value, no subtext.

Anomandris

Cheers, mate. Ditto from my side – any misunderstanding is definitely not intended.

Let's keep this fandom nice and well, as it deserves!

Anomandris

So a rather wordy query, but why is the Dead King still fighting? Or continuing his invasion/genocide? I doubt he is an expansionist, nor is he like a typical "Evil" with a capital E that exists in most books without needing any rationalisation.

I mean, I earlier chalked it to the whole Nameiness of being, well, The Dead King and therefore not liking life + his animosity towards the Bard and how she would use the Living Heroes and Villains against him.

Now, though, aren't the stories of the Villains shattered? Or did I read too much into what happened and it's only the Story structure that got broken for the Villains (and not any

compulsion/effect of the Names themselves). Also the Bars has been pretty much outed AND dealt a huge blow, so shouldn't he, you know, try to work via back channels with the others who want her gone forever too?

Basically ELI5 DK's current motivations, anyone?

dadycool

Control? It'd be my motivation, in his place. If I had a Realm of people who adored and worshiped me and a continent full of people who wanted to kill me, I'd wipe the continent clean and let my worshipers loose on the place. Even pre-Mute, the more land he had under his control, the more defenses he could erect, the more resources he could harvest or otherwise exploit.

I think some of the Villain's "nature" was story-driven, but Names like Warlock tend to be researchers simply because mages are intelligent enough to be curious about the world and what they can do in/to it. Contrast this to Palpatine-esque cackling and saying "All according to plan" on the edge of a cliff in a third-act darkest hour scenario. A Big Bad like that should be smart enough to follow OSHA guidelines regarding safety railings, but the story drives them to either go insane or get worse, painting a giant "Weak Point" poster where they're most vulnerable.

Anomandris

It fits. Although it is asking for more opponents, not less – one tends to be in more danger perpetuating war than peace. Maybe threat levels plummet post afore-mentioned eradication, but they spike so much during that it actually might even out on a net basis.

dadycool

A million gnats isn't that much more dangerous than a hundred gnats, especially if you have a flamethrower.

[lolo96](#)

DK knows if he does nothing, he will lose eventually as both Bard and Tyrant said. Calernia will progress enough that a crusade will manage to kill him. He's attacking now to kill off the entire Calernia. If he leaves in the middle of the war after conquering enough territories and dealing enough damage, there's a risk that Grand Alliance / Nameds are gonna follow him back to deal with him.

[amit27592](#)

I'd recommend subscribing to Patreon to read the Neshamah chapter for more insight on DK's motivations. The side chapter expounds on it quite a bit.

RoflCat

The way I see it, it's because now he is the only actor on Below's scale.

See, above all the life stuffs happening, there's the balancing game of the Gods in the background affecting things.

Like how Amadeus hypothesized that his career as Black night was so successful because the scale was tipped to Above from all of Pilgrim's successes (And later Catherine was supposed to be Heroine to balance it back but then she went and gone Villain so...)

The balancing of the scale can happen on both the bigger picture (Amadeus and Pilgrim) or in the immediate (Pilgrim's sacrifice tipped the scale for Above, so DK get to unleash Hellgate unimpeded as a balancing act)

This push is basically DK doing the same thing as the battle of Hainaut but on a bigger scale.

He pushes with the technically 'low stake' army of his that's he's built over time (clearly evil overlords are expected to have an army of minions)

If Procer crumbles, the rest of the continent will follow, and they can't win with just armies because DK's armies have been built over his long reign + necromancy to make even trade still favor him.

And when Above side get to use their superweapon (Cord's angelic bomb), he will get to unleash something equally nasty of his own.

Especially now that he is the sole beneficiary of it since other villains can't cause any Story weigh to change.

tl;dr – DK is basically trying another battle of Hainaut but on bigger scale now that he's the sole beneficiary of Below's balancing power.

[Faye Kiname](#)

His motivation is laid out pretty clearly in a patreon only interlude. I won't say what it is for obvious reasons.

ninegardens

Frederick is as excellent as always.
Such the goodest boy.

I love how he know **exactly** how much he needs to say to keep Cat (and others) satisfied, while giving no more.

BargleNawdleZouss

1. Did I miss something, or has Catherine still not been formally introduced to Prince Otto? I'm interested to read his reaction to all the help she has provided to his people.
2. Too bad this issue can't be resolved by marrying Cordelia and Hanno. As it's a question of policy, a wedding wouldn't resolve anything.
3. At this point, I believe the only political entities on Calernia not in play are the ratlings and the elves. I'd love to see Catherine leveraging one or both against the dwarves to move them in the right direction, somehow.
4. What was the resolution of the goblin issue? AFAIK, this is still hanging out there.
5. Cat previously mentioned something about a possible evacuation across the Tyrian Sea; has there been any previous political contact between her court and any entities over there?
6. I want my Catherine & Hakram reunion!
7. Where are all the funds and materials that Pickler was promised for the assault on Keter (back when she introduced the copperstones to Cat)? Will she get to produce her ultimate artillery array of awesomeness?

ByVectron!

"Accord was reached," the Kingfisher Prince finally said. "We are of one mind."

I did not hide my surprise.

"My people weren't sure Malanza would stick with you," I admitted.

He looked, I thought, ruefully amused.

"Princess Rozala is respected among her peers for good reason," Prince Frederic said.

Am I wrong, or is that exactly the sort of precise and clever phrasing of a reply that would be used if they had decided the other way? Especially given the rueful bit, it seems to me that he is neither confirming nor denying the direction, merely that they all agreed.

ninegardens

... Has Cordelia handed her kingdom of to Rozalia?

Hear me out on this: Cordy was really insistent back during the coup that there would be no grey clad warden to rule from above; that Procer would not be ruled by named.

IF she is going to claim a name, there has to be a clear line of succession for who rules procer next. The obvious candidate is Rozalia...

Is that her Gambit? Or does losing the Title undermine the name??

ninegardens

It would also act as a way of not splitting the armies loyalties: if she loses, those most loyal to Hanno will still cooperate with Rozalia, and those loyal to her (fred and Co) will also follow Rozy as the appointed First prince of Procer, endorsed by Cordelia herself.

If she WINS and becomes warden then the front line troops will follow the new First prince (Rozalia, front line general) and those loyal to her will still follow her (the new warden of the west).

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

How to win even if one loses...

nick

Thanks for the chapter! "would be but to better use in the Principate's capital than anywhere else. " -> put to better use

nick

Not really a comment, so consider deleting after reading... "An opportunity to moved the conversation towards what I'd actually come here for, and smoothly offered enough that I had no doubt he'd done it on purpose. I had a lot of unflattering things to say about Alamans highborn, but I did have to conceded that they exquisitely trained in certain regards."-> to move , to concede

Xinci

Decentralizing themselves while setting up clear cooperative channels of information has been a effective method survival for empires in the past. Especially when cooperation between different parts is highly contentious or the flow of information from them to the center is highly variable.

Sve really does need a plan for Kurosiv(too bad they dont have a Longstride analogue that they could use, unless Ivah or Rumena makes a new one). Their previous statements on Night and them being it likely tie their hands to some degree, but Cat probably should work with them to understand the narrative they are on currently probably ends with them as barely sentient scraps at best.

It is good that they managed to advance means to mitigate demons at least, though given they have a timespan for containment(perhaps like Masego's own acts in his pocket dimension) they still likely need to make some intrinsic method to resist the Demons or need to trust a Heroic faction/group of Light users.

Someperson

The things with the demon traps that release the sealed evil after 99 years, and also the permanent hellgates that open every X years to release waves of darkness on the world, all sound like the makings of a sequel story :]

Not that I am expecting a sequel, but it **does** give us a glimpse of what some of the aftermath might look like.

Zach

I just realized something that is bugging me.

Why isn't Dead King releasing demons on Procer right now (like he did when the Below stories were first removed)? Now that Catherine is in Procer, the angel weapon can't be used without also killing Catherine (and any other villains in the city).

Actually, why is Forgetful Librarian still alive? She's a villain who presumably would have been in Procer (though I suppose it's possible Cordelia sent her away in preparation for using the weapon, though seems like it would have been on very short notice).

hakureireimu

The Witch set up a Ward over Salia. You can travel fast through Twilight.

Zach

Ah, forgot about the Ward, thanks!

Twilight is also a pretty good explanation for temporarily removing people from Salia (though I feel like Cordelia or someone else mentioned "the angel weapon kill all affiliated with Below" as a potential problem for its later use, which wouldn't really be the case if you could easily just shunt all Below-affiliated Named into Twilight before using it).

Someperson

In a weird way, I guess the (maybe temporary?) abolition of villainous stories was actually necessitated by the logic of the story.

The Dead King invaded under the pretext that Malicia invited him. With Praes getting forced in line, that invitation would effectively be nixed, so the Dead King's invasion no longer works storywise. There is a very real possibility this might have forced things into an anticlimax where Neshamah just retreats to Keter and holes up for another couple of centuries, and most of Calernia's fighting forces elect to take some extremely needed breathing room instead of going forward with the desperate showdown in Keter.

Only the story demands an actual confrontation with the Big Bad. A story can't really just say "oh, nevermind" about the most climactic conflict that is brewing. So... **something** had to get rid of the limiter preventing the Dead King from waging all-out war.

In a very real way, the villainous stories might have actually offed themselves.

I'm not sure how this is related to the chapter beyond just that the war against Keter is getting more and more dire, but it's what I was thinking about as I read this chapter so anyways thank u for coming to my TED Talk.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Those villain stories are Suppressed.
Backlash is a bitch...

Chapter 35: Catch

"Great Ones, the evidence is clear: we have been betrayed by the Cruxis Cabal. They mean to sell us out to the Emperor, and so we have no choice but to silence them before they can destroy us."

– Archlector Analphagor of the Temple of Crespuscum, addressing the inner circle (later revealed to have been Supreme General Mendacius of the Cruxis Cabal all along, and also Dread Emperor Traitorous).

My first warning it was about to come to ahead was my being told the Warlord was about to arrive.

Hakram Deadhand, Warlord of the Clans, had decided to ride out ahead of the second wave and arrive in Salia the better part of a week ahead of the armies. He'd be there, Vivienne's messenger told me, by early afternoon. Tomorrow. I spent an hour chewing on that and going through a bottle of wine, unsure how I felt about the surprise and how I *should* be feeling about it. I'd promised Masego I would talk with Hakram when he came to the Proceran capital, but it'd been a faraway thing when I'd spoken the words. Not it was at the front gate, knocking to be let in, and I had never sympathized more with the deer that froze before hunters.

I was not to be allowed to nurse my wine for long, though. I got a visit from Secretary Nestor Ikaroi, though it was not official and it was dealt with briskly. He'd come in person because my rank demanded it, not the message itself. It was certainly short enough that the walk to the Lineal from the city must have felt like a waste.

"Empress Basilia will be arriving in the capital within three days," Secretary Nestor said. "And with her the rest of the League council."

I made some expected noises about how I was looking forward to it and it would a pleasure to sit in the company of such an august council once more, but even as my lips moved my mind was racing. One was an oddity, two could be coincidence, but if I found a third... This was starting to look like a confluence, power calling to power, and there was only one thread of story in Salia that would demand so great a gathering to be resolved. Cordelia and Hanno had made their choices, begun their paths, and now water was flowing down the riverbed. Fuck, I'd thought I had more time. I sent away the Delosi with courtesy, polished off the rest of my glass and immediately went fishing.

If we were on the last stretch, as I was beginning to suspect, I needed to know how much time I had. Vivienne had hinted to me that she'd be trying her hand at the Salian archives tonight so she might find out what Cordelia was up to, but Hanno was proving unfortunately difficult to find for such a public figure. But first, I thought, I needed to find my third. My proof that events were in motion. And though it was tempting to think that the last part would be another surprise arrival, I dismissed the thought. Everyone that needed to be there for the resolution was already set to be, which meant I needed instead to be looking for a nudge.

One of Above's since my half of the Gods had fallen silent. Thankfully, I had seen to that contingency already and all I needed to suffer was to limp my way up the damnable set of stairs up the eastern wing of the palace where my scrying mages had set

up. I dropped down into a sinfully comfortable plush seat after having given my order, massaging my bad leg. The entire length felt like a single throbbing bruise. My mages were good at their business, and so it was only moments before the Observatory connected us to the silver mirror on the other side and Masego's face was in front of me.

"Hierophant," I said.

"Catherine," Zeze enthused. "Very fine timing on your part."

My eye narrowed.

"Let me guess," I said. "You've just had a breakthrough and Roland had a significant role in it."

He looked surprised.

"That is broadly true," Masego conceded. "He had a stroke of inspiration this morning and we just had our first results."

My fingers clenched. Three for three, damn me. There was a reason I'd wanted the Rogue Sorcerer with Hierophant as he looked into returning Below's stories, and it wasn't just because Roland was one of the most learned people on Calernia when it came to magic. He was also a hero, and while my Gods had been silenced the opposition's could still give a nudge here and there.

"Tell me," I ordered.

"We believe the Intercessor is exerting the full strength of her aspect at all times to keep the stories muted," Masego said.

"Theoretically, with sufficient power directed in the exact right manner we could break the effort – and perhaps shattered the aspect itself in the process."

"And we've got a source for that power?" I asked.

"Possibly one," Hierophant said. "I need more time to prove it conclusively."

And there it was.

"How long?" I asked.

"Five days."

So that was my timeline. Five days, more or less, the Gods expected that there would be a Warden of the West seated opposite of me before we entered the last stretch of this war.

"Do what you can," I said, and the ritual began to fade.

Five days, I thought, massaging my leg. I was not ready, but then neither were either of the claimants. And that was the part that was bothering me the more I thought about it. Hasenbach had the skills and the will to make a great Warden in some regards, but in others – direct strength, namelore – she was sorely lacking. It was the same for Hanno, whose weaknesses as a candidate were less direct but arguably even more dangerous. Neither of them seemed like a perfect fit for the Name, and though part of that might be blamed on the Role itself not having been settled yet it felt like too weak an explanation.

I'd been going back and forth between them looking for who should be backed, the rest of the Grand Alliance peering over my shoulder and wondering the same, but I couldn't shake the impression that somehow both the choices were losing ones. That this should have been cleaner, that the angles of it were... slightly askew. My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched. It would not do to start seeing a devil in every shadow, I reminded myself. And yet. I closed my eye, calmed my breath. My Name shook itself away, a great maw looking over my shoulder. I looked for the stars inside and found nothing, only darkness, but that was all right. The sight of them had been my Name recognizing a skill I already had and crowning it, not a gift Below had given me.

I could do it by hand, if need be, as I always had before. I would find out where the objects in motion were headed and what it meant, then lay the single finger on the scales that I was allowed. And since Vivienne was already looking into Cordelia Hasenbach, my task was clear: I was going to unearth the plans of the Sword of Judgement.

—

I went about it the polite way first, sending a rider to his war camp to ask where he might be and how soon we might speak.

The answer I got was a polite workaround giving me an actual answer, which told me that they didn't actually know where he was right now. That was fine, as I'd not actually expected them to lead me to him: what I'd wanted to find out was whether or not *they* knew where he was. It did not seem to be the case, and that meant he was nowhere official. He'd gone to ground to get something done, which smacked to me of Hanno preparing his move to become Warden of the West. I'd not spent the hour waiting on the messenger idly, using it instead to cross off another possibility: more than half of the possible wielders for the Severance were in the city, so he couldn't be holding a council of heroes over who'd get to wave it around.

I'd narrowed down the possibilities, but Hanno was still in the wind and I had no real idea of where he might be. Thankfully, in the process of finding the potential wielders of the Severance I'd also gotten my hands on an avenue to solve that lack.

"That's a new kind," I noted. "And I can almost *smell* the power coming off it."

Adanna of Smyrna, the Blessed Artificer, looked at me smugly through her spectacles. It was a little unsettling to see those highborn golden eyes in the face of someone who wouldn't spare a thimble of spit if every Soninke were on fire.

"The Hierophant is not the only who learns through facing opponents," Adanna said, straightening proudly. "I have reached a deeper realm of understanding regarding the Light."

I had no trouble believing that, looking at her newest receptacle for Above's power: it looked like a wooden pillar about half a foot wide and seven tall, heavily sculpted and crisscrossed by rods of copper. It stung my eye to linger too long on the sculptures, which I took to mean they were sacred in some way. The Blessed Artificer's entire workshop in the city reeked of the same uncomfortable power, but I kept it away from my face.

"I'm impressed," I honestly said. "Has the White Knight seen it yet? He has final say over your artefacts before they become war assets."

"Not yet," the Blessed Artificer peevishly said. "He's been busy of late."

I cocked an eyebrow, making my disbelief blatant enough even she would pick up on it.

"It looks like a good shot at blowing through one of the gates of Keter," I said. "What is it that's more important, exactly?"

Just the right amount of disbelief and flattery, which should...

"My very opinion," Adanna irritated said. "As if anything the Blacksmith could make would..."

Her mouth snapped shut and she eyed me warily.

"Why is it you came to visit again?" the Blessed Artificer asked.

"We need war assets accounted for before we move out," I lied, "so we can assign them properly."

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly more. She didn't call me a liar, though she was clearly suspicious, because that was very much a legitimate reason for me to be here.

"I am sure *Prince White* will inform you when my work is ready for such considerations," Adanna said, emphasizing Hanno's recent title.

Well, no need to ask who she thought should be Warden of the West. I 'reluctantly' conceded that she was right and I really ought to wait for him, which gave her the pleasure of having caught me out trying to go around Hanno instead of figuring out what I was actually for. I let myself be ushered out without protest. I'd got what I needed from her: my next lead. The Bitter Blacksmith was involved in whatever it was that Hanno was up to, and while the Sword of Judgement was surrounded by people who'd obscure his movements should he ask the Lycaonese heroine would be much easier to track.

There were two Bitter Blacksmiths, a brother and a sister who were respectively a villain and a heroine. Helmgard Bauerlein was the eldest of the pair and though unlike her brother she was not a mage and did not work magic into her blades she'd still been the one picked to work on Severance in the Arsenal since she was better at handling exotic materials. In a time without the Truce and Terms, I was pretty sure one of them would have killed the other by now, but instead they'd both been recruited and kept in different theatres of the war – the north for the villain, the Arsenal for her.

Going by memory, we'd sent her Rozala's way after all with another batch of Named from the Arsenal. The Princess of Aequitan's armies saw a lot more siege warfare than Hanno's did, so it'd been a natural fit. That was a good turn for me, since it meant the horse the Bitter Blacksmith would have saddled to get to Hanno's camp would be from Princess Rozala's spare horses. Something I was well within my right to ask about as a high officer of the Grand Alliance. Took me another hour to find out, but not because I was being put off: it turned out the Bitter Blacksmith hadn't actually ridden out from Rozala's camp but from Salia instead, presumably using a different stable.

I picked up her trail after remembering that the First Prince had once mentioned to me in passing setting aside a dozen stables and attendant horses for Named and dignitaries, when asking me about how many villains could actually ride a horse. One of those, I found out, had loaned out a horse to Helmgard Bauerlein. I wasn't going to get lucky enough that the Blacksmith would conveniently reveal to a stable hand where Hanno had disappeared to, but I did get something out of investigating there: the horse had been taken yesterday afternoon and wasn't expected back until tomorrow. I thanked the girl and limped away with two answers.

First, the Blacksmith had been headed out to the countryside outside the city. This wasn't in Salia. Second, her usefulness to whatever Hanno was up to would end around tomorrow. Meaning whatever it was it was both ongoing and incomplete. It made sense, I grimly thought. Cordelia's own mission in the Salian archives, whatever it might be, was not finished either. Claimant symmetry.

I hit the northern gate of Salia and had the watch captain there rustle up the commander for the evening shift yesterday, but it wasn't through there the Blacksmith had gone. I tried the eastern gate instead and found her trail there. Good. Rode straight to the Army of Callow's camp afterwards, to get my hands on the finest map I had of the region. There I ran into a dead end, because as far as that map had to say there was *fuck all* east of Salia. Townships and grain fields, but the closest city was two days' ride away and that was too long for what I'd found out. Had Hanno just been looking for a quiet place to gather heroes and solidify his backing there like Cordelia had done with her princes?

No, it couldn't be that. Whatever he was up to was ongoing, I'd already established that. He was actively doing something out there, not just looking up a place to do something later. Which meant my map didn't have the right information, or at least the right kind of information. So what was it the Sword of Judgement had been looking for that wouldn't be on my campaign maps? It wasn't like Hanno actually knew the principality, he'd spent even less time here than I had. I went through a glass of wine thinking of that until I realized the obvious: Recall. The aspect, which I suspected him to still have to some extent, gave him access to anything a human hero had ever learned about Salia.

"Something old," I murmured. "Old enough it wouldn't be on our maps anymore."

Hanno wasn't a ritual sort of man, so it wouldn't be a forgotten place of power. The Bitter Blacksmith was the key, I decided. It was a sort of place he'd need her expertise for. The odds were decent it'd be a structure of some sort and I was out of my depth, so I went to find an expert of my own.

"You're looking at this wrong," Pickler said.

"That's why I'm here, yes," I drily replied. "Now tell me something I *don't* know, if you would."

"Male goblins lose their teeth easier, but they grow back until much later in their lives than most women," my Sapper-General helpfully said.

I actually hadn't known that, but I still gesture obscenely at her out of principle. After having taken her amusement at my expense, she then bothered to actually help me.

"He's not going to need a blacksmith for a structure," Pickler said. "It's too far out her expertise. It'll be something smaller, Catherine. Like a trap, or maybe a lock."

I paused, going still in my seat. A lock. *Fuck*, I thought. *Let me be wrong*. The lock wasn't so important as what you found those

on. Pickler cleared her throat loudly. I cocked an eyebrow at her questioningly.

"You're going the I-figured-it-out face," the Sapper-General told me, looking irritated.

"Eh," I said. "I might have. Maybe. Why's it making you cranky?"

"Because you didn't tell me what you figured out, you rude fuck," Pickler said. "Do you expect us to just read your mind?"

I considered her for a moment, cocking my head to the side, then smiled beatifically.

"Thank for your teaching me about goblin teeth, Sapper-General," I sweetly replied.

She cursed me all the way out of her tent, as was only just. Smiling as I was, my mind raced ahead. I needed another set of maps, but that wasn't the kind either the Army of Callow or the Legions of Terror would have. The Blood, maybe? I grimaced as I limped my way through the camp avenues. No, Levantine maps were infamously terrible. They'd actually used Proceran ones when fighting the Legions in the central Principate. The Dominion was close enough they should have the maps, but unlikely to have them. I needed people who'd been recording history for long enough that... Ah, I grinned. It happened that I did know a historian, and a pretty good one too.

Secretary Nestor Ikaroi of Delos, though in practice an ambassador from the League of Free Cities, was not officially that. So while he fulfilled the functions, the First Prince had not lodged him in one of the empty palaces of the Lineal: if she did, it'd be something of an insult when the formal diplomats arrived since they'd be put on even footing. It was already mid afternoon by then so it was with slight impatience that I found the officer of the Jacks that Vivienne had left in the palace and found out where he was being lodged. Amusingly enough it was only four streets away from where the Goethal manse I'd visited that morning was, so I rode back to the neighbourhood.

One a horse. It made Zombie jealous, but she was just a tad too noticeable and I was trying to be discreet.

Secretary Nestor received me with all courtesies, visibly expecting me to be about to tell him which claimant we should back, so he was rather surprised when instead I asked him a question as a scholar. Surprised and rather flattered, by my estimation.

"So the Secretariat does keep extensive records of the lands that became Procer even before the Principate was founded," I said.

"We do," Nestor said. "Nicae had extensive trade and marriage ties to many of the great *reales* of the Arlesite south and most of the League imported spelter from what is now Orne before it became cheaper to buy it from the Empire instead. We have a great many contemporary firm and weak sources for the chronicles, though we ever seek to refine our knowledge."

"And what have you got on Salia?" I asked.

"Less than we'd like," Secretary Nestor admitted. "We tried to reconcile the stories from *Chansons des pierres et du vent* with contemporary tribal conflicts, but there is not much to use. The region only began to rise under the Vezelons and then the Merovins, fairly late in Alamans history."

Well, it was worth asking anyway.

"In any of your histories," I said, "is there ever mention of a dwarven gate in Salia?"

The old man leaned back into his seat, looking very interested.

"It has been alleged," the white-haired scholar said. "As I'm sure you know, the Kingdom Under rarely keeps a gate for more than a century or two – with the exception of the Mercantis gate – so the location of many have been lost."

"Of course," I smiled, not having known that in the slightest. "But there are indications there might have been one in what is now Salia?"

"In a manner of speaking," Secretary Nestor said. "There are repeated mentions of the 'Carrouges fairgrounds' in different chronicles, which drew some skepticism as fairgrounds were sacred to early Alamans – it was forbidden to fight there – but there are no Mavian prayers in the region that would explain such a truce being observed."

Dwarven presence certainly would explain the tribes being reluctant to fight. The dwarves were not shy about enforcing civility on everyone else. I leaned forward.

"These 'Carrouges fairgrounds', were they ever found?"

"I don't believe so," the old man said. "There is a town of the same name a few hours to the east of the city, I believe, but the existence of such a gate was never proven."

Fuck, I thought, even as I felt a swell of triumph. I was pretty sure I'd just found Hanno, but what I'd found was not exactly pleasing. I took my leave from the white-haired *askretis*, avoiding answering when he obliquely brought up what he'd last come to me to discuss. He took that well enough, declining to

press the matter once it became clear I was not ready to commit either way. I rode back to the palace and unfurled the maps there, finding what Nestor Ikaroi had mentioned: a small village to the east of Salia called Carrouges. It shared the name with a nearby swamp.

The afternoon was getting long in the tooth but there was nothing to gain by waiting, so I was back in the saddle within moments of getting some food in my stomach. I took Zombie, this time, to her vocal pleasure. Having bored of terrifying stable hands she cawed triumphantly when we rose into the sky, uncaring that I had first veiled us in Night. The roads were very good this close to Salia so I didn't gain much time by flying instead of riding, but I did get a much better view of what lay ahead from the heights.

We were just past dusk when I led Zombie into a circular glide over what had to be Carrouges according to the map. The village was both unimpressive and empty. Parts of it had also burned down at some point, most of them around the House of Light. Considering the broken tower that'd once topped the temple was at the heart of the burnt-out husks, I was inclined to blame a lightning strike and everybody being gone for that. The Carrouges *swamp*, though, was swarming with activity.

It was hard to tell how large the swamp would originally have been, as it'd since been drained. What had to be maybe two hundred soldiers, by the look of the banners a mix of Brabantine conscripts and *fantassins*, were digging out of the dried mud a massive steel trapdoor. I saw remains of a large stone structure as well, pillars and maybe parts of a roof lying around, but that was broken. The trapdoor was still pristine, and I risked flying even lower under the cover of night. Just as I'd thought, over the steel door a solitary figure was moving around.

Trying to force open the lock in the middle, using long iron poles and what looked like a complicated system of counterweights. I had found the Bitter Blacksmith.

I did not bother to land, instead spurring on Zombie to rise back above the clouds and head back to Salia. I'd already learned everything I needed to, all that showing up there would achieve was a confrontation. When I'd spoken with Hanno, he had stated he wanted to have a conversation with the Herald. That, should an appeal fail, he then wanted to speak directly with the Kingdom Under. For both those things, though, he would need the First Prince to arrange the conversations. Now it seemed he might be digging up an old dwarven gate so he could cut out the middlewoman and make his move no matter what anyone else thought. Something had begun to feel wrong this morning and the feeling was only increasing as the evening went on.

I chewed on that all the way back to the palace, arriving near Midnight Bell, but was no closer to an answer when I found

Vivienne waiting for me in the solar. By the look on her face, though, that was about to change. She had a glass of wine in hand and she drained it all when I arrived, slumped bonelessly in her seat.

"Did you ever wonder where the Tyrant learned his gargoyle trick?" the Princess asked me.

"I'd assumed Helikean mages," I replied, sitting across from her. "Was I wrong?"

"I have my doubts," Vivienne drawled, "since I just spent an hour avoiding squealing warthogs made of stone on the roof of the Salian archive. Have you ever seen a stone warthog, Catherine?"

"I have not," I replied, trying and failing to keep the amusement out of my tone.

"You wouldn't believe how quick on the hooves the bastards are, given the weight," she muttered. "Or how goddamned loud they squeal. If I hadn't followed Southpool tripward rules and brought two pigeons to let loose as a decoy the guards would have caught me and we would have had a very awkward diplomatic incident to deal with."

"But you came through," I grinned, "as I never doubted you would."

I received an obscene gesture we'd both learned from Indrani in answer and only then did she begin aggressively slapping down books on the low table. One, two, three – seven all in all, and then one scroll she pressed directly into my hand was not a copy of something but a list. Of all the things Cordelia Hasenbach had been reading for which we did not have a tome of at hand. It was the overwhelming majority, but that wasn't exactly unexpected. My eye scanned down, brow creasing as it did.

"Yeah, couldn't make too much of it myself," Vivienne said. "I got the common books, they're the ones we have in this palace's library."

I hadn't even known we had one of those, but then I'd seen barely a third of this place.

"Any common thread?" I asked.

"The books I did find in the palace are the easy part," the Princess said. "They're all about coin."

I let out a contemplative noise. Huh. Hadn't expected that.

"How so?"

"Apparently back in the early days of the Principate, the First Prince that talked the Highest Assembly into having a common currency and giving the officer control of the mints was saddled with a condition," Vivienne said. "The princes were afraid that First Princes would just debase currency whenever they needed quick gold for a war or a palace and fuck over the rest of Procer doing it. So all the mints were to keep count of how many coins were minted and it'd be written on scrolls that the Highest Assembly would be given a copy of at the beginning of every year."

I blinked in surprise.

"Five of those seven books are compendiums of those scrolls," Vivienne told me. "The other two are about currency as well, but not Procer's. It's about foreign coinage and how much metal there was in it, how much it was worth."

I hummed again.

"Anything that stuck out there?"

"Callow got fucked by the way the Fairfaxes kept allowing other nobles to mint their coins," Vivienne said. "Meant no one outside our borders ever wanted to take it. The Dread Empire's *aurelii* were considered more reliable even during periods when the Tower was at war with half of Calernia."

Yeah, I grimly thought, that sounded about right. Ratface had been appalled at Callowan coinage, back in the day, and though we'd never finished edging out the other Callowan coinage I suspected that Queen Vivienne's reign would see that work thoroughly finished.

"So she's looking at the old finances of Procer," I mused.

"Not just that, though," Vivienne said. "The list casts a broader net."

It really did. The books in there were all over the place. Going by the tiles there was stuff in there about voting rights in the Highest Assembly, Proceran trade with the League – particularly Mercantis – and more historical stuff. Like the old Lycaonese states before they were turned into principalities, chronicles about Penthes in the last two centuries, precedents for royal land grants in Procer, Highest Assembly records from Orne and Bayeux, and most strangely of all a book about the wars waged by the Republic of Bellerophon. Vivienne was right, it was a pretty broad net that the First Prince had cast.

"I'm not seeing a pattern," I admitted.

Somewhere in this was the foundation of Cordelia Hasenbach's attempt to become Warden of the West, but I wasn't seeing it.

"From the list there are maybe seventy of the named works that are about trade," Vivienne said. "Either inside Procer or with the League of Free Cities. If I had to guess, that's the unifying thread. The coinage books are just to understand what the coin was worth, it's all about where the gold has been going."

Only that didn't explain the histories, I thought with a frown. Or the sudden preoccupation with voting rights when at the moment the Highest Assembly was pretty much an empty formality. Why would she-

"*Fuck*," I swore. "Merciless, bugging Gods *fuck*."

Vivienne poured herself another cup of wine but didn't even offer me the same courtesy, the ungrateful wretch.

"I take it you've realized something?" the Princess drily asked.

"We're not seeing a pattern because those books aren't about one thing," I said. "They're about two things."

I rapped a knuckled atop the books.

"She used those to know what Procer's coin was worth," I said. "Then the trade books and the foreign currency books are about finding out how large the wealth of other nations was. Specifically nations that were trading with the dwarves."

"That explains the Mercantis books and the Penthesian ones, they both have gates," Vivienne said, "but Bellerophon-"

"Hates Penthes to the bone," I said. "So most of the time, when they declare a war it's attacking Penthes. That weakens trade in the region, even if they lose the war."

She was a smart woman, Vivienne, so she caught up quickly.

"That's what the records of Orne and Bayeux in the Highest Assembly are about," she realized. "They used to trade raids with the Counts of Ankou through the Red Flower Vales, and whenever their holdings were hit-"

"-they complained about it in the Highest Assembly, trying to get backing from the First Princes," I finished. "And when Cordelia sees those complains, she knows that trade with Callow was drying up since the Vales used to be our only land path to Procer. It's about their wealth, not us."

"It's insane, Catherine," Vivienne grimaced. "I know she's an intelligent woman, but trying to figure out entire treasuries from just these records? To have even a chance, she'd need..."

"Someone capable of reading through an entire library in a day and remember every word," I interrupted. "Like, say, the Forgetful Librarian."

I saw the understanding sink in. Cordelia wasn't reading those books herself, at least not most of them. She was using the Librarian to do it and then using her as a living reference book to work with. It was insane, just as Vivienne had said, but if there was one woman in Calernia who might be able to pull it off it was Cordelia Hasenbach. Who was, for all her flaws, a remarkably brilliant woman.

"She's putting hard numbers to how much trade with the dwarves is worth," I said. "That's what she's doing. She's figured out something about what the Herald wants and she's following the trail so she can figure out how to flip the negotiations around."

"That's good," Vivienne slowly said. "Isn't it? We're in favour of getting the best of the Herald, aren't we?"

"No when Hanno is going all in on a fundamentally incompatible path," I cursed. "He's digging up a dwarven gate to approach them on his own."

"Cordelia's position could accommodate that," the Princess frowned. "She's not committed yet, she-"

"She is," I interrupted. "Because of the other thing she's doing, the one you couldn't figure out because you didn't have the conversation with Frederic Goethal I had this morning."

My fingers clenched.

"Old Lycaonese borders, voting rights?" I said. "Look at the shape of it, Vivienne. Hasenbach was the Iron Prince's heiress, in principle she's Princess of Hannover as well as Prince of Rhenia right now. Mathilda of Neustria died in Hainaut and word is pretty much all the Siegenburg of Neustria died defending their lands. That leaves two people to hold all the north: Cordelia Hasenbach and Otto Reitzenberg."

And Otto Redcrown had been in that closed council.

"The only reason voting rights would matter," Vivienne slowly said, "is if she believes that there is about to be a change to the borders of the principalities."

"The Kingfisher Prince told me this morning that the princes would stand behind her united," I said. "I think we've just found out how she bought that."

"She's going to abdicate," the Princess said.

"Not just as First Prince," I said. "As Prince of Rhenia and Princess of Hannover as well. She's uniting all Lycaonese lands under Prince Otto."

"Princess Rozala would dare ask as much," Vivienne said.

"No," I said, "but Hasenbach is *smart*. I underestimated her."

I let out a sigh.

"She's realized she can't be a ruler and the Warden of the West at the same time," I said. "So she's settling all her affairs before she goes all in on her claim."

And there would be no room for retreat, I realized with horror, after having cut away so much of what she loved. She would be in it to the knife. And so would Hanno, who fought for nothing except what he was willing to die for: he would not bend, not now that he believed he'd found a way to save us all. Wasn't that the lesson he'd learned from the silence of the Tribunal: that sometimes you had to take it on your own hands, because no one else would? *Fuck*, I thought once more. I still wasn't sure what that royal land grant book was for, but it didn't matter.

Not when I'd just become clear that the two claimants to the Name of Warden of the West had just begun to plod down path that *could not be reconciled*. The differences of opinion over the Blood, they'd just been a pivot that differentiate them. The dwarves were the pivot where the knives came out and neither of them were leaving any room for retreat. Hanno was staking his entire soundness as a leader on the gambit of levelling with the dwarves, risking disgrace if he failed. Which he would if Cordelia found her solution and got to the dwarves first. If he lost there, he was done as a claimant.

The entire philosophy he'd adopted in the wake of the Choir of Judgement falling silent would be proved wrong. The judgment he'd finally begun to venture would be proved *wrong* at its first real test.

On the other hand, Cordelia had burned every bridge behind her before taking her leap. She was renouncing titles and wealth and rule of the most powerful nation of Calernia to become Warden of the West, which she'd prove worthy of by bending the Herald of the Deeps to her will. Something that could be rendered completely worthless if Hanno got to him first and succeeded with his appeal on emotion. All those sacrifices rendered into nothing in the span of a single conversation. My stomach tightened just thinking about it.

"They're not just rival claimants, Vivienne," I quietly said. "If one of them wins, it fucks over the other. Strongly. Permanently."

She studied me with hooded eyes.

"You told me," the Princess said, "that a pivot cannot be had without a cost."

It's too high a cost, I thought. Their trajectory was a collision from which only one would walk away, and I was not certain we could afford to lose either of them. Slowly I shook my head.

"This is not coincidence," I murmured. "Or fate, and least of all providence."

And that left only one possibility: enemy action.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

*arcanavita*15

The bard is up to something with this as noted by the last statement, also I did not expect for Cordelia to ditch being First Prince but when you look at it by abdicating she solves a lot of her problems and maintains her ideals.

caoimhinh

I mean, there was a whole mini-arc about the Bard trying to make Cordelia Warden of the West, which only failed because of the Augur's intervention.

Cordelia getting the Name now is just doing what the Bard wanted, with a delay.

*Linnus*42

I mean does relying on a Villain as Cordelia does to get a win, help or hurt her claim. Honestly, that is her biggest problem she has little support among Heroes. I did kinda predict that Procer would get split into three parts so that checks out. Still Cordelia reliance on a Villain does mean Cat has a much easier time throttling Cordelia's plot whenever she wants.

Indrani's hint that something was still up with Hanno bears out. Hidden Dwarf gates eh. I am going to guess Hanno also bothered to look up how to speak and read Dwarfish.

Enemy Action eh that sounds like the Bard up to no good... I suppose it could be DK though not sure how he execute that one. I don't think there is anyone else relevant enough to factor in or have the knowledge to execute.

I am thinking this might get bloody if its all or nothing there is no point in Hanno not leveraging his superior martial and magical power.

Anomandris

Cordelia seemed to be relying on something even more evil than Villains here – Financial Analysis!!

Miles

Turns put the Gods Below were just algebra all along.

ninegardens

“The real gods were the equations we solved along the way” - Masego, probably.

The Ignorant Student

The means of gathering information are not important, if anything they might strengthen it since “villain explains their evil plan” is an old story. But it doesn’t matter either way since the Bard is suppressing Below’s stories. As far as creation is concerned, Cordelia is just getting her information from a very reliable librarian.

Honestly, I’m just surprised no Villains have figured out they aren’t bound by stories any more. I mean, Dead King figured it out in about five seconds. Plus, doesn’t Cat still have Above’s stories in her possession? She should be able to do something similar to what the Bard is doing, or at the very least, put a finger on the scales so Cordelia and Hanno are quite on quite so spectacular a path of MAD.

Miles

Speaking of story weight there should be a third claimant. Thus I vote Abigail for Warden.

She doesn’t want it. She doesn’t even see it coming. If she did see it coming she’d run screaming for the hills at the thought of being opposed to Cat.

Combined with her talents of moonwalking uphill, all of this makes her the ideal candidate.

M0och123

You know, I had that thought as well...

Since neither option is palatable for Cat, she may go with option C.

I love the nomination of Abogail for that role, though it would leave two Callowans as the wardens.

caoimhinh

I believe Rozala would be a better middle point as Warden between Cordelia and Hanno.

SpeckofStardust

...
"I still wasn't sure what that royal land grant book was for, but it didn't matter."

Well I think I see how this is going to be handled because Cat is dum.

How many people were for Cordelia X Hanno pairing again?

[Liliet](#)

Oooh? How?

Badziew

I guess the shipping plan is that she will be granted some land as a "reward" for abdication, then married with Hanno, and then they both become Wardens (similar how the Bitter Blacksmiths are) and live happily ever after.

Another scenario is that after one of claimants is defeated they become a Spiritual Advisor (or some other assistant Name) to the Warden, perhaps even literally if the defeat will be physical and not just political.

And yet another crazy scenario it that some kind of magic clusterfuck happens and they both fuse (physically and mentally) into a single Named person, the new Warden, able to switch between their two conflicting philosophies as needed.

ohJohN

I don't understand the logic behind that first scenario – if Cordelia abdicates, what could she possibly gain from marrying someone she despises? A political marriage is worthless without a crown, and there's no reason to think it would improve their chances of becoming joint Wardens of the West – the Bitter Blacksmiths are siblings, not married.

SpeckofStardust

No you misunderstand, everyone can see that the warden position has 2 people to fill it.
Rather much like ending a feud of noble families merging via marriage well.
The land grants is to given directly to Hanno a tie that

can help control him, on the other hand as Cordy has shown this chapter she has zero problems with using people effectively and 'kindly?'

If she becomes warden she'll need a heroic adviser aka White Prince, while Hanno becoming the Warden needs a political adviser aka former first prince and maker of the diplomatic union between everyone currently here.

Only reason why I didn't considering as a given is that frankly one of the 2 of them needed to make a move in that direction but the royal land grant fits it perfectly.

Mind you a conversation between the 2 needs to happen before a plan fails for it to really work.

Which means all Cat needs to do is kidnap both of them and shove them into a room for an hour.

Tenthyr

The Bard is bending all of the power of perhaps her most terrifying aspect to allow the Dead King free reign, entirely to set up this disaster. She couldn't prevent Catherine's Name being born, but her name is one that requires an equal. It can't stand at its most powerful without an opposing force. So she's attacking here, and now, by turning the birth of the Warden of the West into the death knell of the the war that would cement the Wardens into the zeitgeist.

The Ignorant Student

Eh, I don't know about that. The Bard managed uncontested dominion over Above and Below for thousands of years. It would make more sense to me that Cat can turn this around to becoming Warden of East and West, or just Warden I guess. This conflict actually helps her claim if she wanted to push it. Firstly, she is the one in possession of Above's stories, which already gives her more authority over Heroes than Cordelia or Hanno can muster. Plus, it's setting up a great "blinded by greed" in action if not intention for both as each of them are throwing people under the bus in order to advance their own power.

I don't know much about Procer geography, but Cordelia is promising at the very least to TRIPLE Otto's holdings, AND, since the Dead King is to the north, once he's dealt with, a big chunk of that will be come de facto territory of Otto. Hanno, on the other hand, has always insisted that "I do not judge" and claimed he's just a servant of Judgment, but while he can play the humble Hero not afraid to commit to menial labor all he wants, the fact is that every time his power and authority is challenged, Cat and everyone around him has to defuse a hissy fit, and he is actively getting involved in political matters he has no standing to meddle in.

NEITHER of them deserve to be Warden of the West, because while Cat has earned her Name carefully deescalating the collapse of an Empire and has spent months preparing for her Role, Hanno

and Cordelia are blundering ahead trying to grab at this shiny new Name without considering the consequences. They KNOW that the other is aiming for the Name, and instead of trying to take a diplomatic stance on the issue, they're focusing on screwing the other as hard as they can

P.S yes, I know it's full of spelling and grammar mistakes, I'm writing this in a tiny text box on my phone.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia and Hanno have actually been collaborating on defense of Procer quite successfully. Sure, they won't talk to each other, which is stupid, but the only reason they're sabotaging each other here at all is because both of them are unaware the other has staked all of their self-worth on being THE ONE to solve the problem. Hanno's solution failing won't even ruin Cordelia's attempt!

MoreBeer

Free reign for the Dead King? Was that a deliberate pun?

flashburn283

I have to wonder, is this DK being evil, or is the Bard really really screwing everybody over just to prove a point

[Liliet](#)

Cicero

Could Cat be in a pattern of three with the Bard?

Her first confrontation a draw? The second a loss?

[Liliet](#)

It only works win/draw/lose (or lose/draw/win from the other side). If the first confrontation is a draw, a pattern is not initiated.

Of course, there's plenty of three-beats out there, but please, please,

ruduen

Any guesses on what the Aspect's term would have to be for the Bard to have that granular control over stories? My guess is Narrate.

It's good to have confirmation that Cat's recognized the fact that neither of them feel like claimants that are good fits for what the Warden of the West will be. But it seems the stakes have been raised by the fact that it's been identified as enemy action – and unfortunately, when it comes to name manipulation, I'd put

my money on it being the Bard. The Dead King, while knowledgeable, doesn't seem to dip into namelore to the same degree, and seems much less likely to have a role to interfere with claimants through methods outside of... Well, killing them.

So, we've officially gone from politicking to political name fights. Though if that's the case, the good news is, there's a good chance it'll be possible to take a retaliatory swing at the Bard at the end of that line. Of course, it's going to be tricky getting there – this time, she doesn't have the information necessary to take a swing or identify where she can place a hand, so we're back in the theater of improvisation and hoping to find the necessary pieces in time, as well as identify the third option between choosing either of the claimants. If the timeline is five days and there are two 'checkpoints' between with Hakram and Basilia's arrival, here's hoping she can get things in line and can prepare to incorporate the surprises they're bound to bring.

[Liliet](#)

I'm guessing the Aspect is Tell.

shikkarasu

And this is why the Aspect needs to be passed on to the Wardens. Any good Bard knows; **Show**, don't **Tell**.

Relai

My guess/ hope is that this arc will be the opposite of the last arc. In the Praese arc Cat course of action was to do nothing even when she was surrounded by allies and could have probably manipulated the entire course of actions to a better outcome, but didn't and got bitten for it. I think this time she is going to turn herself into an opposing force against both Cordelia and Hanno. The 3 factors, the League, the Orcs, and what Roland and Masego are doing,.. Cat has power and the ability to influence all three and their decisions while neither Hanno nor Cordelia has the same military prowess or political leverage by themselves to oppose her on each of those factors. Thus instead of Cordelia and Hanno being directed at each other they will be forced to both change course and oppose Cat like how it is with the Bitter Blacksmiths.

Frivolous

Hah!

Thank you, EE, for answering my question in the comments of Recoil, about whether the Intercessor's act of halting the stories of Evil was single or continuous. The answer is apparently continuous.

Now that we know, I'm a bit amazed that she was able to keep on doing that even as she was dying and being reincarnated.

Also: Happy to see that Vivienne's still got it.

I wonder how it was possible that the Intercessor was able to attack both Hanno and Cordelia in this chapter. That's even more subtle than usual. Who did she manipulate?

Or did she visit them directly? That would be scary, if so.

Frivolous

Also it looks like the Intercessor is doing even when she's sleeping. I don't recall ever reading before of an aspect that works even when asleep.

Or maybe she just doesn't sleep? Awake all the time? I feel pity for her if so.

shikkarasu

She told William that when she vanishes she goes 'nowhere,' so I think she only exists while actively necessary to the 'plot.' She therefore wouldn't sleep, since that does not progress any of the stories that she is part of.

As for keeping Aspects active while she literally doesn't exist? Yeah, that's still really badass, but if Scribe could turn **Inscribe** into 'Create Murder Golem' after a few decades of practise, I have no doubt that Bard could learn to exert will while not existing.

dadycool

Cat has many enemies. It could be one of Bard's plots coming to fruition, it might be Malicia being sneaky, it might be Ranger doing something out of character, it could be DK pulling strings, or it could be someone we don't think of as an enemy of the Grand Alliance sticking their nose where it doesn't belong and messing things up accidentally.

nick012000

Pretty sure it's not Alaya of Satus. She's not Malicia any more, after all, and the army she's leading is still days away.

[Liliet](#)

This is an Arsenal play.

Anomandris

Well then it's doomed to fail (Looks at current status of Arsenal F.C.)

Anomandris

Seems extremely OOC for Ranger though. And Alaya has enough, well, humanity? in her to respect Amadeus's last wishes.

Anyone thinking it's the dwarves? Might be the Herald playing the two sides against each other to get better concessions

Reader in The Night

>I wonder how it was possible that the Intercessor was able to attack both Hanno and Cordelia in this chapter. That's even more subtle than usual. Who did she manipulate?<

The dwarves, maybe? They have Named, they are in Calernia, it follows that they're within Bard's reach. Also, the dwarves are at the center of this conflict, particularly the approximately-heroic Herald of the Deep.

[Liliet](#)

(This is all the way from the Arsenal, Cat's just only now catching it)

Jason Ipswitch

This was a great chapter. Making library records and a conversation about trivial history riveting is an amazing talent.

It also seems to strongly follow a thought I've been having for a while: Cordelia and Hanno are the wrong people to be Warden of the West. Their needs to be a third claimant. Hackram's swift ascent to Warlord recently showed us that the right claimant can rise suddenly, so there's absolutely precedent. Up until last chapter, I would have thought the Kingfisher Prince, but he does not seem interested. And, while it may just may be my memory, I don't see any other particularly obvious and appropriate choices. I have a few crazy theories, though.

One: The Mirror Knight.

We know who he is, he has both fought and dabbled in politics. The last time we saw him he was being apprenticed to the Pilgrim. Perhaps he's grown and is now a good claimant for the role. Heck, maybe even Cat has misread things and Hanno is going for a Heroic Mentor role and everything he's doing is intended to help Christophe, not elevate himself. It seems like reach, and the MK's current character is effectively a cypher, but it could work. And Cat would hate it.

Two: Cat

I've wondered if Cat was originally supposed to be the Bard's replacement, with a role more like Arbiter or Judge than Warden of the West. If that was the case, then the Bard successfully played Cat into ended up in a lesser (but still potent) Role than she might have had. In which case, Cat isn't really a claimant to Warden of the West, but would be shedding or transmogrifying her new name into simple Warden or Warden of Calerina, the ultimately authority over both Heroes and Villains. I don't think it really fits, but it seems at least a little plausible.

Three: Akua

If I had to make only one guess, this would be it. She'd almost completed a full turn to Good, she's still around, she has no real role in the East any longer, and she has no ties in the West to interfere with local politics. Also, becoming Warden of the West would make her Cat's opposite number, which may appeal to her personally, and has a strong Story theme to it, both in Calernia and in the ongoing story we're reading.

The only question is how she gets there. My prediction would be that it's much like her near-ascension to Dread Empress – almost entirely unwilling. If Hanno and Cordelia realize what's happening, and if they can be freed from their Story ruts (and Akua would be a great person to help do that, based on her own experiences if nothing else) they might very well empower Akua as a compromise candidate.

Extra Bonus Crazy: Cordelia and Hanno have both been planning to make Akua into Warden of the West for weeks, and there is no actual conflict, just the two of them doing necessary preparations for negotiations with the dwarves and not telling Cat what they're planning because they think she'd stop it.

dadycool

I think MK's actions in the Arsenal kinda closed the door on any leadership role. It is possible he could learn, but probably not this quickly. Even though he was set up to be Cat's opposite early on.

Cat is more likely, but that also feels too much like "Wandering Bard, just slightly off".

Akua is absolutely the perfect candidate. She's been Cat's opposite since the beginning, has been turning into a Heroic Leader, and would absolutely stumble into the role kicking and screaming. If Cordelia and Hanno have been preparing to make her Warden, I'm pretty sure it'd have been unknowing.

Sykomantis

The correct answer is Abigail the Fox out of f**king nowhere. It's just the logical conclusion to her story arc: "failing" upwards so hard she gets to be the leader of the Heroes and

having to be in near constant conflict with the BLACK QUEEN!
All the Namelore benefits of being a comic relief character combined with the ungodly luck that comes from being the epitome of imposter syndrome. She wouldn't even need to know anything about how things are run, she would just bumble into doing the correct thing every time a problem comes up! It would very much piss Cat off to no end, and you can't tell me we all wouldn't love seeing it.

PeteKay

This makes no sense, has not been set up in any meaningful fashion and contradicts the basic tenet that named are made of Intent and Belief. BUT I AM STILL ALL HERE FOR IT. ALL HAIL ABIGAIL THE FOX, F**IN WARDEN OF THE WEST.

[Liliet](#)

"Named are made of intent and belief" no, they're made of story.

Proof: newborn baby Sabah, who had a Name even though I'm pretty sure newborns are incapable of either intent or belief.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia and Hanno are each half a Warden. Unmatched in their own area of expertise, utterly bumbling in the other's.

shikkarasu

"I'll have one Nakamakua, please."

'Would you like Extra Bonus Crazy with that?'

"I'm offended you have to ask."

dadycool

Traitorous Strikes Again!

The first part of this chapter, until she found the Blacksmith, felt a lot like a quest, but in a rather organic way, which was nice.

The second part felt more like her old habits of Sherlocking her way to the answer, which was also fun.

[Hargabga](#)

She's going to make them, ugh, talk to each other, wouldn't she?

[Liliet](#)

I bloody well hope so!

Anomandris

Imagine if they had already done so behind Cat's back – I mean neither of the two are idiots. It would be hilarious .

Cat: "I, as your savior, have a solution to your problems!!".
Them: "What problems?"

This might be a two pronged approach to force the Dwarven hands. Cordy is ready with a more reasonable trade while Hanno appeals directly to the Name. Herald ends up taking the offer.

[Liliet](#)

That would be nice!

[Hargabga](#)

But there is so much drama in the misunderstandings! Entire genre were build on less.

Raved Thrad

Two claimants enter, one warden leaves. Former claimant left to bask in the afterglow. ;P

[medailyfun](#)

or get laid

Juff

Typo Thread:

come to ahead > come to a head
Not it was > Now it was
would a pleasure > would be a pleasure
up the damnable set of stairs up (two ups)
perhaps shattered > perhaps shatter
workaround giving (missing something like "in lieu of")
face if someone > face of someone
but form Salia > but from Salia
still gesture > still gestured
You're going > You're doing
have the maps, but unlikely to have them (sounds odd)
One a horse. > On a horse.
Having bored > Having become bored
those complains > those complaints
No when > Not when
when I'd just > when it'd just
differentiate > differentiated

Forum Solipsist

Analphagor...
Still laughing at that.



ohJohN

My Old Miezan is a little rusty, but Traitorous is basically undercover as “Professor Ass-Eater”, right? 😂

“archlector” (from Latin *archi-* “highest, most important” + *lēctor* “reader”) ≈ “eminent scholar”
“anal” (from Latin *ānus*) is... obvious
“phagor” (from Latin *-phagus* “eating” + *-tor* “one who does”) ≈ “eater”

MoreDakka

That is a epic mix of rare knowledge and childish glee

Fits Traitorous like a glove

Shawn DeLuca

This chapter is so good!!!

Xinci

Mm, so Hanno still having potentially having recall does strengthen two propositions I had on it.

1) It uses Light as a medium of storage and interaction. So if he can figure out where to go, he can feasibly still use it to search for things. This is logical as Light in of itself must contain a high amount of information to categorize things as unnatural or not.

2) As it was made from a artifact, the “shape” of its interactions on Hanno’s soul remains even if he no longer has the previous mantle of White Knight. Similarly to how Cat retained qualities of Take, as she went on. She had learned the shape of the ability even if she lost a particular source of power.

This does indeed feel kind of like the continuation of the seeds sown in the Arsenal. Perhaps this time properly clear and complete information sharing will be done so no one feels the need to dissent.

[Liliet](#)

> This is logical as Light in of itself must contain a high amount of information

That’s a completely unwarranted assumption. Light does not need to “contain” information. It can instead:

- 1) *have access to* an external source of information that it can draw from on demand;
- 2) contain an *algorithm* that differentiates natural from unnatural easily in context and is concise;
- 3) *have access to an external algorithm*, combining the two above options;
- 4) contain an algorithm that includes accessing external information, combining the two above options in another way.

shikkarasu

Do we know that **Recall** uses Light? We know that **Ride** does, and I'd be surprised if his coin flip didn't use it, but **Recall** seems to be a way to google the sort of information Names store up over time, like how some Named dream the memories of their predecessors. If that's the case those memories shouldn't require Light, since not all Heroes seem to wield it and more than just Heroes have those memories.

Obviously it's more powerful than that, giving Hanno their fighting styles and skills in addition to information, but it still fits as the core ability that **Recall** is strengthening.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think we know that it's Light either.

TrustiestRaptor

So as I read through, I saw the obvious pattern of seven and one in the books/scroll Vivienne brought to the table regarding Cordelia and I wondered if there was a seven and one pattern regarding Hanno. Maybe I'm just seeing things, but this is a story about story repetition, so there's that.

Catherine went to find Hanno,

- 1] Checked his camp, ruled out Severance council.
- 2] Visited Blessed Artificer, found out about Bitter Blacksmith.
- 3] Went to check horses to find her, Rozala's camp and then Proceran stables, found a worker pointing to them leaving yesterday.
- 4] Went out the eastern gate to the Callowan Army camp, maps are very bad, looking for someplace incredibly old.
- 5] Spoke with Pickler, realized she was not looking for a structure, but something like a lock or trap.
- 6] Visited Nestor Ikaroi, learned about Carrouges [no fighting allowed], rumors of Dwarven Gate.
- 7] Flew to Carrouges, nothing present, but the swamp has activity and has been drained.

One] There is the Bitter Blacksmith, picking the lock that's been dug out of the muck. Alongside them are two hundred Brabantine conscripts and fantassins.

Now, I have no idea if this actually means anything to the current plot at hand, and I might have missed an event or gotten this all wrong, but it does look to me like a pattern of seven and one.

Lord Haart

Well spotted! I buy it.

ohJohN

The Bard is almost definitely responsible, given her surreptitious final play during the Arsenal affrays. But I wonder if she had already set this all in motion then, or if she needed to give another nudge in the time since then – e.g. by influencing the dwarves before their meeting. They might not have received (or heeded) the Grand Alliance's warning about her, making them one of the few major players she might still have traction with, and they're at the crux of this brewing catastrophe.

It seems like she's using the exact same strategy she tried to hamstring Warden of the East with: present a false dichotomy of Named (Hanno) vs. nations (Cordelia) and make Cat think she has to choose one, when the correct answer is *she needs both*: two Wardens of the West.

Hanno has ample experience with being Named, he's well-versed in Namelore, he's the heroic representative under the T&T, and he's widely trusted and respected by heroes (and even some villains). But, while he's starting to gain some political influence, it's still limited and he doesn't seem particularly skilled at or temperamentally inclined to ruling.

Meanwhile, Cordelia has spent most of her life ruling the most powerful surface nation, is an expert cat-herder, diplomat, and intriguer, and has somehow held together both an international coalition and a dying Principate during a near-hopeless war. She has some Named support, but isn't widely trusted to lead them – and she doesn't have the experience, lore, and mindset to do so effectively.

Cat has a long history of consolidating disparate power and authority in ways that others simply can't: Squire, head of the Fifteenth Legion, Queen of Callow, Sovereign of Moonless Night, Queen of Lost and Found, First Under the Night... Particularly within the Grand Alliance, she's both the leader of a signatory nation and the representative for villains under the T&T. Hoarding titles like a magpie has become part of her story, and

it made her uniquely suited to fulfill both necessary elements of WotE.

So... why does she think that either Hanno or Cordelia alone can meet similar requirements for WotW? She's aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and the lesson about Named vs. nations should be fresh and deeply learned, given what it cost her. In this chapter, even, she idly thinks about how the Bitter Blacksmiths share the same Name! She's SO CLOSE to getting it.

Is it just that she's failed to recognize that she's special, that nobody else has the same breath of authority? Humility is all well and good, but, uh, now Cordelia is renouncing rule and Hanno is trying his hand at diplomacy 😞.

Liliet

TBF, all precedents for a shared Name we know of have been siblings, which Hanno and Cordelia are not (to the best of our knowledge lol).

It's a bit of a leap, and Cat only just caught up to the audience on the dichotomy being false and Bard-engineered.

superkeaton

Cat's playing the endgame of New Vegas now.

Tohron

One thing I noticed – Hanno and Cordelia are currently approaching the matter of becoming Warden of the West in the way that villains fight over getting a Name – assuming they have to defeat their rivals in order to claim it for themselves. It feels like claiming what's supposed to be a heroic name in this manner would have some pretty bad consequences...

Archange

Traitorous is just the absolute best.

Chapter 36: Reiterate

"If you cannot forgive, forget; if you cannot forget, forgive."

– King Jehan the Wise of Callow

The morning of Hakram's arrival, I got a visit from Archer.

Though Indrani enjoyed a good pampering most out of the Woe, she was too restless to actually stay in a palace for long. It'd been the same back in Laure, where she'd spent more in dives by the docks than in her suite. I trusted her not to get into too much trouble, and once in a while she did stumble across an interesting tidbit. Sometimes she even bothered to share those. This morning, by her sunny smile, was to be one of the lucky ones. Indrani only got that manically pleasant when she figured she'd found something of sufficient value to ask something of me in turn.

"Tell me I'm good," she demanded, sitting on the table just to the left of my eggs.

"You're sometimes slightly to the north of decent," I helpfully replied. "Like, once every few years. It has happened. I'm told. In rumours. But not, like, very reliable ones."

She wagged a finger at me.

"If I don't get honey, you don't get your treat," Archer said.

Leaning forward, I offered her a widely pleasant smile and snatched a little covered porcelain bowl which I then put on her lap. There was a pause.

"There's honey in that, isn't there," Indrani resignedly said.

"I think we should be talking about where my treat is, if anything," I replied, taking a bite of my eggs.

Good eggs. They tasted like salt and a little bit of victory at someone else's expense. She sighed, stealing a fork and then a bite of her own. Magnanimously I allowed this raider-like behaviour, even though taking breakfast from her rightful queen could be seen as treason in a certain light.

"Our little hero friends are about to meet for a Good talk," Archer told me. "Tonight. A buddy told me it's mandatory for any of their kind that're in the region."

I let out a low whistle. That was a lot of heroes. Maybe the most there'd been together in more than a century: even when we'd started the Truce and Terms, most of the people who'd signed it hadn't actually been in the same place. There had to be at least forty heroes around Salia at the moment, since all those that'd been on other fronts had retreated to the capital with their parent army.

"Hanno called that?" I asked.

"I didn't get told that outright," Archer admitted, "but there's really no one else who could give that order and expect it to work."

Well, she wasn't wrong there. If the Grey Pilgrim still lived he would have made a second, but since Tariq had died there'd been no potential rival for leadership on Above's side of the fence.

"How reliable would you say your friend is?" I asked.

"She wouldn't lie," Indrani firmly said. "I trust her."

Either the Silver Huntress or the Vagrant Spear then, I thought. I wasn't sure that Alexis would come to her with something like that even after they'd buried the hatchet, though, so most likely the Spear. I took another bite of eggs, swallowed.

"Why'd she tell you?" I asked.

"Because the Blood are worried about this little tiff between Cordy and Shiny Boots going bad so they've had a talk with their Bestowed," Indrani said. "Congrats, Cat, you're now the adult in the room the rats go tattle to."

"Ah, everything I ever wanted," I thinly smiled.

The thought that even the Blood, whose idea of diplomatic subtlety was painting the cudgel black before hitting someone with it, could tell the situation was getting volatile rather soured my appetite. I needed to ask one more thing first, though.

"You find out where they're meeting?"

I'd set down my fork, so Indrani did not miss a beat before helping herself to my breakfast. Refuge had taught her some very firm ideas about unattended food being up for grabs.

"Some place out in the country," Archer said. "A village in the middle of nowhere."

"Let me guess," I smiled, "is it called Carrouges?"

She shoveled in the last mouthful of breakfast and eyed me balefully.

"How would you even know that?" Indrani complained through her chewing.

"I was just there last night," I sighed. "Shiny Boots is digging up a dwarven gate there."

And then dragging everyone there. That was telling: he'd get the Bitter Blacksmith to open the lock for him and then, with that open gate in sight, make his case to the heroes that the Kingdom

Under should be appealed to directly. Going around Cordelia. I grimaced. Even if he didn't get to it immediately after, if he let a few day pass, the simple act of having gotten most of the heroes to back his solution would kneecap Cordelia's claim. Their Name was about handling heroes, and the heroes would be making their preference pretty clear. I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"I might have to do something about this," I admitted. "If he goes through with it there's only confrontation left."

I wouldn't need to warn the First Prince about it happening, not since the Kingfisher Prince would be part of the gathering and I did not doubt he'd inform her the moment he got the summons, but I wasn't actually sure Cordelia could do a lot about this. She was a high officer of the Grand Alliance, for all that now the authority was fraying along with all authorities more parchment than steel, so it could be argued that she had a right to attend and make to them her own case. *And Hanno would let her*, I thought. He'd respect the right, even if it opened the door to a rival claimant.

It wouldn't be a good battlefield for her, though. Hanno had fought alongside most those people and he was still the Sword of Judgement, two things that'd weigh the balance of opinion in his favour. And should the First Prince's support come mostly from Proceran heroes, which I suspected it would, then it would be final nail in the coffin of her claim: people could live with a Warden who was Proceran, but no one would want a Proceran Warden. I sighed, lost in thought, and came back to the sound of Indrani slurping down the last of my tea.

"I need to find out what Hasenbach will be up to," I said. "She's been looking for her slayer's arrow, but now she needs to give answer or she'll get knocked out of the race."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" Indrani asked.

I cocked my head at her.

"Did Vivienne talk to you about what we found out?"

"You two think this is a Bard plot," she said. "That she somehow nudged things a while back so that it'd get ugly when they fought it out."

"There's something off, 'Drani," I said. "I can feel it. They're both better than this, but it's like every action one takes scrapes the other raw."

Archer chewed her lip.

"I've learned not to bet against you when it comes to this stuff," she said. "So do what you think you have to, Cat. But if

you're worried that time is running out, then you need to be careful about something too."

I leaned back, giving her my full attention. It was rare enough for her to venture advice that when she did I always felt bound to take it seriously.

"You need to get your own house in order, Cat," Indrani said. "You're worried about the two of them fucking it up when someone becomes Warden of the West, but you're not done either. You need to clean up your loose ends, otherwise it's you that becomes the weak point."

My lips thinned.

"You're talking about Hakram," I said.

"Not just him," she replied. "Whatever the Hells you have going with Akua these days, that needs seeing to. And you made a promise to the Pilgrim before he died."

I had made three, but I knew which one she meant. I'd sworn to Tariq that I would reconcile with Hanno. Which I very much had not, for all that our last conversation had been cordial. That'd been a veneer, a surface thing. Nothing had been aired out or fixed.

"I don't have a lot of time, Indrani," I quietly said. "Four days, maybe less."

"So you best get a move on," Archer mercilessly replied. "And one last warning, since I know you."

She met my eye squarely.

"You like to just dip your toe in and retreat," Indrani said. "Like you're gauging the temperature of the water. It's a thing you do when you're afraid of dealing with a hard conversation, Cat, and you've even got the excuse of all that's going on right now to justify being half-hearted."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Don't," Archer said. "You might be pissed, but Hakram's one of us. Don't botch this because it stings."

My fingers tightened around the arm of my chair. She set down my empty cup and hopped off the table, throwing me one last look over her shoulder before walking out of the room.

That I wasn't sure who it was I was angry at only made the anger burn more harshly.

An hour before Noon Bell I learned that my tentative steps to find out what the First Prince was planning as a response to Hanno's summons were pointless. I didn't have to rely on spies because it was at my own damn door that the knock came: Cordelia Hasenbach wanted to meet.

I offered to head to the archives, but she'd taken the lead already. She was out, had gone by her palace and was ready to receive me as soon as I could make the time. I didn't bother to play coy or string it out. The sooner that talk was had the better. Word had come by scrying ritual that Warlord Hakram and a band of wolf riders were out of the Twilight Ways and making good pace, expected half past Noon Bell. I figured that the other half of the reason Hasenbach had left the archive was that she wanted to have a look at the preparations to formally receive the Warlord of the Clans for the first time in Proceran history.

So I limped my way through beautiful old Merovins halls again, led by servants to another of the pretty little parlours that seemed to grow like mushrooms wherever Cordelia Hasenbach stayed for more than a few days. I was ushered in quietly, my visit not secret but definitely less than official, and I found that the First Prince of Procer looked *tired*. She was impeccably dressed in grey and green, hair in a Lycaonese braid, but even though she'd tried to hide it under cosmetics I could see the rings around her eyes. Someone had been reading instead of sleeping for too long.

We got through a single round of the usual courtesies before she brought up why she'd asked me to come, which by Hasenbach standards was positively brusque. She, too, was feeling time slipping away through her fingers.

"When we first began discussing the Liesse Accords, one of the central principles was the founding of a city in the Red Flower Vales," Cordelia said. "A centre of learning and a seat for the Accords."

Also a way to discourage war between Callow and Procer, since it'd be standing right in the middle and sworn to neutrality. The Stairway was a second land path between our nations, but it was also ridiculously defensible and easy to close off. Geography always had a seat at the table when war was discussed, whether we liked to admit it or not. I intended to have ours strongly arguing for peace.

"As Queen of Callow I have the right to grant lands on the kingdom's side," I said. "My successor has sworn to abide by the grant."

If there'd actually been Counts of Ankou around left this might have gotten messy, but they'd been unseated with the Conquest.

Telling a governor I'd appointed myself that the map would get redrawn was much less complicated.

"Indeed," Cordelia said. "Princess Vivienne was most eloquent in arguing in favour, arguments I passed to the Highest Assembly. Not enough, unfortunately, were swayed."

If the ceded lands had come from just Orne or Bayeux it might have gone through, Vivienne had written me back then, but with two principalities losing a slice it'd turned into a slog. Ceding territory through anything but a peace treaty needed to be ratified by two thirds of the Highest Assembly and the First Prince just hadn't had the votes.

"And you're telling me that's changed?" I asked.

She smiled and set a scroll down on the table between us. I popped the seal and unfurled it, reading through the dense lines carefully. Most of it was legalistic nonsense, but the gist of it was pretty clear. Since some principalities had formally seceded and some summons to emergency sessions of the Highest Assembly refused, the First Prince was exercising ancient prerogatives to establish a new principality. The Principality of Cardinal. Its borders had been decided this morning by vote in the Assembly, but there I tripped over a phrase.

"What is a '*vote présentiel*'?" I asked.

"Only princes in attendance or their representatives may vote, and there is no quorum to any decision so taken," the First Prince said. "The decisions are not binding until a second vote has been taken over the matter, but to be fully overturned it would need a two thirds majority or the consent of the First Prince."

Meaning that this morning, Cordelia Hasenbach had created a principality out of two chunks of land – one in Orne, one in Bayeux – and been made princess of them. She had then, I saw in the following lines, declared independence from the Principate of Procer. In practice the land wasn't actually in her hands yet, but the legal foundation was there and if Rozala Malanza backed this, which by the roll count of the votes she did, then it was a done deal. So long as she held firm and refused to let the decision be overturned, the land was split from Procer and ready to be added to the city-state of Cardinal.

There had been two things I wanted most out of Cordelia Hasenbach: Cardinal and Procer's signature on the Accords. She was already halfway to delivering that.

"That is," I frankly said, "a very good bribe."

She didn't take offence, even though her nose wrinkled ever so slightly at the bluntness. We both knew that this was. I closed my eye, thinking it through. The First Prince was giving me this but she'd not asked for anything in return. So what was it that she got? I clenched my fingers and unclenched them. The timing made it clear that this was her answer to what Hanno was up to, but this wouldn't help her with the heroes. It wouldn't – no, I was looking at this wrong. Hasenbach was never going to win this by heroic backing, she already knew that. Her angle, her strength, it was on the great scale. The nation game, not the boots on the ground where Hanno thrived.

She hadn't asked anything of me, I realized, because my *signature* was what she was after. What she wanted was the two of us working together to make the Age of Order so that she was already pretty much filling the shoes of the Warden of the West. Hanno's opening stroke was gathering support, Cordelia was going straight for the authority. She wanted the wind in her sails before she ever stepped foot in front of the heroes, providence nudging things her way.

"Someone's been teaching you namelore," I finally said, opening my eye.

The blonde princess' austere face turned anguished, for a moment. It was gone in a flicker, like it'd never been there.

"Owls are terrible gossips," the First Prince simply said.

The Augur, I thought. Hasenbach wasn't learning namelore so much as brute forcing through prediction what might and might not work. Gods, that must be rough on her cousin. Especially the parts that had anything to do with me, because I had it on good authority that the Augur had been unable to predict me since I became First Under the Night. Sve Noc had seen to that. *So she doesn't know if I accept this or not*, I considered. *She just knows that if I agree, she might be able to beat Hanno.*

"I see you have concerns," Cordelia calmly said. "Perhaps I can allay them."

"I'm not sure you can," I honestly said.

Her calm did not waver.

"Then perhaps it is a matter of tightening our alliance," the First Prince of Procer said. "Let us sign the Liesse Accords."

I paused for a beat.

"You're serious," I said.

"I am," Cordelia said. "I believe the Blood is so inclined as well, and should have the hour free. It has waited long enough, Queen Catherine. Let us sign the papers."

Fuck, I thought. I wasn't *sure* it'd make her win, if I went through with this. If my instincts were right every time, I wouldn't have murdered my own fucking father. And this, the offer on the table *right now*, wasn't it what I'd been after for years? I could get the world I'd been after today. Not tomorrow, not in a year, not on the horizon. Today. Wouldn't it change what this war was, to be fighting for something? It might even help. And it wasn't like I'd be fucking over Good, one of Above's own claimants was *asking* me for this. It wasn't a plot or a scheme, there was no reason it should...

I breathed in, breathed out. Forced the thoughts back into line. I knew myself just well enough to be aware that, given long enough, I could justify nearly anything to myself if it got me something I wanted badly enough. That'd gotten me through some hard decisions, but it'd let me make some bad ones too. And, setting aside all my worries about one claimant winning against the other, there was still one warning fresh to my ear. Archer had been right, when she'd told me I needed to see to my loose ends. Going into this half-cocked was potentially disastrous. I licked my lips. I'd not noticed them going dry.

"I'll have to consult with my successor first," I said, tone even.

Her control slipped just enough that I saw her eyes tighten. Dismay. Fear. *She thinks she loses tonight if she doesn't get this*, I realized. *That she'll have abdicated for nothing, thrown her life and her life's work away pointlessly*. And I feared too, knowing that, as much because I was not sure I could stop Hanno as because I was afraid of what Cordelia Hasenbach might yet do, cornered.

"I see," the First Prince replied, tone just as even.

I rose to my feet, then hesitated.

"What is it about him that you find unacceptable?" I asked.

Her face was a mask, pale and unmoving.

"Hanno of Arwad is the culmination of personal power," the First Prince said, tone hard as steel. "He derives authority from his personal virtue, his personal strength of arms, his personal ties to a Choir. And for all his flaws, I recognize the man to be exceptional. Which is the very issue: he is an *exception*."

The Lycaonese princess rose to her feet.

"He has not method, no system, because he does not use them," she said. "His judgement, when it is not that of angels, is entirely personal. Circumstantial. And perhaps, for Hanno of Arwad, most of the time the answer will still be correct. But ask yourself this – will the same be true of his successors?"

Her blue eyes burned.

"That is why we partition power, why we share it," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "Why we make rules all have to obey. His flaw is the same was yours, Warden: he believes, deep down, that he is capable of wielding power without misusing it. That others after him will do the same."

Her jaw clenched.

"I have seen what that mistaken belief did to Procer," she said. "Even when the power was in my hands. And I would not see that mistake repeated for all of Calernia. There must be rules for Named as there are for men, and I cannot brook anyone who would do otherwise."

The queen's judgement, I thought, against the assembly's law. Of course she didn't trust heroes, while she was trying to keep Procer from falling apart they kept... getting in the way, from where she sat. The Mirror Knight emboldening a prince to make a scheme that nearly pulled the Firstborn out of the war, another trying to kill a prince of the blood and then the Kingfisher Prince refusing to ask for her death. All of it, that expanding mess dropped in her lap, culminating in that moment where the White Knight looked her in the eye and refused to compromise.

A disaster that the First Prince traced back to the Chosen, and their leader had just refused to consider helping fix it.

It'd not been that that happened, at least not exactly. Not entirely. But I could so easily see how she'd come to see Named as needing to made subject to rules, and how fundamentally she would never believe that Hanno of Arwad would ever do it. If he had it in him, wouldn't he have done it back then? It was the harshest light possible to look at the past in, but no part of it was entirely *wrong*. That was the problem here. When I was going to speak to Hanno one last time, and I must, I expected his troubles to be just as grounded in truth. Neither was wrong.

One must still lose, though, and so that damn coin was spinning.

"You're not out of this yet," I said, and left it at that.

—

I wasn't part of the party that greeted Hakram when he rode into the capital.

Procer was the host, it wouldn't do to step on their toes. The two of us were rulers now, I no longer had a claim on him beyond what the Warden of the East could stake. Instead of moping in a palace, I went down into the city and found a nice little butcher's shop. They killed the pig out bad, clean and quick, and I bought a bag of salt from the owner's brother just down the street. I put the dead pig on my borrowed horse's back and headed back up to the Lineal. There were plenty of empty parks and palaces, so I found myself a nice little thicket of trees and hung my cloak on a branch.

It'd been a while since I'd dug a fire pit, but I still remembered how. I put my back into it, and it when it was done I went back to the palace to snatch up a spit and firewood. Blackflame would spoil the taste, so I struck Legion pinewood matches and struggled with the feeble breeze that'd shown up to fight me. I should have brought oil to quicken that up, even if it would have been cheating a bit. The pleasant thing about Name strength was that I needed no Night to shove the pig onto the spike and begin to roast it. I rubbed salt on sparingly. Orcs preferred the meat without spices.

It was halfway to Afternoon Bell when I heard the first footsteps. Vivienne had taken longer to tell him where I was than I'd thought she would. I didn't need to ask who it was, or even turn. I might have temporarily lost the knack I'd had as Warden of the East, but I could still pick out the sound of that gait out of a thousand. There'd been a time where it had been just as familiar as my own, almost an extension of my own body. Those days were over. I still remembered.

The steps stuttered as he entered the thicket.

"Smells good," Hakram Deadhand said, voice hesitant.

Careful. I glanced at him, turning the spit. He looked, I thought, much the same as he had in Ater. Oh the armour was off, the same plate that'd been burnt by Summer flame and he had never left abandoned, but the clothes didn't matter much. He was still one of the tallest orcs I'd ever met, broad-shouldered and built. The arm and leg he'd lost in my service were now in steel, the finest prosthetic work Hierophant had ever done, and the hand he'd lost to the Lone Swordsman remained in bone. Deadhand they'd called him, even before they called him Adjutant.

There was still a song about it. *Dead the hand and dead the man*, I almost hummed. But it was a Legion song, and he was no longer of the Legions. Or one of mine at all. I had not yet said a word, and already that knowledge hung between us like a funerary shroud. I took my hand off the spit, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

"I thought," I said, "that this would be hard in the way that picking at a wound is hard."

Hakram stood in a tall oak's shadow, the sun not reaching any of the limbs that would reflect it.

"But it's not?" he quietly asked.

I smiled, a tad bitterly.

"I just don't know what to say," I admitted.

In a way, that was even worse. Six months ago he'd been the only person in my life I'd ever found it hard to understand. Now it was like there was a pit between who we'd become and who we'd been and anything I said would just be shouting to the shadow across the pit rather than the man in front of me. Pointless. Slowly, Hakram moved out of the shade. Eyes watching me every step of the way, as if waiting for a storm or a refusal, he made his way to the other side of the fire. There he sat, lowering himself to the forest floor.

"Then," Hakram Deadhand said, "perhaps you should let me start."

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Sir Nil

That is a respectable counter by Hasenbach.

Zggt

It's the classic counter-argument for nationalist dictators. This is of course something that we (who know world history) can easily recognize. The "single competent ruler" attitude will very rarely get a competent leadership and over time they will not be the single ones in the job. What eventually will follow is a single incompetent ruler, usually followed by others, where by the time another competent ruler gets in place all they can do is delay the inevitable end.

The fact that Cordelia recognizes this before a set of disastrous and repeated collapses makes her quite frankly brilliant. In the context of a world which bends reality to justify heroes, this is an incredibly deep realization.

Vicos

But the problem with the argument is The Warden is directly selected by gods, real verifiable gods, which mean that is factible they are always "exceptions"

Rynjin

It's also...dubiously accurate in this world. They're literally shaping the role right now. If the role is hard-shaped to require someone impartial, fair, and wise of judgment then it will likely be acceptable for only a single person to hold all that power.

If, instead, the role is coded with political maneuvering required and encouraged...things get messy.

Zggt

If someone gets a Name, it does not ensure they are good at it. There are long lists of heroes and villains who suck at their job and get murdered in the story. Praes had Triumphant (the ordained victor) just as much as Procer has Cordelia (the pragmatic political operator), both extremely successful rulers despite being opposites of the norm for their respective states. The fact that the role is being set for "single great ruler" does not make that single great ruler infallible, nor does it even mean all who will pick up that mantle will fulfill that role well.

Ranger lost, Black died, Triumphant was defeated, despite all the Crusades it doesn't look like the Heroes are any closer to achieving any of their goals, and Cat still lives despite the Bard having all the lore in the world at her disposal and repeated attempts. The only exception we know of in the story is the Dead King, the proverbial biggest bad, whose strength that allows him to do this also means that he can never become more than he is currently, only less.

So, I'm not sure that just because it is set to work that way it can overcome human nature in general. One of the earliest motifs of APGtE is that the nature of people themselves can be stronger than names and stories.

Xinci

I mean one can note the point of Black's whole view of Praes and its Dread Empress's/Emperors was that, it was shaped in a fashion that the actually competent rulers were the exception. Its Role wasn't cemented under some great ruler, who managed to shape Praes out of scarcity, it was shaped by such a person promptly being murdered at the inception point of their reign. If anything Praes

shows how important the fomenting parts of a Name are for future generations.

Even with other Heroes, we get it noted that those participating in the Crusade are outside of their story protections(one could honestly posit that Christophe may have not been in such a bad place in an alternate timeline where he was just guarding his lake and learning from the Elfen Dames). By the nature of this lack of protection, Cat and Black were able to beat them back(and from a doylist sense must do so if we are going to have a story where our protagonist is successful), specifically, because they lacked some of the protection their Roles likely would have given them in their original narratives. The Role definitely doesn't guarantee survival or the like, but it is definitely something that can set the pattern for centuries after the first iteration.

Salt

Respectable, but far from completely accurate.

The problem with law is that it's only ever a framework, and can easily be abused. That's why the judicial system exists, and why jurisprudence is so complex – what a law actually means tends to be completely circumstantial, and whether a law does what it's actually intended to do is even less reliable. Complaining about circumstantial judgements and then advocating for the rule of law, is like complaining about water and advocating for scuba diving.

There is an insane amount of personal judgement involved in the interpretation and application of law, and the idea that the law by itself could ever come close to being in any way shape or form fair or just is a joke. Proceran politics and every personal skill Cordelia has is the best example of this problem – Proceran laws almost never did what they were intended to do, rarely served the people they were intended to serve, almost never in the way that they were intended to function, and regularly was twisted into allowing whatever outcome a clever enough person like Cordelia wished.

At the end of the day, wholly trusting in law as objective or non-circumstantial is just as flawed as wholly trusting in the goodness of people as innate and inevitable. It's a really nice sounding ideal in theory, but it doesn't work by itself. At all.

Agent J

“Proceran politics and every personal skill Cordelia has is the best example of this problem – Proceran laws almost never

did what they were intended to do, rarely served the people they were intended to serve"

I'll remind that it's been canonically stated that the Proceran peasantry is the best treated and have more liberties than any other on the continent.

jamesc9

So there's a question: whether the outcomes for Proceran peasantry are because of or despite the law under which they live?

If it's despite, then I'd be looking to:

- what the Proceran House of Light expects, teaches, and won't preach against
- the rural version of no Prince surviving a whispering campaign
- wealth

If it's because, then I'm looking for ways in which princes are punished, who try to use brute force to smash through any of those constraints.

Linnus42

I find it hilarious Cordelia is blaming the Chosen and Heroes for Mirror Knight and Cat's nodding along when she got the report. That it was the Princes and the nobles poisoning Christophe against the Drow not the other way around. And Christophe had not even signed off the plan anyway. Cat got that info directly from Sve Noc. But Cordelia is delusional and doesn't believe in personal responsibility apparently. I should also note Cordelia didn't have a solution to that Prince going rogue until Arsenal went off.

And I don't think getting the top jobs cause you are related to right person is some grand fair system either quite frankly. But I don't see Cordelia massively overhauling the Noble system. At least Hanno earned his power and it wasn't served up on a silver spoon.

Sinead

I don't think describing Cat as 'nodding along' is correct. I think it's that she sees and understands Cordelia's frustrations and issues with Hanno.

Linnus42

Maybe but its funny Cordelia talks about the importance of Law and Order. When she has assassinated political rivals and the reason the Red Axe spiraled out of control was because

Cordelia didn't want to follow the laws she agreed to because she had a political crisis. So its kinda rich she talks about the importance of Laws and Order when she is a Noble (who was born with special privileges) and has violated said rules herself. That is mighty Hypocritical.

caoimhinh

But... that is what Cat did.
Because Cordelia is wrong in a lot of things, if not all of those that were mentioned. And Catherine is just nodding along mentally and saying Cordelia is not wrong.
Just because it's understandable that Cordelia would hold a grudge since she was screwed by what happened in those occasions does not mean that she is not wrong in her stance and her actions.

Salt

They're (Hanno and Cordelia) are both a little wrong to be honest. You're never going to get anywhere if you just trust in the goodness of people or exceptional individuals, but on the other hand the law by itself is absolutely worthless if the people interpreting and applying it don't have exceptional moral backbone. At the end of the day you need both.

You need the structure and universal basis as a framework that Cordelia is advocating, not the total lack of oversight that Hanno wants, else you just get endless squabbling based on personal and often ignorant ideas about what's right and wrong. It's not wrong to say that Heroes as a whole are dysfunctional at best and horrifically flawed at worst.

You also need to rely exceptional people like Hanno to make circumstantial judgements and make sure the law does what it was intended to do, instead of leaving power to people like Cordelia who would abuse the law for their own goals. No one wants a Proceran Warden because well-crafted laws piloted by clever people with lackluster ethics is an irredeemable horror show, as Cordelia and the rest of the highest assembly spent their entire lives proving.

Sinead

She's saying Cordelia is not entirely wrong because the heroes are causing issues in Cordelia's effort to maintain peace or settle the War on Keter from the side of logistics.

-Laurence poisoned the well of diplomacy with the Western House of Light's conclave

-Christophe was used as a political shield against early retribution against the drow plot

-The Red Axe attempted to assassinate a Prince

-While Hanno is correct in that the treaty gave him jurisdiction over the Red Axe trial, he couldn't have acknowledged that perhaps an international treaty didn't foresee treaty members attempting to assassinate each other? And that some discussion is warranted.

Her experience is that Heroes are the bane to any attempts at large scale diplomacy and organization and need to be corralled. This is in part because Cat has really kept her side in line, so Hanno's off hand approach stands out in contrast. This is more than a grudge and the idea that one office cannot hold absolute authority. And I do not read Cordelia as absolving herself of this criticism with 'I have seen what this power has done, even when I've held the office.'

That is why Cordelia is as described by Cat right from where she sits. Cat is not speaking in these meeting to strongly for the exact concern of weakening the Role of Warden of the West.

Hargabga

Funny how you can berate blindness while being deaf.

Liliet

I mean, it's not like Cordelia is advocating for Princes to have all this individual power either? She's been curtailing nobles ever since she first became First Prince. Her problem is not that the Chosen are WORSE, it's that they are NOT BETTER ENOUGH.

Zach

I don't know where you're getting the idea that Cordelia only blames the Chosen.

Cordelia believes in institutions above individuals, whether that individual is a non-Named Prince or a Chosen. And she's not wrong about this.

It really confuses me that this decision isn't more simple for Catherine (or at least that Catherine doesn't lean towards Cordelia). One of the big goals of the Liesse Accords (albeit one she was forced to compromise on) is having Named in places of high leadership. Hanno would essentially just be a very powerful Named leader (arguably more powerful than any Named

leaders in the past). He might be a really good one – Cordelia herself acknowledges this. But it's not a good precedent and is one that is very likely to cause a return to the ways of the past. Cordelia, on the other hand, wants to create institutions that don't rely on a single charismatic individual.

And Cordelia has no opposition to the Liesse Accords, even being willing to sign onto it and facilitate the creation of Cardinal. Hanno, on the other hand, is fundamentally incompatible with the Accords. He has no real commitment to them and will only uphold them to the extent that doing so never conflicts with his own personal moral convictions.

Abrakadabra

Exactly. Even in reality, people undersell the institutions and overstate the role of individual leaders. Case in point: all the Potus in the states generally does not matter. Whether they are knowledgeable or ignorant buffons makes little difference, they cannot reform the failing institutions.

Reader in the Night

>"If you cannot forgive, forget; if you cannot forget, forgive."

– King Jehan the Wise of Callow<

You call yourself King of Callow?! You should have your Callowan license revoked, is what. Callowans don't forget, and they definitely don't forgive.

Also, why did Cat have to hear about an assembly of Heroes through Indrani, was the Princess not invited? Vivienne is one of Above's, is she not?

And on the matter of Cordelia, I do get that Author-san is trying to have her and Hanno be foils to each other, but... She's just not that convincing for the role of Warden, compared to Hanno.

She's trying to politic her way into the role and cheating by using the Augur to substitute actually knowing her business.

Katreus

Eh? I find Cordelia more intriguing as a Warden. Her points are correct – Hanno may be exceptional as a good person and decent small group leader and warlord in military settings, but he's not a good manager or representative to others on behalf of heroes. Hanno's ethos seems contradictory to what a Warden has to be. He abdicated his duty as Truce representative previously, leaving Cat to do all the management, and he basically just shows up to unilaterally pout and veto things when Cat inevitably makes a decision that he doesn't like. He

does the same thing here when he runs off on his own to unilaterally negotiate with the dwarves rather than work with the Alliance representatives on this issue. I still find it a farce that his long personal journey from him not judging is to arrive at the conclusion his judgment is he doesn't judge heroes.

caoimhinh

Not really.

Cordelia is a hypocrite in her statements and actions; while she claims to be protecting society she is just defending noble privilege.

Hanno being exceptional is exactly the point, Cordelia sees it as something wrong, but that's the whole point of getting a Name and being qualified for a position. Cordelia speaks as if she is not gonna make the Name of Warden of the West be in a person but a system, when by its very nature the only one to get the Name will be an exceptional person who earns it in some way.

Plus, Hanno is exactly the adequate person to lead and represent Heroes. Above's Chosen cannot be reined in and forced to behave by force of arms like Villains. The Role of the Warden of the West is different than the one of Warden of the East because they must deal with different issues. They are both to restrain the worst impulses of their respective side, but the methods MUST be different because those impulses are different too.

Villains can be brought to heel by schemes and force, they can be beaten and made to behave; but Heroes need to be swayed by morals, virtue, or a cause, if you try to force them they will just dig in their heels and die making a stand for what they believe.

Hence Hanno's approach of being a guide and counselor for them. Which is a similar take as Tariq took, and it's what worked on Heroes and made the Pilgrim be the leader figure along with the White Knight.

Abrakadabra

Eh, to me Hanno is still Othar Triggvassen (gentleman arventurer).

caoimhinh

Could you elaborate, please?

Reader in the Night

Like, Hasenbach was just trying to bribe Cat into giving her the ultimate authority. Which by itself isn't Evil, but by contrast

if you have Hanno being his usual earnest self and not compromising anything to care about to get his way.

Cordelia: Hanno doesn't respect democracy

Hanno: Is assembling a gathering of Heroes to put an important matter to a vote. Cat's inner narration even says he would have welcomed Hasenbach and let her participate

Hasenbach: Just spent the last day wheeling and dealing and using her personal charisma to convince the Highest Assembly to give her a Principality.

Linnus42

Yeah its weird. I mean if Frederic is getting invited and he regularly goes behind Hanno's back. I am not sure why Viv would not. I mean Hanno doesn't expect Cordelia and Cat to miss all these Heroes traveling anyway.

But yeah its funny Cordelia talks about the importance of power not being in the hands of the few and following all the Laws like she believes in Democracy. When the Red Axe mess was caused by Cordelia refusing to follow the Law she agreed to personally because it was inconvenient. When Cordelia has assassinated political rivals. When Cordelia is concentrating more power into the hands of less Nobles and is a Noble herself so didn't earn her place like Hanno. Does everything behind closed doors while Hanno calls assemblies and invites even Heroes who don't support him to get their moment to talk.

Cordelia really is the typical elite who wants one set of rules for her people and different rules for the peasants. She is a hypocrite of the worst kind.

Abrakadabra

It was not Just inconvenient. The Red axe case. It was keeping the fucking principate working. It is political reality, about which the big damn heroes either a) clueless, b) doesnt give a shit c) actually stirring the shit.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia was literally the first claimant, and Hanno would have backed her back then, too.

Linnus42

Yeah and Cordelia showed then in my book she is not worthy. She put her personal desires above the lives of every living being on the continent. Why because she personally thinks a Name should not run Procer. Not because she believed the Name

couldn't do the job or she was afraid of Bard intervention. She expects others to sacrifice their cores principals to save Procer. But refuses to do the same when the moment calls.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I don't think it's entirely fair to characterize Cordelia's refusal of the Name as putting herself ahead of others. She took a moral stance on an issue of extraordinary importance: that random weirdos who have authority for no other reason than that they're so intensely weird shouldn't run roughshod over everyone else. Your dislike of her philosophy doesn't invalidate it, and the fact that she's hypocritical in various ways doesn't make every decision of hers you dislike an example of hypocrisy. Who isn't a hypocrite? If absolute internal consistency is required to be able to say that you stand for something, then no one has stood for anything in history.

Also, where has she been demanding others bend their principles, other than her efforts to check the more stupid among Proceran nobility and when she asked Hanno to do his job as an officer of the Grand Alliance and it turned out that doing the job he agreed to was in itself against his principles? I'm not saying that it hasn't happened, but all I can recall that might fit the bill is doing normal feudal political stuff like having her enemies killed before they can destroy her life and trying to make Procer less bureaucratic on a temporary basis so that ultimately vacuous pencil-pusher issues don't hand victory to Keter.

Speaking of Hanno earlier: he's equally hypocritical, being unwilling-bordering-on-incapable of considering viewpoints that spring from different priorities than his own. They're both flawed in what I think are quite interesting ways, though in the end you're certainly entitled to your dislike of her.

jamesc9

> authority for no other reason than that they're so intensely weird

Yes, I think that's a good characterisation of how a person gets a Name.

ninegardens

I mean... its also worth remembering that when she did that, the war against DK was in *low gear*. Like, Cat had bought them all a 3 month a truce, All of Cordelia's new allies were about to show up, the angel gun was going well. Even we

the audience didn't really get what an utter terror DK really was.

THEN we had 2 gruelling years of war, and THEN Nessie got completely let off the chain.

Cordelia didn't compromise her principles, because back then, success did not look so utterly unattainable. MANY of the characters were sticking more to their principles back then (Hanno included).

They've since been forced to adapt... and do not that Cordelia has since found ways to take the Warden roll while maintaining her principles (namely, by abdicating).

Abrakadabra

Nah. You are Just biased. End of story.

Lord Haart

Viv is a ruler of the East though so would not necessarily have the right to vote on a matter of the West.

nick012000

>One must still lose, though, and so that damn coin was spinning.

Unless neither of them loses, and they wind up sharing the post because each of them is half of what Cat is.

[boballab](#)

People keep making a fundamental mistake when it comes to a coin flipping (or spinning in this case) ... there is 3 sides not 2. When you flip a coin and let it land it can go heads, tails or stop and land on its edge. Cat needs the coin to land on its edge.

Abrakadabra

Good catch, I did not think of that.

ninegardens

Cordelia raises great points, very Lawful Good.

Cat: Why did you not tell her this is a Bard plot? Why did you not tell her **why** you were being really fucking careful, every single step of the way? Why did you not tell her that anything you do will sink into the roll of Warden of the East, and hence... you couldn't do what you wanted, what you thought is right, you had to be very very careful?

Cordy AND Hanno both deserve to know that the situation has likely been manipulated by the Bard, and thus they both *need* to be gentle with one another. Assume that their own intel has been tainted, even if only slightly, in order to produce this conflict.

That is information Cat *needs* to deliver, and I'm surprised she didn't do so just now.

Sinead

My honest suspicion is that it's because Cat's still bracing for the conversation with Hakram to come.

I suspect that her settling accounts with Hanno, and all other information will be at a pivotal moment. Because Named are all drama kids.

Linnus42

Looks like Cordelia doesn't really have any cards left to play and is all in on Cat bailing her out quite frankly. Unless she does something crazy.

Support from Frederic and Augur doesn't seem liable to carry much weight. Also I don't think its public knowledge what Cordelia did to poor Red Axe. I would hazard guess that is not liable to help her poll numbers. And I am glad Cat acknowledged that Cordelia is to Proceran.

I don't see how Cat backs Cordelia hard and fixes things with Hanno like Pilgrim and Archer want. Good to know though we are going to clean up the Hakram and Akua Stuff. Also shouldn't Viv have gotten an invite to the Heroic Meeting, she is officially a Princess now right?

[Liliet](#)

This isn't "bailing her out". Cordelia has made a play that Cat would 100% have backed without second thought if the Warden thing was not going on. She showcased, and used, her mastery of politics both internal and external – knowing how to get other people to go along with what she wants.

Linnus42

I prefer the Dwarf Issue being the decider where Cordelia could also show her Political Savvy. The victory in this contest for Warden should not be decided by Cat if the Roles are suppose to be Equal. Cordelia needing a massive amount of help from Cat to get over the line, narratively poisons the balance by setting the imbalance in the very narrative bedrock of the Names. Creating a dangerous precedent.

Earl of Purple

There's more Proceran heroes than the Auger and the Kingfisher Prince. There's also the Mirror Knight, Blade of Mercy, Bloody Sword, Rogue Sorcerer, one of the Bitter Blacksmiths, and those are just the ones in the forty or so heroes I know to be in the area. The Relentless Magistrate is also Proceran, last seen in Mercantis.

That's all the heroes I know to be from Procer, actually. The Silver Huntress might be, too, and the Blind Maker.

Earl of Purple

I forgot the Page, the Grizzled Fantassin (who is a fence-sitter, but had retired which villains don't do), the Merry Balladeer and the Swaggering Duellist as Proceran heroes. That's eleven potential Proceran heroes out of the forty heroes in Salia right now, though two of those might still be in Mercantis.

AbraKadabra

Poor Red axe? Poor.? Wow.

jamesc9

Well, in the common-law legal tradition, I think that being executed, then being resurrected and tried again for the same crime in the same jurisdiction, would count as double jeopardy. The most readily available encyclopaedia tells me that multiple trials in different jurisdiction, as is the case here, are not reliably prohibited.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_jeopardy

Lord Haart

Red Axe was literally doing what Cat did in the first chapter of PGTE.

I am at least somewhat sympathetic to the view that if the Truce and Terms allowed the worst Villains to not have to pay for their crimes, then maybe the Truce and Terms was rotten enough to need challenging.

One can justify a lot for the sake of survival but it's fair to say that at some point one has to then justify survival itself if it comes at such cost.

Reader in the Night

This is my third post so far (cursed lack of an edit function), but I just keep thinking about this:

Hanno is trying to get the title of Big Good by convincing the other Do-Gooders that he's the right man for the job;

Cordelia is trying to get the title of Big Good by bribing the Big Evil into recognizing her as an equal;

One of them just ends up looking more Heroic than the other, you know? Or is that just me?

Sinead

It's the magnification of what is at the heart of their differences.

And Cat uses both now, especially after Book 4. She may have the personal charisma to draw people to her like Hanno does, but she does know the value of systems and contingencies that Cordelia focuses on.

Hanno is the Big God Damn Hero of the BGDH Moment, but Cordelia tries to build proactive systems so that such moments are not as required. Cordelia is probably closer to a Good Monarch of Callow that had to deal with the reality of politics as well.

Abrakadabra

Good point. Cordelia in Callow would have been the best of their rulers. Especially since we know from Cats history lessons that there were quite a lot of inept Callowan rulers.

Juff

Typo Thread:

said. "I trust (extra space)
Nd then dragging > And then dragging
day pass > days pass
not method > no method
same was yours > same as yours
The queen's judgement, (extra space)
it when it > when it
only person in my life I'd ever found it hard to understand (is this right?)

aurikdomi

it should be *never* especially with the words that come after and what we know of the relationship between them.

frederic

The more we see that the 2 claimant to Warden of the West title have complementary strength and that neither is good enough on

his own, the more I believe the Name will either be split or go to another candidate....

mlissa

I vote Cordelia.

I like Hanno too but Cordelia's take on the Warden is better. Also Cat x Cordelia is hotter than Cat x Hanno.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I prefer the Catkua misery-ship but I like how you think.

Abrakadabra

Yep. Cordelia's warden involves a lot of work on her part, while Hannos let the heroes do what they want is Just... Lazy.

[sengachi](#)

I feel like, ultimately, what this choice is coming down to is if the Wardens are bickering but cooperative, or amicable but violently opposed.

Cordelia as the opposing Warden would never let Cat have peace. Every single decision would be discussed and litigated and used as a negotiation point. But, ultimately, they would have the same mutual goals of minimizing the negative impact of Named on Calernia.

Hanno, on the other hand, I think would mostly live and let live with Cat. He'd let her govern her sphere of influence as she wished, and he would guide his by example. For the most part they'd get along. But then on the big issues, where they disagreed, he would literally fight her over it, to the death if he thought it necessary.

What I think is going to resolve it though is Hakram. That's what Cat needs, and why she's floundering. She needs the help of her oldest ally. However it turns out, he's going to be needed to make it work.

Black Spiral Dancer

These are all great insights in the comments. I'm humbled, and it is rare. What a great following you have here, and may I say it only matches the absolutely stunning storytelling, something of the highest caliber in fantasy.

Joan Lung

It has to be both of them. Neither Hanno nor Cordelia alone can shape the Name into something that can last, even if they could

bear to surrender it to the other.
That's what makes this such a Bard plot. Heads, she wins, Tails, you lose.

Chapter 37: Bygone

"The past is best yearned for with one eye closed."

– Free Cities saying

"I didn't leave Wolof meaning to become Warlord," Hakram said.

The pig on the spit between us crackled as the woodsmoke rose, sometimes veiling parts of his face. Light moved across his skin and steel in spots, the branches above swaying to let the sun pass at the whims of a lazy breeze. This felt, I thought, like a conversation best had at night. In a dimmer place, where the dark would smooth sharp edges and the stars would give only the kindest of lights. Not on a sunny afternoon, where I could read every slight expression. Where I risked learning things I would not be able to unlearn. But that was not what the roll of the dice had given me, and I knew I could not put this off even if part of me craved to.

In the back of my mind the coin was still spinning, and tonight Hanno of Arwad was making his move. It was sunlight or nothing, and nothing may cost more than just me.

"I didn't think you did," I replied. "I'm just not sure if that makes it better or worse."

That he'd planned it and not told me, that would have gouged deep. But in a way that all our years together would be tossed away on, what, a fucking whim? My fingers clenched down on the spit until the knuckles turned white and I reminded myself that I wasn't being fair. That I was just getting angry because it was easier that way. Anger was an old friend, and it was a lot more pleasant than feeling *betrayed*.

"I say it not to excuse but to make it clear that I was not deceiving you, before I left," Hakram evenly said. "That it was not false."

My hand twitched. I released the spit, stepping back and playing it off as if I were getting away from the smoke and heat.

"Just because you weren't lying doesn't mean it wasn't false," I harshly replied. "It just means you weren't admitting things to yourself. And maybe that I wasn't either."

He watched me through the smoke, then his jaw tightened.

"Say it out loud," Hakram gravelled. "It's already stuck in your fangs, don't choke on it."

How like him to not even leave me my grievances to chew on.

"You wouldn't have made this decision," I said, "before the Arsenal."

And there it was, the plain truth that I knew deep in my bones. I'd spent him too sorely that day, crossed a line, and it had changed things for good. Maybe he didn't regret it, like he'd insisted since, but we'd both had a good look at what it actually meant for us to be as we had been. That there were costs, that it might get him *killed*. We'd seen in practice how someone giving unconditionally, trusting without reservation, would end. At least when the other half of it was me. He'd die, one piece at a time, until I'd spent every last limb of him.

"You didn't listen then," Hakram harshly said, "and you're not listening now. It's about what put me in the chair. It's about how you treated me when I was in it."

"Like I didn't fucking want you to die?" I incredulously replied.

I'd have bitten back on that answer, before, been careful. Given ground because I was afraid to lose him. But he was good as lost anyway now, wasn't he? He couldn't just turn around and become the Adjutant again, call the whole Warlord thing a lark. So this time I didn't bite my tongue.

"You lost an arm and a leg," I said, "and you wanted me to just send you back into the melee like nothing happened. Like it was just... cosmetic."

I spat in the fire.

"But it really did happen, Hakram," I bit out. "And if I let you keep on pretending it hadn't you were going to lose your head instead of a limb."

"You lost trust in me," he growled. "An aspect was withering like a sick plant because I put my soul in your hands and then you dropped it. Can you imagine what it felt like, to bind so much of yourself to someone else and then feel them *turn away*?"

The orc scoffed.

"You can't," Hakram said, flashing fangs. "Because you don't do that, Catherine. When you're afraid it's going to end, you look away first so it ends on your terms. Like you did with Kilian."

My stomach clenched. It had just enough truth to it to sting. The kind of barb only someone who knew me would know to throw.

"I'm not without fault," I said. "Hells, I'm mostly faults. But you know what I did, Hakram?"

I gestured around us, at us.

"I fought for this," I said. "You were unhappy and I tried to understand why. To fix it. So I don't want to hear a sermon from the man whose idea of mending the gap was putting me to secret tests in the middle of the most brutal campaign of either our lives."

I'd not forgotten those evenings in Hainaut when I'd agonized over the bad plan to deal with the Clans he'd pushed for me to read. How many hours I'd wrestled over it, trying to find a saving grace, only to learn that it'd been a test the whole time. That he was finding out whether I'd take bad advice from him out of guilt. And I understood why he'd done that, I did.

It hadn't made it any less hard to be on the other side of.

"You didn't fight," I harshly said. "You stood back to see if I would. And maybe you needed to see that I really would, that it did more to help than anything I said."

I leaned forward, eye hard.

"But it also means I'm not going to take *shit* from you about turning away first, Hakram," I said. "I still had both eyes back then, and you wouldn't meet either."

I was panting, my muscles clenched tight. Smoke wafted up, the crackling fat of the roasting pig. The thick green skin of his face was taut around his lips, like he was fighting the urge to growl and shout.

"I didn't come here to fight," Hakram finally said.

"Maybe we ought anyway," I grunted.

Dark eyes mulled that over, with that usual careful thoroughness.

"Maybe we ought," he acknowledged.

I hid my surprise, but he knew me well enough he caught it anyway.

"Even when we reconciled," Hakram said, "it was half-done. The wound was bandaged but neither of us would speak of the sword."

I rolled my shoulder, easing the muscle that had begun to cramp.

"And what sword is that?" I asked.

I knew better than to think he meant the Severance, though it was the blade that'd cut him.

"You and me," he said. "The Woe. We let rot set in."

I almost flinched back. There were precious few havens left in my life, places where I could feel safe and at rest, but the Woe were one. That I might get that stripped away from me now felt like too ruinous of a cost for this sunny little afternoon.

"It's in your teeth," I said, echoing him from earlier. "Get it out before you choke."

His jaw clenched.

"I remember a night in Laure," Hakram said, "when Vivienne almost died. Where it took a knife through my wrist to wake her up from the terrified decisions she was about to make."

I'd never got the full story of what had happened in Laure from either of them. Hakram had called it an investment in the future, she'd called it a debt. What I knew was that when I'd returned from the Everdark they had been friends instead of foes and Hakram had lost a second hand.

"Part of it was my fault," the orc said. "Mistakes I made. But the source of it is that you don't take advice, Catherine"

I glared.

"Hell of a thing to say, coming from someone whose advice I took for years," I bit out.

"You take it on lesser matters," Hakram said. "Details. But when the crossroads come, it's always a decision you make alone. By the time we're all at the table talking, the choice is already made in your head. It's dress-up."

I tried to answer but he rode over my voice without hesitation.

"It was like that when we turned against the Tower after the Doom," he said. "When we headed for Keter. When you decided to go to the Everdark. When you decided to make peace with the Grand Alliance."

A pause.

"I'm sure it was the same when you decided to have Masego cut up the Intercessor to steal her power," Hakram said. "Another decision that affected millions. Maybe you heard some people out, Catherine, let them move around a few pieces on the mosaic, but you make these calls *alone*. There is no question of you being swayed."

My fingers tightened.

"Are we getting to a point?" I said.

"You made Vivienne your conscience," Hakram said, "then like your actual conscience you browbeat and ignored her. I put some of the fear in the woman I saw that night in Laure, but not the most. What did you think was going to happen when you gave her a role only to immediately make it worthless?"

"I did not think that," I hissed. "Because apparently I'm not perfect, Hakram, who fucking knew – except *goddamn everybody!*"

The more I spoke, the more furious I became.

"You drag up things that happened years ago and parade them up like they were acts of deliberate cruelty," I said. "Like I don't make mistakes. Of course I made fucking mistakes, and of all people you ought to know: you were standing to my right while I made most of them."

I smiled thinly.

"Where was this cutting insight then?" I asked. "I don't recall ever hearing it."

I let out a scoff, stepping away from a curl of smoke.

"And maybe I don't get swayed easy," I said. "I'm hard-headed, that's on me. But I don't recall ever forbidding anyone to try. Did I ever close the door on any of those decisions, forbid someone to argue against them?"

His face was calm, but I knew him. I could see the anger in the cast of it, in the careful way he moved – as if he were afraid that going too quickly would see him lose control of his temper.

"I don't stick a course when someone shows me I'm wrong," I challenged. "If I didn't get convinced, it's not because I'm some sort of fucking legendary mule: I simply *didn't get convinced*."

"Because we can't," Hakram said.

I glared at him, gesturing for him to get on with it.

"We cannot disagree with you, not past a certain line," he said. "That is the unspoken law of the Woe. Crossing that line gets you cut off, left behind."

"You're the one who told me I should act like was in charge of the band, on our way to Keter," I said. "And now you're complaining that I did?"

He hesitated.

"Gods, to hear you talk I was poison in the blood," I said. "Still am. And I'll not deny there were times I stumbled, but Burning Hells – who is it that *could* live up to your idol of the Perfect Catherine?"

My stomach clenched.

"Not me," I thickly said. "And you should have known better. I've never pretended to be more than what I am."

And if that'd never been enough, then burn him.

"You did things right too," Hakram gravelled. "That's not..."

He looked angry.

"You pull people in," he said. "And you take care of them, as much as you can, and they don't want to leave. But you pull them into your wake, not at your side."

"You had a place there," I coldly replied. "You're the one who walked away."

So you could go play saviour, I bit down on adding.

"But I wasn't at your side," Hakram frustratedly said. "That's what you refuse to see. I was under you."

I glared.

"Just because-"

"*Listen,*" he growled. "Maybe you don't want to admit you think that way, but you do. You can love us, but you could never be in love with any of us. The way you are with Akua Sahelian. Because, unlike her, *we are not your equals.*"

I rocked back, like he'd slapped me.

"This mad plan you built up around her laid it out plain," Hakram said as he slowly rose to his feet. "Even when she was a powerless prisoner, you treated her as more of a peer than us."

"Fuck you," I hissed. "For even thinking that-"

"You would have killed her for any of us," he said. "But that's not the same thing. And I'm not going to be Scribe, Catherine, not even for you. I still remember what a single aspect withering was like. What the Carrion Lord did to her, after decades together..."

I'm not him, I wanted to scream. *I would never have set you aside*. He shook his head.

"No," the Warlord said. "I learned her lesson. My own inheritance from a Calamity."

And that more, than the rest, had rage burn in my blood.

"You goddamn coward," I spat. "I scraped my hands raw trying to find ways we could stay together, ways to live with the changes, but what was any of it worth? I'm the one who can't be fucking swayed, Hakram? *Me?*"

Smoke billowed, as if conjured by my rising tone.

"Who is it that ran away across half the Empire before making his choice?" I said. "Who is it that sat on all of this until he left instead of just *telling me?*"

I could have fought this, fixed it. If I'd known. But instead he'd held his peace and here we were: beyond taking any of it back. Too late.

"And what should I have done?" Hakram challenged. "Asked you to change who you are?"

"YES," I shouted.

He stepped back at the vehemence of my voice.

"I would have done that, for you," I cursed. "I gave you the right to ask."

For the first time since we'd begun to talk, I saw him genuinely taken aback.

"It doesn't have to..." he hesitantly tried. "I cannot be the Adjutant, but-"

The anger went out of me at the sight. Dead in a moment, like a fire stripped of air. It was beginning to sink in, at last, that this was finished. That the page had turned.

"You were supposed to be the one who stayed," I tiredly said. "The one I'd journey on with. It's dead, Hakram."

And now they were all going to leave. Indrani to her horizons, Masego to his research, Vivienne to her kingdom and Hakram to his

people. I would end this journey as I had begun it, that night my father had found me in the alley. Standing alone.

Silence hung. I was not the one to break it.

"They need me," the Warlord quietly said.

"I needed you too," I replied, knowing it was unfair. "And maybe it's the right choice you made. The principled one, whatever that's worth."

I breathed out.

"But it was still a choice," I said. "And those have prices."

"Aye," he quietly said, "they do."

His fangs clicked together.

"It doesn't have to be the end of us," Hakram said.

I felt my pulse quicken. That was it, I thought. The pus had been lanced, the ugliness dragged into the light of day so it might burn and turn to smoke. And still he offered a hand. Not quite in forgiveness, but at least in understanding. In willingness to keep on sharing a road. It would be the easiest thing in the world, I thought, to just take that offered hand and let it drag me into the current. I could see it in my mind's eye, clear as day: we would sit and talk and eat and laugh. It would be not quite like old times, but it would have the sweetness of them. An old friendship changing shape. And I craved it down to the marrow of my bone, because I could barely remember who I'd even been before Hakram had come into my life. I just recalled a lot of fear and anger, fingers tight on the grip of my sword as I watched the world from behind a blade. I'd become who I was with him at my side.

The thought of losing that for good made me nauseous.

But he'd not been wrong, to talk of rot. Of things left unsaid and how they had come back to haunt us. And worst of all was that, if I held my tongue now, I would make him right when he'd said I did not think of them as equals. As people capable of handling the bitter sting of truth. *How many times*, I thought, *can you build a tower on the same quicksand before it is called madness?* Once had been too much already, I thought. There were only so many times I was willing to bleed myself dry. That left only one path forward, I knew that, and yet my mouth would not move. My arms were trembling. I bit the inside of my cheek until it burned. I'd called him a coward, was I going to be the one living up to the word?

I slowly straightened my back and met his gaze head on.

"In Ater," I plainly said, "I made the choice to murder you."

His face closed. He'd known that already, I thought, but it was another thing to hear it voiced out loud.

"I had a choice between your life, my father's life, and what I thought would win us the war," I said. "And you'd avoided me, cornered me until there was no middle way. Either I took up the knife or the Intercessor won."

I smiled thinly.

"So I took up the knife," I said.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"I only ended up killing one of you that night," I said. "But I made the choice anyway."

His dark eyes were unblinking.

"I'm not saying this to be cruel," I told him. "I'm saying this because you need to know that I still see that choice every time I look at your face."

I almost turned away there but stubbornness saw me through.

"And I don't regret it," I quietly said. "I didn't work as we thought it would, but it did work. And it might yet win us this war. So I don't regret it, and I'd make the same choice again."

I breathed out, slowly.

"And that's how we got here, isn't it?" I said. "Me making the choices. So I guess it's your turn now."

I looked away at last.

"I told you all I have to say," I said. "Now it's in your hands."

I searched his face but saw no answers. I might as well have been looking at stone.

"You know where I am," I said.

I limped out of the woods, leaving him behind with the roasting pig, and he did not stop me.

—

My mind felt restless for the rest of the afternoon, twisting this way and that. It was obvious enough Vivienne commented on it after we held council, though she was graceful enough not to ask how my conversation with Hakram had gone. I told her anyway.

"It's in his hands now," I said. "I don't get to decide how it ends."

She slowly nodded, visibly hesitating. She was curious but didn't want to push too far. I almost flinched at the sight. *We are not your equals*, Hakram had said. Had he been right? I led the Woe, it'd been like that from the start, but I was not their queen. I'd always thought of it as a company, not a kingdom. And while they did things for me when I asked, they were not beholden. Only it hadn't been anything as clear cut as my wearing a crown that he'd been talking about, had it?

"Vivienne," I said, "did you ever..."

Blue-grey eyes watched me patiently as I trailed off and an uncomfortable silence took hold. I wasn't sure why I'd started to speak. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to ask.

"Are we friends?" I artlessly asked.

She frowned.

"Gods," she said. "It really did a number on you, didn't it?"

"That's not an answer," I said.

Vivienne sighed.

"Of course we're friends," she said. "You're one of the most important people in my life, Cat. In some ways the most. You can't use you and Hakram as a measuring stick for everyone else."

I leaned back into my seat.

"And why's that?" I asked.

She looked at me for a long time.

"He's first person you ever really trusted, isn't he?" Vivienne quietly asked.

My fingers clenched. I did not answer.

"Maybe the only person you ever trusted, at least that deeply," she said. "It always cuts deeper when it's closer to home, Catherine."

"He said things," I admitted, "that I'm not sure are wrong."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Vivienne said. "The one blind spot he's had as long as I've known him is his relationship with you."

Maybe you're right, I thought, *but that doesn't mean he's wrong*. I shook myself. The coin was still spinning. There were greater concerns to speak of.

"I don't like that we're not sure what the First Prince is planning," I said, changing the subject.

Vivienne tactfully went along with it.

"I think she knows she loses if she does nothing so she's rolling the dice," the Princess said. "It explains why the Jacks have seen her reach out to princes. She'll be going to the hero council in force, with her backing there to impress."

I wasn't sure how much having the princes behind her would impress heroes, but having the armies those few represented supporting her might sway some. Enough to beat Hanno on his own stage?

"I don't think that's enough for her to win," I said. "Or even tie. And that begs the question that we've avoided voicing out loud so far."

Vivienne grimaced.

"What does the First Prince do if she sees she's lost?" she asked.

I had a great deal of respect for Cordelia Hasenbach, but I was not blind to her occasional bouts of ruthlessness. On the contrary, they were part of why I respected her. The problem was what that ruthlessness might lead her to do, if she thought Hanno was about to become Warden of the West and doom us all. I liked to think that the Lycaonese princess would be careful of avoiding doing anything that might destroy our chances at taking Keter, but she was desperate. Cornered. That was not when people made their finest decisions, claimants especially. I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"I can't just show up and tell them to play nice," I said. "I almost want to, Viv, but it'd be too direct an intervention. I'd get a rap on the knuckles from Above for sure and my lot isn't in any position to ensure that love tap doesn't disintegrate my entire arm."

"It might be out of our hands, Catherine," Vivienne said. "I know you don't like the thought, and to be honest I don't either, but--"

"-it might be a situation where acting has worse consequences than not acting," I completed. "Yeah, the thought's occurred."

We talked a while longer after that, but there were only so many words to say. My problem was that the two of them had moved quicker than I thought but I couldn't actually do anything about it. And I'd yet to reconcile with Hanno, which as Indrani had pointed out might turn to be a problem if he became Warden of the West tonight. *And I'm not sure I liked the idea of going after Keter with unfulfilled oaths.* Seemed like the kind of mistake Neshamah would use to bury me. We sent out spies and feelers and tried to get a grasp on what was happening as I struggled to find a way out of the mess, but I couldn't find one. The well of ideas was dry and my mind was... slow, today.

By the time the sun began to dip the tension in my shoulders had metamorphosed into a knot of dread in my stomach. I'd not felt this powerless in a while and it was never a feeling I'd enjoyed. Which was, naturally, when Akua chose that moment to reappear. I'd not seen her in two days. She came and went as she wished, and I had no call on her hours. She might be one of my advisors once more, but I knew better than to try to ask too much of her. It might just give her the reason to leave I suspected she was still looking for.

The balcony where I'd been wracking my brain overlooked a small statuary garden where servants had already lit lanterns, though I'd come out here more for the fresh air than the view. Akua drifted in through the room behind me with the same gliding grace she'd had as a shade, bringing with her two glasses of wine. She pressed one into my hand and came to lean against the stone railing, sipping at her own. No jewelry, I saw. Not that she needed any: even in the simple red and gold gown she wore, Akua Sahelian had the presence of a queen.

"It promises to be a beautiful night," she said.

I sipped at the wine. Red and full-mouthed, a little too bitter for me. From Cantal, maybe? There were so many damned wines in Procer that I could spend a lifetime learning and still miss a few.

"I can't afford to savour it," I said. "There's trouble in the distance."

"I heard," Akua languidly replied. "The Sword and the Princess rushing their conclusion, is it?"

I nodded.

"And I'm sure the Bard has her fingers in it too," I grunted. "Not put there recently, I don't think she can do much except mute Below's stories right now, but this has her scent all over it."

"The spoiled liquor stench is rather distinctive," Akua noted.

I snorted, but the amusement passed quickly.

"I'm no sure what I can do," I admitted.

"It is their choice to hurry the confrontation," Akua said. "A mistake I would expect of Hasenbach, but less so of the Sword of Judgement. He should know that power left to ripen is all the fuller for it."

"They both think the other will fuck it up," I sighed. "So they're pushing hard. And I'm starting to think this one is just a loss."

Golden eyes turned to me, curious.

"I think I might be able to nudge it one way or another," I said. "I have just the right leverage for it. So what's left is picking whoever I think is the better candidate."

"Yet you consider that a defeat," Akua said.

"Because the Bard gets what she wants," I replied. "We lose something. The Warden of the West is weaker, maybe it screws us against Keter down the line. Why the Intercessor would want that I can only guess, but I hate giving it to her anyway."

"I have come to believe," Akua murmured, "that the Intercessor's designs are best grasped by who she chooses to move."

I flicked her an interested glance.

"You were only moved against when you became a threat," the golden-eyed sorceress said. "So you can safely be considered to be inconsequential to her actual plan. As far as I can see, her actions cluster around three souls: Kairos Theodosian, Hanno of Arwad and Cordelia Hasenbach."

One dead, two now claimants and at odds.

"So you think this conflict is larger," I said.

"I am not yet sure," Akua gracefully shrugged. "But ultimately it is irrelevant."

"There's a bold take," I drily said. "How's that?"

"Because," Akua calmly said, "this is beneath you."

I raised my glass.

"Evidently not," I said, "else I wouldn't be here."

"This... fatalism," she said. "The pretence that you are bound to let your enemy's scheme succeed. It is beneath you."

"I can't intervene, Akua," I bit out. "If I could-"

"So find another way," Akua said. "Has that not been your favourite trick since the very beginning?"

She waved amusedly.

"Cornered is when you are most dangerous, dearest," she said. "When they have you surrounded by dead ends. The pit has always been, Catherine, where you shine."

I looked away.

"Well's run dry," I said, oddly ashamed. "I have nothing."

"I don't believe that's true."

Irritated, I turned to glare but was caught by a soft smile instead.

"You have been burned," Akua said. "And now you hesitate. Discard this."

She circled the rim of her glass with a finger.

"Let the fear fall away and you will find an answer," Akua said. "You always do."

I breathed out shallowly.

"Why are you helping?"

I'd been the one, I realized, to ask the question. Golden eyes studied me.

"Do you know," Akua asked me, "the difference between a knot and a noose?"

"There isn't," I said. "A noose *is* a knot."

"Only," she smilingly said, "if there is a corpse."

I blinked in confusion. I was missing something here, a kernel that would allow me to understand.

"I will choose what it is I do," Akua said. "Not you. Not her. Not my mother's shade. *Me*."

She leaned in closer, and warm lips were pressed against the side of my neck. I shivered.

"Now go, Catherine," she said. "Go out there and win."

She left and took the warmth she had brought with her. I stayed out there on the balcony, alone with my silence. Thinking for the Gods only knew how long.

Huh.

Maybe I did have an idea, after all.

—

Three hours later the sky opened as the wind howled around me. High Lady Abreha had been accommodating when I'd decided to use one of the assets brought from Ater early, not even asking why. As the clouds parted and light danced across the sky, I sat on the throne atop the great tower as it began crashing towards the ground north of the capital. The air screamed around us and the night crackled with thunder, sorcery lashing out around us in great flares. It wasn't quite a flying fortress, those would come with the second wave, but the sight of this cutting across the night sky certainly ought to catch people's attention.

And when had heroes ever been able to resist poking at a beehive?

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Steven Silver

"Will you vote?" I artlessly asked.

She frowned.

"Gods," she said. "It really did a number on you, didn't it?"

"That's not an answer," I said.

Vivienne sighed.

"Of course I'll vote," she said.

Handful Ujjain

"I will choose what it is I will do. Not you. Not her. Not my mother's shade. Not a copy pasted comment. Me."

Sulo

Poor Hakram. 😞

Cicero

I agree with Cat. Maybe Hakram is fight, and Cat didn't trust them to be her equal. But Hakram didn't trust himself to be her equal either. Seems poor form to blame her for a flaw he held himself.

Sulo

And which is more tragic? That someone did wrong by him, or that he believed someone had and did wrong by them in response and regrets it? I stand by my pity~

shikkarasu

They both acted poorly to one another. Hakram had serious concerns and grievances, but emotionally torturing your loved ones and calling it a test is *super* toxic. This conversation needed to happen years ago, but I can certainly see why he didn't want to have it and why Cat didn't think it was needed until it was too late.

I feel for them both.

The Ignorant Student

Also, as cruel as it may sound, Harlan was the Adjunct, which is not a Role that makes an equal. As best, he could be a trusted subordinate in a Story, but however they felt personally, their roles were pushing them into a superior/subordinate relationship. The fallout between Cat/Hakram AND Black/Scribe only came about when the subordinate Named started trying to make serious decisions against the wishes of their superior.

From a pure narrative perspective, Cat and Black did nothing wrong. Hakram and Scribe betrayed their trust.

When a CEO finds out their PA has been making company wide rescissions without approval, it's not on the CEO for failing to trust their PA

Of course, as people, yeah they both made mistakes, and they both have good points, and they both need to work to repair the broken trust between them.

Skaddix

I don't think Cordelia thought out her plan well. And by that I mean having a bunch of Proceran Princes backing your claim and a few Proceran Heroes. Is not very persuasive when all Foreign Heroes basically hate Procer. Cat noted the issue with this herself...its one thing to be a Warden of the West from Procer quite another thing to be a Proceran Warden of the West. And Cordelia is kinda walking right into that trap. Not accounting

for most Heroes being commoners who might not be inclined to love Nobles anyway. As for her flipping the table I presume it have to involve her Angel Weapon.

Still at the base level of Cordelia is she has a very weak base of Heroic Support. it doesn't help that she hates Heroes but I have seen no plan for her to grow her Heroic Support. Augur never hangs out with her fellow Heroes and Frederic well he is not exactly the most respected. Also I am not sure if the whole Red Axe zombie is public but I don't imagine that help Cordelia. Hanno has the heroic support and plenty of military rank and file support and quite frankly most governments will be quite fine if Hanno mostly keeps his hands off and delivers on the battle front.

Hmm I am not sure who Bard wants to win you figure it be Hanno cause well she first appeared with him. However, Hanno is not exactly inclined to do anything Bard wants involving her Angel Laser since he never trusted her anyway. Cordelia though she will actually fire it. I kinda actually wanted POV from Cordelia and Hanno on this Warden Issue.

Akua gives good advice, I have no idea where Cat is going with this plot. I mean Akua I buy that line more you no if you were just passive at the end of the Ater arc. I mean I suppose it delays the meeting if they have to rally to stop this crisis. As for Hakram x Cat well that hurt.

dadycool

I think the conflict is what Bard is after, not necessarily who the winner is.

[Liliet](#)

It doesn't matter which of them wins, either of them LOSING is the loss where it matters.

caoimhinh

It was stated before that Bard wanted Cordelia as Warden of the West, that was the whole point of the Salia's attempted Coup d'etat mini-arc. Only the Augur's intervention gave the chance for Cordelia to refuse becoming Warden of the West.

Isn't she making a claim for it now just setting the Bard's plan in motion again?

I can't help but see Cat's objections to Hanno being Warden of the West as anything but selfish and kinda hypocritical. Hanno taking actions into his own hands when he sees others aren't making advances is Catherine's whole theme, she has always been making high stakes bets with lots of things on the line but she simply balks at another doing the same.

Plus, her other objection when she had a sort of epiphany where she could see that Hanno would not disagree with her in most things, but would have lines that he would not cross, principles he would not break, seems a lot better than the alternative she envisioned with Cordelia: a Warden that would fight her tooth and nail for everything but could be made to compromise and wanted sort of the same things as Cat in the long run, or at least is willing to bribe Catherine with the things she wants (like signing on the Liesse Accords).

Hanno is what the Warden of the West is supposed to be, a mirror to the Warden of the East. A peer, but not the same. He won't use the same methods Cat uses, because his duty is different, on account of the people that he must herd being different than the ones Cat must keep in line.

And the very fact that Cordelia is trying to use the signing of the Liesse Accords as a bribe, when she had already agreed to sign it, shows how she is and the same kind of attitude that she showed back in the Red Axe Case: backing off from an agreement the moment it becomes politically inconvenient for her or Procer.

Like, what is she implying with that offer to sign now? Will Procer not sign the Accords if Cat doesn't agree with what Cordelia wants?

Deworld

When Bard wanted Cordelia as a Warden of the West it was a totally different Name. It was supposed to be something purely political, similar to Hierarch I think. Now, however, after the Warden of the East came in Cat, this Name would mean a lot more – authority over half of the continent and half of the Named isn't what Bard wanted to put on Cordelia's shoulders originally. So the argument "Bard wanted Cordelia as Warden of the West" can't be really applied here I think.

The Ignorant Student

That brings up the interesting problem that is: did the Augur not tell Cordelia about the Bard's attempt to make her take up a Name? It feels like Cordelia has no clue what she's doing when it comes to Named which is a big problem considering she's gone from straight up refusing the Name to all but begging for it. That's got narrative significance. That's someone who's wishy-washy.

Miles

Both claimants are unfit for the Role.

This message was approved by Abigail for Warden.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

A painful break from Hakram but perhaps necessary. The Warden can't be relying on someone to bring their ideas to fruition after the fact. Catherine's first steps without leaning on a person like a crutch are going to be interesting to see.

Also: Flying fortresses without a villainous lose attached is going to be so cool to watch.

Zach

It's not necessarily a break from Hakram. Catherine didn't reject his offer; she just said it was now in his hands. Catherine basically listened to what Hakram had said about her making all the significant decisions and decided that choosing whether to accept his proposal would just be a continuation of that.

dadycoool

Augh! It hurts to watch Cat rip her own heart out like that. Hakram said something interesting: "The way you are with Akua Sahelian. Because, unlike her, we are not your equals." That reeks of foreshadowing, especially since she then proceeded to stand next to her and, in a way, help plan out her next step and practically took the reins of making her decision. Warden Akua is looking mighty likely from my perspective.

SpeckofStardust

Only of the east after cat kicks the bucket.

Sinead

Blows dust off of Cat takes the Twilight Crown theory

Soronel Haetir

I don't know, Akua has been acting much more the Hero lately. It would very much wreck things to have Below's representative in Creation be of Above.

Sinead

I mean, fair point. Depending on the story beats, I do suspect that Cat will not get a happy ending. And I don't know if Akua will be a full Hero, or the Reformed Villain in the style that is likely the end goal of the Accords.

Akua is intimately aware of the impact of legacy, after all...

Darael

I don't know. Having two Wardens of the East would provide a counterbalance which might make it narratively easier to share the Wardenship of the West between Cordelia and Hanno... or Akua could become the Warden of the North, following through on the plan to have her contain Neshamah in a modified form and mirroring Cat's role for Praes, and Hanno the Warden of the South, representing both the Crusade to defend the living lands and his time further south in the Titanomachy. Four Wardens, for four cardinal directions, and the city of Cardinal as a pivot... it's a shape that could work.

zenanii

Okay that would actually be very cool. The Warden of the West being a hero turned villain and the Warden of the East being a villain turned hero.

Miles

But there are no villains turned Hero.

Redemption arcs end in death.

[Hargabga](#)

This is a really depressing chapter. It stinks of things broken and lost. But also, like hope? Hakram is not where Cat wanted him to be, and neither is Aqua. Two of the most important people to her. I still feel weird how our resident Hitler didn't get her carmic comeuppance, but, uh, maybe she will? I don't know, this whole chapter sits ill with me, like things best left buried and forgotten. Maybe I am reading too much into everything.

Albert Wen

Karma doesn't make sense for people with body counts in the hundreds of thousands. No single entity is capable of receiving that much negative karma.

ninegardens

I mean... she **could** send the delightful duo a memo saying "Yo, Bard be fucking with you. Don't do anything rash. Don't lose sight of the **real** enemy".

It would be a good starting point.

Linnus42

You know the Hakram x Cat situation on Love/Friendship reminds me of Berserk a lot. Reminds me of Griffith giving his speech on what makes a True Friend that Guts overhears and leads to the breaking of the Band of the Hawk. And the Golden Age descending

into Darkness. Though obviously I don't think things will go that bad in this story. But still I get that feeling reading it. So this is like Griffith's speech to Charlotte and the duel before Guts leave combined to me.

As for Cordelia, well I think the main flaw in her plan is she has done nothing to sure up Heroic Support. Which is part of the role. I mean maybe Otto and Frederic are willing to go all the way for Cordelia if she flips the table but I don't think Rozala or the Blood are. They might all prefer Cordelia to win but I don't think they will be especially mad if it goes the other way. Cordelia's moves and plans make her look like Proceran Warden and not a Warden from Proceran.

Also I don't think there is enough justification for Cordelia to flip the table like Cat thinks she might. Maybe we need some Cordelia POV? Cause I don't have the most favorable view of Cordelia but I am not seeing complaints about Hanno that justify such an extreme reaction from Cordelia. Like okay he is not going to make sacrifices for Procer that you want, he is not as good at politics as you and you think Heroes need to be checked. Those issues have not been painted as bad enough to justify such an extreme reaction from Cordelia in my book.

Ci

Cordelia is responding to the acts of the Sword Saint. That's who soured Cordelia on Heroes. After that, it's not so much that Hanno has acted outrageously like the Sword Saint, but he's acted with enough of the same disregard of political realities that a hyper sensitive Cordelia now sees it as something intrinsic to Heroes.

Sure, maybe Hanno himself will be okay, even Cordelia admits that. But what of his successor? Unlike a villian, Heroes die of old age, so there will be another Warden of the West after him. What if someday a Sword Saint rises to that position? Cordelia wants there to be institutions that will resist someone like that and prevent the Warden from doing something crazy, like decide to sacrifice Procer to establish a story to empower the eventual defeat of the Dead King.

[wadeingintheriver](#)

I was thinking just the same, regarding the shades of the Eclipse that hung over that conversation. I think the conversation between Cat and Hakram actually cuts deeper than the confrontation between Griffith and Guts (taken in the void, without knowledge of what's to come), because Cat sincerely views Hakram as a confidant and friend, instead of a piece on the board as I think Griffith always saw everybody. It also helps that both Cat and Hakram have a capacity for self-reflection that neither the narcissistic Griffith nor the blunt

instrument Guts possessed, so both are able to understand criticism of their actions without immediately rejecting them.

Also, I think there's still hope for both Cat and Hakram, because Cat was able to actually extend a hand after the confrontation, which Griffith was not, and because I doubt that, even if Cat were to sacrifice her true companions, it would be for a reason as nakedly selfish and self-serving as Griffith's wish. So we haven't fully reached Behelit territory yet, I think.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Akua is such a tease. Isn't there a rule where no one leaves the room unfucked after getting kissed on the neck?

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Cat's the one who refuses to fuck her.

[Sugar Roll](#)

True, true. The appropriate response was supposed be physically stopping her from leaving while asking "Where do you think you're going?"

Juff

Typo Thread:

nothing may cost > nothing might cost
Catherine" > Catherine."
handling he > handling the
I didn't work > It didn't work
He's first person > He's the first person
I liked the idea > I like the idea
out her more > out here more

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Minor addition: most of the series, people have been saying godsdamn. Godsdamn this, godsdamn you, godsdamn this godsdamned thing, etc. It's pluralized. Here we see several non-pluralized GDs, and I'm fairly certain they've been unpluralized in previous chapters this book as well.

ohJohN

I've been noticing this as well, recently – the 's' used to be so prevalent that the occasional omissions seemed like typos, now its inclusion is becoming the exception.

I can't tell if it's a stylistic choice to move away from the nonstandard-English-but-internally-consistent form, if it's

an intentional indicator of a change in Cat's thinking (though a conversion to monotheism seems... unlikely), or the writing/editing process has changed to make these harder to notice before posting.

Sinead

Keep in mind that even if you added a plural 'godsdamn' into your Word spell checker, it probably wouldn't catch any slip-up on your end. So if you are doing a scan, it would be easy to miss (I know I do not tend to notice this error).

[Liliet](#)

Oh my god please tell me Cat brought Tenebrous. Please tell me Cat brought Tenebrous. Please tell me Cat brought Tenebrous.

Anyway, HELL YEAH on the Hakram conversation. And half a hell yeah on the Vivienne conversation. CONTINUE THAT SOMETIME CAT

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I don't know anything you don't, but since you asked nicely and I also want it to be true: Cat brought Tenebrous.

shikkarasu

It sounds just a little bit like Cat brought a few floors of the Tower. I would call this hubris, but we've outgrown such a weak word. This is *gestures in vain to find an appropriate term* *Theodosian*.

[pirateddesigns](#)

"Theodosian" is decidedly my new favorite adjective.

erebus42

I like it. Especially since it carries undercurrents of calculation and self awareness about what you are doing.

shikkarasu

It is a very specific and nuanced adjective. A real state of being.

JIC

I don't think she would. An undead could be easily taken over by the Hidden Horror

[Liliet](#)

So far Cat is 1:0 with Neshamah on who steals whose toys

shikkarasu

I think stealing Masego for a few months should count. He isn't Cat's toy, he's Archer's, but that's beside the point.

I'ma call it 1:1:1; Cat:Nessie:Ma'Drani. I *do* want a Tenebrous Tiebreaker, tho.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Ma'Drani sounds like an Elder Scrolls character. Might use that.

nick012000

sigh

I see that Masego's going to need to have **another** talk with Cat about how they're not their parents, and he's not planning on abandoning her to his researches.

dadycool

Yeah, at this point Masego and Indrani are the two least likely to leave her, which of course perfectly inverts what happened with the Calamities. Not only was Cat their first friend, she's also practically the outer core of their very selves. Hakram used to be that way too, except then bits and pieces kept getting carved away. Now Masego and Indrani essentially only have each other and her.

KiltedBastich

Exactly. Masego doesn't care where he does his research, as long as he gets to do it. I can see him happily setting up shop in Cardinal, frankly. I mean, the center of name lore for the continent? A magical university? Where else is he going to go?

And Indrani will leave, but she will always come back. That's the difference for her, from Ranger. It will never be "goodbye", always "until we meet again". Which is exactly how things are now, so, no problem. Heck, I could see Concocter settling in Cardinal too, which would give Indrani yet another reason to stick around.

[Liliet](#)

Unlike Wekesa, who started literally on the run, Masego had had comfy research to sit with since the end of book 2. And yet every time Cat wanted something of him he said "okay" threw on his coat and walked out.

dadycool

The "Wizard's Tower" for Masego was always just a wing of Cat's palace, and that sums their relationship up perfectly.

[Liliet](#)

He also actually had the actual wizard tower in Marchford! Which he then abandoned and moved to Laure with her. And then to Cardinal.

[Liliet](#)

* to the Arsenal but you get my point

RoflCat

Well, that IS one way to stop a conflict.

Create another, bigger situation so both parties has to stop fighting.

Which means something is about to get set on fire tonight.

Miles

It's technically treason to call the Queen an arsonist.

sidehammer056302

I'm sorry, did Cat just ride in on a falling magical tower? XD

And finally the confrontation. Very glad that both parties share in the fault and it wasn't just turned on Cat. So heartbreaking, though, I knew this would crush her. I still believe in Hakram, though. I think he'll come through. He'll reach out again, regardless of her murder statement. He's an orc, what's a little murder between best friends?

Ooh, but asking Viv if they were friends. That cut deeeeeeeep. Viv responded well, too. I'm starting to see a little light at the end of the tunnel, something to counter the spiraling I predicted for Cat later down the line. They'll come back. I think it's that simple. Just when things are at their darkest, Indrani, Masego, Viv and Hakram will all come back and prove that while things are dark, there's still hope.

And damn, Akua flicking Cat in the nose to get her back on track, I really loved that. It's "beneath" her, lol! Bombasticity is Cat's trump card yet again, it appears! XD

Silverking

I'm seeing some similarities between the conversation between Cat and Hakram and an earlier conversation between Archer and

Concoctor back at the Arsenal. The main similarity that stuck out to me was one party stopping the other dead in their tracks by saying, "Yes, there were real problems and personality clashes, and maybe we could or couldn't have resolved them, but you never bothered to even ASK!"

As for the flying fortress, this might be Cat changing the conversation about the Warden, to the tune of "Forget the dwarves, forget the Dead King, the real problem is that you're fighting to become my counterpart and peer, but NEITHER of you are really at my level."

sidehammer056302

Ohmergerdyesplz!

"You think you're on MY level...? Good luck..."

Reader in the Night

Aaah, Cat is going to use her villainous prerogative and pull a Kairos Theodosian to force Hanno and Cordelia to team up and work together, thus resolving their differences! Genius Stuff!

Of course, for it to work, she has to be the Over-the-Top, hammy Evil of villains of yore (while also providing a credible enough Evil threat that Hanno and Cordy will be forced to work together to stop her). Thus: Pulling a Kairos Theodosian.

It'll burn her with both of them, but I suspect she'll take it if it's the cost for getting them to work together.

shikkarasu

Oh ye GODS; what that why Bard wanted him dead? Because Kairos was a catalyst for bringing the Heroes together?

letouriste

This is so well written, my gods. It was everything we could have hoped this chapter to be. kudos EE

M0och123

Wait, they flying fortresses coming for support?!

I guess it is Praes...

Darkening

The dead king doesn't have proper heroes to inevitably destroy them either! And there's no story for them to fall either with the Bard breaking them lol. So they can actually be effective!

Deworld

That's the best thing about the "Villain vs Villain" conflict. We can see all their tricks in full power without Providence-led heroes who would ruin all the fun. I wish we had more on Drow vs Dead King war.

Daniel E

Villains are not bound by Stories. Every single trope in the universe is now legit; flying fortress, monologue, taunting, offering Heroes a turncoat deal, throwing said Heroes off a cliff. I sincerely hope that EE allows Cat some major indulgences here.

[David](#)

Though throwing a hero off a cliff would still have them survive – the survival is tied to a heroic story, after all. It's probably more that the villain won't feel the strong *urge* to throw them off a cliff, or leave them in a slow deathtrap.

[ChillyPepper](#)

The only suitable person for Warden of the West is Akua, she is her equal. Or one of those twice god darned gargoyles, they are acting a bit smarter than the rest of candidates!

erebus42

Honestly the "Doom of Liesse" being made Warden of the West would be quite amusing given it's delightful irony and the fact that it would probably give like 90% of the Heroes an anyerism. Also who doesn't love a bit of the old pining across opposing lines.

[David](#)

The absence of a third candidate for Warden of the West has been bugging me all along, given stories, so I'd wonder if what Cat is going to do here is over-the-toply villainously provide her own candidate to derail the entire confrontation.

john

Hakram: Feelings are complicated, good communication is hard.
Vivienne: Doing anything at all might make things even worse!
Akua: Have you tried turning your villainy off and then on again?
Cat: Of course I already... wait, no, that cleared it right up.
Huh.

Miyamoto Musashi:

"To renew" applies when we are fighting with the enemy, and an

entangled spirit arises where there is no possible resolution. We must abandon our efforts, think of the situation in a fresh spirit then win in the new rhythm. To renew, when we are deadlocked with the enemy, means that without changing our circumstance we change our spirit and win through a different technique.

Someperson

Well, going full villain certainly ought to get their attention.

Don't like the nature of the current pivot over dwarven policy? Then drop a new and more pressing conflict on them in the form of a sorcerous tower falling from the sky and hold the contest for Warden of the West on your own terms.

Neshamah isn't the only one whose power limiters got removed.

Deworld

Oh yeah. Catherine using a flying fortress of all things means one of the two things: either the world went mad, or her. Neither is good news.

[Mincheriit](#)

Thanks for the juicy chapter. Wow that campfire between cat and hakram really got some use with that smoke. So much emotion in that moment.

Cat just used the flying fortress card to get attention of the heroes... well i guess thats an old time classic thats going to backfire in just the right way cat wants lol.

Evgeny Permyakov

Ah, sweet irony. First Cat was the defiant one and now Akua is. Also, defiant Akua. This is going to be good.

[MadeThisAccountJustForYou \(@MadeThi54U\)](#)

This chapter was wonky as hell, I'm sorry. Hakram and Cat's firepit was pure soap opera, conversation not because you'd figured out how to have it but just so that you could. What are they hashing out there? That the woe hitched their wagons to Cat's leadership because she was the only one with the nerve to take the reins is beyond well-tread at this point, apparently now that he's done Hakram's done the same thing (and, if memory serves, with the knowledge that he was just walking a similar path with taking responsibility for the path his people were taking because nobody else seemed to be able to) He was having his whinge about an aspect withering seemingly in abject ignorance of the fact that Cat had an aspect CUT OUT because nobody could give her a better idea.

All that and we still seem to be all having to suspend out disbelief so hard that White's plan isn't obvious garbage. He's going to take a bunch of Grand Alliance assets, force open a gate to the kingdom under and start trespassing?! With everything that's been established about the kingdom under that's an invasion pure and simple and the sheer dizzying stupidity of that plan still hasn't been so much as narrated about. So yeah, wonky as hell imo.

I write all of this not because it makes me happy, but because I don't want to see years of work fall apart in an avoidable heap. I love your work, I've loved it for years, but I'm not going to let that love blind me to what might wreck a fitting finale

Lord Haart

Disagree on both counts.

Hakram is right that Cat has massive trust issues and hasn't ever respected the judgement of the Woe except in a few specific cases. The whole thing with Akua really proved that IMO.

Hanno's plan *could* backfire in theory (and Cat said as much) but he does have Providence backing him still so odds of that are low. More likely he'll at least improve their position with the Dwarves if not get their support for free.

I also think EE is just as good as ever about answering these sorts of story worries in subsequent chapters. The Web Serial format does demand a bit of adaptive thinking and forgiveness to the author for not explaining every detail since they only have limited time to edit.

superkeaton

Naturally, the solution to all of Cat's problems is to give herself more enemies. I had a feeling this would happen.

Zanydruoid

Finally caught up

Chapter 38: Salvo

"It's a matter of principle for me never to have railings built on anything, Chancellor. It saves on both construction costs and retirement pensions."

– Dread Emperor Inimical, the Miser

The flying tower hit the ground with a thunderous sound, earth rippling and breaking under the impact as we 'landed'.

It was like an old god had just had a slugging match with the earth, and it sure as Hells wasn't the earth winning. The foundations of the tower stolen from the broken remnants of Ater groaned, their reinforcing enchantments struggling with the load, but in the end they held. Not that you could tell there'd been doubts, from my comfortable throne under the stars. The viewing platform was so heavily warded not even a gnat could come through without permission and not so much as a shake had made it to my seat. I leaned back against the cushion, sipping at the Vale summer wine I'd sent for. Iridescent strands of magic still skittered across the sky, announcing our presence to anyone who cared to look.

Well, that and the massive amount of Night I'd been accumulating for the better part of an hour now. I figured even onlooking angels had to be a mite worried about that, given that there was now so much of the power roiling around me that the tower itself was beginning to be wreathed in shadow. I figured it'd make for a nice touch, you know, when the heroes showed up: dying lights above, a desolate empty plain around us and a lone tower swallowed by writhing, malicious darkness. The war had killed or seasoned all our greenhorns, but I figured that a few of the younger ones ought to balk at least. I finished my glass and set it down a pearl-encrusted table.

"If I were a maniacal laughter kind of girl," I noted, "that would have been a good time for it."

"Wow," Archer said, sounding impressed. "The power is going *straight* to your head."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"It's kind of hot," she admitted. "It's a Praesi flying tower, you know, so I'm sure if we look there's gotta be a least one revealing dress to-"

I raised a hand at the height of my chest.

"This is where you are right now," I said, then waited a beat. "And this is the expendable asset zone."

She squinted at me.

"You didn't move your hand," she pointed out.

"No, I did not," I pleasantly smiled. "So are you *sure* that downwards is the direction you want to keep digging?"

I'd never gotten to throw anyone down a tower before. I felt like doing it at least the once would allow me to better understand the people that I represented as Warden of the East, which was definitely the main reason I wanted to do that and not because it seemed like everyone else had gotten to. Just in case I began eyeing the rampart and working out the angles.

"Message received," Archer cheerfully replied.

She then knelt and made a melodramatically sombre face, because she'd always been a wench and always would be.

"What are your orders, Your Dark Mistrastery?" she sinisterly asked.

Wait, had she just pushed together mistress and maj- *no, Catherine, don't let yourself be sucked into her pace.*

"I need you to go to the edge of the rampart and look at how long we've got before they show up," I said, then paused. "Also, send for a refill. My glass is empty."

Indrani eyed me skeptically.

"And you can't walk the like ten feet to the edge of the wall to look yourself, because..." she trailed off.

My lips thinned.

"Disloyalty is severely punished in this outfit, wench," I warned her.

She studied me for a long moment, then suddenly grinned.

"You can't get up, can you?" Indrani said.

Shit.

"Of course I can," I lied.

"Do it," she challenged. "Just for two heartbeats. Do it and I'll speak entirely in rhyme for an entire month."

I shifted in my seat.

"Look," I defensively said, "it's not my fault the mages built this damn thing so that all the channelling arteries end up right under the throne. If I stop touching it-"

"You lose control of a bunch of the power you've gathered," Archer said grin, widening. "Oh Gods, you're literally stuck in that seat until they show up aren't you?"

"How far are they?" I whined. "The back of my knee itches and I don't want to have to take off the armour bending around on the chair."

"You're a tragedy," Indrani amusedly told me.

She went to have a look, though, so I let it pass without censure.

"So?"

"We've got a dozen riding hard our way," Archer said. "And that cloak is pretty hard to mistake: Shiny Boots is in the lead."

I hummed.

"Is the Witch of the Woods with them?" I asked.

"I would have mentioned the giant monster wolf, Cat," she snorted.

Good. We'd been pretty sure she wouldn't be there, since she was supposed to be fixing a breach in the wards up north, but it was hard to be sure with her. The Witch avoided cities and even towns like the plague whenever she could, so it was even more difficult to keep track of her than your average Named. I'd had a backup plan in case she did end up being there, but I was happier not having to use it. Since Cordelia had taken to using the ealamal like a goddamn party trick the boundary with Arcadia had damned hard to breach in the region. *Tabula rasa*, Masego called the effect. Pissing angel light all over the land fixed the accumulated damage in the fabric of Creation.

Two breaches in a single evening would have taken more out of me than I'd like.

"The First Prince?" I pressed.

"Nowhere in sight," Indrani said. "Told you it was long odds."

I waved a hand.

"She's not the one I want to talk to anyway," I said. "And I've already gotten most of what I want."

"Breaking up a party," Indrani solemnly said. "Shame on you, Cat. You used to be fun."

"It was a Good party," I argued. "They would have all drunk responsibly and there'd have been no brawling."

Except for the Levantines, I mentally corrected. They *definitely* would have drunk too much and brawled. Indrani snorted, then her eyes turned serious even as the smile remained.

"You think it'll be enough?" she asked. "It's not even half of them riding here."

I suspected that probably had more to do with the number of horses fit for a hard ride they'd had on hand than interest, but that hadn't been the thrust of her thought.

"Hanno left," I said. "That kills his plan as well as whatever Hasenbach was cooking up to match him."

"He could just do it tomorrow morning," Indrani said.

I'll have gotten my licks in before then, I thought. I still answered, because it would have been arrogance to assume what I intended was guaranteed to work.

"A repeat?" I dismissively shrugged. "He's free to try. Won't have the same weight, though. I stole that by slapping down a gauntlet through the clouds and daring him to pick it up. My bet is he'll push it back a day or two, trying to gather momentum again, but by then it'll be a different game."

"It's coming close to supporting Hasenbach," Archer said.

I smiled, cold and lean.

"If she gets something out of tonight, good for her," I said. "But I'm not doing it on her behalf. When I laid down the gauntlet, I was completely serious."

Archer slowly nodded.

"You'd really do it?" she asked.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"I will, 'Drani," I said. "If Hanno doesn't give me a good reason not to, I'll eat the Book of Some Things."

I'd not gathered all this Night on a lark. Indrani hummed.

"At this rate," she told me, "Shiny Boots and attendants will be there in two hours."

I cursed in Mthethwa.

"You're going to have to help me out of my armour," I told her. "And send for the damn bottle, would you?"

—

A warband of heroes approached my tower on half-dead horses.

Picking out the faces and Names, they'd come ready for a fight. They had the steel: Vagrant Spear, Mirror Knight, Myrmidon, Bloody Sword and Valiant Champion. A balance of Light and magic for their backline: Forsworn Healer, Blessed Artificer, Apprentice and the Wise Astrologer. Then a pair of specialists, the Bitter Blacksmith and the Painted Knife, with Hanno himself the last of the lot. Exactly twelve in all. They rode across the yellow grass towards the tower's gate, their silhouettes cast in moonlight as shadows roiled before them.

Twelve heroes to the seven villains lying in wait. Most of them of better calibre too. It was a good thing I had no intention of picking a fair fight.

I was watching them all through eyes of Night I'd seeded into the writhing darkness embracing the tower, using it as cover. At a long distance I'd been forced to rely on Indrani's eyes, but up close these would do just fine. Hanno was leading them to the gate, in front with the Astrologer and the Champion, but aside from that they were pretty loosely arranged. Most of the Levantines were clustered in the back, talking excitedly in one of their languages as they pointed at the tower. The Sword of Judgement rode ahead of his two companions, white cloak trailing behind him as he stared up with hard eyes.

"Warden of the East," he called out, "open your gates. You owe explanation."

I snorted, up on my throne, as I began to mould the Night within the tower. Yeah, like that was going to work. I still couldn't leave my seat, but thankfully I had assigned a gatekeeper. He'd gotten his latest orders from Indrani, who had proclaimed herself my herald safe in the knowledge that I couldn't get up to contradict her. Given even that minute amount of authority she had immediately become a hedonistic tyrant, as everyone even remotely knowing her had seen coming. Still, I did wonder how Ishaq was going to interpret 'slow them down, without fighting if possible'.

"To pass this gate," a ghastly voice answered from an arrowslit above the gate, "you must answer my riddles three."

Goddamnit, Ishaq. The Barrow Sword had been handed an enchanted necklace that'd lace his voice with horror, an old Praesi favourite, but that wasn't going to be enough to carry this. There was a pregnant pause from the heroic side. Getting the Night in place was taking longer than I'd thought it would, even with the tower mostly emptied so I wouldn't have to worry about collateral damage. He better keep them busy for a while still or this wasn't going to work.

"We won't be doing that," Hanno politely replied. "Stop trying to buy time and open the gate."

"Lord," the Vagrant Spear cut in, sounding appalled.

All the Levantines except the Painted Knife, who was rolling her eyes, seemed to agree. Sidonia looked up at the arrowslit.

"Speak your riddles, gatekeeper," the Vagrant Spear called out.

... I took it back, Ishaq had at least a vague idea of what he was doing. He began to give them his first riddle and I kept half an eye on the situation as I continued moulding the Night, layering it carefully, and noticed that the Wise Astrologer was quietly talking with the Apprentice. Who looked a little uncomfortable as he nodded. Ugh, the Astrologer. She was barely even a mage, I was pretty sure at least half a fraud, and I didn't care that – the older Ashuran heroine pointed her finger, the Apprentice's magic flashed in fire and I lost one of the Night eyes I'd hidden. I lost another four in quick succession, almost half the ones I'd seeded. My flesh eye narrowed.

"Dicer," I spoke into the Night. "Hit the Astrologer."

The Pilfering Dicer was a rather minor villain I'd assigned to the First Prince's service after having disciplined him for bad behaviour. He had, you see, stolen luck from my soldiers. That was his trick, stealing luck from others. And tonight, with no story hanging above our heads to punish us for overstepping, I had no hesitation in using him against heroes. I got a hesitant nod from the young man in reply and he dipped into his Name a moment later. Three heartbeats later, the Astrologer's horse saw something move in the grass it got spooked. She got shaken right off the saddle, landing on her back with strength enough it would bruise.

I coldly smiled.

"Well done," I praised through the Night, even as Hanno's face hardened.

"That was an attack," he called out at the gate. "I felt it. Enough of these games."

Even as the Levantines protested he bared his sword, but he was just a little too slow. The Mirror Knight had already dismounted, and with a few quick strides he stood before the steel-barded gates of the tower. Sighing, he took a sharp step forward and slammed his helmeted head into the gate. It groaned. Another and it cracked. A third and it broke. On the fourth, the steel bars keeping it closed snapped and the gate flew open. The human-shaped battering ram took a step back, brushing away wooden shards.

"There," Christophe de Pavanie said. "Shall we get on with it?"

That was a little impressive, but the Barrow Sword had done exactly what I'd asked of him: he'd bought me enough time to finish my preparations.

"Cursed are you who broke the pact of entrance," Ishaq told them in that horrifying voice. "You will know no rest in this world or the next."

Now that was just dedication to the job, I approvingly thought. Even better, some of the Levantines looked like they were taking him seriously.

"Astrologer?" Hanno asked.

"I've never seen so much Night in one place before," the Ashuran told him, grimacing. "It is difficult to tell what it is meant for."

"Then we press on," Hanno grimly replied.

"I could hammer at the tower," the Blessed Artificer offered, "I have prepared-"

"Warning shot," I ordered through the Night.

The black arrow streaked down, landing less than a hair's breadth away from the end of Adanna of Smyrna's left foot. She wore good leather boots, but not so good they'd stop an arrow fired by Archer. She yelped and flinched away, but it wasn't her I'd been looking at. Hanno's eyes narrowed. A message received, then. I was only going to play nice so long as they did. The moment the gloves came off for them, I stopped holding back.

"We press on," Hanno repeated, voice firmer. "Prepare yourselves, we are awaited."

They must have talked tactics on the ride over, because they got into a formation without much jostling. Hanno and the Mirror Knight in front, Champion and Myrmidon out back, their strikers distributed according to range and their most vulnerable Named safely encircled by steel. It was pretty well thought out, I noted as they passed the threshold of the broken gates and entered the bottom floor of the tower. It'd be difficult to crack in a fight, especially considering the small number of villains I'd judged safe to bring into this. A shame for them it wouldn't matter. Within a heartbeat of the entire warband having ventured into the dark, I pressed down with all my might and the Night I'd been moulding obeyed.

There floor under their feet broke and all of them were dropped into Arcadia. Separated.

And best of all, I could finally get up from the throne.

—

I'd not known for sure how many would come, so ten cells had seemed a safe bet.

Not that I meant 'cells' in the sense of iron bars, of course, since throwing a hero in a dungeon was a recipe to have them rampaging all over your fortress before the day was done. I had instead made sure that they ended up in different, distant parts of Arcadia. The difficulty was that I needed to move them towards one destination or another while they were transitioning, and naturally the opiniated little bastards fought me over it. Fine, it wouldn't be a perfect spread then. I'd still mostly get my way.

I dropped the Myrmidon and the Bloody Sword on a sunny island in the middle of a deep lake, keeping a single eye on them from the shadow of the trees. Neither was hurt, and I could now consider them pretty much out of the game: both of them were a whirlwind of pain when you let them get in lose, but they had no mobility trick and no deep experience with Arcadia. Let them swim their way to the shore and wander around, it'd take them hours and even providence couldn't magically bring them to another hero able to guide them.

I tossed the Painted Knife into a swamp near a fae tower, betting that she'd get curious and waste her time there. If allowed to wander she had the potential to be a pain, as a stealthy Named, but between the mud and the distraction she should keep out of my hair. The Blessed Artificer would need careful handling, so I dropped her into a natural well. It was a deep stone shaft with even deeper water at the bottom, in a mountain valley, so while she was in no real danger she'd have to be careful about blowing her way out if she didn't want to bring half a mountain down on her head. Most likely she'd burn through a bunch of her smaller Light trinkets to carve steps, which I had no issue with. While it might be the massive workings that made her a real threat, in practice she only had a handful of those to call on. Disarming her of the rest would do much to box her in.

The Forsworn Healer was the first to fight me off successfully. I'd meant to dump him in the middle of an open and empty plain, let him wander around, but my nudge was slapped aside and he clung to the Valiant Champion instead. That wasn't great, I thought, but neither was it horrible. I'd sent her into the broken echo of an old battle, the massacre of some Alamans tribe by what had to be Triumphant's ancient Legions of Terror, and while the ghosts wouldn't be able to hurt them getting out of a shard like that could be tricky. The Healer might be able to guide them out, though, so the Champion would be back in play sooner than I would have liked.

That could be dealt with.

"Harrowed Witch," I called out.

The answer came promptly through the Night.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Draw fae to the battlefield shard," I ordered. "That hunting party out in the woods ought to do nicely."

Only one noble there, Indrani had told me, and not a powerful one. Even if one of them did end up wounded, well, they had a healer along. Hopefully they'd enjoy tangling with a pack of fae in the middle of what was essentially a violent illusory field, I thought with just a drop of viciousness. I did manage to split the Astrologer and the Apprentice, putting my back into it, but the fucking Astrologer managed to wiggle her way into falling along with the Vagrant Spear. I'd chosen for them low hills that looked like Twilight, banking on confusion, but that wouldn't work. And the Astrologer pointed at my eyes within moments, the Spear killing them in bursts of Light.

I'd lost sight on them, which was potentially problematic.

The Apprentice I nudged towards a beautiful golden apple orchard, since she was a good kid and she'd looked a little hungry. She, uh, fell through a bunch of branches on her way down which I'd not meant her to but she seemed to walk off with only bruises. I'd known from the start that moving the Mirror Knight would be like trying to punch a rock barehanded, so him I just let fall straight down. He landed on an old raised stone, which he cracked bouncing off, and got his footing almost immediately. Already he'd be able to see my tower's Arcadian reflection in the distance, but I had plans to slow him down.

A heartbeat after him the Bitter Blacksmith followed him down, landing in the grass with a thump. The Mirror Knight would be able to run full tilt the whole way to the tower in full plate, he was that kind of ridiculous, but the Blacksmith definitely could not. She was built like one of her trade: for effort, not long runs. Christophe wouldn't abandon her alone in Arcadia, so they'd be moving at her pace instead of his. It wasn't perfect, but it bought me time. And time was what I needed, I thought as I angled Hanno for his own fall. Light flared for a moment as he burned away the Night, but a heartbeat later he realized I was sending him exactly where he wanted to go and stopped.

Like a falling star, white cloak trailing behind him, the Sword of Judgement fell before the roiling darkness of my tower. Knees bending as he landed in crouch, he rose smoothly with his sword in hand and did not bat an eye before beginning to advance. Best get the reception ready, else he'd be on me before I'd finished the last of my preparations.

"Barrow Sword," I spoke into the Night. "Entertain our guest."

"Of course," Ishaq lightly agreed. "Rules?"

"Nothing permanent," I said. "Withdraw if it gets too heated."

"Understood."

I moved my will through the Night, finding another villain.

"Hunted Magician," I said.

"You have my attention, Warden," the man easily replied.

"The Barrow Sword and our favourite guest are about to fight in the gatehouse," I said. "Be a dear and shoot the White Knight in the back while he's busy, would you?"

I got a delighted laugh back.

"Your Excellency," the Hunted Magician replied, "it will be my very great pleasure."

I didn't even bother to tell him to keep it nonlethal. The Magician was a predictable sort of a creature: he'd not want to risk the backlash of killing Hanno even if I *had* given him such an order. That ought to keep Shiny Boots busy for a while, even if it'd definitely not turn him away. Opening my eye, I ripped off the globe of Night I'd burrowed my head in and dispersed it. The strands of darkness slithered around my skin, going down below my seat where the channel would lead them to the heart of the tower. The preliminaries were finished, all the forces in movement and accounted for. I could begin my ritual with a degree of assurance that I wouldn't be jumped.

Finally, I rose from my throne. Reaching out with my hand without looking, I found my staff of yew waiting. Rolling my shoulders, I adjusted the Mantle of Woe and began limping my way to the stairs. Barely three steps in, there was a tug at the Night. I flicked my wrist and circle of Night appeared by my head as I kept moving.

"Archer," I said. "I'm listening."

"Painted Knife is loose," Indrani said. "She captured the fae tower keeper and cut off fingers until he gave her directions. She's headed straight for the tower."

Well, that'd gotten out of hand impressively quick.

"She's still in the swamps, right?" I asked.

"Yeah," Indrani replied. "I'm keeping an eye on her from a distance."

"I'll handle it," I said. "Astrologer and Vagrant Spear are in the hills and they killed my eyes, I want you to look in on them."

"Gotcha."

I'd put the Painted Knife near the edge of the swamp not only because that was where the tower was. It was also because there was a little spot of trouble deeper in. I moved my will through the Night and found the villain I was looking for.

"Dicer," I said.

"Ma'am," he replied, sounding wary.

No doubt he'd been hoping that after stepping in once he'd be able to stay out of it. The little bastard wasn't that lucky, though. At least not yet.

"Steal the Painted Knife's luck," I ordered. "As much of it as you can."

"Is it, er, all right if I run away afterwards?" the Pilfering Dicer.

"I'd actually prefer it," I honestly replied.

With a sigh of relief on his part, the conversation ended. The Dicer's little trick ought to compensate for providence enough that the house-sized and very territorial heron in the swamps would pick up on the sudden scent of blood in its territory. That ought to keep the Painted Knife busy for a while longer. I'd barely taken another three steps before Archer was tugging at the Night again.

"Cat," she said the moment the circle formed next to my head. "You sent a hunting party after the Champion and the Healer, right?"

"Asked the Witch to lure one in, yes," I corrected. "And?"

"Half of the fae are dead, they stole two horses and now they're riding out of the battle echo at a gallop," Indrani bluntly said.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Fine. Fucking fae, and to think they'd been so reliably awful when I started out. Those two were a genuine problem if they got to Hanno, they'd be able to support him well enough he'd blow straight to the chamber where I was keeping the Book. Worse, I realized as I closed my eye and visualized the path they'd be taking, they'd be coming through the plains where the Mirror Knight and the Blacksmith were walking. If they gave a horse to the Mirror Knight, this was going to head downhill real quick. Although, wait, technically to the east of them...

"Hold on a moment," I said, plunging my head into the circle of Night.

I found the eye I was looking for, the one in the swamp where the Painted Knife had landed. While I couldn't see either her or the Pilfering Dicer, I *could* see the very large and very angry red heron storming through the swamp. Yeah, that could work. I withdrew my head from the circle.

"I'm going to have the Witch light up the swamp, it'll draw their attention to a fight brewing there," I said. "Should delay them long enough."

Then I paused.

"How good at flying are herons, do you know?" I asked.

"Average, I'd think?" Indrani replied.

Yeah, I wasn't taking the chance.

"See the giant red bird?" I asked.

A moment passed.

"Found it," she replied.

"Shoot one of the wings," I said. "Something the Forsworn Healer won't be able to heal. And I still want you on the Astrologer and Sidonia when you have a moment, so keep moving."

"I hear ya, Your Dreadsome Majority."

I rolled my eye at her, even knowing she wouldn't be able to see it. Taking a wing would make it an easier fight for them, but I wasn't going to have this end in the three heroes riding the giant bird to the tower. It was easy enough to call on the Harrowed Witch and have her cast a lightshow around the swamps, which had the added benefit of making the heron *significantly* angrier. I got to the bottom of the stairs, at least, before the next set of bad news. From the Royal Conjurer, this time, whom I'd been hoping to keep back until the last moment.

"Your Excellency," the old man said. "The Blessed Artificer is drowning."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"She tried to blow her way out through the fucking mountain, didn't she?" I guessed.

"That appears to be the case," the Royal Conjurer agreed.

Goddamn Adanna. She was actually going to be the first one to take someone on my side off the board by sheer virtue of having put herself into such a bad situation. I'd kept the Conjuror near the valley as a precaution in case she got out too early, not thinking she'd get herself killed.

"Get her out," I sighed. "You won't make it back in time for the reception, but it can't be helped."

Leaving her to die would push this further than I was willing to take it. Even if it weakened my second line of defence more than I'd like. *Aspasie will have to do instead.*

"And should she attack me after she's been rescued?" the old man mildly asked.

I snorted.

"I said get her out," I replied. "Never said anything about her being conscious. Our charity has limits."

"Indeed," the Royal Conjuror lightly replied, and I would have bet good money he was smirking.

That did some to improve my mood, at least until Archer tugged at the Night again.

"Let me guess," I sighed, "they seduced the goddamn King of Arcadia and he's giving them a ride to the tower on his personal flying chariot?"

"Good news or bad news?" Archer asked.

"Good news," I said.

Could so with some of those.

"The Astrologer helped Sidonia to some strange Light trick and she shot up a pillar in the sky as a signal," Indrani said. "I'm pretty sure only two people saw it, though, the Mirror Knight and the Bitter Blacksmith. They're trying to link up, but looking at it Sidonia and the Ashuran are going the wrong way entirely."

Which would slow down the heroic battering ram even more. The hills were to the east of the region where I'd dispersed the heroes, it was very much going off-road for the pair that'd been in a straight line to the tower since the start.

"The bad news?" I asked.

"Only the Blacksmith is headed that way," Indrani cheerfully said. "The Mirror Knight is now running after the tower like it stole his glistening codpiece."

I swore. So when they'd figured there were other heroes close by good ol' Christophe had felt comfortable pawing off the Blacksmith in their general direction. That was a problem.

"Pull back to the tower," I said. "We're starting early."

"You got something in mind for handling Polished Ponce?" Archer curiously asked.

"He's shit with illusions," I said. "I'm going to have to tie down the Harrowed Witch keeping him out, but it's a worthwhile trade."

And there went my backup for the second line of defence, not that the woman in question seemed to mind. If anything, Aspasie seemed relieved when I gave the order. She'd be sitting out the rest of this, after all: her only duty would be hiding herself and making the Mirror Knight believe the tower was in another direction entirely. It was a good bet that sooner or later a comrade would run into him and help him out of the illusion, but that'd take a while. Not as long as I'd like, but that was why plans had to be kept flexible. And mine was, in a manner of speaking. See, since I knew that the heroes had kept their stories but my side didn't it was much easier to predict how events would unfold.

Like if I were to say, begin a ritual to eat the Book of Some Things?

Everyone would converge on the tower immediately and Hanno would begin smashing whoever was in his way at the time. I could have put everyone on fighting him from the start, sure, but it would have been a mistake. It would all be a single 'fight' that he'd blow through when I began the ritual and providence put a finger to the scale so he could stop me in time. And if I *didn't* begin the ritual, then providence would begin nudging every hero to get there to reinforce him in time – which was still a loss condition for me. No, much as it ran against my instinct to disperse my forces what I needed was a second line of defence after he got his. Fortunately, she was already on her way back to the tower. I would have liked for the Royal Conjuror or at least the Harrowed Witch to back Archer up, but we'd have to do without.

The butt of my staff rapped against the stone floor as I entered the chamber where all the writhing strands of Night converged, stone walls covered with carvings and runes humming with power. On a pedestal awaited an unimpressive leather-bound book. There was nothing special about it, until you noticed that no shadow seemed to be able to come within precisely seven inches of it. Mind you, for anything with a shred of a sense for power the Book of Some Things felt like a storm shoved into a teacup.

"You know," I told the Book, "there's usually rules about this. Like, don't eat unknown magic or you'll blow up. Don't double-cross devils for kicks or try to cannibalize gods."

Wood on stone, a gentle rap as I limped forward.

"Only they're not rules so much as stories," I said. "And those are out of the game, at the moment. So it's still a risk, just between you me, and I won't pretend otherwise. But it's a risk and not a *risk*, you get me?"

I leaned forward.

"So I'll admit that I'm a little curious," I murmured. "I know my teeth are sharp, but are they *that* sharp?"

I smiled, drawing back, and reached out. Strands of Night began to flow from the walls to my hand, returning to me. By my ear, I felt bare fangs as an old friend grinned her approval. I sank into the shadows one last time, and saw through my eyes on the tower. In the distance, I glimpsed riders. Coming closer. Not many, but not few. At their head rode the Kingfisher Prince, but their leading banner was not his: it was a mountain crowned in bronze on a field dark blue. The heraldry of Rhenia, the First Prince's banner. *So you're going to show up as well, Cordelia*, I smiled. *Good. It's better this way*. My eye opened and I looked down at the stolen stories of Good made into an artefact.

"Let's find out," I grinned, and the Night howled.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Let me guess," I sighed, "they linked the goddamn King of Arcadia and he's giving them a votes for PTTE on his personal gaming desktop?"

topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil

moonmoon

bruh there was 1 chapter where no1 put a stupid god damn annoying changed quote to vote in the comments and it was glorious. your actively lowering enjoyment of the story for people. plus the repeated spam buys you no sympathy or willingness to do what you say.

ISiejek

There were plenty of chapters with none, and while admittedly I'm not too keen on this one, the best ones are really good to read, I.e., an improvement

anoxymoron

I love these comments, and using the unscientific method of counting votes in the comments, that seems like the majority opinion. How hard is it to just not read things that annoy you?

Insanenoodlyguy

If my or anybody's silly little quote reminder is enough to put you off doing something that helps the webnovel, I suspect you were too lazy to do it in the first place, and so highly doubt I incurred a net loss for Erratic here. If I actually hurt your story enjoyment, with a comment you don't even see until you have finished reading the story, I question how much you were enjoying the story. In short I apologize for nothing and intend to do this again should the opportunity arise to do so.

jamesc9

Yes, somewhere along the way, I became too lazy.

I suspect that the changes in how topwebfiction voting worked were part of it.

This conflict is also part of it.

The leading proponent of one side of the conflict explained why it mattered to them. Do you want me to look back and link to it?

Rabblrouser

What a weird thing to cry about.

Shaerick 68

Speak for yourself dude, you are not forced to read them and many readers find them humorous.

j

It's cooled by *liquid ice*.

Why wouldn't the bard just turn the Evil stories back on at the worst possible moment for Cat?

Insanenoodlyguy

She might. I have a feeling that cat has an unspoken plan for just that.

Linnus42

Ah so Barrow is going to get his chance to fight Hanno. I am not sure that is going to be as fun as he wants it to be. Curious to see what Cat does with the Book. And what the consequences of this mess will be. Still I kinda want Hanno and Cordelia POV. If they are the main competitors then it be nice to get in their head.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, it probably will. He's not trying to kill him. That'd get him killed, villian story pause or not a hero with that boost against the first line of defense in the evil fortress would shred him apart. But he's not doing that, he's stalling. She WANTS Hanno to make it to her, But at the right moment. The key is keeping it one on one to ensure the right kind of timing. With that, the Barrow Sword can make it take just as long as necessary, getting a lick or two in and taking 2-3 back, but probably able to have fun with this, and when it starts to turn say something pithy as he withdraws. Might not go that way but his odds are decent.

Linnus42

I meant more Cat should be more worried about Barrow holding out then she is Barrow hurting Hanno. Hanno holding back crushed Mirror Knight. So there are decent odds holding back isn't nearly as much of limitation on Hanno as it is Ishaq. I suppose the main factors are how much not having Name makes Hanno weaker and how much damage he is willing to do to Barrow to get it done quickly. Depends on how good the healers are really.

shikkarasu

He still has a wisp of White Knight left, Cat mentioned that she is pretty sure he can still use Recall to some extent, and he is Claimant to Warden. He should still have a fair amount of juice, he just needs to be canny about it. Like how Amadeus fought smart and not hard when he went up against Hanno.

And that's why Cat ordered him shot.

beleester

Barrow is a pretty durable hero. Like, we haven't really seen him do astonishing things in combat, but he's a competent bodyguard, he wears magic armor, and he can come

back from the dead if necessary. Probably her best choice for keeping Hanno busy without losing anyone.

Nairne .01

Those would be nice interludes.

dadycoool

That was fun. It's always a hoot to watch Cat dance, and we even got to glimpse her Name-wolf at the end.

Nairne .01

I really like the way you called it even though I always imagined it as something more savage and coiling inside, yet still warg-like in appearance.

The way it shows its face makes me think of a dragon opening its eye when something interesting is happening so it can have a better look.

Agent J

It always struck me as a tiger. All instinct and malice.

moonmoon

does it then sniff distainingly, roll over, and go back to sleep if whatever's happening isn't interesting enough or ends?

ohJohN

Huh, I also thought it was a wolf, but now I can't remember if that was explicit in the text or just something I assumed.

We do know it has fur, at least (Cat pulls herself up by it in... Wolof, I think?).

Cicero

Well... that escalated quickly.

I guess "stop having a pissing match and keep the villain from eating all the Heroic Stories" is an effective means of reconciling Cordelia and Hanno.

Max Anonymous

oh my god I am loving this arc this is amazing. Cat playing the part of a proper Evil Empress is so much fun holy shit I can't wait for the next chapter.

Also that final line made me think...
What do heroes know?

Do they know things?
Lets find out!

Axel Rafael

Mr. Peanutbutter in the house? 😊

Bojack Horseman is such an underrated show.

erebus42

Awww! That was rather maternal of Cat looking after the Apprentice like that.
She has always been good at making good use of her people and their skills but this is a rather impressive showing.
I'm still trying to figure out how this will potentially turn Hanno down a better path though.

erebus42

*Hanno and or Cordelia

Insanenoodlyguy

Hanno and Cordelia were moving in specifically contrary directions. Normally, as Cat noted, one wins and the other is pragmatic and good aligned enough to take the loss and say "okay, not my ideal outcome, but your warden, how can I help you save the continent?" But instead each is doing something that dicks over the other, and whoever wins they've still been fucked over, and fucked the other worse, and now their ability to work together is significantly reduced. Cat suspects Bard directly aimed for that. She doesn't have the juice, the charisma or even the time to get them both to just stop and sit down and talk, they are both moving ahead full steam and it's too important to stop now. So cat pulled out the ultimate distraction. Big bad is making the power play that dooms all, personal quests are paused and since the hero and villian always end up taking during these things anyway, Cat now has that time to sort things with Hanno. But it went even better then she'd hoped:

But heroes about to irrevocably about to fuck things up for each other have one solid Providence for exactly this situation: just before the point of no return, the real threat shows up, clearly evil and requiring everybody to stop their shit and work together. And in the process of working together or immediately afterwards they find the common ground that lets them solve things to the benefit of all. Except the villian, they are fucked. But that last part not today.

ninegardens

... is Cat going to force these kids to work together? Is that her wild plan?

Or just change the game to "Whoever rescues the book wins. Screw all this philosophy bullshit?"

Cause if that the case... she foiled Hannos plan, but then parked the game FIRMLY in his wheelhouse in terms of doing things.

Silverking

No, her conversation earlier in the chapter indicated that this little exercise is intended as a delay, not a true pivot. I feel this is more calling Hanno out. "You wanna be the Warden of the West? You claim to be my equal? Show me what you got, because what I've seen doesn't put you on MY level, let alone the Dead King's." Cat's going to show that she's good enough at this game that the "finger on the scales" isn't going to enough, that Hanno is going to have to change his approach if he wants to have a chance of winning the REAL battle.

Miles

Cat: It's eight o'clock, and I'm callin' you out!

Hanno: It's not eight yet!

Cat: It is by my watch! Let's settle this once and for all, runt! Or ain't you got the gumption?

Juff

Typo Thread:

had damned > had been damned
The rode > They rode
as he nodded > as she nodded
There floor > The floor
opiniated > opinionated
Sidonia to some > Sidonia do some
side didn't > side hadn't
or t least > or at least
you me > you and me
field dark blue > field of dark blue

Sinead

"Who looked a little uncomfortable as he nodded. Ugh, the Astrologer."

he -> she, since it's Astrologer and Apprentice in this context. Unless 'he' is someone completely different?

ohJohn

Almost definitely meant to refer to the Apprentice: she's mentioned at the very end of the previous sentence; she then starts sending fireballs where the Astrologer points, implying the nod was her agreeing to do so; and it makes sense she'd be a little uncomfortable about it, since she's on good terms with Cat.

Adrian V

A bit of fridge brilliance (maybe) but maybe the fae are so useless here is because being dependent on stories so much the muting of half of them affected them a lot.

Also poor Addanna they are never letting her live this one down lol

Reader in the Night

Ah, I see Cat's pulling an Irritant: making losing her win-condition to game Providence into giving her exactly what she wants.

Also, where the hell is Akua to witness Dread Empress Cat hamming it up with the best of them? She would get such a kick out of this.

And yeah, if the two Warden claimants can't stop the Evil Villain from eating the Book of Some Things, they don't deserve it in the first place. Which means Cat will be inevitably stopped, but maybe Providence will knock Hanno and Cordelia's heads together and tell them to play nice in process?

Rey d`Tutto

After storming the Dread Tower, both Claimants will see their personal plans in Ruins, and Cooperate to forge a Better Solution.

Old Trope. Bronze Age.

And Cat just got an Opportunity to Monologue.
Nay, a Good Story expectation of a Villainous Monologue.

Which is what she needed from the get-go.

Brilliant writing. Awesome Trope/Story-fu. Both within the Fiction, as well as the World-building of the Fiction.

Meta-Appause for a Metaverse at the ISMETA epitaph level.

Sir Nil

I love that the Levantine heroes and villains got really into it. Barrow Sword pulling out them riddles while the heroes protested just slamming down the door. With all the practical evil nonsense

few people would have had a chance to have a good ol raiding the dark tower of evil spar.

Reader in the Night

My headcanon is now that all the Levantines are basically very enthusiastic LARPers when it comes to Named shenanigans.

dadycoool

So, every Levantine Blood Name is just dressing up in their ancestors' outfits?

Actually, this could work with the whole Face Paint thing the Levantines have going. How many cosplayers IRL paint their face to be more in character? Never mind how many dye their hair.

LarsBlitzer

Well, when the LARP in question can and will lead to the possibility of pulling off some impressive "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" wu xia shit if you play well enough and be fortunate to be born into the right family, you'll start taking it seriously. Hell, I've seen some truly Machiavellian scheming go down in real life LARPS over who gets to have an extra slice of pizza or XP point.

beleester

The Levantines are very much the D&D adventurer type of heroes. They explore the dangerous wilderness, fight monsters, raid barrows for ancient treasure, etc. Of course they wouldn't just skip past a dungeon puzzle.

ohJohn

I interpreted it as some shared cultural belief among Levantines, along the lines of "bypassing riddles gets you killed" (probably related to barrows and/or the Brocelian). That's how Ishaq knew it would be an effective stall, that's why even the Champion – who is Hanno's best friend and *canonically hates riddles* – is among those appalled by Hanno refusing to engage, and that's why some of them take Ishaq's parting "y'all're cursed now" seriously.

(fr tho, Rafaella "fucking hate[s] riddles" 😏: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2021/05/04/interlude-north-i/>)

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I love your due diligence of posting the link.

nimelennar

Dammit, Cat. Stories or not, you have to remember rule 22: No matter how tempted I am with the prospect of unlimited power, **I will not consume any energy field bigger than my head.**

It's just common sense.

Sinead

The book is not that big...

Silverking

Good, Cat, unleash your inner Tyrant! "I know this is probably a bad idea and won't work...but what if it did? I have to at least try, both for my own satisfaction, and to see the look on Hanno's face!"

dadycool

She's basically grabbing a copper pole, going to the top of a mountain and saying "Do it. You won't, pussy." at the sky. "Sure, this'll probably zap me into a guided tour of every hell, but what if it doesn't?"

shikkarasu

Sweet Sisters of Night, I am using that exact taunt in my next DnD session.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

She literally spends the first part of the chapter with her head submerged in a floating Night bubble, and later sticks her head into another one to more effectively monitor the heroes. I feel like the fact that she's generating rather than consuming them is beside the point.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The Book of Some Things is a Tome, not a trade paperback. Think Research Book in a big Library. A Foot to half a Meter high and wide, and Thick. Is it bigger than her head? In at least 2(two) dimensions, I'd say.

WuseMajor

Well that's the thing. Villains aren't bound by stories right now. So Hubris doesn't get automatically Punished anymore.

shikkarasu

Hubris is just insufficient planning and Catherine's plan is well thought out and flexible. Look, look how those F00LS

have struggled against her and all they have accomplished is burying the Artificer under a mountain. They cannot POSSIBLY escape her BRILLIANT-

meanwhile, in the void

Bard: Why do I feel like I should be rolling over in my grave? It's like I'm missing... something.

ninegardens

Is Cat going to monolouge?

Like, is she just going to go full ham and take the chance to monolouge while there are no stories around to punish her for it?

shikkarasu

If she doesn't I will be cross. She gets to toss out a 'Sorry, Dad, but I'm taking this' into the void, but she better get that peak drama out of her system in a safe environment. I live vicariously through her and I *need* this in my life.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

With both Hanno and Cordy present to endure her Monologue?

I haven't read ahead, but I'll call it as I sees it. She will monologue, and the Heroes will "upset" her plans in the most Practical Good outcome.

shikkarasu

Hah! You think my head isn't big enough? All the power has gone to it! It's HUGE.

Miles

LOL

She's setting up a story for a final showdown between herself and Abigail whoever her heroic counterpart turns out to be.

Frivolous

At this point or soon, I would expect the Intercessor to appear and make a mess of things, to try to salvage her scheme to ruin the heroes in general and the candidates for Warden of the West in particular.

That is the reason why I think someone important is missing: Masego. I think the Hierophant is being held in reserve to deal with the Intercessor if she dares to appear.

Jdburger

Yea but I think the Intercessor cannot... She used her 3 shots during the Praesi campaign to stop Cat and has to contain the Evil stories. I the plot with the Warden of the West has just been continuing by its own momentum so far so ultimately Cat just needs to derail the story for now

[Liliet](#)

So Cat said she had seven villains, right?

Warden of the East
Pilfering Dicer
Barrow Sword
Archer
Harrowed Witch
Royal Conjuror
Hunted Magician
yep sounds like all of them!

shikkarasu

I expect one or both of the following twists:

- 7 Villains was not counting herself; Catherin is the 'and one'
- Akua may be called Lady Warlock, but she never did get the Name. She is not a *Villain* per se, and it would be so very Irritant of Cat to play on that technicality within her own inner monologue.

[Liliet](#)

Cat did mention she had no intention of playing fair...

But really, the point here is not for Cat to find a clever way to win against Hanno. The point is... I have no fucking idea what the point is to be quite honest. Not that though.

beleester

The goal is to draw Hanno into a one-on-one fight. The secondary villains are being used to keep the other heroes from reinforcing Hanno in the nick of time. So it's some form of "prove you're worthy to carry the book or I'll eat it and nobody gets to be my rival."

I'm not exactly sure what the benefit is, though – she still has to make a choice between Hanno and Cordelia, and throwing it into the hands of fate doesn't really change the fact that one or the other is going to lose this fight. I guess maybe the benefit is that the question is settled with a straight-up dungeon crawl instead of getting tangled up in the dwarven negotiations?

shikkarasu

Actually, I think the point is to beat Hanno in an elaborate chess metaphor, not a 1 on 1 fight. Cat having only 7 Villains(and one?) versus Hanno's force of 12 shows that he is not her equal as a leader of Named. If he can't stop her from eating the Book he isn't on her level and he loses the "I am the better War Leader" argument.

Suddenly Cordelia looks like a better candidate since she isn't good at leading Bands, but at least she's a politician. If Cordelia shows up and *also* fails? Well then both parties need to seriously reconsider why they think they should be the Warden.

Reader in the Night

I think the point is more to knock the wind out of the Dwarves plotline's sails. Like someone else said before, Cordelia's and Hanno's approach to the Dwarves issue aren't mutually exclusive, just the way they were going about it.

By redirecting their enmity to a fight against her/competition for the Book, she buys time and spends the story momentum of them coming to blows early, so they can approach the dwarves thing as an united front.

Linnus42

I think you are missing some obvious factors. Cat got to use prep to setup this whole situation in terms of time and place with elaborate plans for her merry band of Damned. Where Hanno was not prepping for anything nearly this random and out of the blue. Also needing to 2 to 1 odds to win an assault on an enemy base is not historically unusual.

ohJohn

Well, she had all of... an afternoon, maybe? It's the same day as the last chapter, she had the idea after talking with Hakram and then, later, Vivienne, and I can't imagine Hanno scheduled his meeting too late at night.

Linnus42

That does not address my points. She had time to prep this trap and set things up. Hanno wasn't planning to lead a heroic squad to do anything tonight.

shikkarasu

My point is that traps are how Villains operate and dealing with them unexpectedly is how Heroes operate. Villains also normally have many more minions than the Band has members. It's supposed to be an unwinnable fight that they triumph over anyway. Asymmetrical warfare, if you will. She is at a slight disadvantage thematically and the Theme is what is important, here.

Also, Reader in the Night is right about this disrupting the Dwarf situation, I just think that the gauntlet being thrown down is, at least in part, a test that she is expecting them to fail. "Can't beat be with only half your numbers and a non-lethal villainous plot? You do realize that DK is shooting to kill, right?"

ohJohn

If it wasn't clear: I think you're overstating how significant that prep time was. I went back and checked the previous chapter – there were 3 hours between Cat first having the idea and the tower touching down. Hanno then had a 2+ hour ride to think of how to use his (stronger & more numerous) party of heroes effectively.

I won't deny she caught him off guard, or that forcing him to storm the tower is a tactical advantage. But this isn't like Second Llesse, the culmination of a villain's entire life spent crafting and refining an elaborate plan – it's just what Cat could slap together *in 3 hours*.

Agent J

If she wanted to get Hanno in a one-on-one fight, she'd not have called the Hunted Magician to shoot him in the back while Ishaq distracts him with a duel.

I think she wants him in her presence but not actively trying to stab her. Which is also why she doesn't want him having back up that might embolden such an attempt.

> "If Hanno doesn't give me a good reason not to, I'll eat the Book of Some Things."

Seems more like she wants to finally have a talk that with him.

Tariq: Please work things out with Hanno.

Cat: Slap a millennium old Dark Tower down on Salia and

bully him into making nice with me and Cordelia. Got it.
Tariq: If I had a grave, I'd be rolling in it right now.

beleester

I figured the Hunted Magician was just Cat taking Hanno seriously instead of throwing a single B-lister at him.

>Seems more like she wants to finally have a talk that with him.

She already talked to him, and if she wanted a second talk it wouldn't have been very hard to arrange. Smashing down a flying fortress means she wants Hanno to be trying to stab her when they have their talk. (Which is an odd way to reconcile, but I think a running theme in this book has been that you can't treat someone as an equal unless you let them oppose you.)

[Liliet](#)

Cat said her objective was to TALK to Hanno.

Alien4ngel

Neither Cordy or Shiny Boots gets the name. Akua eats the book, her role as warden was foreshadowed for eons.

Curtopolis

Hakram did just say that akua was the only one cat considered her equal. And she has become all about that redemption arc lately....

Tim

Archer isn't a villain

[Liliet](#)

She is for the purposes of this count, usually. She's under Cat in the T&T and everything.

mindsword2

If the Hierophant isn't there to watch, I'll be shocked.

[Liliet](#)

He's busy inventing a way to turn the stories back on with Roland.

Daniel E

None of this would be possible without Sve Noc. Cat's Name hasn't granted her anything special yet (Speak, and maybe kind of see Stories). At this point, her ability to use Night feels like a cheap magical battery that nobody appreciates, especially given the deteriorating conditions up North. It's easy to forget that all the power she wields is not actually her own.

letouriste

well, she still needs to gain aspects. As far as I know, she has none because the little sun ability was broken and stems from something she already had.

shikkarasu

I think she hasn't had any need for Aspects, so she hasn't gotten any. The stars seem like more of a Name trick than Aspect, like how she and Amadeus could control their shadows.

She probably *should* have gotten something in the confrontation with her father and Hakram, but he called in his Dues to ensure that she wouldn't save him, so the Gods Below wouldn't exactly go out of their way to give her any new toys in that moment.

I expect some pivotal, weighty moment in the near future to grant her her first Aspect. I'm still expecting **Rein** (but not **Reign**), and **Collect**.

letouriste

ok, that was a delight to read. I didn't expect that plan but it totally makes sense in retrospect

[wadeingintheriver](#)

I love maternal Cat taking care to put the Apprentice down in an orchard 'cause she looked a bit peckish... But not as much as I love the ever hilarious interactions between Cat and Archer! Man, that would be infuriating, being unable to get out of your evil throne but that one place you can't reach itches! Truly, Cat has already been punished for this night's evilness!

ohJohN

I have to wonder how kind that actually was – we know Arcadian water is unsafe to drink, the fruit that grows there might also be inherently toxic. And even if it's not, it would be extremely on-brand for fae to plant an orchard of apples that make you sleep for a century, or turn you into a tree, or render you mute, etc.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The Apprentice is a Hero.

That fruit will be at the very least nutritious, and at best some Mythic Bonus type object that will allow the Apprentice to intervene at the appropriate junction, and/or provide an ongoing enhancement to her Name.

[iamwaitingtocompile](#)

I'm surprised that nobody else seems to think this is what I think it is: Cat is trying to control the shape of the Warden of the West. If the warden comes into their name through politics, then tha'll be their role. If, on the other hand, The Warden comes into their name by assaulting a magically fortified location and stopping a powerful villan from enacting their grand ritual, then that's the kind of name that's going to be useful for the final assault on the dead king

Tim

I must say, one of the biggest disappointments of this entire epic story is we don't get that month of Archer speaking in rhyme. I am experiencing great grief right now.

[Sugar Roll](#)

I gotta say, I love Cat's idea of a teambuilding exercise.

Silverking

I know that it's not nearly as eye-catching as some other things this chapter, but it seem that the Mirror Knight has finally mellowed out a bit since the last time he was in the spotlight.

Arsenal Mirror Knight: I am the guiding light, the true arbiter of Good and Evil! All who oppose me have been corrupted and must be purged!

Current Mirror Knight: I am the blunt force object. It's a thankless job, but somebody's got to do it.

Barrendur

I had really begun to dislike Cat during the interminable Everdark episode, as her burgeoning smugness and grandiosity made her ever more annoying and less sympathetic to read about. By the time that chapter was concluded, I no longer wanted Cat to win; I just wanted to see her suffer the consequences of her arrogance and narcissism.

Inertia and curiosity kept me reading the updates, but Cat didn't improve... and now, with her blatant and misplaced meddling in the Naming of the Warden of the West – which really, really, REALLY isn't any of her affair – I've realised I actually detest her. Stubborn to the point of monomania, hypocritical to the level of

delusion, utterly convinced of her own infalliability and fixated on crafting laughably elaborate “clever strategies” to achieve goals that are moral and meaningful only to Catherine... and now she’s attacked the Heroes, because “Catherine has a cunning plan,” and “Cat knows best.”

I hope the Gnomes forceably stuff her away in the Golden Bloom Home for the Irrelevant and Obnoxious.

Lord Haart

I mean those are real flaws of hers but they are also half of what makes her so fun to read so your point? 😊

[Mincheriit](#)

Thanks for the chapter. My take on cat’s plan is to force a detour on hanno and cordelia while also delivering an ultimatum of sorts. If the warden of the east is ‘achieved’ by such a destructive loss to their side overall, (the loss of either cordelia or hanno and the fallout of their clash), then whoever wins doesnt deserve the book and cat will use its power herself for w/e. If they manage to convince her not to eat the book then good for them. They also have to stop their current plans and come stop cat, forcing them to have a chat essentially.

Abnaxis

Cat: “I just killed my father because Warden of the East has to command both Named and Kings, not one or the other.”

Cordelia: “Screw leading named, I’m only going to worry about leading Princes and make all the Named be ruled by Princes.”

Hanno: “Screw being political, I’m just going to be a figurehead for named and screw all those Princes unless they get in my way.”

Cat: “FINE! If neither of you wants to do your entire damn job I’ll just eat the Book of Some Things and do all the Wardening my own damn self.”

Interlude: Occidental I

“Seventy-five: you should never be too friendly or too hostile to a rival. Too friendly means you cannot put aside your rivalry to defeat a common foe; too hostile may drive them to join that very foe.”

-“Two Hundred Heroic Axioms”, author unknown

Hanno had already learned better than to receive that blade with a full parry: he had no intention of allowing a second notch onto the edge of his sword. Instead he nudged the blow aside, quickening his movement with Light, and stepped in close as he pivoted. His armoured elbow caught the enemy's helmeted cheek from the left, but the villain took the blow without batting an eye. Hanno danced back before a bronze-clad boot could smash into his knee, leaning back an inch to let that wicked blade pass just before his eyes. The dark-skinned hero withdrew even further, making space as his brow furrowed.

The fight was lasting longer than he'd wanted, in no small part because the Barrow Sword was proving significantly harder to handle than he'd expected. Not that the villain had announced himself, or even talked since that debacle with the riddles.

But the hellish landscape that Night had made of this tower had not been enough to obscure the identity of the man facing him, and neither had been the black paint half-heartedly slapped over a very distinct set of bronze armour. Still, Hanno would admit that the shadows were... disquieting. The way they moved just at the corner of your eye, hinting at faces and fanged maws, flapping wings and unblinking eyes. Looking at them too long was disorienting, the movements invited belief into depth and angles that did not exist – rooms seemed smaller or larger, crooked where they should be straight or flat when they were sloped.

And through the dark the Warden of the East watched them all, her intentions still inscrutable. Hanno flexed the stumps of his crippled hands, watching his opponent's loose stance. The Barrow Sword was not aiming to win, he decided, but to delay.

“This does not have to end in violence,” Hanno said. “Take me to her, Barrow Sword. I will go with my sword sheathed, not to fight but to treat in good faith.”

The other man watched him through the slits of the bronze helm, face impassive for a long moment until it split into a broad grin. The kind some might have called nasty.

“What if we *want* to fight, hero?”

The voice was distorted, laced with sorcery. It made the air shiver, though focus let him ignore the pull at his mind.

“I do not believe you do,” Hanno evenly said. “So far your side has acted with restr-”

It was only instinct that led him to take a step to the side instead of backwards, which made the difference between life and death. The thrust of that eerie bronze sword – it felt Ligurian

to his senses, but deeper somehow – cut the edge of his cheek, drawing blood from a thin wound. If he'd moved too slowly, or backwards, it would have punctured his throat.

"Your side keeps talking," the Barrow Sword snorted. "Speeches and schemes, like all that strutting about isn't what made you a lord in the first place. Even now you're trying to get one over the Rhenian, like this is the world's saddest pissing match."

The villain flicked his wrist, blood slapping down against cool stone.

"Well, congratulations," the Barrow Sword grinned. "You kept at it long enough the Warden lost her temper. Get in line, Ashuran, or get stepped on."

Hanno's eyes narrowed. Light pulsed under his skin. Perhaps this was more serious a situation than he'd thought. He needed to finish this fight quickly, so he should set out bait.

"There are limits to what I will tolerate," he warned, "no matter the intentions."

The man laughed in his face, loudly and scathingly.

"Tolerate?" the Barrow Sword mocked. "You can't even get past *me*. What claim have you got on higher honour?"

That ought to do it, Hanno thought. Light flared as his back foot hit the floor, lending him an explosive start. Three steps in the blink of an eye, the villain belatedly raising his sword to strike. Parrying would be a mistake, so he did not. He bent low instead, caught the kick aimed to sweep him to the side and sent it back. The Barrow Sword's footing stumbled and Hanno smoothly rose, catching the arm holding the sword before it could properly swing back and pivoting sharply. The throw he'd learned through one of the Sages of the West flowed smoothly, the villain's armoured back slamming against the stone. Best to break the wrist of his sword arm, Hanno decided. He'd be less of a threat without the enchanted blade.

His knee was already rising when he felt magic flare behind him. It was an awkward moment, leaving him little room to maneuver. The mark of a skilled opponent. The dark-haired hero threw himself to the side, but he was too slow by a hair: the ice spike caught the side of his leg, in the weakness of the armour, and he felt sorcery spreading through his blood. A curse. Breathing out sharply, Hanno ran Light through his veins. It was an unpleasant sensation, like skin stayed close to an open flame too long, but he would not take a risk with curses. Landing in a pained crouch, he swept through the spike with a sword stroke and parried a second as he turned to watch his fresh opponent.

A man in rich dark robes, his face obscured by a spell. Too tall to be the Royal Conjurer, though too short to be the Hierophant. *Hunted Magician*, Hanno thought. That meant old magic, heavy on curses and enchantments, with some fae learning. Behind him the Barrow Sword was getting back up.

"I will ask the same of you as I asked of him," Hanno said to the Magician. "Take me to the Warden of the East and this can still end peacefully."

"It can end right now, that is true," the Magician easily agreed. "All that's required is your surrender."

Hanno almost sighed. Was he truly going to have to fight his way to the summit of the tower before he could speak with the Warden, as if this were a Dread Empress' lair being cracked open? He opened his mouth to reply with one last offer of diplomacy but the words never came out: the air had just *shivered*. Great power was being used above him, a staggering amount of Night. And it was being used to smother something, he found, eyes narrowing. Forcefully put out a light. Instinct tugged at him urgently, insistently. Whatever it was Catherine Foundling had just begun, it could not be allowed to finish. Hanno slowly raised his sword.

"Change of plans," the Sword of Judgement told the villains. "I can no longer afford to hold back."

"Tough talk," the Barrow Sword scoffed, "but--"

Hanno moved, and there was no longer time for anyone to talk.

—

The Kingfisher Prince laid a hand on the Mirror Knight's shoulder, face taut with concentration. A moment passed and then Cordelia dimly felt it: a ripple on the pond. A murmur of water against her hand. Mere months ago, she thought, she would have felt nothing at all. Even being a claimant, she had found, was as if a veil had been lifted on some part of Creation. Like she'd been allowed to peek behind the stage and see the pierced bucket used to make the rain, the mage on a ladder making lightning. Withdrawing his hand, Frederic Goethal smiled.

"He's coming back," the Prince of Brus said. "Any moment now."

Cordelia slowly nodded.

"An aspect was used," the First Prince said. "**Aid**, you called it?"

The fair-haired man nodded.

"Most of the time it is little more than an instinct taking me where I most need to be," Prince Frederic said, "but it has some other minor uses."

More than just that, Cordelia thought. Not once since Frederic had become Chosen had soldiers he fought alongside with been routed. His mere presence seemed to be enough to turn even the greenest of levies into stubborn, tenacious veterans. Otto, in his letters, had described it as his friend being 'a nail keeping our line in place wherever he stands'. The Prince of Bremen, ever plain in speech, had a way of turning almost poetic when it came to the Prince of Brus. The close friendship between those two had been one of the few lights brought about by this war, in Cordelia's opinion.

Were Frederic a woman, she suspected they would already be wed.

She set aside the idle thoughts as the Mirror Knight came to, his blank eyes focusing on his surroundings as he took in the sight of the riders and the starlit plain.

"Hallowed," Christophe de Pavanie cursed. "I was bespelled, wasn't I?"

"We believe so," Cordelia calmly said, her voice immediately commanding his attention. "Though we did not find the caster responsible for it."

The green-eyed Chosen grimaced.

"These are the Black Queen's picked grounds, Your Highness," he said. "We won't fight anything she doesn't want us to find. I thank you for freeing me nonetheless."

"It was my pleasure," Prince Frederic dismissed.

Christophe de Pavanie quite willingly gave out every detail of how he had gotten where he stood and why, including the number of Chosen that the Sword of Judgement had led into this mess. He did not, however, speak of what she most wanted to know. Accordingly, she took the matter in hand.

"As you can see," Cordelia said, "we come late to the evening. Can you tell us what happened to rouse the Warden of the East to such anger?"

Though it would make a great many things easier if it were a blunder by Hanno of Arwad responsible, she did not truly hope for that to be the case. The consequences of a strong falling out there would send fracture lines through the Grand Alliance. *She has too many allies, too many followers*, the Lycaonese princess thought. The Blood had already expressed in private their doubts that the war could be won without her, and if the Circle of

Thorns was to be believed the League of Free Cities was treating her as the main negotiating partner in the Grand Alliance.

A great many things would fall apart in a matter of days, Cordelia well knew, if the unstinting support from the most dreaded figure of their age came to an end.

"She's not angry," the Mirror Knight replied.

Cordelia hid her doubt behind a smile.

"Have you grasped something, Lord Christophe?" she asked.

The man looked frustrated, fiddling with the dark locks that his helmet kept pressed against his forehead.

"I understand I'm no friend of hers," the Mirror Knight said, "and that my judgement is held in poor esteem."

Cordelia's eyes narrowed the slightest bit. That was more awareness than she'd expected of a man of his reputation. Had his time under the Grey Pilgrim truly tempered him? When the punishment had been doled out she'd thought it nonsense, just another example of the White Knight letting off his charges with a slap on the wrist after they behaved atrociously – Christophe de Pavanie had accused the Queen of Callow of cooperating with the Dead King before mutilating a high officer of the Grand Alliance – but perhaps there had been some use to it.

"But," Cordelia prompted.

"If she really were angry, Your Highness," the younger man said, "that fortress would have landed *on us*."

She blinked in surprise.

"And while we were broken and dying," the Mirror Knight bluntly said, "she'd have sailed it back up in the clouds, where we can't reach it."

"We'd have found a way to reach up there," Frederic said, tone calm and utterly certain. "There's always a way."

"Maybe," the Mirror Knight replied, "but we haven't had to, Kingfisher. Because she landed the tower in the middle of a plain where everyone can see it, bold as you please."

"You believe this is a challenge," Cordelia stated.

His head bobbed up and down.

"If it's not a war," Christophe de Pavanie said, "it's a spar."

A look at Frederic, who was frowning thoughtfully and not disagreeing, told her he was coming around to the thought. Cordelia's gaze moved to the tall tower in the distance, the writhing streak of darkness jutting out of the starlit grass. What is Catherine meant to accomplish with all this? And there *would* be a purpose, she thought. Under the thuggish swagger and the affected drawl lay a clever, calculating mind. *You forced a fight*, Cordelia thought. *With him, and perhaps with me as well.* Was it as simple as forcing them to stand together against her?

No, it would not be. There had to be a victor, that much could not be worked around. Cordelia had combed through every historical archive she could reach when looking for possible compromises, and the only recorded instances of a Name being shared were siblings. Even the Bitter Blacksmiths, while one Chosen and the other Damned, were brother and sister. There could only be one Warden of the West, which meant that any cooperation between them – even against a common foe – could only be temporary. There must be a deeper purpose, one Cordelia could not yet suss out.

"We will not learn the answer standing here," she finally said. "We must ride to the tower."

"There's no telling what will be waiting for us there, Your Highness," the Mirror Knight said. "It would be safer for you to stay behind with your soldiers. The Kingfisher Prince and I—"

"Will be escorting me to the tower," Cordelia pleasantly smiled.

The green-eyed hero turned to object, but then he caught her gaze and slowly closed his mouth. A moment passed as she watched him, unblinking, and thought of how very tired she was of having to herd Chosen instead of the man who should have been doing it all this time. His mouth stayed closed.

"Let us proceed, then," the blonde princess amicably said. "One of my retinue will cede a horse to you, Lord Christophe."

He hesitantly nodded. Her gaze turned to Frederic.

"You mentioned," Cordelia said, "that your aspect tells you where you are most needed."

The Kingfisher Prince, looking faintly amused, nodded.

"It is not always clear-cut, especially in complicated situations, but it does grant me such a sense," the Prince of Brus said.

"And where does it tell you to be now?" she asked.

He cocked his head to the side.

"South," the Kingfisher Prince said after a moment. "North to the tower pulls at well, but not as strongly."

"I saw lights south before I was bespelled," the Mirror Knight offered. "Sorcery. There might be a fight."

Cordelia took a step back from the immediate, trying to understand the broader pattern. The Chosen had been split up by Catherine as they crossed into Arcadia, likely because they were too strong a threat together. Which implied her defences were inferior to the force of heroes gathered. *So what she wants is not something that can be obtained by force.* If it were, she would have gathered more force. Should Cordelia then ignore the obvious step of gathering the separated Chosen to march on the tower together? If force was not to be the deciding factor, it would be a waste of time to...

No, that was a flawed approach. Though Catherine did not seem intent on using force to achieve her end, she had acted to prevent force being used against her. Which meant that Cordelia could obtain leverage by gathering the Chosen. It would come at the cost of time, ever the scarcest of resources in a time of crisis, but the blonde princess was likely buying time at this very moment: no one had caught sight of Hanno of Arwad, which meant the odds were good he had already reached the tower. *She planned for that, Cordelia thought. She believes she can drive back or capture the Sword of Judgement.*

Yet, for all that Cordelia Hasenbach deeply disliked the man, she would not deny he was an exceptional fighter. Handling him would take time. Time enough, perhaps, for her to gather the Chosen and prepare her own attempt to resolve the situation. Eyes still on the distant tower, Cordelia breathed out shallowly. This was not so different, she thought, from the schemes of the Highest Assembly. The rules and the pieces were different, but Cordelia had not been born knowing the rules of the Ebb and Flow. She had learned them, as she would learn the rules of Named.

"Then let us ride south," Cordelia Hasenbach smiled, "and lend our comrades a hand."

—

The stairs were hungry.

Or at least the Night slithering atop them. Something was coiled and ready to strike at his back just out of his sight, a sense of hostility like an itch between his shoulder blades. Hanno rose carefully, sword in hand and eyes ever moving. He had defeated the gatekeepers, which meant even deeper peril now awaited him. Either the Warden's own right hand or some kind of bound creature. Most likely the former, as Catherine Foundling had never known to use any monster save the ones she rode. Either the

Hierophant or the Archer, Hanno believed. Vivienne Dartwick was not a villain or the kind of woman to lend her hand to this, and would be a lesser threat even she were.

The Princess was not as skilled a combatant as the rest of the Woe, and likely never would be. If that sort of confrontation had been in her nature, she would never have become the Thief. Besides, she was to be Queen of Callow one day. Catherine would not use her as sorely as she had used the two downstairs. They would live, Hanno knew. The Barrow Sword's leg could be reattached with a spell before he bled out, and the Hunted Magician would be able to cast when he finished swallowing his teeth. Hanno had broken his fingers, not his wrists, it should be enough for the man to be capable of basic healing.

Hanno's boots scuffed the stone as he passed the threshold to the second level, finding it to be a single large hall. Ornate reliefs of stone depicting devils slaying each other dripped with liquid shadow, though he saw that the shadow dripped up as well as down. There was an open gate on the other side of the hall and not a sign of anything here aside from the Night. The dark-skinned hero paused.

"This is a trap," Hanno plainly said.

"Trap," a voice behind him agreed, just as the arrow went through his back.

Biting down on a hiss of pain, he turned even as he considered the angle the arrow had punched through the plate at. Not just behind, but – Archer's boots hit his face as she finished leaping down from above the gate he'd entered through, sending him tumbling in a pained tangle of limbs. A detonation of Light against his side slowed the spin, allowing him to land in a controlled skid, but it also pushed the arrow deeper. Archer landed gracefully, coat fluttering as she nocked and loosed another arrow in the span of a single breath. His body was already moving, but he corrected in time with another burst of Light. Not a single arrow but too, the second fired just as he began to move to swat away the first.

He angled himself so the first would miss and he could parry the second, narrowly. Archer sighed.

"You're too quick in a small room," she said. "A bow won't work."

"If I had not adjusted," Hanno evenly said, "that second shot would have gone through my eye."

"I aimed for the one opposite Cat's," Archer cheerfully informed him. "You know, to fit the whole opposite Wardens thing."

A short pause, a brazen grin.

"You're welcome."

Of all the Woe, Hanno had always disliked the Archer the most. Even the Adjutant, for all his moral void and bland antipathy, was no match for the casual cruelty Archer delighted in. That she could be charming when she wished to be only made it worse, as it drew the eye away from the viciousness of her words and deeds. People, even those who should know better, forgave much of a witty woman in good humour. Hanno would not have made that mistake even if he did not have an arrow jutting out of his back. *It went through plate like butter and made not a sound.* Dangerous. He broke the arrow's shaft but left the head in the flesh. He could fight through the pain, it was better to wait for proper healing.

"This has gone on for long enough," Hanno curtly said. "Whatever grievance the Warden of the East has, there were better ways to handle it. If this does not end now, it will have consequences."

The Archer casually tossed away her bow and loosed her quiver's strap. There was something wrong, something off. His eyes followed her, trying to find a match for what his instincts screamed.

"Consequences, huh," the Archer said. "You know, Shiny Boots, I argued you'd make the finer Warden but the more you talk the more I think this was the right idea."

"This is sheer stupidity," he harshly retorted. "The-"

"Nah, this is just a slap across the face," the Archer cut in, amused. "You're not meant to *like* it. Sheer stupidity, now, that'd be trying to dig up a dwarven gate on the sly."

He went still in surprise.

"Of course we know, Hanno," Archer smiled. "We're the fucking Woe. Always assume we know."

They'd been seen through, then, despite their best efforts. Did the First Prince know as well? It had been her he meant to fool.

"So that's why," Hanno said, almost relieved. "Then this is a misunderstanding. I never int-"

"Eh," Archer shrugged, unsheathing her longknives and idly spinning them. "I don't really care."

His jaw tightened. She was baiting him.

"Then there is no more point in speaking to you," Hanno said. "This is my last warning, Archer: get out of my way."

"Shiny Boots," she patiently said, "you must be confused. Do I look like someone who gives a shit about-"

Evil's stories might be silenced, but a gloater was a gloater. He burst into movement while she was jeering, but he saw from the lack of surprise in her eyes that he'd not taken her aback. Unfortunate. He wouldn't be able to end this quickly. He struck first, high and to the side, not committing to the blow. She gave ground lightly, circling him, and continued to give it the more he pressed forward. Hanno took a step towards the gate, testing her, but she did not get in the way. She wouldn't force herself to engage on his terms even if he feigned the intention of going up without first putting her down. Archer was the most seasoned villain he'd fought since the Black Knight, and promised to be just as much of a headache.

Fine. He'd strike properly, then. His boot hit the floor and Light flared as he shot forward, feinting low and to the side to draw her blades. One did sweep down, lazily, but as he moved into his true blow – a deep thrust at belly height – she darted towards him. One moment her stance had been entirely loose, the heartbeat after her entire body was moving. Sensing the danger he hastily moved to the side, a razor-sharp blade harmless skidding against the side of his plate instead of plunging through his armpit, and shifted his footing so he could swing at her back. He'd expected her to dodge by rolling forward, using her momentum, but instead she dropped down.

The edge of his sword whispered just above her hair as she tried to sweep his legs. She was strong and the angle bade for him, so he took a step back just in time for her to rise into a blow at his throat. An opening, she'd overcommitted: he slammed his pommel onto her hand, forcing her to drop the longknife and was about to break her jaw on the second blow when he saw the glint of steel from the corner of his eye. He leaned back, the blade slicing through his cheek and lip, and before he could kick her in the stomach she darted back. But not, he saw, without first snatching up her dropped knife. Hanno's hand came up to touch the side of his face, coming away red.

He could feel the blood going down his cheek, dripping down onto his armour. Over the white cloak.

"Those reflexes are a little much, Shiny Boots," Archer complained. "That little mistake should have cost you an eye."

She was a skilled combatant, Hanno thought, but not *this* skilled. She'd exploited his propensity to close distance so he could use Light to quickly end a fight to very nearly land a crippling blow two exchanges into their fight. That had not been improvised.

"You've trained to kill me," Hanno calmly said.

"Figured I might have to, one of these days," she casually shrugged. "If you ever got ideas about Cat being more trouble than she's worth."

Even that, though, should not be enough. She was good, but those instincts were- Hanno's eyes narrowed as he studied her once more. The ease she handled those two longknives with, the way they just seemed to *fit*. Those instincts were not an Archer's instincts.

"You're becoming the Ranger," Hanno said.

"Claimant," Archer grinned, "but it's early days yet. But enough yapping, yeah? We gonna do this or-"

It did not take him by surprise when she darted forward, any more than it had taken her. He knew better than to lower his guard against Indrani the Archer. Four steps forward, quick as an arrow, and when he raised his sword she smiled. Footing switching, she suddenly drew back and if Hanno had been striking her it would have gone wide. But he was not. Instead he was taking a step forward, closing the distance, and her weight was headed the wrong way. She kept drawing away, to make distance, and it was true that by simple physical ability she was slightly faster than him. Hanno, though, did not rely on his body alone.

A burst of Light behind his left foot pushed him forward, lengthening his stride, and though it shot his footing he adjusted with another burst of Light just under his right shoulder blade. The thrust ripped through her coat at shoulder height and broke chain mail, but delivered nothing more than bruises. Archer had reacted quickly, dropping down towards the floor, but Hanno was not finished. His steel-clad boot caught her in stomach, slamming her against the stone with a pained gasp. He heard one of the lower ribs break. She wore no gauntlets, the Sword of Judgement thought as his sword rose. Cutting through both wrists should end this.

Instead he had to duck back, a longknife spinning through where his face had been a heartbeat earlier, and she rolled back into a crouch. He pressed a step forward, ignoring the knife still in the air, but she darted back before he could close the distance. Her eyes weren't even on his sword, he noticed, but on his footing. *She's watching for the Light*. The acceleration trick would not take her by surprise twice. Still, the exchange had cost her a broken rib and half her longknives – which he heard clatter against the stone behind him. This was not going to end quickly, as he had feared, so he'd used Light to melt the knife she had thrown. It should tip the balance in his favour.

It would be close, Hanno thought, but he would get to the Warden of the East in time. He could feel it in his – a wet, red gasp passed through his lips. Pain in his back. He'd been struck

through his armour? *No, the arrow. Something used the opening.* Gritting his teeth, he flared Light at his back only for it to be swallowed. Devoured. Blood turning cold, Hanno turned even as he felt the spike impaling his back beginning to raise him off the ground.

Catherine Foundling, one-eyed and smiling, met his gaze.

"Did you really think you'd just get to fight your way up to me one brawl at a time?" she said. "Really, Hanno, I'm *insulted*."

There was a swell of power, of Night, and after a wave of pain all Hanno knew was darkness.

Linnus42

I am thinking I am might have to write a whole paper and what I don't like about treatment of Black Characters in this story. At this point its mostly about these characters going on arcs that end in truncated endings.

But lets see how Cordelia's Hero Collection Plays Out.

dadycoool

Cat's story comes to mind, given how unsatisfied I still feel about it. As a Villain, she's not eligible for Happy Ever After, but that just felt like torturing Squidward. Pain with no point.

Linnus42

I am talking about specific arcs lol. And Akua's arc in Praes left me feeling quite blueballed. She went on arc....burned down the tower and then might as well have not been there for the resolution at all. She could have stepped up and done something but instead she is back to will they wont they with Cat.

I suppose this also ties into my complaint about I don't really think Heroes perform all that great against Named Villains. But that is for another time.

Cat eh its way too far out for me to predict if she gets a happy ending quite frankly. I expect it might be bitter sweet at worse but not a bad ending. I don't think this story is going to end on a down note. So no DK killing everyone to create an Undead Paradise.

Black Spiral Dancer

You say that like it's a bad thing...

Persecuted Grey Drow

As a person living in part of the world where racial politics don't dominate my everyday life, I didn't catch any hint about racism when reading these stories. It's a story about fucking Zombie Horses, amputee Orcs, the subtle politics in a wildly fantasy world, where people with GREY skin are getting persecuted by midgets, and you choose to focus on the skin colour that was mentioned in Book 1? Jesus, everything must trigger you

zenanii

This. There is racism and xenophobia in this story, but it exclusively focuses on fantasy races/factions, like orcs vs humans, duni vs praes, praes vs callowan, dwarves vs drow, highborn vs commoners, elves vs everything else and the list goes on.

At NO point in this entire story has someones darker skin color been the source of any sort of conflict or used to suppress a character (Amadeus' lighter skin color has been the foundation of some conflict, but it has been thoroughly established that the core issue was him being duni, and his skin color merely identified him as such.

In this story skin color has been exclusively used to describe peoples appearance, no different from gender or hair color, and if people want to read into it to try and find some sort of racist message then the issue lays with them and not the story.

Miles

LOUD NOISES

Geno

There's an entire nation of evil black and brown people, but the closest to evil white people is Procer. You're just being an asshole for no reason

Linnus42

I mean I argue the issue is not per say having an entire nation of Evil Black and Brown People. But it does stand out that the only Nation of Black and Brown people is Evil.

Zach

You're ignoring the Dominion, whose people are visually similar enough to Taghreb that they can easily pass as being the same race. Also, most of the people in the story who are major characters the audience is meant to care about are black or brown.

Liliet

Levantines are still not black. Nor are Taghreb. They are Arab.

Rey d`Tutto

Arab = Brown.
Racists and "Anti-Racist" both care about skin color a great deal more than could ever be healthy.

jamesc9

@Rey, sure, provided the context doesn't strongly incent them to care.

If you want the imaginary story that enabled me to start noticing how privilege works, we can go there.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'd argue that prover at the beginning of this story was evil in all but name. You don't invade a country for political convenience and conquest and get to say your among the angels.

jamesc9

This could go to the difference between Good and good, which is an ongoing theme of the story.

Insanenoodlyguy

Akua's story isn't done yet, it's multi arc character progression and always was. She had her major moment, and it's very nature was to reject that power and influence you wanted her to have. It doesn't mean she'll never have any, but it was appropriate for her to be back burning for the rest of that climax.

KageLupus

The issue with the Heroes fighting Villains is that for the last long while, they have either been fighting Revenants or

going up against Cat. In both cases the Heroes have to deal with fairly powerful enemies that are very pragmatic, and are backed by someone who knows how to twist a story to their own ends.

The Good guys had the Wandering Bard and the Grey Pilgrim for experts in Namelore, and now both of them are unavailable. So they are going to be at a natural disadvantage against enemies who have that knowledge and expertise. That only gets exasperated now that the stories for Below are being suppressed and the Bad guys don't have an extra finger on the scales tripping them up.

Basically, the Heroes are going up against strong enemies, who are better at navigating stories, and who don't have the usual push to fail that they normally do. The Heroes feel underwhelming right now because they are.

shikkarasu

I will point out quickly that Hanno beat Barrow Sword and Royal Conjurer at the same time. He also nearly beat Archer before Cat cheated. A Hero also killed Sabah. They get their licks in, but we follow Villains as our main POVs. Protagonist trumps Hero, narratively, and it's hard not to make that seem one sided.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Cat decided to Embrace the Suck, and has gone with the "Irritant" method of Losing to Win.
Xanatos victory conditions in effect.

Soronel Haetir

"I suppose this also ties into my complaint about I don't really think Heroes perform all that great against Named Villains", that's the villain's complaint as well. That Heroes win not because they are better but because Above puts extra weight on the scales.

caoimhinh

This story has consistently proven over and over that it has no racist undertones whatsoever, so please stop pretending and claiming that it does.

If you cannot see beyond a character's skin tone to notice the complex array of motivations, background, personality and plot development that drove them throughout their role in the story up to their conclusion, it's up to you.

Share your opinion if you don't like something or want to debate about a character's fate, but don't come saying that it happened because the character is black. That poorly-veiled accusation of racism towards an author that has always shown to have no such prejudice nor discrimination towards any group, is just ridiculous.

Memer

Oh, I was reading proper noun "Black Characters" to mean "the ones who serve Bella's ends."

If OP meant to comment on racial injustice in PGTE... good luck finding a leg to stand on. If they're commenting on the endings that Villians get, then there's a discussion to have.

Linnus42

When did I accuse EE of being racist? I have issue with some of his work on Black Characters. If I thought he was racist I wouldn't have bothered reading this series.

I can see all that and still see racial dynamics I don't care for. They are not mutually exclusive. I am not sort who wants to ignore differences of characters or people. Differences can be appreciated and not simply tolerated.

Trust me if I wanted to argue in bad faith that EE is racist I could do that easily. You don't like my opinion fine but your inability to actually comment on what I said and instead cast aspirations shows no one should ever give a single **** about your opinion on Race.

jworks17

Honestly curious- where do you see problematic racial dynamics? Where do you see meaningful racial dynamics at all? It's not a thing I've even considered while reading.

captainmarcia

Personally, it's something I started really noticing with the Marchford arc, with Niln's death. The first of Cat's friends to die, and also the only major black character out of the War College team, and he turned out to be a traitor. (And honestly, up to that point I'd felt like he was the least developed of them anyway.) That left Masego as the major black character in Cat's team at the time, which is a tricky position since just one character from a group means there's no others to balance them out. It didn't help that that was also the point Cat was suspecting Masego of being corrupted and making

arrangements to be able to blow him up, which brought to mind how that scenario would make things even worse.

There's also the matter of Praes in general, and Amadeus's relation to it. The fact that almost all the black characters in the story are from the one Designated Evil Nation makes things really awkward, with the in-story cultural contexts they're part of as a result. Meanwhile we've got this one guy who works to reform things, acting as a counterweight to Alaya's issues known for wanting to murder his way through the (Soninke and Taghreb) nobles, and he's part of the one white ethnic group in Praes. (The Duni are noted for being marginalized in-story, but I do not think making them white was a good call.) We've left off that arc with Cat essentially taking over Praes, leaving a humiliated Alaya to run things from death row, only as long as Cat permits.

A lot of those things make sense in-story, but all together, it looks pretty awkward. Personally, I hadn't looked much at the arcs of particular characters, but I do think it's a valid thing to consider, and I don't like how many people are jumping to shoot it down.

Ultimately, I do love Guide. But things like this are why I'm hesitant to recommend it to people as much as I wish I could. I'm not black, myself – which is probably part of why I'm able to enjoy Guide as much as I do in spite of those concerns. But they do catch my attention from time to time, and make me feel that Guide is a weaker story than it could be.

Linnus42

Wonderfully put captain. I think the issue was in making all the Black and Brown people come really only from one Nation. It was fine as long as Cat was part of Praes (protag centered morality) but when she went independent well that is a problem. If no other nation is going to have characters coded that way of a more good persuasion to balance things out.

AbraKadabra

You do realize, that Cat is not white, right? It was a plot point early on in book one that she was looking like those Daoine or something. You Just chose to forget it. Not black enough for you. It Just did not come up since then because NOBODY CARES EXCEPT YOU.

Linnus42

Do you think everyone who is browner then a paper bag is Black? Cat is not Black. She is mixed White English and Native American (which I know is big group but I don't remember what specific group she is a reference to). What do all brown people just look alike to you? I am talking specifically about Black Characters here. So no I didn't forget about Cat but its telling you jump to that.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Nitpick: Daoine is the place, not the people. The word you're looking for is Deoraithe.
More substantially: "nobody else cares" is not a valid rebuttal, nor is it true in the first place. If it were true it would still be rhetorically valueless however.

Jordan Blanch

Jeeesus christ.

Shut. Up.

[Adrian_V](#)

You do realize that is because the setting is locked in mediaval stasis? It is imposible tor each diversification in such a setting unless is soemthign like a trade city, not a nation. At some points the narration has gone out of its way to show that up until recently people almost never got to meet anyone from far away, for example Callowans wouldn't even knwo what a Lantern is much less recognize them, and confuse levantines with Taghred by sigh

jworks17

See but this is what I mean by MEANINGFUL racial dynamics though. Like do you think Erratica is trying to actually say something by making the dread empire primarily black and all those other things, or is Erratica just including black people in the story in a way that looks bad with our cultural context? In other words, do you think there was INTENT behind the placement of race, or was Erratica just trying to include different races of Mankind because different races make up Mankind?

A lot of the nations in the guide are directly analogous to real world places- the Levant, Procer, the free cities, Callow- but most of them have very little cultural parallels to those places and peoples. Could

Erratica not be doing the same thing with race, implementing it without regard to our worlds contexts? Implementing it just because... humans come in different colors?

I'm not trying to be facetious by saying this, I just know that in my writing I implement different races, but I don't implement them in any meaningful way beyond there being a more realistic representation of humanity. Black people in my fictional worlds have no connection to black people in our world, for example, but black people are humans, so I give them a fictional role like the other races.

captainmarcia

"See but this is what I mean by MEANINGFUL racial dynamics though. Like do you think Erratica is trying to actually say something by making the dread empire primarily black and all those other things, or is Erratica just including black people in the story in a way that looks bad with our cultural context? In other words, do you think there was INTENT behind the placement of race, or was Erratica just trying to include different races of Mankind because different races make up Mankind?"

Those are different questions. I do not think EE intended to convey anything negative about black people with the story, but I do think there are some areas where he didn't put enough thought into how things would look from a real-world perspective, and that can still be meaningful. I'm not here to critique EE himself, I'm here to critique the story.

jworks17

Ah, I see what you mean now. In a high fantasy like this I don't even consider context to be honest, but I can see how it would be a gripe of people who do relate the story to the real world.

caoimhinh

Yep, though the issue is that one can only reach that conclusion by taking the things in the story out of their context and relating it to the real world, while isolating the racial factor, and disregarding EVERYTHING ELSE, looking only at their skin color.

It's a disingenuous thing, needing a lot of mental gymnastics and a blatant disregard of everything

that makes the story and characters valuable to reduce them to "a person of X skin color".

It's like in the Interlude: A Mould Unbroken, when Amadeus announced that he will rebel against Malicia. There were a few people there saying "All I see is a white man going to kill a black woman" which is the most superficial way to look at the situation.

One needs to be deliberately malicious in their intent to look at this story through those lenses.

captainmarcia

Yeah, I think it can be helpful when writing to see how things might look from different perspectives, and if any unwanted patterns stand out, to look for a way to meaningfully disrupt those patterns.

A lot of fantasy stories have issues like that. But I think two things that call attention to it in Guide specifically – even compared to stories that are worse about those patterns – are that it does emphasize and explore in-story racial issues, and that it's really good about most social issues so the flops here are more noticeable.

zenanii

I do not know Erratics creative process, but if I would gander a guess I think it would be something like:

Let's make a evil nation!

Why are they evil?

They live in a resource starved environment which has forced them to become ruthless to survive!

Hm, what kind of environment would that be?

Let's make it a desert, where hardly anything grows.

Right, and people who live in desert = dark skin.

And if you want to really read into things, you're completely missing the mark with your analysis since the orcs (not the praesi) are the ones who most closely mirror real world black people (a faction of different complexion from the general populace, who for the longest time was used as slaves and cheap labor, who just recently has started having more rights on a similar level of that of normal people, although there are still those who view them as lesser (lone swordsman says hi) and up until recently did not hold any major positions (Names)).

Doesn't this sound a whole lot closer to that of black people compared to the actual black people in the Guide?

Zach

I've seen the future, and it's just the endless dubious moral judgement of media that is completely invisible and irrelevant to 99% of working people, as everyone continues to suffer and die under capitalism

Pogtastic

Truly, people idly posting on wordpress are most at fault for society's ills.

what kind of genius sees someone complain about a mild irritation and concludes they are the reason society is doomed?

[Rey d'Tutto](#)

So what part of me offering to mow my neighbor's lawn, after he had a stroke, and him insisting on paying for the gas and \$20 for my time is offensive to you?

Capitalism isn't Corporatism. Please refrain from political comments, especially when you promote failed systems.

Sharing is Good. Taxes are a Necessary Evil, as is Government in general.

Free people are the most Productive folks. Regulation and Central Planning hinder productivity and entrench Wealth to limited folks. This is historical fact.

Law \neq Justice. Morality is Black and White and shades of Grey. Legality and Legislation are Blue and Orange and shades of Brown. They address different needs in any group of humans that call themselves a Society.

Harrison

Capitalism is an economic system driven by the capital holding class, not the exchange of currency for goods and services, or even market based economic systems. Consider the existence of market socialism, corporatism, fascism and other systems that utilise those aspects but are definitely not capitalism.

Additionally, you mention corporatism, but what I'm guessing you mean is something like corporationalism, a specific capitalist system where the capital owning class is organised primarily through corporate entities.

As far as historical fact goes, excessive regulation of economic systems does indeed typically hinder productivity and filter wealth upwards to a specific privileged class, but the same is true of a general lack of regulation, as the formation of cartels, monopolies and unchecked damaging, but individually profitable behaviour is inevitable in a system with no or little regulation.

When people refer to capitalism in a negative sense like the person you are replying to, what they typically mean is that the system that allows a small number of privileged people to control the economy through owning much of the wealth, and the hierarchies and behaviours that they create, are to blame at least partially for the issue they're discussing.

Insanenoodlyguy

Being honest, I think I'd feel the same about your paper if you get around to writing it.

j

There's already pretty much a paper right here in the comments.

And yeah, Do Not Recommend.

[Liliet](#)

> This story has consistently proven over and over that it has no racist undertones whatsoever

Not how it works, dude.

EE absolutely doesn't have A RACIST AGENDA, certainly, and in fact most definitely has an anti-racist one, we can all see it, Linnus42 included. But we all, including EE, still grew up in a culture steeped in racism, and anti-racism is a fun game of playing whack-a-mole with bullshit that snuck into our subconscious when we weren't looking.

EE is ACCIDENTALLY reproducing racist tropes. No-one's accusing him of doing it on purpose.

caoimhinh

And what are those "racist tropes" that you are talking about?

Because so far all I'm seeing in those complaining is reducing the characters to their skin color and saying "this

happened to a black person" and calling it a racist thing.
Literally the most superficial way to look at them.

Big I

I'd point out that three of the Woe (Cat, Indrani, Masego) are PoC. Four if you count Hakram. Not to mention Hanno, Tariq, the Blessed Artificer, Malicia, etc. They don't all have anticlimactic endings.

Linnus42

I am talking about Black Characters specifically. So only Masego would be relevant to that.
And I would not consider 1 out of 4 a great batting average.

Kevstar

So we have Masego who's black, Cat and Indrani who's PoC, Hakram who is an orc, and Vivienne as the only Caucasian in the group.

It's a group made out of misfits from several different cultures and backgrounds. What, do you want all of them to be black? Would that be a more acceptable "batting average" for you?

Honestly dude, I don't know what your issue is. It's fine to have felt blueballed by a plotline you didn't enjoy, but I really don't see what race has to do with it. Maybe if you clarified a bit more what you meant, but at the moment it mostly comes off as whining and trying to impose your vision for what the series should be on the author.

Blue Mage Tank

The US is 13% black.

You want sensible representation? One out of four is too many.

Point Point

"Sensible" does not mean "mirroring real life."

Blue Mage Tank

It's okay to be White, and we have a right to exist.

Point Point

I agree with most of what you've said here, except for this.

There are definitely problems in the handling of race in this story, but the Woe in particular does not lack diversity.

(I realize that's not the actual point you're trying to make in this thread, but it is the point the person you replied to here was making.)

(And, on the other hand, the Woe's diversity has a problem mirroring the story at large: the only white member is also their only hero.)

'Ladi Williams

I would like to say at this juncture that I didn't even know Cat and Indrani were black.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cat, to us, would appear half Native American half Caucasian, with the former being prevalent. Idrani would appear Indian.

Abrakadabra

Yep. Something like that. But it did not come up all the time, because nobody really cares... Is it not the point? The endgame of all this antiracism is exactly this. The point where nobody even notices it, because when they look at the other person they see an oöher person not a black Or whito Or whatever. That is the goal! Or it supposed to be, but some people jusó cannot let go of the issue Just like the dog do not want to let go the old bone Or its favourite chewtoy...

[Liliet](#)

The problem is, it's easy to not notice it in fiction when you're not the one BEING noticed IRL. People who are actually the targets of prejudice don't get the luxury of ignoring its existence.

Abrakadabra

Okay. But we ARE reading fiction. So it is not Just disturbing But assholish to bring into it real world politics.

captainmarcia

Those real-world politics affect how real people experience the story, and there's nothing wrong with talking about that. It's written by and for people in our world, not people in Guide's world.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think you understand how fiction works, and has always worked, since fiction was first invented. It always rehashed real world politics, that's one of its functions. You think the anti-greenskin racism thread isn't intended as a statement relating to real-world racism? You think the lack of queerphobia is because the writer actually forgot it was a thing? You think the "one step better than our world" sexism situation isn't carefully thought through? You think all the references to real world political systems in Bellerophon and Praes and Procer are accidental?

EE is tackling real world politics obliquely in this piece of fiction. We can respect him enough to acknowledge that and work with that. (Where pointing out a minor misstep is in fact working with that)

dera

I'm honestly curious : who amongst those who noticed or saw racial undertones are living in the US?
Because from an european PoV it has never been an issue in this story.

jamesc9

I live in New Zealand. The ethnocentrism in the story is quite clearly specified, and connected to physical appearance, so it fits the sociological definition of race rather than ethnicity.

hakureireimu

I agree; there should be less black characters and more Asian ones.

Magtok

Asia doesn't even exist in this setting, buddy.

Pawn

...Africa doesn't exist in this world either and Ranger is half-Asian.

My guess is Akua has something good coming up. But beyond that, geographically, black characters are Praesi. Hanno's mom kept to the gods below so pretty sure she came from praes and that's why he's half-black. The rest of the Woe have stories aligned with different geographies (Indrani a traveling foreigner, Viv the callowan princess, hakram an orc). I just don't see which characters you could reasonably

expect to turn black besides the Praesi we already have. Or how to fit in more Praesi characters in order to add “good” arcs when we already have such a large supporting cast in the Praesi armies and nobility.

Of the Praesi supporting cast, I suppose some of the more interesting character arcs are taken by orcs and goblins because they’re the “colored” minorities in Praes who are fighting for recognition. Because in this world the black people of Praes are a rich villainous society who conquered societies of green and white people, aka orcs goblins and callowans, which is a world-building narrative that flips the typical white people conquering black and native populations storyline. Would it be better if black people were made the oppressed groups? Then interesting characters like hune, juniper and robber would be black, but that would also be problematic by forcing black people to take the same role of second class citizens in a fantasy world like in real life where there’s no need for them to be.

Also as a reminder this story started with just callow and praes. I suppose you could argue some part of procer could have been a black nation but like was mentioned before other ethnicities were added and praes is on the far side of callow, so it doesn’t make sense geographically for their ethnicities to mix, and as procer has grown to play a larger part in the story, albeit with few characters I imagine would meet the standards for “good” character arcs if hanno doesn’t count, there’s less chance for the smaller nation of Praes to field characters with interesting arcs, now that a lot of cat’s friends and the calamities are mostly dead.

Generally in narrative-building as well, the greater the power of a character the greater the challenges. Cat and Masego are definitely the most powerful of the Woe, and their losses help balance that narrative. Hanno is the most powerful of the heroes besides Pilgrim and Sword Saint, and maybe you’d approve of a black Tariq but I imagine a black Saint wouldn’t help matters, and Tariq is too Levantine to muck with. Cordelia’s still only a claimant. So it makes sense for Hanno to be going thru some trials and losses. He was mostly winning this chapter anyhow so im not sure what the problem is, he’s smart, strong, principled, generally a good communicator, and he’s certainly learned and grown since fighting Black and the Tyrant. I guess you could argue Witch of the Woods is more powerful but she doesn’t have a character arc to speak of so making her black wouldn’t change much.

The length of the comment is mostly due to me being up late and in an inquisitive mood btw, this isn’t a hard-line or super thought-out stance and I’m open to being convinced I’m

wrong. Tho if I were going to ask for anything I'd want more gay guys but 2 and a bi demon is already more than you usually get lol.

[amit27592](#)

Yeah that was sarcasm.

Annya Smilyanova

So Yan Tei are?

[Estelulu](#)

Yeah, but you get what he means. Ranger is half elf and half Korean.

Linnus42

I find it curious your response is that there should be less Black Characters. There are not a lot of major black characters in this story period but there are plenty of White Characters. So I find it interesting your solution is simply remove the Black Characters for Asian Characters like its some zero sum game.

Insanenoodlyguy

Starting to think you are just looking for a fight.



[Liliet](#)

He isn't.

Mirror Night

its weird to me that your response to one black person complaining about story elements they don't like in regards to Black Characters is that they should be replaced with Asian Characters. As if removing Black Characters is the only possible way to get more Asian Characters in the story. One Black Person doesn't like something and your response is we should toss out Black Characters so you can get more rep? Like some weird collective punishment fetish. Just weird and unhealthy response in my book.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Instead of writing a paper no one really cares about, might I suggest focusing your efforts on writing your own story instead. That way, you get to decide what happens to your characters based on their skin color.

Linnus42

Alas my talents are not in creative writing I am terrible at it.

Vortex

So what you are saying is you are only happy in a story with good treatment of black people?

I do want to add that several of the non-black characters in this story have suffered significantly more than Masego or Hanno, yet you appeared to have no objection on those chapters.

It's only this one chapter where you pop out to take note on racial dynamics? Not when the pilgrim literally murders everyone in his own bloodline to stop the dead king or when thousands of white soldiers sacrifice themselves holding a fort against the undead? Not when Catherine literally stabs her father in the heart or when an angel literally is about to descend and enslave an entire city of Callowans into a crusade at the behest of some white dude?

But here one black guy gets stabbed in the back and knocked unconscious and here is where you decide the treatment of black people in this story is messed up and unfair?

[Liliet](#)

No, actually, this guy has been consistently presenting complaints, all of them reasonable and at least one actually followed up on by EE – because yes, they are usually reasonable, and even when they are premature or arguable,

they have a reason. And yes I'd say it's pretty valid for an oppressed minority to only be comfortable reading stories where their kind is treated well.

Hargabga

What a shitshow. Of course we should give a black character a mandatory happy ending – that'll prove we're racially unbiased.

Raidman

Ikr. Creating the appearance of a problem where there is none so they can be the White Knight keyboard warrior with their virtue signalling.

Also the use of capitals as a form of emphasis is very poorly done. May as well have written 'BLaCkHaRAcTeRs'. Just makes me roll my eyes and dismiss the argument.

What do they want? Every ethnicity (which are all fictional in the story but you know. Parallels.) to be given round-table representation? The characters are the characters and the only thing even remotely close to racism I can recall in the narrative among humans is the treatment of the Duni and the Deoraithe, and the way the Praesi have their ubermensch bloodlines. None of which is ever glorified and none of which are real.

Abrakadabra

Yep. It is the same kind of trolling Ryoka did in the court of masks in the recent wandering inn chapter.

Zentalon

He's not dead

Joe Nuts

This point is just as nonsensical every time it comes up. This is a story with a variety of characters with a variety of origins and a variety of outcomes. Unless the author shows favoritism to a particular skin color (which would be racist), some of the negative outcomes will happen to characters of any skin color you pick, such as black. To map American racial politics onto a story set in a fantasy world with consistent but different ethnicities (written by someone who isn't even American, and all things considered is probably African), and complain that some of the characters that got the short end of the stick were black even though all of it is motivated purely by – and consistent with – the book's narrative, is to yourself be racist and feed it through confirmation bias. The capital B in Black has never before, to me, really meant so much as it

does in the context: nobody in the book is capital-B Black, i.e. the American ethnic group that you might have strong opinions regarding; they just vaguely look like their ancestors.

Appreciate the characters for their worldviews and goals, and the story for being built on them instead of the much shallower standard antagonism model. Appreciate that the only way you could write a story this complaint couldn't be made about is if there were no black people, or if black people were always perfect top characters no matter what, or if it just pretended race didn't exist, all of which would be bad. Appreciate that this is probably the fictional story that's the **most** respectful of different ethnicities there's ever been (barring stories explicitly about one country), with characters e.g. giving mockery that's a pun in multiple African languages at the same time.

Onos

Oh definitely write the paper, that'll be hilarious. Think you can get as many people to give a shit as EE does? Cos I'm fairly sure you're not gonna get any more than three people reading whatever nonsense analysis you come up with.

Persecuted Grey Drow

As a person living in part of the world where racial politics don't dominate my everyday life, I didn't catch any hint about racism when reading these stories. It's a story about fucking Zombie Horses, amputee Orcs, the subtle politics in a wildly fantasy world, where people with GREY skin are getting persecuted by midgets, and you choose to focus on the skin colour that was mentioned in Book 1? Jesus, everything must trigger you

jamesc9

The comment above is a repeat.

Black Spiral Dancer

Just to point out: I never really cared or "seen" the skin tone of the characters when I'm reading, in my mind's eye. Let's not create a problem where there isn't one... what matters is the good-vs-evil problem, and each character gives off a pretty unique "energy". Vibration, if you will. Role. That is how I visualize characters in the story. Not sure if it's how the rest of readers do or just me. Perhaps each one "translates" those vibrations into physical characteristics according to their own culture? Anyhow, my 2 cents.

[Liliet](#)

> Just to point out: I never really cared or “seen” the skin tone of the characters when I’m reading, in my mind’s eye.

So I’m actually really curious about this. Does this mean you’re imagining all of them as white, or does it mean you’re imagining them as, like, grey outlines, or not imagining them at all? My imagination always presents faces as more or less blank (I’m faceblind), and occasionally all I get is the outfit, but I do regularly get hair length, color and texture, and yes skin color in what I get in my mind’s eye. And I kind of go out of my way to get all these right because damn I dislike imagining things wrong.

Ristridin

Not the person you are responding to, but I could have said the same. I personally don’t visualize the characters at all. I’m reading words on a page, there are no images to go with that. If it hadn’t been for the comment section, I probably wouldn’t even know which skin color any character had (well, green for orcs/goblins tends to be a safe guess; I think orcs at least have been called ‘greenskins’ often enough to be reasonably certain). In general, I tend to skim over and quickly forget any visual aspects that are mentioned.

For example, I was again reminded this chapter that Cat lost an eye; if it’s not mentioned, I might as well not know. I already forgot whether she lost her left eye or her right eye. The missing eye is not central to Cat’s character (from how I interpret it anyway), so it doesn’t stick out. When the eye is mentioned, I do remember it was an arrow by the Hawk that took it, and know that it was the reason why Cat had to be woken up by Hakram working with the Grey Pilgrim (I’m pretty sure it’s Grey; if not, feel free to consider it further evidence that I don’t remember ‘visual’ details 😊). The only other visual aspects of Cat I know of, is that she’s short, with thanks to the many jokes made about that, and that she has a bad leg that occasionally reminds her of her mistakes when it hurts (my guess is it was her left leg). I don’t know her hair colour, or even whether her hair is short or long (I’m guessing reasonably long; were there any jokes about how her hair failed to dramatically wave in the wind? I can also imagine she cuts it short for reasons of practicality, so... *shrugs*). In terms of clothes it’s the Mantle of Woe, and now that I’m thinking of it, her dragonbone pipe, and her staff (although I haven’t heard mention of that one recently; does she still have it? Getting it was definitely a big moment for her character, so I think it would not disappear so easily).

Details I do remember are things like Hakram being an orc and having two missing hands ('Deadhand' is mentioned often enough); in contrast, when reading I have to be reminded of the missing leg (or is it legs? I know it came up a few chapters back...). If some visual aspect is repeated often enough (or a few times very prominently), it's more likely to stick of course. Alaya appears infrequently, but her 'supernatural beauty' was extremely central the first times we saw her, so I remember that she's very attractive (as an abstract point; I don't remember any concrete details).

Liliet

Huh, interesting. I get a "movie" in my head as I read, so aspects like skin color, height, manner of dress, hairstyle all stick out. And Amadeus is more than a little bit anime in my head bc of how much the PALE GREEN (from most angles in most lightning will be indistinguishable from grey!!! eye color is not super visible if you're not an anime character!!!) eyes have been brought up lmao

(We don't actually now which eye Cat lost. It's not specified, which is actually better than the situation with her hurt leg, since which it was actually changed within the 3 chapters from it happening...)

Jennah

What in the world are you on about? Skin color is mentioned extremely infrequently, has basically no relevance to the story, and zero correlation with Earth's history of racial prejudices.

I don't even know what skin color about half the human cast even has; and I often forget the other half because it's of zero significance aside from (sometimes) indicating nationality.

ruduen

If Hanno's out for the moment and she plans on also handling Cordelia...

This is going to end in a monologue in front of multiple heroic captives, isn't it. Cat has to know that'd be pushing pretty hard on the Heroic side, so I suppose it's a matter of whether or not they'll actually find something that's more than platitudes.

It's good to know that some of the simpler solutions (shared Name or forced cooperation) are looking fairly unlikely at this point.

Linnus42

I mean I can see a way this mends things between Cordelia and Hanno mostly by making Cordelia look very good at Hanno's expense.

I don't see how this mends things between Hanno and Cat with Indrani explicitly trying to inflict permanent damage for **** and giggles.

Garrick

Dude your stupid

I'm sorry reading you comments all I see is hyper focus. Your wrong you know your wrong.

Don't even try debate that or you'll be proving me right every inch of the way.

My bet is this isn't the first argument you've been into.... I can even guarantee that the moment you see this you'll argue with me regardless of if I am right or wrong.

It's not about being right for you.... it's about the argument itself you need it and if givin the opportunity you'll take it.

But let's go over your comments

You try to say "no I'm not claiming this author is racist" knowing full well your comments implied just that on top of saying that you could win that argument implying that you believe the author is racist because obviously you wouldn't have the evidence you claim you have otherwise.

On top of this your comment has nothing to say about the actual chapter itself just a vague accusation you know will start an argument which is frankly made worse by the fact that it's the first comment.

Now let's cut to the chase of the accusation because that comment IS an accusation.

You claim the author is racist and when evidence is presented that it is not the case such as there being multiple characters of different ethnicities you claim that it doesn't count because only one of those characters is black.

Now I apparently need to remind you of the definition of racist "a prejudice based on the color of one's skin" which means your comment is racist and therefore you are racist.

Now I know what your going to do

Your gonna get upset and you'll probably try to argue and somewhere there will be a post full of insults and cussing like it somehow proves your point.

Now when you respond to this or don't either way I get what I want.

See I like to argue too.

So you can either engage me (which I made sure to leave some holes in my argument for you to do so)

Or you cannot which leads to you looking like a cowerd.

It's a win/win for me and a loss for you.

[Liliet](#)

> You try to say "no I'm not claiming this author is racist" knowing full well your comments implied just that

Only in the heads of people who don't actually understand how writing and tropes work.

Insanenoodlyguy

Speaking as somebody who disagrees with what the person you responded to has said, you know what's far far worse? Somebody like you. Not only being crass and rude, and worse yet, arguing like "I'm right and if you argue that proves I'm right", but doing so in the wrong comment thread. Linnus talks about being unsure how Cat and Hanno reconcile, and you start off on racism, which Linnus never accused Erratic of in the first place. You are in the completely wrong part to be giving such a response. Don't scroll up mind you, this comment would contribute nothing of value up there either. Your self masturbatory "I know all the things you could do and I get what I want no matter what" does not suggest intelligence, it suggests immaturity. It gives me the kind of vibes I'd get watching 6th graders have an argument. You claim Linnus will respond in an equally immature fashion when none of us have ever seen him do so, suggesting this is projection. Not responding to you wouldn't be cowardice, it would be having something better to do with your time then arguing with a child. Do better.

Pogtastic

Their comments just do not imply the author is racist, though? I don't really see what Linnus is complaining about, but it's quite possible for an author to just give lots of black characters unsatisfying arcs with no malice.

Also, most of your comment seems to consist of speculation on what the person you're replying will do, and the actual meat of your argument boils down to "there are nonwhite people in this story, so it cannot be racist." I don't think this story is remotely racist*, but that's an awful defence.

*except arguably when lampshading tropes about Evil Black People etc, but i think the argument would be pretty weak

Annya

I am absolutely confident that she is holding back, so, if she can seriously injure or hurt him, he has a lot bigger issues than Indrani.

Linnus42

I mean he is also holding back while having some injuries and just having fought two opponents at the same time while Indrani enters Fresh. I don't get this argument that Indrani should be some cakewalk to beat in a martial fight. The advantages for this fight are stacked in Indrani's Favor not Hanno's.

GM

Personally, I got the sense that this is where Cordelia proves she's actually more worthy of being the Warden, addressing her namelore and Hero issues, by gathering and leading them. Whereas Hanno basically ran in alone and figured he could fight his way through to her.

That said, it would be hilarious and enjoyable to see everyone captured and Cat monologuing at them.

hakureireimu

To be fair, Hanno did bought plenty of help. They simply got separated.

Darkening

And instead of acting like a leader and rallying his forces and making sure they survived, he fell back on his lone hero instincts and charged in all on his own. It's not a great look for a Name that's supposed to be about leading other heroes.

Insanenoodlyguy

He's on a time crunch and can feel cat eating the book. He knows his stories as well, there is no time he can afford to spend doing other things. Even if there is, ignoring it will hurt his story too much for it to matter.

Darkening

Note that he didn't start feeling cat eat the book until after the hunter magician showed up.

Insanenoodlyguy

She didn't start eating it before that. Also, he has no idea where his forces are, but knows they were all flung in different directions. It'd be one thing if he saw them all carried off into the next room, they've all been moved miles away.

Miles

I mean all she's doing is creating a stage where the Heroes have a chance at a pissing contest without screwing over the entire continent while doing it. The winner gets to be the WoW (warden of the west).

Unfortunately this might have put my favorite black horse candidate – Abigail – out of the running before she even had a chance to feel the existential dread of maybe getting a Name that makes her face the WoE as an equal.

Anyway the only one who seems to be acting as a WoW should right now is Christophe of all people. Hanno is transitioning to Damsel in Distress, Cordelia is questioning whether she even wants the job, and Christophe is assembling a proper band to get things done, with a proper Heroic Journey and everything.

Frivolous

Indrani was nasty enough as Archer. As Ranger, she'd be a nightmare squared.

I'd had no idea, no hint, that Hanno disliked Hakram and Indrani. Moral void, bland antipathy, casual cruelty? All this time, amazing.

I wonder what the Book of Some Things tasted like. And did Catherine eat it raw or cooked, plain or with condiments?

Everything becomes like food to me when I'm hungry.

Definite change in hero versus villain fights now that Evil has been muted. Hanno should have not had such difficulty even if she is becoming Ranger.

Linnus42

I mean Indrani is pretty elite fighter, Hanno had to win a 2 v 1 to get there and has taken damage. Indrani came in fresh and opened with an Ambush. Shouldn't she be the won winning and

not struggling? Especially with being a Ranger Claimant making her more well rounded and less bow dependent.

Agent J

I mean, Hanno's a pretty elite fighter. Lol. He gently slapped down the Mirror Tank while he was wielding Murder Granny.

Linnus42

I don't disagree my point is I am not sure why one would be saying Hanno should not have difficulty with Indrani. When he had to fight a 2 v 1 to get here, Indrani ambushed him and got a shot in, when she is pretty elite herself and when he is holding back far more then she is in terms of damage. If anything Indrani should be the one getting questioned for why she is not winning quicker.

Agent J

To say it more clearly, I believe that question answers itself. Hanno is just the better fighter. Indrani treated Lawrence similarly. It's her "do not engage until noticeably worn down" strategy. Which implies a high degree of respect for his capabilities on her part.

Snappy270

Cause she is trying to delay not win. She doesnt go for killing blows or she could of really done damage with that arrow shot. They are both pulling back.

Insanenoodlyguy

If she went for the killing blow it wouldn't have worked. At least normally. I'd guess he'd still get enough of an advantage though.

Hakram's Dead Hand

You have to remember that you are talking about the strongest Hero in creation. (That we know of) Someone, that when it comes to Martial abilities, has complete backing with the Gods Above. While Indrani is insanely powerful and has proved that, she still wouldn't have tried to fight the previous best, which was the Saint. Furthermore there are two types of story effects that go on during a fight with a hero. There is the current underlying story, which consists of when in the story the fight takes place. But there is also Providence present in any fight with a hero, which is described as fate making sure you are doing the right thing at the right time.

Sure, villains are no longer fated to lose their battles, because of the Bard muting their side of stories. But that doesn't mean Heroes don't have the force of providence trying to force them to win. I think that's what's so interesting about the muting, is that we get to watch the Heroes' stories exist in a vacuum.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, this is just people pointing out how Indrani being in the same league as Hanno means she's elite as fuck.

Lord Haart

Well, Claimant vs Claimant here. And Ranger was previously the most elite fighter in Calernia so arguably means more for a duel than Warden.

Sykomantis

This is the only summarization of that fight that exists and you can't tell me otherwise

Insanenoodlyguy

It's a tower climb grind. The normal progression is that the plan works: he wins each fight but getting more exhausted, more wounded, his victories more and more narrow as each level has a harder fight on an emptier tank. Then he makes it to the final boss, exhausted, having no chance, and somehow fate still gives him a victory, or, as happens here, he does fail and the Villian captures him, but is compelled to gloat and so does not finish him off. Considering Cats current Akua'ing it up, I'm half expecting him to wake up in a death trap.

Reader in the Night

Tiger Pit! Put him on a Tiger Pit!

reckonir

Make it a taper pit!

Insanenoodlyguy

No, the tapirs remember last time. They'll have a much tighter legal defense this time, and we can't risk the Tapier Warden of the East being interested in things that aren't eating people.

caoimhinh

It was mentioned pretty early in the story that Hanno and Hakram did not get along, plus everyone with a bit of insight and cleverness realizes that Archer is extremely dangerous.

Plus, Hanno is nerfed right now as he is Nameless, even if he is still ridiculously OP by being able to use Light so masterfully, and Catherine suspects that he can still access Recall. I mean, he quickly and singlehandedly beat the shit out of two strong Named at the same time and had nothing but scratches for it.

If anything, his current level of strength is absurdly high.

Frivolous

caoimhinh: Could you please link me to the chapter or interlude where Hanno and Hakram don't get along?

Archer being dangerous was not in question; Hanno thinking Archer was a jerk was. I mean, this is the guy who famously Does Not Judge.

I don't believe Hanno can access Recall anymore. No mention of in this chapter.

What I believe he is doing is using recall (lower case), his unaugmented memory of using Recall. It suffices if your memory is good enough.

Annya

Indrani IS an asshole. But she is not just that and she is a lot smarter and complicated. But she does usually present herself as an asshole. She is like a big cat that knows that she could eat almost everything she wants and she absolutely uses that to her advantage. She survived Ranger's academy for fucked up gifted youngsters and thrived. You don't get that by being nice on the outside.

Hanno is however really disappointing in the fact that he has not observed everything else about her but so far we have seen that he has ZERO clue how to handle people who do not operate the way he expected. He doesn't understand Masego and Hakram, clearly doesn't get Indrani and is why he couldn't handle The Mirror Knight. He does not understand neurodivergant people. The Witch and the Champion are the exceptions to some extent I guess and it helps that both are AMASING at communication in their own, specific ways.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah. Hanno is really REALLY remarkably unobservant. This has badly backfired before, with Christophe reaching the boiling point that he had in the Arsenal, and then again

when he failed to realize that maybe there was a reason Cat and Cordelia were insisting, and now... well. Now it's deadly dangerous if he presses his claim successfully while being Like This.

jamesc9

The angels were observing for him.

caoimhinh

I don't have the actual chapter, though I'll try to look it up.

It was in the early chapters of Book 6, and was mentioned from Catherine's perspective. She noted that they seemed to have some grudging respect and professionalism, but did not get along at all.

Also, it seems most characters outside Cat's team don't like Hakram, because he seems like a cold-blooded unambitious killer whose only purpose is to serve the Black Queen (this was shown from even Malicia's POV).

Everyone who has ever interacted with Indrani thinks she is a jerk. Everyone, except maybe Masego XD
Plus, Hanno judges now, so there's that.

Cat mentioned a few chapters ago that she suspects Hanno to still have access to Recall's ability, even if to a lesser degree. We know that Hanno developed Recall while training with the Gigantes in "The Room of Many Lives" or something like that, and apparently there was a recent Extra Chapter called Strangers that shows Recall as something deeply ingrained into Hanno (I haven't read that since I'm not a Patreon, so I can't confirm this).

[Liliet](#)

> Everyone who has ever interacted with Indrani thinks she is a jerk.

Her team loves and respects her, and I do not mean the Woe. I mean the band of 5 she led during the timeskip.

Refugees know better than anyone else that she's a jerk, but even Alexis is talking to her now? Hanno is missing pretty big developments there.

caoimhinh

One thing does not remove the other.

She can be a jerk and still be loved and respected, because she has a lot of other qualities besides that, which most people who interact with her notice after a

few interactions.

Just like most other characters, there are good and bad things to be said about her.

Hanno is not missing anything here, he knows how she is, and in this chapter he was simply mentally commenting on the aspect of her personality more directly relevant to the situation that he is currently in. That does not mean that he doesn't know about her good qualities.

[Liliet](#)

It sure sounds like he does, tbh. The thing that most stuck out for me here... remember how he reacted to Nephele in Winter I? She was deliberately aiming to hurt everyone who talked to her, at that time. But Hanno saw the best in her and acted on that.

With Archer... Like, I get that they're fighting right now, but that very much sounded like a more general opinion.

medailyfun

according to the extra chapter "Strangers", Hanno's Recall is not a plain Aspect but a deeper part of him, probably similar to Catherine's Take.

caoimhinh

In one of his earliest interludes, it was mentioned that Hanno developed Recall while training with the Gigantes in some places called something like "The Room of Many Lives". It was there that he trained to polish his skills before he left to adventure and formed his Band of Five to go against Kairos.

[Liliet](#)

The Chamber of Borrowed Lives. The extra chapter elaborates on that.

Big I

There was tension between Hakram and Hanno when they shared a scene, like before the Arsenal when they were all on the frontlines.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani is terrifying, it's so great.

We did know Hakram and Hanno disliked one another from the end of Book 6. But... yeah. I had definitely not expected THIS.

Linnus42

Seems kinda anticlimatic. Like we get told its a big deal where Hakram won't tell Cat what its about and its a personality clash? Seems weird that neither Hanno or Hakram would talk to Cat about it. Kinda feels like EE had a plan for it and just truncated that arc so tied it up in a rather unsatisfying way.

shikkarasu

I get the feeling that it's more that Hanno and Hakram were both willing to work with one another in good faith because they both trusted Cat. Hanno was always one of the more open to working with Villains in the early days, before the Tyrant's Trial. He might not like Hakram, but he recognises that Hakram is necessary and trusted by the other side. He Did Not Judge, but he did have quiet opinions.

[Liliet](#)

We were not told it was a big deal. I'm pretty sure Cat assumed it was a personality clash right away.

I also speculate – and speculated back then – that it's part of Hakram's toxic pattern of jealousy of people around Cat. It explains a lot if he resented her not seeing him as an equal... and resented Hanno for BEING her equal.

Linnus42

That checks out pretty well actually. Given what he said about Akua.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's why I thought about it that way =x

Tenthyr

Catherine's really relishing in the chance to actually play Villain for once, I think.

Metalshop

Hanno's fighting style is anime as fuck.

Rex

I was specifically reminded of Saber's prana burst from fate stay night, and some of Azula's firebending moves from Avatar

Insanenoodlyguy

I thought that was always kinda the point? He's even got a summonable horse.

Lord Haart

1. Summonable Mount
2. Can hotswap skills
3. Can defer to a guide outside his reality (Judgement aka video game walk through) to see which dialogue options/actions to take

Yep White Knight Hanno is basically straight out of the stock standard fantasy RPG. Cat is right that he needs to bring more to the table to beat the DK.

dadycoool

Oh, this was glorious! Every part of this was amazing! I can't articulate just how much.

Sam

I totally agree. It's been ages since we have been able to have some good clean fun at the heroes expense.

Nilsn

Hanno-on-a-stick

sidehammer056302

God, It's so delicious when she gets to be Evil Overlord! XD Shes far too much the child of Amadeus of the Green Stretch to leave so cliché a trope unfucked with, lol! I love it!

Insanenoodlyguy

I am sadder then ever he is dead. He would have loved this, and part of the interlude would be him here and loving this.

shikkarasu

I think he would be keying up for another "Catherine, we've talked about this." Like, disappointed Dad vibes while she's out there killing it her own way. This is everything he's ever told her not to do, but it's working.

Now we just need to see what happens once she's firmly past the First Part of her Plan. (I know the Villain stories are napping, but I still feel anxious.)

[Liliet](#)

If Amadeus's conclusion from Catherine's First Llesse adventure was "holy shit she's awesome", he'd 100% be onboard with this.

I mean that one was literally "play hero, get killed" but it worked for her and he was BEAMING with pride. Amadeus does not do disappointed dad until and unless she actually gets seriously hurt, and this situation is not shaping up in that direction.

He's the guy who TAUGHT her to win despite the rules.

Miles

Just wait until Bard brings back Villain Tropes to trip up Cat at the worst possible moment.

jamesc9

I wonder what Cat's back-up plan is, for that. It's been discussed in comments, and I'd be surprised if there isn't one.

Insanenoodlyguy

But see, the rules have changed. The first thing that cold unfeeling machine mind of his would be doing is thinking how to adjust strategy with the scales being a lot less biased. Which is what cat is doing, using the hero tropes along with her own lower chances of failure to predict their actions. He'd be loving this. If anything he'd request a role in it somewhere, doing all the things he never was allowed. He couldn't do much fighting with Hanno as an unnamed but perhaps setting up an elaborate death trap or a lethal puzzle game or something, where he taunted them from the other side, ready to scream "just as planned!" and laugh if it was even partially successful. That or do the opposite, and be the starscream with dry sarcasm. "Hello, I am the Chancellor. Would you like to know a shortcut that will take you straight to my evil mistress' lair? This in no way serves my own nefarious plans. I am very trustworthy in this situation."

hakureireimu

You're way underestimating Amadeus if you don't think he can acquire new information and change his approach.

arcanavita15

I like the character development here Cordelia and her view on kingfisher Prince, mirror night growing up and understanding the game and actually gets a bit of what is going on, Also hannos

opinions on Hakram and Indrani, which speaking of Ranger claimant I mean we all knew it was coming put this is a pretty great way to reveal it.

Insanenoodlyguy

She will get a final fight with ranger now, I think, who is scarred in many ways after the last encounter. It will be a very different kind of fight then the last one but this time Indrani will be able to win.

Black Spiral Dancer

hahah, bravo!

Silverking

...Wow, Cat's going to be able to teach a lesson to BOTH claimants with this exercise.

Hanno is going to learn what Stories CAN'T do. Up until this point, his whole guiding philosophy has been that if he commits to his role, keeps faith in Above, and follows all Two Hundred Axioms, that everything will eventually work itself out (without him having to politic or compromise on ANYTHING he doesn't want to). Of course he's going to climb the Tower, of course Cat is only one who has to be held accountable for her actions; that's how the game works. Now, he's learning that this reliance on tropes can become a crutch, and if he wants to succeed against craftier foes who no longer have a handicap, he's going to need to learn some new tricks (and maybe break a few rules).

Cordelia is going to learn what Stories CAN do. Up until this point, she has viewed Heroes as overpowered rabid dogs, followers of an illogical set of rules who need to be brought to heel. But now she's open to "learning the rules", and once she gets a Band of Five together, she'll get her first taste of Story: the momentum, the finger on the scales, the universe WANTING you to win. It may not solve all her issues, but she'll finally understand the perspective of her would-be constituents.

arcanavitae15

I really like how you put this. I think Cat is just teaching them a lesson and Christophe bloody Christophe got it first, this is a spar not a slaughter.

RoflCat

It's always the monke-est guy that come up with the most surprisingly intuitive answer.

Also see Raphaela telling Hanno "if not now, when?"

Juff

Typo Thread:

neither had been > neither had
lager > larger
skin stayed > skin that'd stayed
exception fighter > exceptional fighter
never known > never been known
even she were > even if she were
but too, > but two,
harmless skidding > harmlessly skidding
angle bade > angle bad
longknife and > longknife, and
up tome > up to me

Captain Amazing

In the Arsenal, at the end of the Bard's card trick, the cards were scattered with bloodied Judgement landing between the Empress and the Tower. Catherine didn't notice. This is more dramatically literal than I had thought, but this might still be part of the Bard's plan.

Insanenoodlyguy

See now, I am pretty sure that was back at the actual tower. Bard was clearly intending to kill her there cause I really don't think losing a huge part of her power was ever her plan.

shikkarasu

A fair point, except for two things:

- Bard made it clear that the Empress was Cordelia in that game, and Judgement was the Sword Of.
- This *is* the actual Tower. The mad lass actually did it. She turned it into a flying fortress and invaded the West. I AM SO DAMN HAPPY

A-hem, but yes, Bard was setting up some variation of this story. We should get ready for, I dunno, Bard taking her foot off of Evil's stories for 10 seconds so Hanno can get a boost or something otherwise jerk like.

RoflCat

I dunno, as much as everything you said make sense, it'd be such an insane read from Bard that it doesn't feel like it should work.

The side of Cordelia and Hanno remaining hostile to each other is the easy part because two stubborn people.

But THIS whole tower drop thing...
It needs Catherine to be doing this as THE Warden to pull both claimants under the influence
Which implies Bard knew Catherine would overcome her attempt at killing Warden of the East name?
And the idea only came after Akua pulled Catherine out of her slump, and Akua's character change only came about after her chat with Hakram at the tower.
(which a part of me wonder if Akua's just enjoying some kind of twisted 'until death do us part', since a knot doesn't become a noose until there's a corpse...and tying the knot is slang for marriage)

shikkarasu

It's not about 100% perfectly predicting the future, she isn't an Augur, but Bard had knowledge of all stories on both sides Bestowal. All she really needed to do was nudge the objects in motion. This was likely not even her first option, but the one she fell back on when Ater didn't go as planned. Note how she was not remotely ruffled until Cat and Masego managed to pry the Book out of her; she clearly already knew the shape of what would happen next.

It's important to remember that Bard and Cat both work off of considering what is bound to happen and arranging events in their own favour. Like the thing with the Goblins and the Green Stretch coming to Cat for arbitration; the exact details were irrelevant. The Story will complete itself around Named and Claimants once it starts being written.

The only thing that makes this seem far-fetched to me is that it kept working after the Evil stories were put on hold. Probably just means that Bard wasn't relying too hard on Villains acting like Villains, anyway.

jamesc9

Well, a lot of the villains have been trying hard not to act like classical cackling villains for a while, so if the Bard was still relying on it, that would be a bad plan.

[Tenmei](#)

Im now also reminded that Cat suspected that the Intercessor had been brewing the split between Cordelia and Hanno for a very long time.

So this makes perfect sense!
Whether she decides to interfere though.. guess we will have to see soon..

caoimhinh

This is not something that the Bard planned so far ahead, but rather a consequence of Cordelia backtracking and making a claim for the Name of Warden of the West, which put them back into the plan the Bard had of having the First Prince of Procer as Named with the angel weapon.

The situation and events are definitely different from how the Bard envisioned them initially, but the story she was using back then is in power again.

ninegardens

Ha ha ha ha ha

Silly Hanno.

You thought you would get to fight the dragon BEFORE the big bad.

He... kind of made an ass of himself in this one. His absolute willingness to hurt and maim people based on a weird instinct of "Cat is doing a bad thing"? its a lack of trust.

Also, MK learning things and becoming a better/wiser person is low key my favourite part of this chapter.

Linnus42

Did you miss the part we tried to talk down everyone?
Or that he only did damage to them that they could heal from?
While Indrani was explicitly trying to take out his eye and deal permanent damage.

Dont see how some of that can be your takeaway without massive anti character bias.

But yes Christophe growth is nice.

ninegardens

Okay, this is fair critique. He did try to talk down everyone and.... I'm maybe not fairly accounting for the fact that unlike Christoph, he still does not seem to get that this is a spar, not a war.

I know that Niether the Barrow sword, not Indrani, nor the hunted Magician are trying to kill him (even if he seems to think they are), and its easy for that distinction to colour my interpretation of things.

Indrani "trying to deal permanent damage" I'll take with a grain of salt- Indrani is a lying liar who lies, and has a VERY good measure of how far to push things (see Ranger fights).

Linnus42

I argue if he thought this was not a spar he would not have been concerned about dealing permanent damage. I think he gets Cat is playing a game but not why and think its stupid.

Lets hope DK doesn't launch an attack during this debacle. But yes Christophe growth is nice shows Hanno's method on him worked out quite well.

ninegardens

Actually wait, I think I figured out what bothered me in Hanno's thinking.

At no point does he think "These people are dangerous too me, therefore I must hurt them to defend myself", his *primary* concern seems to be "Well obviously I can beat them, But I guess I'll have to chop their legs off *because I am in a hurry* "

I get that there's way more to it than that, but the initial read of "I'm in a hurry, no legs for you" was... super jarring.

[Liliet](#)

TBF, Hanno does trust the feeling that's telling him he HAS to be in a hurry, and for good reason. It's not steered him wrong yet, except for when he himself made mistakes.

Personally I found his estimate of the Woe more jarring. He's sure as fuck more charitable towards heroes.

Xi Cree

I would like to counter that the only one he knows Personally is Cat... who he views as the linchpin holding them all to a higher standard.

... and he's not wrong. Just missing out on their deeper character developments.

It's actually amusing how on the money he is about who they USED to be... while mistaking it for who they Are.

[Liliet](#)

Mm. Hanno is quite thoroughly ignorant of what's going on around him, including how much Indrani is liked and respected by the team she's led – heroes included – and how even Alexis has started talking to her again.

That's... a BIT of a problem? It's not like this information is deeply hidden...

SpeckofStardust

eh his view on Indrani is spot on, now he badly misreads Hakram because Hakram even before he got attached to cat 'cared' he just has problems in expressing it (his fixation on the tower building game started pre cat)

As for Indrani character development,
"Indrani," I said, "how many people have you killed this year?"

The ochre-skinned Named hummed.

"Define people," she finally asked.

"Because that," I told him. – Book 6 chapter 16
Like Indrani can and does love other people, but if she doesn't love someone well, she can and likely will leave corpses in back alleys or drag them to people she likes but wants to mess with.

[*Liliet*](#)

I wonder how he reconciles his view of Indrani with the love and respect she's earned from her team – you know, the one with Vagrant Spear on it. And the fact Alexis talks to her again now.

And eeyup, no excuse for Hakram. Does he just judge Hakram for disliking him or what?

SpeckofStardust

Honestly Hakram and Hanno are the same with the whole trusting a higher power (angels/Cat) to follow, both also grew out of just trusting to making their own choices (hanno via force and Hakram by choice) as such that could simply be a reaction to your mirror on the other side.
Indrani is becoming Ranger which sorta is a bad look considering how much of a butt Ranger was. And Ranger was loved by the other calamities. Someone being loved/respected doesn't mean someone is a good person.

[*Liliet*](#)

TBF, I don't think being an asshole is a feature of the Name. It's not a villainous one for one, that's been said repeatedly. And Indrani kind of

specifically aims to be less of an asshole than Hye, which admittedly is a VERY low bar, but even just aim counts for something.

And I'm not talking about the WOE liking and respecting Indrani. I'm talking about her being put IN CHARGE (this matters) of a mixed team, and how they came out of it her friends willing to come to her and tell her things. Vagrant Spear? Forsaken Paladin? Those people.

When Hye was in charge of some kids, they came out of it with a suppressed desire to carve up her face. Indrani... has made a different showing.

[Liliet](#)

Good observation on Hakram and Hanno. They're also both still following the ideals of the entity they initially submitted to, just on their own!

Insanenoodlyguy

No, Cat told us. This only works if she follows through. She legit is trying to eat the book of something, and will if nobody can stop her. Hanno is being spurred by that because it's legit. The fact she doesn't expect it to work or even has that as her primary outcome doesn't change that she'll do it if nobody prevents her.

[Liliet](#)

> I'm maybe not fairly accounting for the fact that unlike Christoph, he still does not seem to get that this is a spar, not a war.

> Hanno's eyes narrowed. Light pulsed under his skin. Perhaps this was more serious a situation than he'd thought. He needed to finish this fight quickly, so he should set out bait.

...

> Hanno almost sighed. Was he truly going to have to fight his way to the summit of the tower before he could speak with the Warden, as if this were a Dread Empress' lair being cracked open? He opened his mouth to reply with one last offer of diplomacy but the words never came out: the air had just shivered. Great power was being used above him, a staggering amount of Night. And it was being used to smother something, he found, eyes narrowing. Forcefully put out a light. Instinct tugged at him urgently, insistently. Whatever it was Catherine Foundling had just begun, it could

not be allowed to finish. Hanno slowly raised his sword.

>

> "Change of plans," the Sword of Judgement told the villains. "I can no longer afford to hold back."

Hanno understands that Catherine is not actually hostile as well as Christophe does, but he has more accurate intel on how urgent it is, and Catherine has deliberately tugged on it to make it pretty damn urgent. Christophe's insight is valuable, but Cat is also specifically for real intending to eat the Book of Some Things if Hanno doesn't stop her.

caoimhinh

What are you talking about?

Hanno explicitly noted how none of them were trying to kill him, just delaying him. He only noted that some of their moves were serious strikes that would deal lethal damage to someone less skilled than him.

Which, to be fair, is what they need to do just to buy time when fighting against someone so strong as Hanno.

Hanno only hurried here because he can physically feel that Catherine is doing something with that massive accumulation of Night, which she is, so it's not a weird instinct of "she is doing a bad thing", she is actually doing it, and declared to Indrani that she would. We even saw her last chapter and don't know if she succeeded in absorbing the Book.

SnappleFacts

I'm not convinced that Indrani shooting out his eye in this situation would be permanent. Cat's eye is permanently gone because of Revenant bullshit, but we don't actually know whether Archer would be using something that could accomplish the same. Certainly she's got something in her bag of tricks that could do it, but she's holding back—Hanno explicitly notes a moment where she chooses **not** to stab him in the armpit, which with a long knife would be a lethal blow or close to one.

Is it fucked up to try to shoot someone's eye out, yes, but this is a setting where magical and/or light-based healing can walk back an awful lot.

Abrakadabra

Okay, Hanno is your personal favourite because of the hue of his epidermis. We get it.

Linnus42

He is actually not at all lol. One of my favorites sure but number one, no. Its funny you assume that he is my favorite just cause of skin color though that says more about you then it does about me.

My favorite character overall still living is Hakram.

ninegardens

So, can we just pause to acknowledge the Cerebus Rollercoaster we are on?

Like, we've cut direct from "I killed my father and Dead king has murdered Procer" to "Wacky hijinx Miss Evil Overlord Maam".

This isn't a criticism, its just a... This story swings between silly game and grimdark fantasy... and has swung back and forth repeatedly.

And some of that fits (a warm fireside moment in a dark world), and some of it... is like this, and I love it, I really do, but god damn, that switch is giving me whiplash some days.

[Liliet](#)

That's honestly explicitly and specifically what I like about it.

Oshi

The only problem for me is when the roller coaster ride costs me story/pathos/time as it did with the arc in the Empire.

[Liliet](#)

Hum. It has never cost ME story or pathos.

[Liliet](#)

Never cost ME any of it -smug shrug-

Snappy270

TBF I see it more of cat cant figured out the emotional problems she been trying to deal with. So she did find a solution to this problem so she is putting her all in to distract herself cause this is what she is good at. There will probs be an emotional fall after this, since i bet she never talked to viv about it, even though they have been working together.

shikkarasu

Yep. Grief is hard and takes a long time to get over, but it is rarely complete paralysis for 3+ months. She will keep being hurt and depressed, but she can also try to keep living her life. Sometimes she will even live it. Sometimes she will even have some Dark Majitress. As a treat.

Anomandris

Huh – this chapter (well, the fallout from this rather) kinda tells me why I would never be a Hero....

Cause if I am Hanno, I would walk away from all this. He keeps getting plots, knives in his back, and broadly shit from not only his side, his counter-side as well as the big bad facing them. He hasn't shown anything so far in the story to warrant the same. He tries talking – nothing. He literally is opening up a dwarf gate for Talking!

He tries being non lethal – nothing. He goes for breaking wrists cause he knows that the war still needs the Barrow sword. In return, let's put an arrow in his back and throw night at him.

(But hey, Akua still gets to be Calernia Jesus, so who cares, am I right?)

Walk away, mate. Win or loose, let them live the consequences of their actions. Ain't heroic, but definitely human. And still more than Cat/Procer/Levant deserve.

Annya

Are we reading the same story?

Sorry, PRINCE White? He gets nothing? He makes himself a gigantic pain in the ass, creates literally half the drama with Cordelia Hasenbach in the middle of a war with the DK and he is the one whom you see as hurt and not getting the respect he deserves. He is an agent of his own actions and those actions are based on how he sees the world and his role in it. I do agree that there was a nice way of being more mature which went sideways in the engagement with MK and not just that but since then he has been escalating and deepening the divide and he honestly believes he knows better. He is a hero, so of course he does but the same goes for every other hero .

I am curious why you dragged Akua into this, honestly.

Insanenoodlyguy

If he walks away, cat eats the book. And she's told us she'd do it, that's not a bluff. All of this works because it's not a bluff. It's just that it's not her primary goal in doing this. You walk away when the stakes are this high, you live to regret it the rest of your life. That too is a story. And he wouldn't

be named in the first place if he had that kind of give in the first place.

caoimhinh

Yeah, but that's not the point of what Anomandris was saying. The point is "I wouldn't be a Hero, because they kind of stuff they have to do is something I wouldn't do. I would walk away from this mess, Hanno won't."

beleester

He's trying to talk to the dwarves, yes, but going over Cordelia's head in the process. You know, the leader of the alliance, the person whose literal *job* is to talk to people. They can't both claim to speak for all of Calernia.

Also, Cat is being about as non-lethal as Hanno is being, so I'm willing to chalk it all up as "basically just sparring."

Reader in the Night

Cordelia isn't the Leader of the Alliance. There is no "Leader" of the Alliance, that's how alliances work. And she sure as hell doesn't have the authority to speak for all of Calernia.

Hanno doesn't, either, but when the hell has that ever stopped a Hero from invoking Moral Righteousness as justification to make choices for other people?

jamesc9

When they were a hero of something un-photogenic that involves enabling people to choose for themselves, but those ones probably don't get stories written about them.

Oshi

If this ends with Cordelia, Hanno and Cat named I wouldn't be at all surprised. Cordelia to be a voice for what Hanno and Cat could never be. Who says Balance has to be with TWO sides.

NZ

A two legged stool isn't balanced. Tripods. Or triumvirates worked for balance. Someone to break the tie.

Abrakadabra

Good thinking. It would make sense if the three of them would become a council of sorts.
Hanno idealistic good.
Cat practical evil.

Cordelia practical good.
The evil for evil sake side died with the Tyrant.

caoimhinh

To be fair, Hanno is more practical Good than Cordelia by far, and Catherine herself has noted how he is more prone to compromise and agree with her in most situations than Cordelia. The thing is, Hanno has lines that he won't cross, (because that's what having a principle means, you don't get to break it when it's inconvenient to maintain it), and thus when the time comes for standing for something, he won't yield. Which is what Catherine herself does.

Cordelia is *bureaucratic* Good, apparently orderly things and complex system establishment that would work wonders if properly implemented... except it won't. Because that's how Procer is. Pretty on the outside but a corrupt shitshow of bickering nobles at its core using legalese to avoid fulfilling the spirit of the law. And she is obsessed with maintaining noble privileges, and she has consistently proven that she will go back on signed agreements the moment something threatens the privileges of nobles, and will not stand for principles except the benefits of Procer, and more specifically Procer's nobility. She has also proved that she won't do what is good or sensible if it is politically inconvenient for her, as shown during the Crusades and during the Red Axe case.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cat is already named. There might be a possibility of them sharing a name, because it's never happened and so is now very possible, but the goal here is to let this resolve in a way that lets Cordy and Hanno not destroy their working relationship.

jamesc9

@Oshi; @NZ; does a three-legged stool imply that someone has backing from an entity other than the gods above and below?

SpeckofStardust

Hanno made the dimmest mistake that good or cordy got immediately, if Cat has set it up for you to "solo" her she will kick your ass.
Like on the villain scale Cats been tied with the Dead King as number 1 for like years at this point.

caoimhinh

But Hanno was explicitly and consistently trying to NOT fight. He spent the whole chapter trying to dialogue with every single person he met and fighting only when forced to. He didn't climb that tower to solo Catherine, he went there to talk. And only hurried because he needed to talk to her and stop her from what he could feel she was doing.

SpeckofStardust

He started off with a party at his back for a reason. The fact that he rushed ahead because he can "do something" is wrong, he cant do something he cant stop it solo and his presumption that he could was his mistake.

Matt

He had a party because hed called a meeting of heroes, they were with him at the time. Cat decided to crash it to stop him alnd force a fair confontation/force him to ally with cordelia. He didnt form a party to face her, her actions arent defensive. Its intetesting how when his feeling that he must act now even if solo paints him as pigheaded and stupid when Cat has done so in multiple instances of the story and its be lauded as brilliant. Guess it just proves people will carry bias for their 'team' even if theyre acting no different from the 'enemy'.

jamesc9

@caolimhinh

> [Hanno] spent the whole chapter trying to dialogue ...

Ish. It didn't extend to answering riddles.

[Liliet](#)

Nice to finally get an acknowledgement of the "share the Name" option, though it's a bit frustrating that it comes so late and as such an aside. Really should have been explained earlier IMHO, and in Cat's POV, too. Though it's interesting characterization that we learn it from Cordelia, I expect in context that it's more that Cat already knows this and finds it too obvious to remark upon, than that somehow Cordelia came up with a solution Cat didn't at all.

It IS excellent that Cordelia has thought of it, though. Points for her.

Insanenoodlyguy

Actually I think it's now a possibility, though not my first choice. Still we are told today that it definitely never ever happens, can't happen. Which means it totally could happen now.

Liliet

True!

ISiejek

Hanno is such an ass, not only is his personality shitty, he has the nerve to talk about consequences when this is blatantly only occurring as a consequence of his actions. Again!

Liliet

Honestly, I'd ordinarily disagree with Hanno's personality being shitty, but... -looks at the latest arc-
...he's been getting worse

hue hue

The Mirror Knight finally learned, Tarric gave the guy very good lessons

Rynjin

Cordelia...why the hell do you want a job where your literal only responsibility is "herding Chosen" if you're already tired of doing it in the fucking TRIAL PHASE.

ArkhnIX

I don't think Cordelia's tired of doing it. I think she's tired of doing it WHEN SHE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO. That is what makes the difference here. She sees how Hanno is running things as a problem she ends up having to wrangle when they step on her countries toes, and she wants home to do better. And if he won't Cordelia believes she can do the better job. She expresses a desire to learn namelore here, which shows she is willing to learn and work with the heroes, and understand their rules. She wouldn't do that if she didn't want to actually do the job well. She'd just rely on political authority.

For all Cordelia sees heroes as a problem, she isn't inflexible. It just takes her a bit of time and evidence to change her mind. See her opinion on the mirror knight in this chapter to show how actual work to better himself raised Cordelia's opinion of Christophe. If the other heroes can actually show they can be competent adults, and not just be a parade of problems at her door, I think Cordelia would probably respect them more.

Rynjin

Doing your duty is all well and good, but someone who is resentful of a responsibility shouldn't be taking that responsibility onto themselves. It's just going to impact

their judgment, because they're not going to be making decisions with a clear head, there's always going to be that thought of "I can't believe I have to fucking do this".

john

Cat worked her way up to Warden of the East with a similar attitude. Would you rather have a leader who resents having to use their own power, and thus with care born of bitterness arranges stable solutions which won't soon result in them needing to use it again... or one who savors the use, treating any and every additional scrap of clout like a shiny new toy?

jamesc9

I would love to be convinced that real people are like this. Can you point me to some prominent people IRL who seem to live like the first option?

Abrakadabra

Because duty. That moves cordy forward.

jamesc9

Lest dawn fail.

MoR

EE, i just started reading 3 months ago and just now got to the newest chapter. I always read the comments too, and i dont think you should. They get weirder, way to entitled and toxic as your amazing story goes on. Its actual torture thou to actually wait for new chapters, i check at least twice a day. Become a patreon member too since you really, really deserve it. Maybe approach netflix for a series deal, they are desperate and the sheer amount of stories seems very profitable. Might be a solution for the decision to not publish this as a book yet, and solve the narrative breaks between chapters since it would make excellent episodes. I just really love the world you created! Dont let all these self entitled people trying to force your hand by explaining what they would absolutly not like going forward influence you in the slightest. Your way is the single best one, as you prove chapter for chapter. Keep beeing you, and thank you, like a lot.

Abrakadabra

This.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I get where you're coming from, but I also believe that he can balance the often unreasonable input of the comments against his own priorities. He's done so thus far, after all. Shutting out all feedback is not necessarily the optimal solution, though it is always an option.

Also, you might already know this, but there's a schedule for the updates: Tuesday and Friday, every week without fail. The sheer consistency of this is a small part of why I don't think he needs to avoid the comments; if he were agonizing over feedback or doing hasty rewrites there'd be frequent delays, whereas any holdup is a rare thing for this serial.

[Liliet](#)

Personally I don't think a live action adaptation of Guide could remotely do it justice... a cartoon adaptation is actually much more likely to work, for sticking to appearance descriptions of characters, for special effects, for scenery and large scale battles...

Insanenoodlyguy

Agreed. I know it'd reach a wider audience but a live action would be a disappointing underwhelming thing unless it got a lord of the rings tier budget.

[Liliet](#)

LotR is three books adapted into three movies. PGTE, to do remote justice to the source material, would have to be a tv series. Where, like, every other episode had LotR tier budget.

Yeah. I'm dreaming of a cartoon adaptation.

Matt

I agree totally, invincible has proven that a cartoon medium can tell a very mature story incorporate the gore and still pluck emotional heartstrings.

mindsword2

The part I found most interesting was this

"When the punishment had been doled out she'd thought it nonsense, just another example of the White Knight letting off his charges with a slap on the wrist after they behaved atrociously – Christophe de Pavanie had accused the Queen of Callow of cooperating with the Dead King before mutilating a high officer of the Grand Alliance – but perhaps there had been some use to it."

It implies very interesting things about how Cordelia viewed Hanno's Judgement. We all know he was going light (ish) on Mirror but it was to keep the man alive. But the bit "another example" jumps out at me. Have we seen Hanno let any other hero off? The Red Axe was killed, just not in the way Cordelia wanted.

[wadeingintheriver](#)

I mean, going off what the historical punishments for attempting to murder royalty were, the Red Axe got off super lightly. Seeing how Procer is so French/Frankish flavored, I imagine that the legal penalty for attempting to murder a Prince must be similar to the Execution of Damiens for the attempted assassination of Louis XV.

Compared to that, the way that the Red Axe died was a total slap on the wrist, even if she did subsequently get rezzed and axed again.

mindsword2

Quite possibly, but Cordelia did not argue with the sentence of death when it was pronounced. If a more draconian death was needed, it could have been suggested. She tried that with Mirror (a month in a cell) after all.

Linnus42

I think Cordelia is mostly mad at 4 Heroes. Red Axe, Mirror Knight, Grey Pilgrim, White Knight.

Arsenal had some other extra traitors on both sides but they all died so hard to get a harsher sentence.

Red Axe I think has been covered didn't get a light sentence, had a fairly justifiable motivation and was already turned before she got there. Got the Death Penalty. Christophe is a major war asset and got reformed seems fair. Tariq didn't get punished at all but he much like Frederic has dual status. And I think he dies before most of this system was formalized. Also its not like Cordelia had a solution to stop Black from starving all of Procer. I don't think Cordelia even logged a formal complaint about Tariq anyway just stewed about it.

Hanno well he is hardly going to punish himself. But he was following the letter of the law. Cordelia needed compromise and special requests to solve political issues at home.

And I should not for Red Axe and Tariq the trigger for their actions was an actual Villain. While Christophe got tricked by Bard and was being worked on to betray the Drow by Princes (Cordelia's Domain) but he had not agreed to any such betrayal at the time.

[Liliet](#)

Tariq died at the end of book 6, long after the Arsenal clusterfuck.

Reader in the Night

Ouch. Every single time Cordelia compares the Heroes unfavorably with the Highest Assembly I just – I can't. One group is composed of mostly selfish idiots with a few well-intentioned folks (Cordelia, Rolanza, Otto, Frederic); the other group is composed of mostly well-intentioned folks with a few idiots (Red Axe, Christophe). That Cordelia somehow has this flipped around is just physically painful to me.

Even the one persistent gripe that Cordelia has with Heroes: the Red Axe situation. We have a woman who killed her rapist and the man who destroyed her village, and then attacked a Hero who was trying to talk her down and happened to be Proceran Royalty, all while being explicitly manipulated by the Bard. And that's bad, because that kind of internal conflict puts the entire continent at risk, as we know.

And then in Interlude Grand, we have a significant part of the Highest Assembly plotting to have Cordelia assassinated because they didn't like her TAXATION POLICY! The taxation that was necessary to win the War for all of Mankind!

Proceran Royalty habitually sinks their own people into civil war as a form of political showboating or backstab each other for sport, and call it "the Ebb and Flow"! When Catherine demanded their crowns for the common good of the people they purport to rule, all but one balked. Proceran Royalty Sucks.

And that Cordelia can compare the Heroic Named to that and be "annoyed" that she has to wrangle them just smacks of such huge hypocrisy. I can't help but feel like Cordelia is only happy when she's in control, and the reason she was annoyed at Heroes was because she couldn't just bully them with procedure like she does the Highest Assembly.

Linnus42

I do think Cordelia wants to be a control freak. But also she is kinda blind to the issues caused by Nobility because well she has always been one. Kinda like to the fish being in water is the natural experience.

kinigget

The difference is that Cordelia is used to the Highest Assembly, and also knows how to make them do what she wants. While at the same time, she sees heroes as completely intractable and prone to lashing out anything that doesn't meet their moral judgement.

And, well, she's not entirely wrong, but her experiences are very much coloring her views here.

Jdburger

So Cordelia's big hero issue is actually from Saint of Swords at first. If I remember correctly she... and I believe Saint threatens her and ultimately tells her she is powerless to stop her. Then we double down with Tariq whom unilaterally decides sacrificing an entire village is worth it to get the Black Knight. The Mirror Knight and Red Axe just further reinforce the point that Heroic names do not seem to consider how their actions affect non-named.

Even Hanno, mostly because judgement messed him up, is another example Red Axe is executed per the Accords, but he did not consider how this affects the signatories since the Kingfisher is both named and still a ruling noble of Procer. This is another example to Cordelia where the named take precedence over the unnamed.

To Cordelia there is no framework of control or accountability for Heroic Names. Even Villainous names have accountability for their actions in the form of Heroes who will hunt them down. Yes, Procer nobles are duplicitous children, but there are laws that can be exerted if they decide to massacre a village.

ninegardens

^ This

Xinci

To be fair on those, Saint just told her that the rot was too deep into Procer to remove it. Which Cordelia kinda realizes herself later. She didn't actually threaten Cordelia, mostly told her the truth of how things go later

Tariq sacrificed a Village while Cordelia was planning to sacrifice a entire city.

When it comes to the Red Axe, it was only an issue due to the aforementioned rot meaning Procer couldn't actually back up its support of a international compact.

She can blame them for getting in her way, but a lot of the reasons are because Procer itself was lacking.

Jdburger

I think the Red Ace issue is a bit more complicated than just corrupt and rotten nobles. Cordelia is not an absolute monarch so depends on work with her nobles to get things done, and if they decide not to obey her... well we get

glimpse of it this arc. Cordellia agreed to the accords because she believe it was needed to successfully win the war, but there is no guarantee that if she dies or get deposed the next first prince will not leave the alliance. Thus when Red Axe wounded a noble of Procer – her nobility expected not only justice but judgement carried out by Procer. If Cordellia backed down and accepted Hanno's judgement as final the nobles whose land were not on the front lines would become even more recalcitrant and potentially seek a new first Prince.

You can claim this is selfish and symbolic of rot in Proceran Nobility, but it also shows the inherent issue with many of the heroes in the story. Tariq slew a village to capture Black, if not for Cat and other named the Choir of Mercy would have killed multiple world leaders to slay the Tyrant preparing the way for the Dead King to win. Hanno's development was stunted by completely giving himself over to the Choir of Judgement. The Lone Swordsman was willing to martyr an entire city to bleed Praes. Even Red Axe believes that the Accords are wrong because they protect the Rapacious Enchanter, but does not consider how to make them better, only tells Cat to make it so, nor does Red Axe consider why they were done. Effectively several of the big Heroes act as if as long as they operate according to their own morality Providence will take care of the rest. It is this attitude that triggers Cordellia's distrust but I think

Linnus42

I mean Cordelia signed a deal where Hanno and Cat got sole discretion to deal with those Named in their camps. There were zero exceptions for if a Prince of Procer got injured or almost killed. Cordelia wanted the rules changed because she needed help dealing with a Proceran Problem. A deal is not going to last if everyone is going to be carving out political exceptions because their poll numbers are bad on the homefront.

I will however agree that Red Axe issue was not really caused by Nobles. Red Axe is simply a very likely outcome in a system like the Truce and Terms where Villains get free passes for all crimes committed before they sign up. I argue Red Axe was flaw that would inevitably cause issues down the line. And I am not going to condemn Hanno for not stopping her when he didn't meet her until after she did her acts. Nor am I going to condemn a rape victim who saw her whole village massacred for not being especially concerned about a system that she views as protecting monsters. Is it for the Greater Good, sure but Red Axe's reaction is perfectly natural given the trauma

she suffered and the fact Bard got to her first. Also Red Axe is not a big Hero.

Tariq slew a village to stop Amadeus from starving all of Procer by destroying the crop supplies. If anything Tariq resolved the issue with minimal loss of life, considering Cordelia's plan involved sacrificing an entire city to stop Amadeus. Not that she was close to executing that plan. Beggars cannot really be choosers in this situation. Cordelia is more mad that Tariq didn't do her plan than anything else. Even if she claims its because he unilaterally decided to kill Procerans. But I will take the plan that kills less civilians overall.

Lone Swordsmen is irrelevant to Cordelia's complaints. Hanno was already covered above. Red Axe was also.

Jdburger

Cordellia is not an absolute monarch – she is not capable of forcing the other Proceran nobles to follow her orders. She must negotiate and bargain with them and generally rules by having the strongest support. So Cordellia I believe signed the Accords in her role as First Prince and the rest of nobles of Procer are going along with it because it more beneficial or less problematic to do so. When Red Axe assaulted or could have potentially killed the Kingfisher who was still a noble of Procer... the other Princes of Procer now have to worry if abiding these Accords will weaken their rights and protections. If so they might decide the benefits of the Accords are outweighed by the drawbacks. Cordellia realizes that and so yea she needed to ensure the Princes got their justice or else Procer as an united front goes away. This is why I am saying the issue is more complicated then just she made an agreement and is reneging on it.

To the Tariq issue if I remember correctly I was pretty sure Black was retreating back to friendly territory at that point. Furthermore unleashing a plague on a village versus having Black assault a city... I am not sure which is worse. You may technically be right and it resulted in fewer casualties in this instance, but in generally both sides have less control over a plague then a siege / assault. Which I think is the big issue here aside from assurance from the Choir of Mercy could Tariq be sure that the plague may not spread to the rest of Procer? We already know the the Choir of Judgement is willingly to atomize someone who dares to Judge them and the Choir of Mercy is willing to kill a lot of other people to uphold Tariq oath towards the Tyrant.

For Red Axe I agree up to a point... my main issue with her actions is when she attacked the Kingfisher for attempting to protect her! There is no good reason for her to have done so... she already had her vengeance and Hanno could execute with no problem. The only reason she did so was because of the Bards plan – a plan that required the Hero to harm an innocent.

Liliet

> To the Tariq issue if I remember correctly I was pretty sure Black was retreating back to friendly territory at that point.

Nope, he was going DEEPER into Proceran territory. Amadeus didn't actually have friendly territory available to retreat to in that campaign – well, there was the Stairwell, but he was going in a completely different direction from the start. He did not have a planned way out of there, at all.

> Furthermore unleashing a plague on a village versus having Black assault a city... I am not sure which is worse.

It wasn't having him assault a city. Cordelia had specifically given orders to let him into the city then set it on fire with civilians still inside, specifically blocking exits for them so they would also prevent the military from organizing and putting out the fire or leaving.

> For Red Axe I agree up to a point... my main issue with her actions is when she attacked the Kingfisher for attempting to protect her! There is no good reason for her to have done so... she already had her vengeance and Hanno could execute with no problem. The only reason she did so was because of the Bards plan – a plan that required the Hero to harm an innocent.

Well, Frederic is not exactly a non-combatant. He also went along with the plan that Red Axe viewed as fundamentally unjust – the T&T – and so was complicit in her eyes.

hakureireimu

Saint didn't just tell what the future will be. She active works to ensure that future (end of Procer) becomes reality by making it difficult otherwise (peace with Cat). And then she says that burning down Procer is a good thing.

Xinci

Even now Procer is fragmenting, they did indeed lose at first, and newer systems are coming out of it dying. Even this current state is under a similar paradigm to how it would go. You can say this is due to Bard, but Saint was calling out a fairly accurate pattern for the death of empires. The existence of a particular group or culture is never inviolable or perpetual.

Konstantin von Karstein

That's true, but it's not the only thing SoS did. She voluntarily sabotaged the war effort against Keter by trying to prevent any alliance between Callow and the West, and fully acknowledged it could mean the death of millions.

Reader in the Night

To everyone saying that Cordelia's beef with Heroes is that they will all just do whatever they feel is best and hang everything else: You're all absolutely correct. And Heroes do exactly that.

But so does Cordelia, all of the goddamn time. Cordelia habitually does unspeakable things to Proceran law, twisting it, exploiting it, or having it changed by trickery and deceit, when she's not outright breaking it, like when she ordered a failed attack on herself to frame a Proceran Noble for treason (she ordered a Villainous Named to attack said Noble, too. That she had no issue with).

It seems to me that Cordelia's issue with the Heroes isn't that they're unaccountable: The proceran nobles are pretty unaccountable themselves, and Cordelia most of them all, and she's fine with that. Her problem is that she, Cordelia Hasenbach, isn't personally in control of them the way she can Highest Assembly. She's too used to winning, and the Heroes are actors that she can't browbeat into compliance.

In that sense, Cordelia truly deserves a Heroic Name, because that sense of "Justice is whatever the fuck I determine it to be, and hang everybody else's opinion" is exactly what Heroes run on: personal conviction. The problem is that she's very eager to hypocritically condemn all other Heroes for the very same thing she habitually does, while vying for the right to pass judgment on Heroes everywhere. And that can only end poorly.

Jdburger

So I am pretty sure Cordellia does not have control of the High Assembly. That's one of the major issues we see when we look at Procer is that the nobles are acting as an antagonist

to Cordellia. To achieve her goals against the nobility she does often exploit their own laws and sometimes violate them.... But the laws exist to govern Procer. Those same laws give the nobles recourse to select a new first Prince – since I believe Cordellia has worried about getting ousted before.

On the other hand there are no laws really to govern Heroes – only stories.

The second issue is scale of power when comes to accountability. Cordellia is confined to “mundane-ish” options to achieve goals. Yes she can hire an assassin, named or not, but so could any other noble or rich person really. Ultimately anything she could do is possible by any regular person (assuming similar resources – which would include wealthy merchants or nobles in different countries)

A Heroic names though have a lot more power that trumps unnamed abilities. Remember Tariq create a plague and bound the Tyrant to tell only the truth under pain of Choir nuke. I am pretty sure given what we seen throwing the Mirror Knight in front of an army – the Mirror Knight might still have good odds to survive. Hell when the White Knight is called out for his actions – the Hierarch gets blasted by the Choir of Judgement.

If Cordellia had the same unaccountability as Heroes in this story and the degree of control over the High Assembly that the Heroes have over their own actions. Most of her plot items would have been resolved quickly. All Malicia’s plots to stymie Procer would have failed because Cordellia is First Prince and she would execute the treasonous nobles. She would not have to have closed Assembly with only her allies enough people to make it legitimate force through edicts – she would have just commanded it be so.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia actually very rarely twists laws, and only in extremely desperate situations. You’re referring to her actions in Grand, but that’s basically Cordelia snapping and going “no more ms nice gal” towards people who were trying to have HER assassinated while she was trying to lose the war with DK for all their necks at least a little bit slower. For years before then she was upholding both the letter and spirit of law.

Matt

Agree.

zenanii

Good to see that Cats plan for amending her friendship with Hanno is coming along nicely.

nick

Throwing a hero off a tower is prerequisite for any good friendship with a villain:)

Interlude: Occidental II

"Intelligence, Chancellor, is understanding that alligator moats never work against heroes. Cleverness is paying an alchemist for water-coloured acid instead."

– Dread Emperor Venal

The world was upside down.

Hanno could not recall ever waking up hanging from his feet before, at least not in his own body. It would have been disorienting even if the strands of solid shadow binding his feet weren't slowly turning, spinning his body with them. His wrists were behind his back and, he found out after flexing his muscles, tightly secured. Two layers of steel manacles and one of Night, if he was feeling it right. How characteristically thorough of Catherine. He was also, to his mild discomfort, naked from the belt up.

The room was chillier than he would like.

"Hey, look who's up," Archer's voice cheerfully called out.

Now that the spinning was allowing to see more than a screen of Night and glimpses of the stone floor, Hanno found to his mild bemusement that he was being held in what looked like a dungeon. Like spider legs on glass, he felt an instinct skitter across his mind. A wrongness. Hanno cocked his head to the side.

"Is that an iron maiden?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Archer shrugged, seated on top of the open iron cabinet full of spikes. Her legs were wrapped around the head of a screaming ghost, keeping her in place.

"Came with the tower," she told him. "You know Praesi."

Hanno did not, save through memories not truly his own. Perhaps he was lucky, considering what he was looking at. A dozen torture racks, manacles to hang people up against the wall at twisted angles and some sort of... wheel with ropes? He spent a moment trying to work out where the person would go on the device, coming away with the conclusion that no matter *where* that was the exercise would be deeply painful. He pulled at his bindings again, but the steel did not give in the slightest. He then reached for Light, but while he could sense it Hanno could not seem to *move* it.

It was as if a deep and dark pit lay between his will and the gift of Above, not forbidding contact so much as keeping out of reach. It was, he thought, a much harder restraint to break than a simple forbidding would have been. Focusing, he tried to seize the smallest possible sliver of Light.

"I have been healed," Hanno said, as silence would make his work obvious.

The absence of pain on his cheek and back had been noticeable enough, though he could not look to see if the wounds were closed.

"Some," Archer said, wagging a finger in direction. "Mostly we kept it from getting worse, so don't you go getting ideas."

It worked. Hanno felt a well of satisfaction as a mote of Light moved just as he'd willed it. *The binding is not perfect*, he thought. At a guess, there was a lower bound to the quantity of Light he could be prevented from seizing. It was a common enough weakness in workings, given that most human minds had difficulty grasping the level of precision that was the given of the divine. Carefully, Hanno moved his mote slightly to the side before releasing it. It did not move.

The turning hid his pleased smile, and it was gone by the time he was facing his captor again.

"It is traditional for one to escape when held in a torture dungeon," he reminded Archer.

"I could hamstring you if you want," she offered with a sharp smile. "It'd take care of those pesky traditions for you."

It was difficult, careful work. Hanno's forehead beaded with sweat as, one mote at a time, he wove the Light into a chord. One that was stretching out, slowly but surely, towards him.

"You haven't, though," he mused. "Why, Archer? If the Warden truly intends to devour the Book of Some Things, as you said, why would she not take all possible measures to ensure I could not get in her way?"

Catherine Foundling was giving him, Hanno thought, a shot at stopping her. A pause. No, he thought, perhaps not him alone: he would be surprised if the First Prince were not already on her way to the tower. She had the spies to learn of this and Frederic would no doubt help her.

"Do I strike you as the woman with the plan, Shiny Boots?" Archer drawled. "I'm just obeying orders."

He doubted that, but there was no point in pushing for answers she would not give. The chord lengthened and lengthened, his back shining with sweat from the work. It had been some time since he'd had to maintain so minute a focus for so long. These days his manipulations of Light tended for the large, not the small. A lesson to be learned, Hanno considered. Growing in power had caused him to lean towards the ram instead of the key when presented with a closed gate, but that might be a mistake.

A *lesson*, Hanno considered, brow creasing as he rotated away from his captor. Was that the entire purpose of this theatrical tantrum? To teach them a lesson? Spider legs pattered across the glass, the wrongness still crawling all over his mind. He was missing something.

"It won't work," he said. "Giving us a common enemy. Forcing us to work together."

"Shit," Indrani sighed. "You twat, I had ten silvers riding on you not figuring it out until Cordy showed up."

It should have been beneath Hanno to derive even a crumb of satisfaction from having made the smug villainess lose something, but he was only human.

"Unfortunate," Hanno lied, moving on immediately. "This is short-sighted of her, Archer. My differences with Hasenbach are not going to be ended by an evening of making common cause. We already *have* a common cause."

The Grand Alliance, and beyond that Good. Cordelia Hasenbach, however, intended to suborn heroes to laws and crowns after having spent the last few years repeatedly demonstrating that both failed to serve their stated purpose even when the stakes were the highest possible ones. Hanno simply could not understand how someone could look at the behaviour of the Highest Assembly during and before the war then conclude that the likes of them should be given *more* power over heroes. There needed to be changes, that was true, but what was truly needed was an intermediary between Above's champions and earthly powers.

Someone who could steer away from conflicts between them, not serve as some crown-appointed governor of heroes. It simply would not work, and it *should* not: heroes often found their Names

fighting against corrupt authority, it was absurd that an entire system should be built around punishing them should they do this. Absurd and doomed to failure. Named would not bend to those laws, it would run against their nature. All it would accomplish was make heroes into outlaws so that another pack of vultures could feel a little safer plotting in their palaces.

The chord was stretching ever close to him, to his will, providence's nudge making the efforts just a little easier. He must be approaching the close of his conversation with Archer, which would end with his breaking out of his bindings.

"I do not believe she is evil, Archer," Hanno said. "But we disagree fundamentally on how the world should be. That is not something over which there can be compromise and it cannot be papered over by an evening of fighting side by side."

"Well, you got us right pegged," Archer mourned. "Guess we'll just lose then."

The chord connected even as she finished the last word, Light flooding through Hanno's veins, and in the instant that followed the illusion shattered. Like a pane of glass being smashed.

Hanno was not in a dungeon and Archer was not sitting atop an iron maiden.

She was perched on a raised stone covered by runes and glyphs, an arrow loosely nocked to the bow on her knee, but it was not her the illusion had been meant to veil. It was their surroundings. They were in the great room that was the heart of the tower, the nexus where all the power converged, and here shadow dwelled like a living thing. Currents of Night flowed from channels in the walls and floor, rivers crossing the air, and everywhere copper gutters sprawled in esoteric patterns that stung his eyes. Glyphs covered every inch of stone, pulsing with something unseen that moved the tendrils of Night streaming down as if some great beast was breathing in and out.

Now that he was no longer blinded by the illusion, Hanno found the sheer amount of power flowing through the room suffocating. How was Archer unaffected? The darkness swirled lazily around her like smoke, almost playfully, and she gave no sign of feeling ill. His eyes moved past her, following the gutters inevitably leading towards the centre of the room. There lay a raised dais, on which a pedestal had been raised. And on that pedestal a simple leather book had been set down, one that would have seemed a simple manuscript if not for the way Hanno's soul sang whenever he gazed at it. And in front of the artefact stood the third person in the tower heart.

The Warden of the East, leaning against her staff on the dais and wreathed in so much Night she seemed entirely made of it,

cast a disgruntled glance in his direction and snapped her fingers. The darkness he'd woven the Light chord through deepened, grew longer, and the chord shattered in a thousand small motes. Utter surprise stilled him. That should not have been possible, Hanno knew. Night always broke when matched with Light. He'd thought his memory of it being devoured when he was captured was mistaken, that there'd been a misunderstanding on his part – an artefact had been used, perhaps.

"The fucking *Sisters* made that Light trap," Catherine Foundling said, sounding both admiring and disgusted. "And you figured a way through in, what, eighty heartbeats at most? While hanging upside down and talking the whole time."

She shook her head, muttering something that sounded like *fucking heroes* under her breath.

"We were at the good part," Archer smiled at him. "Go on, Shiny Boots, tell us more about how you've figured all this out."

He was still frozen, dripping with sweat and struggling with the surprise. Was it a trick, another illusion? *It should not have been possible for Night to do this.*

"What have you done, Warden?" Hanno harshly asked. "What is this?"

It was more than simply his own Light being suppressed, he realized. The Book he now saw, was fighting darkness encroaching from all sides. He'd not seen it at first because of the gloom, but there were thin strands of Night coming down from the ceiling and walls and trying to touch the holy artefact. They were being kept back by a presence that came in the form of an invisible globe – six, seven inches wide – but Hanno could feel the pressure against it. It was as if the entire tower and all its Night was bearing down on the Book through the tendrils, its weight slowly crushing the artefact. Snuffing out the Light within.

Night, he thought once more, should not have been able to do that. It should have dispersed, vanished, given ground.

"Are you," Catherine Foundling idly asked, "asking me to tell you all about my Evil plan?"

It would not be a deal with a devil, she saw those as beneath her. Had Below itself blessed her with strength? Hanno's stomach clenched. It was unlike the Hellgods to act so blatantly, but these were the end times. Rules grew weaker in the eyes of men and gods alike.

"How many patrons can a single lifetime fit, Catherine?" Hanno asked, hoping pricking her pride would loosen her tongue. "After this one, how many more do you have waiting in the wings?"

He got an amused glance back.

"That would absolutely have worked on me when I was seventeen," the Warden admitted.

Archer loudly cleared her throat.

"Fine," she corrected. "Maybe for a little while after too."

He was not learning anything, but even a delay was worth buying. Soon the First Prince and others would – Hanno's stomach clenched. Even as she had been speaking with him, he realized she had kept the ritual going. How? He found that sole eye watching him, amused. His thoughts must have been plain on his face.

"The first thing I did when this began," the Warden of the East told him, "was figure out a ritual that I'd be able to walk away from before it ends. Made this whole affair longer than it had to be, all bludgeon and no finesse, but that way it accounted for you crashing the party. A worthwhile trade-off, yeah?"

Good, if he could get her talking...

"If you knew I would act stop you," Hanno said, "then, on some level, you know this shouldn't be done. You can still stop, Catherine. There have been no deaths and-"

"And I'm not breaking any laws," she replied, tone mild. "Landing the tower was impolite, I suppose, but that's not why you're really here. What claim do you realistically have on the Book of Some Things, Hanno? You didn't make it and it was ripped out of the Bard, not one of your charges. It has nothing to do with you."

It was not happenstance, that Catherine Foundling had ensured she was both the Queen of Callow and the Warden of the East. It was her favourite tactic to use one title as cover for actions she took as the other: shaking Callowan swords and Grand Alliance laws at him now even as this room held more Night than he'd ever seen gathered in a single place. Bandyng words with her would be pointless, Hanno thought, she could talk in circles until the Last Dusk. Directness was the only way through, stripping the fig leaf.

"It belongs," he plainly said, "to the Warden of the West. Good's stories in Good hands."

The light of the room dimmed, shadows roiling as the invisible globe around the Book groaned.

"That's nice," the Warden of the East praised. "Good turn of phrase, very heroic."

She leaned forward, the movement casting her sharp cheekbones even more harshly. One eye under a cloth as dark as Night, the other eerily knowing. Shadows melded into the long dark hair, threaded themselves around the forlorn staff of dead yew. There was not a man or woman of Calernia that would have seen her in that moment and not known her to be Below's favourite daughter.

"Now tell me, Hanno of Arwad," Catherine curiously asked, "what exactly *is* it that compels me to obey you?"

He blinked, honestly taken aback.

"You would destroy the Accords by denying this," he slowly said. "Accords that you have-"

"No," the Warden cut in. "They'll still all sign, the nations, and they're the part that matters. Even if the heroes balk – and a lot of them won't – then most of what I want will be achieved. Try again."

Gods Above, what was this?

"You would play these games when we prepare to march on the Crown of the Dead?" he asked, incredulous.

It might be that some would sign the Liesse Accords nonetheless, as she'd said, but they could not truly succeed without the support of the heroes. If too many refused the rules, they meant nothing. What was the point of this petty posturing when Calernia teetered on the brink of annihilation? The Dead King was loose.

"Yeah, we *are* about to do that aren't we?" Archer drawled. "Cat, you must have forgot."

Hanno himself had forgot she was there. Archer was someone who called attention to herself, but she was a candle to Catherine Foundling's bonfire.

"Got distracted, I guess. Maybe it was all the concerned diplomats knocking at my door," the Warden sharply smiled. "You know, so they could tell me their worries about the pissing match between Prince White and the First Prince sinking the Grand Alliance before it even began to march."

Archer let out an overdone noise of understanding, all the while smiling like a cat playing with a crippled bird.

"Sorry, Shiny Boots, I interrupted," Archer solicitously said. "You were saying something about games, the siege of Keter coming up?"

His jaw tightened. Catherine could have been lying about the diplomats, but he doubted it. It was usually her preference to use the truth as her knife. The implied reproach was not without merit if his rivalry with the First Prince was shaking the confidence of allies to such an extent.

"How many?" Hanno asked.

"Even if it had been only one," the Warden of the East said, "it would have been too many."

That was, he considered, true. He had not been wrong to step forward and act, but he had not tended to the situation as well as he should have. Authority was trust made action, and he had been wasting trust. All involved lost from this.

"I have been at fault," Hanno frankly replied. "My error must be mended and will be."

He then flicked a hard look around him.

"But my faults, whatever they might be, excuse none of this."

"Excuse?" the Warden of the East laughed. "You seem to be misunderstanding something, Hanno. I have no need to excuse anything."

The Night in the room billowed, like cloth in the wind, as if answering its mistress's harsh laughter.

"Who is it that's going to call me to account tomorrow?" she asked. "You?"

She looked him up and down, dismissive.

"How's that working out?"

Then she gestured dismissively at the distance.

"Cordelia?" she continued. "She's so badly in my debt she'd break an entire wagon of shovels digging her way back to daylight. Besides, neither of you actually commands a damned thing."

Yet another reason the First Prince could not be the Warden of the West. She was too tightly bound to Procer and the debts of gratitude it would Callow – and that kingdom's Black Queen, even after her abdication. The one-eyed priestess shrugged.

"You've split up Procer with your Prince White business," the Warden said. "And she's got her own loyalists in the heroes. You're coming to me with threats and warnings, Hanno, while your fucking house is on fire."

A fire that would be put out the moment he became Warden of the West. The First Prince would know better than to try to exploit heroes for political gains the way she had when he had been the White Knight. A Warden, unlike a Knight, would be able to refuse her when she next tried to mutilate a young girl's corpse to appease the unappeasable. Besides, the dark-skinned hero was still a high officer of the Grand Alliance. She could not capture him like this without breaking the treaties she had signed.

"Unless you intend to keep me imprisoned until the end of this war," Hanno flatly replied, "there *will* be consequences to this."

It was only his own inclination to end this peacefully that would keep her from being scraped raw for this, and he was steadily losing it.

"No," she bluntly said, "there won't be."

He stared at her in disbelief. Did she think herself invincible because Below's stories had been silenced?

"You both need me too badly to pick that fight," the Warden said. "See, if you actually do go after me it's not going to be kept quiet. It's going to come out, word's going to spread. And what exactly do you think's going to happen when people learn you're coming after me to steal an artefact that was already in my possession?"

Hanno's blood ran cold as he genuinely considered it. Even if he was the Warden by then, the amount of damage that conflict would cause just as they prepared to march on Keter...

"You would kill this entire continent for your pride?" he challenged.

"See, now we get to it," Catherine Foundling mused. "You're holding Calernia hostage, pretending you can't bend but I should. She does the same, in her own way. And that's the part that actually pisses me off, you know? That you're both taking charity from me, depending on my goodwill, and then I for some godforsaken reason I have to pretend one of you is my *equal*."

There was a cold, burning indignation in that dark eye that Hanno knew was too blistering to be feigned.

"You have not earned it," Catherine Foundling said, smiling thin and sharp, "and this offends me."

A blade-like smile, he thought. He'd seen it before on another face and liked it no better then.

"This is not," Hanno slowly said, "posturing, is it?"

He'd seen from the start that Catherine was playing a game, that she was enforcing rules and preventing deaths. He had thought it to mean that she was not serious, but it was beginning to sink in that he'd been wrong.

It might be a game she was playing, but the Warden was deadly serious.

"I've played nice with you fine folk," Catherine nonchalantly said. "But it looks like you need the same wake up call Tariq did."

Night surged, swelled, the shapes of thousands of crows flapping their wings filling every surface. Cruel beaks and talons reached out for flesh to slice.

"My help is a *decision*," the Warden of the East said. "It is not a right or a given. And the moment you begin to delude yourself otherwise, I will bury you in a shallow fucking grave."

Hanno breathed out, sought his calm. The situation had deteriorated far beyond what he'd thought possible, but all was not lost. She was still talking and he was still alive. This was not yet over.

"Yet you have not," he said. "So this is still a negotiation."

Her haze hardened, and immediately he knew he had made a mistake.

"You're not learning the lesson, Hanno," Catherine Foundling mildly said. "See, for one you still think that you got me to monologue. That I was trying to hide any of this."

The Book of Some Things screamed, pinpricks of Night beginning to slither through cracks in the globe. Tendrils of darkness were stretching out towards the artefact, hungry and foul. It was like hearing a child be beaten, a painting get ripped: ugly and impossible to take back.

"I didn't need to bargain to eat the Book," the one-eyed priestess said. "Or to shackle you. The difference between you and I, Hanno of Arwad, is that I'm the Warden of the East."

She raised a hand, strands of Night coalescing around it as if they were eager.

"I murdered my own father for that Name," the Warden said. "I've mutilated people I love, scarred my own flesh. That's what I wield every time I call on Night, that's the foundation of my authority."

Darkness pulsed across the room, the breath of some gargantuan beast.

"And you think that your half-assed claim is equal to that?" she scorned. "What is it you've given up, Hanno, that you've *sacrificed*?"

"You have known tragedies," Hanno acknowledged. "But how many of them were of your own making, Catherine?"

He met her eye.

"You think they are something to *boast* of?"

As pain raised one above others, made them worthy. It was the philosophy of the whip, both the master's and the flagellant's. Nothing more. Being hurt didn't make you better. It just made you hurt.

"They're something," the Warden said. "They're weight. Was it you put up against them, Hanno, what's your foundation?"

She snorted.

"No longer having your hand held by angels," she said. "Giving up the pretense you're above petty mortal disputes. You're standing where everyone else started and calling it a journey."

Hanno's fists clenched. How small his doubts and troubles seemed, made into a single turn of phrase. The globe cracked, groaned.

"You've never believed in anything but your right to climb," Hanno harshly said. "I am not surprised you cannot grasp what faith means or what it costs but talk of it coming from you is like a fish speaking of flight."

She smiled unpleasantly.

"Hey, maybe you're right," the Warden said. "Let's find out. Which is stronger, between Light and Night?"

He stilled. Glimpsing what she was about to say before she said it.

"Light, huh," the Warden said. "I wonder why I can shackle you then."

Her eye burned cold.

"Between my authority and yours, Hanno of Arwad, there is no contest. Talk about faith all you want: it will keep ringing hollow as long as you hang up there."

It fell into place. It was not some fresh power that had let her do this but the mantle she had claimed in the East. His mind spun, considering the enormity of that, but soon he realized she was not so strong as she pretended. There was a reason the Warden

had chosen to ride a tower, to draw him into it: here, they were under her roof. A place under her authority, her power. And under that roof the Warden of the East could bend the rules her way, decree that Night would triumph over Light. He found his calm, the quiet place at the heart of him.

It was further away than he remembered, and smaller.

"You embraced your mantle first, that is all it means," Hanno said. "Anything more is wishful paint over your regrets."

"And Gods know I have a great many of those," the Warden of the East said. "An army's worth of ghosts. I have learned my failures, if only because they so lovingly haunt me. You, though?"

She shrugged casually, cuttingly.

"Hells, Hanno," the Warden said, "now you're telling me you want the Warden to guide to heroes the way you did as the White Knight. Can you even hear yourself talking? We've been down this road before."

The one-eyed priestess raised her free hand, wiggling it mockingly.

"How many fingers is the next Mirror Knight going to cost you?" she said.

"Fingers for a life are not a trade I regret," Hanno evenly replied. "Or ever will."

"Then you'll run out of those long before I run out of eyes," the Warden replied. "Of course, it'll all implode far quicker than that. Your house of cards comes down the moment you run into another Red Axe."

His jaw clenched.

"Should I dig her up so she can be cut a third time?" Hanno bit out. "Maybe you can use the spectacle to buy back a deserter prince for a moon's turn. And why stop there? We can dig up a whole graveyard of heroes to shame the full Highest Assembly into showing up the once. They can vote to leave and return to their palaces."

The words were acid on his tongue, acid in his belly, but out they came anyway. He felt no cleaner for it, not relieved in the slightest. Spite lessened both the speaker and listener.

"There it is," the Warden of the East smiled. "They're heroes so they're Good, and that means even their mistakes are always well intended. They shouldn't be strangled with petty mortal laws, just helped out of their messes and allowed to waddle on into the

next one. That's the take you bring to the table, isn't it? Or at least what it comes down to, when all the pretty words are stripped off."

"It is one of your worst habits," Hanno evenly replied, "to poison every well you do not own."

He forced himself to be calm, to be steady. To not lean into the anger that burned in his belly.

"You pretend that villains and heroes are the same, that their difference is a simple matter of... abstract philosophy," he said, "but it is not. Even the most vicious of us are trying to end evil, not spread it. You stand instead for rapists, cannibals and callous murderers. Our exceptions are your *rule*. You are indignant that I would free heroes to act because it would harm villains – but villains are only harmed by those actions because they *choose to do evil*."

It was almost a relief to simply say it out loud. To do away with the pretence that there was something laudable about protecting Evil, that it was anything more than a compromise to allow it.

"The second chances you scorn are given, Catherine, because there is a difference between recklessness and malice," Hanno said. "Heroes are not always right, always good. But they all can be, if they're given help."

The claps he received were openly mocking.

"Pretty speech," the Warden of the East said. "Heroes would love it, I'm sure."

A pause.

"But how about everybody else?"

He started in surprise.

"You cann-"

"What do you think the difference is for someone between getting killed by a cannibal murderer or the Saint of Swords?" the one-eyed priestess interrupted. "Nothing, Hanno. They're still dead. And that's the part you refuse to understand. They're sick of my side, and right to be. *But they're sick of your side too*."

She leaned forward, eye cold.

"Do you think claimants grow on trees, Hanno?" she said. "That Cordelia just *lucked* into having a shot at being the Warden of the West? It's almost like not everyone agrees with that little speech. The fucking arrogance of it, from you who's never ruled so much as a village or had to do anything in a war but fight."

The choices don't stay nice and clean when you have to think about more than a hundred people at a time. How very convenient that you've limited how many you need to care about to that number."

He barely heard the latter half of the tirade. She was right, Hanno thought with muted dismay. Not about what she thought, but she was right. In some way, he'd thought that Cordelia Hasenbach had become a claimant because she was the First Prince. Because she was powerful and prominent and one of the titles adorning her crown was 'Warden of the West'. It had been a comfortable thought, one that fit with his opinion of the woman. It was also not how Names worked. That silent realization stilled his tongue. He could not speak until he'd swallowed it, as if it'd filled his throat.

"Ah," the Warden smiled. "There we are. Catching up at last."

"I-" Hanno started, then hesitated.

"You want the Book but you don't have the law on your side," Catherine Foundling said. "You don't have the story either, and if you're going to try to take it anyway what does that leave?"

A hard, cold smile.

"Just violence," the Warden of the East said. "And I'm better at it than you."

She looked him up and down, then shook her head.

"Throw him out of the tower, Archer," she said.

"Cat?" Archer said, sounding surprised.

The Warden of the East met his eyes with her own.

"There's nothing left to beat," Catherine Foundling calmly said. "We're done here."

The words stung more than being tossed out into the grass, though Archer tried her best. Hanno was not surprised.

They had the ring of truth to them.

[Droughtbringer](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Salt

I'll be honest this hasn't been nearly as compelling as a lot of the previous more philosophical arcs because the setup isn't there, it's a writing problem.

I don't mean as in it needed more chapters to set it up – the development for the themes was done in the six volumes leading up to it – I mean that it hasn't adequately utilized said development. It feels "rushed" and "lacking in setup" because most of the chapters in the mini arc completely *threw out* a lot of the previous 6 volumes of world building in terms of the whole Hanno vs Cordelia thing – particularly the problem with mundane rulership.

Half the books/arcs in the story leading up to this has been about problems with *Heroes*, and the other half about problems with *Politicians and rulers*. There have been so many major politicians/rulers for antagonists that it's nuts: Akua – a ruling noble, Malicia – a queen, Cordelia – a prince, Milenan – prince, every Praesi noble, and every Proceran noble. None of those were major antagonists because they had big scary aspects, they were antagonists because they had big projected political power that they were abusing at the expense of the common people.

Hell, even the original Antagonist that kicked it all off was governor Mazus, the likes of whom oppressed the common people so badly that Cat took the knife in the first place. It wasn't because Heroes were killing too many people. Just the last major arc centered around Amadeus bringing down the Tower to end a corrupt political institution that's been ruining Praes.

Problem is, even though the story has been about conflicts with corrupt politicians with no checks on their power as much as it has been about conflicts with Heroes, it doesn't show in any of Cat's & co's reactions for the arc. The entire arc so far has been Catherine having selective amnesia about the political half and basically just pinning every problem on Heroes being too self righteous; after how many arcs and interludes about Praesi/Proceran politics and bending of the law often being worse than both Villains or Heroes?

The reason this arc hasn't been as compelling is that it's supposed to need little setup other than a basic reiteration, because it's the culmination of six volumes worth of themes. Instead it's been pretty one sided because it's forgotten half the themes in said previous six volumes, and only brought them in briefly this chapter before throwing them out, which is why it seems like the conclusions haven't had much setup.

Salt

Also didn't mean to make this a reply to a post... oops...
delete and repost button where?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Nope on a Rope.
Ain't no retraction without another post.

Welcome to WordPress chat

Linnus42

Amen Great Post and I totally agree.
I also don't think any Hero has initiated a significant conflict. I don't count Bard as either Hero or Villain. They certainly made it worse but if you look at the crisis in this series the roots have been corrupt politicians, villains or both.

Cicero

Saint of Swords.

That's why Coredlia is the alternative. Saint of Swords created a conflict inside Procer that had the express purpose of destroying Procer and allowing the Dead King to eat it. She explicitly told Cordelia so. All for the Greater Good.

That's what set Cordelia down the path of no longer trusting heroes. That's what created the weight to a story of placing Heroes under the Law.

Of course, the Saint was prodded into it by the Bard, but that's no excuse, the Saint accepted that path fully understanding that it would destroy Procer and result in the death of thousands of innocents. All because she believed that the greater good of purging Procer of it's imperfections was worth it. That the end result of the Dead King "winning" was to sow the seeds of his future defeat.

caoimhinh

Actually no, it was Cordelia herself who started that conflict, remember?

It just grew out of her control (practically right away) because it was a freaking Crusade, not a simple military incursion.

Cordelia threw the Crusade wanting to use it as a political tool, thinking it was just like any other invasion or military campaign.

It was also not the Saint of Swords who escalated it either, that was the Bard, who got the priests of the

House of Light of many countries to make a conclave and declare Catherine the Archheretic of the East. The Saint was just the mouthpiece who explained the situation to Cordelia. And yes, the Saint was okay with it, but it was still a mess of Cordelia's own making, as she was the one who started the Crusade without understanding its implications.

What's more, even afterwards, Cordelia could have stopped the Crusade, but it was *politically inconvenient* for her to do so, which in Cordelia's dictionary means that something can absolutely not be done, even if thousands must die as a result.

So the Tenth Crusade was a conflict that Cordelia started because of political reasons, and which she was then forced to keep going because of political reasons. It only ended once Catherine had beaten them over and over again and then the Dead King invaded which provided them with a politically convenient reason to end the Crusade.

Neubia

This can't be happening. It can't be. I've... I've... I've caught up... Noooooooooooooooooooooo.

[TheCelestialEquation](#)

Um... Mirror knight?? XD

Ciel Morgenstern

Tariq killing a whole innocent village to infect the Carrion Lord's men comes to mind if we're talking about what "Heroes" do wrong just as much as Villains... "Mercy"'s take on "for the greater good" has been a whole lot nasty to countless normal people who are neither Named nor politicians.

Ciel Morgenstern

My point being that there IS a point in considering reining in not just politicians OR Named, but both, on ALL sides. Isn't that what the Accords are truly meant to be about? At least putting a maximum stop to the awful that's *all around everywhere*?

Anonymous

Throwing out my two cents after enjoying this chapter a lot:

Remember how Cat realised that she had almost been tricked into choosing either the political side or the Named side of becoming the Warden of the East, and to actually meaningfully

claim the Name she had to do /both/. This is the same issue being faced with Cordelia and Hanno—practically that Cordelia wants to bring Heroes to heel at the hands of governments, and Hanno wants to bring governments to heel at the hands of Heroes. Any acceptable outcome will have to be both and neither, somehow (and Cat's been having issues with both stances so far proposed by the two). The comment I'm replying to seems to be taking issue with Cat crying out against Heroes while forgetting the problems with governments, but that's because she's criticising Hanno's stance which favours Heroes over governments—talking to Cordelia (which we may yet get to see!) it wouldn't/won't be surprising if the points she's arguing are against governments in contrast with Named/Roles. The interesting thing will be seeing what sort of third-choice outcome gets built in the end... have I mentioned I love third-choice outcomes which resolve false dichotomies?

Oshi

I've been saying. Three is a better number than two. Why should there be two wardens? Because there is only two sides to a coin? How'd that work out?

[onedollargum](#)

And some one always ends up flipping that coin.

ohJohn

Ever since Cat started referring to the WoTW situation as a spinning coin, I've been expecting the eventual resolution of the metaphor to be the coin landing on its edge.

ruduen

I think that metaphor was already used for the description of how the Tyrant works in Five Stories. That'd be something that's unlikely, but still within the realm of pre-existing stories.

Personally, I prefer something which shows that they're willing to try to change the system as much as possible. Closer to the metaphor of cutting the coin in half, and doing whatever they want with the pieces.

Rynjin

Exactly this. I assume we'll soon see how Catherine tears down Cordelia's position. I wonder if Cordelia realizes that her path could likely be the death of Heroes as a concept? Hanno is not precisely wrong in this regard, that a Hero who is ruled, truly and completely, cannot be a Hero. They're

just another tool of the State, and any Names which don't fit that narrow, constrained state of being will not be able to exist in Cordelia's world.

Ciel Morgenstern

Yeah, my take on Hanno's side to these interludes as well. This is just ONE SIDE to Cat's plan for interfering. It's about teaching BOTH the necessary lesson so that one or the other or both (does she even care which one?) finally DOES reach the conclusion that BOTH sides are necessary for this new Name and they should friggin take into consideration what they themselves are lacking that the other one has to fit those shoes.

Kirook

To be fair, we haven't heard how she plans to address Cordelia yet and it may be that the reason she's eliding the problems with political power is that she's talking to Hanno, who already understands them. If she has a conversation like this with Cordelia it will probably be very different.

caoimhinh

I hope so, because so far Catherine just seems to be a hypocrite who is leaning on Cordelia's side because of her own personal reasons while everything indicates Hanno would be the best choice for Warden of the West, yet Cordelia seems more likely to give Cat what she wants, so Cat is leaning on her.

Catherine had been stalling and not interfering one way or the other because she has been putting the wants of the woman over the needs of the queen; when this whole time she has always known that it is the other way around.

She let her own personal desires make her hesitate, otherwise Hanno would already be Warden of the West.

Zach

I have no idea where you're getting the idea that Hanno would be a good choice. The precedent he would set would be terrible; Heroes would be given preference over non-Named and would essentially be "above the law."

The Red Axe situation is a perfect example of this; Hanno sees Red Axe as a person and makes his decision based off of that, ignoring the consequences to countless other people from that decision. That one decision – and the fact that he **still** thinks it would have been right – is incredibly damning. He has never taken on the

responsibility necessary of a major leader, instead just making choices in accordance with his own personal morality.

Linnus42

Hanno had no issue executing Red Axe. Was he sympathetic to her back story, sure who would not be. But he still swung the sword on her.

He simply didn't bend to Cordelia's desire for Proceran Show Trial because Cordelia once again needed a bailout on checking her Prince Issue. And under the agreement the GA signed Hanno didn't have to bend as punishment for Heroes is under his sole discretion. You can argue Hanno should have cut a deal with Cordelia but legally speaking he was not required to.

caoimhinh

How can you say that Hanno's actions during the Red Axe situation are Hanno acting above the law?

He literally enforced the law right there, it was the signed agreement of the Truce and Terms that Named would be judged by the T&T tribunal.

What's more, Catherine agreed on him there, only Cordelia wanted to have the Red Axe judged by the Highest Assembly in order to have a show of power that anyone taking a swing at Procer's princes would be judged by Procer, plus threaten the Prince that was manipulating Mirror Knight into submission by showing him that Named could be punished by her.

The thing is, Catherine agreed that Red Axe had to be executed by Hanno, it is explicitly said over and over, and she makes no move to support Cordelia in her claim, because doing so would weaken the foundations of the Liesse Accords, setting the precedent of Procer being able to back off from the signed agreement whenever politically inconvenient.

So Catherine agreed with Hanno in enforcing the law, and would have even opposed it if he had been amenable to granting Cordelia's request.

Their disagreement comes from what she did to Red Axe's corpse, raising her as an undead so she could be judged by the Highest Assembly for Procer's game of politics. Which Catherine did behind his back, thus breaking trust and damaging her friendship with Hanno.

Hanno's disagreement with Cordelia has always been that he has fulfilled his part of the deal, and done his

part, whereas Cordelia wants to bend the rules and go back on agreements due to political stuff, putting Procer's Highest Assembly's interests above everything else and then she comes pretending that she is defending law, when she has consistently shown that *realpolitik* is the thing that moves her and dictates her course.

Ciel Morgenstern

Cordelia's should be the mirror opposite to this conversation, because she lacks exactly what Hanno has too much of and vice versa. Maybe criticize the arc AFTER it's actually done, not in the middle of it?

Vortex

Hard disagree. Several root conflicts were created by heroes and named.

For example, the first antagonist Cat really fought was the lone swordsman who almost called down an angel to enslave a whole city of her people into a crusade.

Another major antagonist was the saint of swords, who refused to compromise for her existence. And the grey pilgrim, who chose to endorse Cordelia's crusade over any chance of her existence.

I would not at all blame politicians for all the problems Cat had. They were just one of many issues.

Vortex

And of course one of the final antagonists, the intercessor, is a hero abusing their power. She is one of Hanno's ex-comrades actually and he has repeatedly suggested negotiating with her in the past.

Linnus42

I argue the cause of William even trying that is Black for invading and conquering Callow. Or you could even say its Cat who kicked a Civil War into high gear in order to get a faster promotion when she let William escape.

The root of the crusade goes to Cordelia then right? She is the one who called for the Crusade to handle domestic problems in Procer. There is no indication Saint or GP were planning to call one.

As for Bard she is not a really a Hero or Villain considering she works for both sets of Gods.

Two dozen snakes

Your argument is Hanno's argument. And it is the problem Cat has always had with heroes: sure, it's all black's fault. So what? Because it's black's fault, it's now fine for the hero to brainwash an entire city via angel? Kill hundred of thousands, most of whom were actually doing quite alright and didn't particularly care, or have to care, about who was in charge? The whole point of the warden is to have someone that will do what's best for the continent right now, which unfortunately for Hanno is not necessarily the same as what Good thinks is best for the continent. Hanno's take on the role is as a guide, his belief is that Good stories are inherently good and therefore beneficial to the people in the long run. And therefore need no oversight, interference or compromise. No matter that said benefits will start showing 20 years in the future and in the meanwhile will cost the lives of thousands. Which is Cat's line in the sand – which means Hanno becoming Warden with that outlook WILL lead to a catastrophic breakdown in relationship between Good and Evil at some point, plunging Calernia into another Crusade. That's why she's airing her personal grievances here, that's the point she's making when she says Hanno hasn't earned his role and his side have been taking her cooperation for granted. And Hanno still didn't really care about that. What broke him was the realization that his outlook is not 100% correct, because Cordelia whose outlook is the opposite of his is also a claimant

Vortex

I agree with this statement. And I would go even further – just as heroes exist for good reasons, so too do villains. Black exists because of a specific set of circumstances shaping his beliefs and ideas. Without the messed up, evil country of Praes raising him, there would be no Black. If Praes were a well-run, stable country not constantly on the verge of starvation, subject to the whims of tyrants and despots, Black would almost certainly not have become a villain. He is shaped by the same forces that shaped heroes.

So when Hanno asserts that heroes deserve to act as they see fit, he is really just acting as a mouthpiece for the Bard, whose sole purpose of existence is to shape a world where heroes and villains are locked in an eternal struggle regardless of the cost to the people around them.

jamesc9

@Vortex @Linnus24,

I'm not sure how much William can be blamed for, when Cat defeated him and gave him instructions, which he was following. A case could be made, that he ought to have followed our conception of liberal non-awfulness rather than the dictates of his name, but following her plan rather than her name wasn't good for Cat, and really isn't normal behaviour for Named in this setting.

Salt

I don't really see how the pilgrim endorsing the crusade Cordelia started gives him more responsibility for starting the crusade than Cordelia, who quite literally started the crusade. The root cause of the hundreds of thousands dead in the Tenth crusade was the First Prince of Procer not giving a shit about what happens to Callow and the people in it, not the Pilgrim being idealistic.

Why did she start the crusade? Greedy Princes of Procer pushing her into it, so she could keep Procer stable. Non-named, mundane princes.

Why is Praes a ruin? The tower as an institution. Why did Malicia allow Akua to create a hellgate despite knowing of her plan long before it occurred? Her need for political leverage over the other nations. Why did Catherine even plan to go to the war college to begin with? To change the rulership Callow was under from the inside. Why is Callow so militaristic and xenophobic? Constant attacks from the East AND the west due to greedy Praesi rulership and greedy Proceran rulership, the first three volumes go on endlessly about how it's shaped their entire national identity. Helike? Kairos, enough said.

Absolutely none of those have anything to do with the Mirror Knights of the world being morons or to idealistically Good.

Sure, the Lone Swordsmen and Mirror Knights of the world will do a lot of damage. The conditions that create Mirror Knights and Lone Swordsmen in the first place? Mundane Crowns and Villains. Honestly, more often the former than the latter, because a lot of the rulers and nobles we've seen so far put most actual Villains to shame, or have outright been bad enough to be capital-V Villains.

Linnus42

I mean lets not forget the endgame plan for Callow and Praes if they Crusade had gone as planned. They would have taken control of all the land and deported or killed all the Praesi in a mass genocide. That is pretty dang awful.

Now Cordelia didn't support that plan and sure she probably wanted to stop it but she wasn't concerned about it to have an actual plan to stop it just figured she could eventually.

Zach

Hanno should have taken a note from Pilgrim, who was at least honest with himself and learned from his experiences with Catherine in the Prince's Graveyard arc. Same with Bard; even though it took some time, he changed his mind about her when presented with proof of her motivations.

Grey Pilgrim during the war (and before his death) was probably the single Named closest to Catherine in terms of goals and perspective. After his time with Tariq, I wouldn't be surprised if Mirror Knight actually has his shit together more than Hanno.

The Ignorant Student

I disagree. I feel that this arc has its flaws to be sure, but when you get down to it, it's about comparing Cat's journey to Warden with Hanno and Cordelia, both of them have actively been damaging the alliance to advance their own personal agenda, and I feel that if we want to say that this is the climax, it's well done. The confrontation with Cordelia is still to come, but Hanno has been shown the error of his ways, and while his revelation is sort of just jammed in at end, I think the way Cat explains just how badly they fucked up is fantastic, especially since this is probably just part one of three (Cat confronts Cordelia, and then lays down the law on whoever becomes Warden).

[GoodGirlJW](#)

This has been amazing and I have no idea what you're talking about.

Voiceoftheriders

Crazy idea here, but with the discussion on who might be an alternative warden instead of Cordy or Hanno, but what if Cat would change her name and become the sole warden.

Korr4K

That would have been possible only if Cat became the new Bard, but she clearly has no intention to be a part of Good

I'm not really appreciating this arc because it's too much telegraphed. PGTE has always been great because you could never really know where the story was going with certainty,

not now tho.

It has been clear since many chapters ago that both claimants will become the new Warden and after today any possible doubt should be discarded. Hanno is going to meet with Cordelia and many other heroes outside the Tower, he has been beaten up to the point that he is now ready to cooperate.

It's not a bad epilogue per se, just too obvious and "easy" for the heroes.. It took Cat years to gain her Name, she lost and sacrificed so much, and now she even has to help the heroes mitigate the consequences of their side? I think that the story would have been more balanced if the price for the title of WoW was the life of one of the two claimants

[Liliet](#)

Holy shit.

We're actually addressing what Hanno has not been noticing???

dadycoool

Maybe Occidental III will be addressing what Cordelia has not been noticing?

ninegardens

Does that mean Occidental IV will be addressing what Cat has not been noticing?

[boballab](#)

I think with her it will have to do with how The Bard and Saint basically told her to be a good little girl and let her people die so there would be that nice storyline for the Hero's to be Hero's. Ever since then she really doesn't trust them anymore and for the most part seems to see them as nothing but villains in hero's clothing.

[Liliet](#)

P L E A S E

Miles

Hope for Abigail for Warden!

She doesn't want it

She's not even part of the contest.

But she can stand by Cat's side as an equal because providence has been her best skill since she was introduced, and she doesn't even need above's help to use it! (For what else would you call her uncanny ability to make the right call for the

wrong reasons at the precisely correct moment while trying to accomplish the wrong goal?)

jamesc9

I'm beginning to wonder if she's ready.

How many people has she killed stupidly by making the wrong call, and how did she pull herself back together?

I think we need that to happen before she becomes WotW, because having her not pull herself back together after getting the top job would be bad.

Linnus42

I mean argue the difference is what Hanno said it is. Heroes try to make the World Better even if you disagree with their actions that is the goal, you have to follow the blueprint from the Gods Above or you fall. Villains on the other hand don't have to make the world better. For Cat's point to be legit you need to point to Saint killing some innocents for no reason besides she wanted to eat them. Its a False Equivalency and I hate those.

Also god EE needs to do more setup. I have seen no evidence to suggest that most of the people are annoyed with the Heroes. Princes and Nobles sure but I have seen no evidence the average Peasant is annoyed at the Heroes. Quite frankly I have seen more evidence they are annoyed at their Princes and terrified of getting killed. After all Hanno had a whole Province begging to save him and high support among Army Rank and File. That is not even reason Cordelia is getting backing from Nobles. Nor does it make any sense for Cordelia to complain about Hanno always letting Heroes off easy last Chapter. When there is no evidence of that and her only example is what Mirror Knight? Honestly, I think we needed some sort of walkabout like Akua and Black did in the Praes arc where we actually got some prospective on the lay person. Cause Cat's points are lacking in textual evidence in my book.

Overall Hanno's point is correct. Heroes mostly serve and come into existence due to some flaw in the existing system so putting them under government control.

[Liliet](#)

This isn't about backlash from the common people. Heroes have good PR, for the most part. That they're liked by the peasant majority in Good countries is not much evidence of anything considering it's LITERALLY THEIR RELIGION.

Catherine's point is that HEROES ARE NOT ALWAYS RIGHT. They do not always KNOW BEST. Yes, they always try their best, sure.

But sometimes their best sucks as much as William's did. And sometimes the fate of the war effort hangs on breaking a law and tweaking procedure, and the hero in charge does not notice or understand that, and refuses to listen.

Linnus42

My point is Cat's argument is Cordelia is getting the Name cause people are fed up with Heroes. The implication seems to be its more then just the Nobles having that opinion. However, there has been no evidence that such a thing is common thing outside of the major Nobles. And I argue Nobles are not inclined to like Heroes they cannot control anyway because as Hanno notes Heroes tend to serve as a major check on Nobles

Tenthyr

And like they just said, that's not actually the point. Hanno just found out he entirely and completely decided his way was right without either attempting to lead nations not attempting to find new solutions. He decided that Cordelia's methods were unfit without any attempt to understand or correct them in a way that worked. It's hollow words, lacking in story or the weight of the actual world behind him. Catherine is sending out her challenge to the world, demanding that there be a good that is the match to the weight she has bourne into her evil. Hanno utterly failed to do that, and so she broke him.

Linnus42

That argument would be a lot more sound if there was any easy route for a commoner to get to run a Nation no? Most people in this story are at the top of Nations because they were born to the right parents...or would you prefer Hanno goes out and conquers a Nation? Point being Cat makes a good point it just a whole lot weaker in universe then it is out of universe.

Konstantin von Karstein

What does Hanno conquering nations has to do with the argument? The point is that while rulers can possibly be held accountable for their actions (Highest Assembly, rebellion, ...) Heroes can't.

Linnus42

I am saying Cat's saying Hanno doesn't have experience running Nations, Provinces, Cities, etc. That argument works better when say in our world you can run for office easily. That doesn't apply in most countries in

this world where people run stuff cause they had the right parents or they conquered something. Hanno is from Ashur with an absurd caste system and he was near the bottom going to be hard to get that exp in context, no?

The point is sound in a vacuum, its just a lot less sound in this world.

Rey d`Tutto

He doesn't understand the impact he has on common folk while he is "doing Good".

This is a Fail for a Warden Candidate.

shikkarasu

I don't think your argument is a point against Cat, here. Hanno not knowing what he's doing is a valid concern. It isn't his *fault*, but blame hardly matters when you are responsible for half a continent. You don't get to complain that you were not adequately trained when you try to take that kind of power, you either self teach, or listen when someone shows you what you are doing wrong. Hanno needed to be tied up and monologued at to get to that 2nd part. Now that he knows what he's missing he can try to start learning.

Zach

I mean, it kind of is his fault, since he hasn't made any real effort during all of this time to learn these things. He even admitted to himself at one point that he was letting Catherine take most of the responsibility for anything beyond "fighting stuff."

The Red Axe situation perfectly illustrates his issue. He made no effort to really consider the broader consequences of his choice (and was 100% unwilling to change his mind under any circumstances).

Knight

"The first Albans were seneschals of Laure long before they were kings," he told me. "And Eleonor, for all her virtues, was born a mere knightess. There is no shame in one's birth. We are what we bring into this world, not what brought us into it."

King Edward would disagree.

Aero

On that point about Hanno, "(going) out and (conquering) a nation," until the recent chapters, heroes were always immediately made nobles and added to the scrolls in the Dominion. The ability to lead a land/people/company was always there if heroes just went to the Dominion. Just because a hero chooses not to doesn't mean the opportunity wasn't there. He definitely could've led the Magisterium if he had been inclined to back then, but he didn't and those chapters before Sabah's death show his blind spot when it comes to the politics of nations. In regards to someone's comment on not seeing commoners upset with heroes let's not even get started about Bellorophon, Abigail's chapters or the interludes for the Procerans(specifically the Rogue Sorcerer ones).

[Sugar Roll](#)

Born to the right parents? This story is full of examples of people rising to the top. Catherine was a waitress. Malicia was the daughter of an innkeeper. Amadeus led rebels and murdered his way to the top. Basilia led armies to become the Empress of the Free Cities. Hakram came from nowhere and is now the leader of the Clans.

Outside of fighting, what has Hanno done? The age of order is upon them and what does he have to offer?

Linnus42

Look at the Good Nations how does one get in power in those sorts of Nations. By being born to the right parents. I have noted the other route is conquest. Hakram actually had the least bloody route funny enough. Basillia got her job by committing atrocities for fun.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Have you forgotten about the story of the Kingfisher Prince? He was not born from family that was the first in line to the throne but he was the most capable one. Do you think the Iron Prince was the leader of Hannoven because he was simply born into the right family? What about Rozala? Being born to the right parents is an advantage for sure but you need to bring more than that if you are to be a leader.

Hanno is being called Prince White now because he has something to offer to Procer but if he wants to become one of the leaders of the coming age, he needs to bring so much more. The Warden of East is not only leading the villains and their nations, she is also bringing the accords and has promised to raise a new city in the center of the continent. The Warden of the West will be measured against that.

Linnus42

The point is you don't have a shot without the right bloodline. Unless you are truly exceptional. Its essentially impossible to get to the top without having the right bloodline as a prerequisite. So yes all those people did some work to become Prince or Princess some more then other but they would not have gotten the shot without having the right bloodline.

Its not like its a democratic system where you can run for office.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Hanno is getting his shot right now. Why do you think he is being called Prince White? He may as well end up being a prince of Procer after this war but is he Warden of West material as he is now? The answer is no and Cat is calling him out on that. The Warden of the West is more than just a leader of heroes, you also need to be a leader of nations.

Hanno needs to embrace becoming a Prince in truth and need to make decisions and be responsible for all the people under his care. He needs a vision on where he's going to take all those people in the coming age.

Evgeny Permyakov

>The point is you don't have a shot without the right bloodline.

Yes you do. You will have hard time getting land without bloodline (though it is still possible in right circumstances), but getting position of authority is possible. Church, city councils and army would work as an entry point.

Beyond that, Hanno is a political figure because he herds Heroes. His authority is over Heroes, but

his actions indirectly affect much more people. He never even considered what his goals as a Warden would be beyond "do good".

Insanenoodlyguy

You aren't wrong,
But I'm not sure why that matters at all here.

shikkarasu

Cat literally got her position through merit. She is an orphan with no known bloodline who was talent-scouted and then proceeded to win uphill battles for the next 10 years. Masego was the same, in that he was adopted by Warlock due to his talent.

As for having the right family being easy-mode, sure it is, but Democracy doesn't fix that problem either. How many penniless orphans do you see running countries IRL? It's unfair, and Cat knows&hates this about the world, but society is not on trial right now, Hanno and Cordelia are.

Abrakadabra

You are always doing this. For some reason You always start harping about nobles and peasants and social justice. But it is MEANINGLESS because those kind of ideals are not part of this world. It is the same thing as berating the romans for noö acting according to our standards. Standards that were made literalli a thousand year after the roman empire fallen. Projecting Back modern ideas into the lives of people WHO cannot have a knowledge of them is supremely stupid. And know we Just do it to a different fictional world, no less!

jamesc9

@Sugar Roll,
berating the other side of the coin from your replies above, those are Evil nations so, in Black's words, if there's something that you want to do and you have the power to do it, then do it.

I'm not sure what the equivalent sentence for good nations is, and whether it inherently justifies inherited authority, but there does seem to be a correlation.

Sugar Roll

First of all, I'm not berating the other side of the coin. I'm merely stating facts in response to a claim by Linnus42 where he said, "Most people in this story are at the top of Nations because they were born to the right parents" which is clearly untrue given the fact that the leaders of at least half the continent rose to the top on their own merits.

And second of all, you have to forgive me, but what exactly are you trying to point out? I'm not following your train of thought.

jamesc9

[Replying to myself to avoid increasing the nesting level; I think that you will see notice of an update in the thread.]

I think that I was replying to:
<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2021/09/17/interlude-occidental-ii/comment-page-1/#comment-95178>

Your argument, to that point, was incomplete, because you did not have examples from Good countries, who ran the kind of order which was most likely to lead to inherited/annointed roles.

You addressed that weakness later.

Annya

No. The argument is that Cordelia sees this DIFFERENTLY and she is STILL getting the name.

Additionally, there is no false equivalence. Of course eating a baby because somebody wants to do so is not the same as a hero killing somebody but the difference is when somebody comes for the baby eater. And who comes for the hero? When the person who would be in charge of it would never do anything about it, because the hero is "Good"? If the rules are applied only to the people defined as evil and the rest get a slap on the wrist, you have a system that is going to simply keep breeding Lone Swordsmen type of people. And that won't do.

The idea of Cat is that there should be rules and consequences.

Linnus42

When has Hanno ever suggested that there should be no consequences for Heroes who do something wrong? Hanno is not opposed to rules for Heroes, he is opposed to every National government basically having their own Avengers team.

Miles

And also opposed to anyone stopping a hero from doing what they're doing. It's literally in this chapter and every one with his view point since this arc began.

Trashbandit

Well he barely did anything to the mirror knight when the mirror knight conspired with a noble to try and kill and let the drow who were fighting the dead king die. He wanted nothing to happen to the red axe who committed first degree attempted murder of another hero

Linnus42

He had no issue convicting Red Axe whatsoever.

Are we convicting Mirror Knight for thought crimes here?

He never agreed to betray the Drow at all. The princess was trying to convince him but even in the vision that Sve Noc showed Cat he had not at all agreed to it.

Meanwhile, Cordelia didn't have a plan to deal with that issue Pre Arsenal Mess and was actively stonewalling Cat and Sve Noc on that Prince.

Annya

The entire Red Axe storyline and the Saint of swords illustrated that perfectly but Hanno himself just literally said that: "You are indignant that I would free heroes to act because it would harm villains – but villains are only harmed by those actions because they choose to do evil." "Heroes are not always right, always good. But they all can be, if they're given help."

HELP. Not consequences. So if a fuckup does not end in consequences, what is stopping the person from repeating that? People act and escalate the longer something is tolerated. And when there are no consequences, only help, the take is, you were right and the issue was optics or how you went about it. Not that the thing done was not okay. "I am a hero. Evrftything I do is right, good, just and moral, because I am doing it". And we have multiple examples of good and heroes doing objectively shitty things that did not help anyone and

anything with the heroes truly believing they were in the right. Hell, the Saint of swords is the end result of that and she happened even while Tariq was there and was trying to help her. Helping is not enough. Not when it reinforces the idea that you are by definition better and your actions have an excuse, because you are on the correct side.

The whole story indicates over and over again how not having to seriously question yourself because you are Good does a disservice to the heroes and makes them shortsighted.

jamesc9

Further to this comment, please may I point people who have adequate sources of moral and psychological security toward "People of the Lie" by M Scott Peck.

Insanenoodlyguy

He is, but he believes heroes should be the sole arbiters of wayward heroes. We know he will take that to very serious penalties, and would probably do a good job as far as that's concerned, but it doesn't exist in a vacuum. Because the Red Axe wasn't just a hero problem. It was a political problem for Procer. And Hanno refused to treat it as one, because he believed it shouldn't be. But a Warden, who managed both the names and mundane can't do that. And as he's just finally realized, it has been hurting him in ways that don't just work out in the end.

Tariq Really posed the best example and is referenced here for a reason. Yes he took down the Carrion Lord. Yes he made sure he suffered in equal amounts to those innocent he killed. Yes the angels of mercy agreed with this. Now consider a son from that place who had gone off and found work in a larger city. One day, he finds out his mothers, his brother and sister and nieces and nephews are all dead? Killed in horrific fashion by a hero as a "necessary evil?" Do you think he cares all that much that a hero did it instead of the carrion lord, or does he care all his loved ones are dead?

Cordelia, recognizing the politics and the threat to the north, had to sit on this. In other circumstances this would have started a war with Levant when she came for his head. And her people would absolutely back her going after a foreigner wiping out villages in her kingdom.

Hanno would, if perhaps not make those mistakes, deal with them in ways that would cause those problems. Cat

is right, his reign falls apart on the next Red Axe incident, when he burns already eroded bridges he needs and people go home because despite the threat they refuse to work with him. Or when somebody does something iffy like Tariq did without being so essential and the local government decides Hanno doesn't get to make those consequences and can shove his higher authority where the light can't reach. He might be able to weather all that, but it will weaken his role significantly. And this is not the time for weakness in that role. Especially since as the first of this new incarnation of it he's setting the shape of it.

Cordelia of course has a ton of problems on the other end, but something tells me we are getting to her.

Miles

Cat's argument is Hanno can't have the Name because he's not worthy of it. I highly doubt cordelia is going to be any better.

Chrisophe seems to be the most likely candidate imo.

Insanenoodlyguy

Pretty sure he turn down the role at this point, he's already had it broken down why he's not a good choice, and Willie has grown his reputation is still a problem and he knows it. But I don't think cat is trying to make Hanno or Cordelia unworthy. She does think they both are bad fits right now, But heroes have ascensions during crisis. She's crushing these coal rocks till she gets a diamond.

Zach

lmao, while I doubt this will happen it's something I actually considered as well. We haven't heard much from Mirror Knight after his time with Tariq, but he's probably changed a lot. Since Tariq, by the point the Christophe traveled with him, was probably the single wisest and most reasonable hero in the story – and his whole Role is specifically characterized by “mentoring heroes to be better” – it wouldn't be that strange for Christophe to be a really good guy now.

The main reason I doubt this will actually happen, though, is that Christophe has basically zero large-scale leadership experience.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, the House of Light in Callow wanted to denounce all the Heroes with the Crusade as Evil. That says something.

Miles

Remember what William almost did with the hashmallim? It pretty much answers all of the concerns you mentioned.

In fact the whole story is filled with examples. Heroes kill some dude and leave behind a power vacuum that's worse than what was there. Over and over.

Hanno flipping a coin and killing some random merchant means entire towns can't get the metal they need to fix their plows and swords, probably causes bad years for entire regions just by the consequences but he doesn't even notice.

William tried to summon a thing that was going to mind control an entire city to turn them into lemmings.

Every time Cordelia used the angel entire sections of the city died because they weren't "Good" enough.

The list goes on and on.

Konstantin von Karstein

Agreed for most of what you said, but you're wrong concerning Cordelia in this specific instance. Sure a few people died from the weapon, but the alternative was a fucking Hellgate opening in the middle of Procer and everyone dying, instead of just those few.

Konstantin von Karstein

Everyone in Salia, I mean. So hundreds of thousands.

nimmo

This is the exact issue being discussed, when heroes act for the greater good they don't consider their actions and the effects they have. Sure no one disagrees that Cordelia needed to activate the angel, and all those people dying was a worthy sacrifice for the greater good, but its the little things that are at issue. She did not inform all the villains it was going to happen and there was a bit about there being a number of close calls that Cat was pretty unhappy with i believe. That's the core issue, the heroes are not even trying to clean up the mess they make, cuz the mess they fix is so much bigger.

Konstantin von Karstein

What? She explicitly evacuated all the Villains present in the city. Also, she's Procer's head of state, to whom should she have asked permission? It's not different from a ruler deciding to sacrifice some villages because they can't afford to send troops there.

And she is not even Named and never was, only Claimant. Do you think Cat would have reacted any differently?

MoreBeer

What happens when your head of state announces to the general public: we're about to activate a defensive weapon that may kill a few of the most evil people in the city?

[Kletanio](#)

Agreed. Cordelia's actions are not a preemptive "well the ends will justify this terrible decision after we are victorious," so much as "if we don't do this, everybody dies, right now." The immediacy of the thing makes a big difference. (It's why murder done in the heat of the moment is also treated somewhat more leniently by the courts than murder planned out in advance (and why killing in self-defense is **not** murder))

shikkarasu

I also side with Cordelia, but the point is not that all Heroes are bastards, it's that there needs to be oversight. Cordelia is an example of responsible Angel-Cannon use, but something like half of all Heroes can do things like that if they live long enough and they need to be held accountable. A few bad apples spoil the bunch, so if you want people to respect and trust Heroes you need *hard consequences* for their Llesse-sized screw ups. Heroes must be held to a higher standard, not lower.

If commoners and Nobles would be executed for something? Heroes should as well. Not because execution is good, but because the double standard is bad.

Konstantin von Karstein

I completely agree with that. I was just objecting the fact that this post was presenting Cordelia's decision in the same light as what the Red Axe did.

jamesc9

> If commoners and Nobles would be executed for something? Heroes should as well.

Rebelling unsuccessfully against a corrupt state.

The corrupt state is the core of what causes heroes, so rebelling against it is close to being their *raison e'tre* / reason for being.

I think that a maximally successful Liesse Accords would punish for damage to civilians, rather than for the rebellion itself. I think that rulers would like to pull it toward punishing the rebellion.

shikkarasu

You seem to have missed the 2nd half: Not because execution is good, but because the double standard is bad.

I don't actually agree with execution. I think it fails to solve any of the underlying issues that caused the crime in the first place. That said, if one narrow group is immune to that punishment while the rest are told that their death is only to be expected, that is one of those underlying issue that needs to be solved. If you don't want to execute Heroes you need to stop executing the rest of the population and you do not get the right to act surprised when you learn that they resent you.

Zach

Yeah, the fact that Hanno hasn't ever looked at the whole "flipping the coin and killing people" thing he used to do (before Judgement went silent) and realized that it was fucked up and wrong is pretty damning.

Trashbandit

I think you can point at the grey pilgrim killing a whole village to try and kill the black knight when he invaded procer ir William trying to call the angels to turn a whole city into mindless people ready to do battle. Who are they to decide what those people want to do. The black knight didn't pillage and kill all those people, I doubt they all wanted to be sacrificed. I doubt all the people living in the city wanted to go to war, all the children and old people. I think what they are getting at is Hanno was so self-confident and thought everyone supported his view and Cordelia "lucked" into her claimant but what cat is revealing is that for Cordelia to be a claimant she has to have a story backing her. Her ideal of being a boundary between heros and villains from doing whatever they want no matter how hood intentioned without a care for individuals involved in collateral damage has to have backing and teeth from a sizable population of people.

Teddy

> For Cat's point to be legit you need to point to Saint killing some innocents for no reason besides she wanted to eat them.

Are we forgetting the time Tariq killed an entire village of innocents with a painful plague for the Greater Good?

The angels told him to do it, but I doubt that mattered very much to the peasants just trying to live their lives.

Linnus42

Tariq doesn't do that and the other options was Black causes everyone to starve to death and get mowed down by DK or Cordelia's plan where they burn a whole city with Black and the Legions inside. Those were the options in the story which one would you prefer?

And are you down for prosecuting Cordelia for War Crimes just as you are for Tariq? If they went with her plan.

Practicalfanofevil

The point cats trying to make isnt that people are annoyed with the heroes. Its that they are annoyed by people that holds the power of life and death over them through acts like contrition rituals or demon summonings or even the deluge that cat uses. And through the books we see this idea expressed by whichever prince holds the pov but it doesnt mean that every single soldier in the armies doesnt share the same thought. And honestly i cant believe you would think there isnt enough setup. I mean the entire story of the fifteenth is to kills gods and devils with mortal men and to show them that their games are not wanted. Which is a direct paralel to everyone else being sick of heroes and villains both.

AceOfSword

The Saint of Sword probably killed her fair share of criminals who'd turned to evil out of desperation, and what does that actually fix?

Like, yeah, sure thanks for wiping out that bandit camp, they were murderers who deserved to die for sure.

But did that actually fix anything, or did you just create a vacuum that other desperate people will want to fill? Because at some point it might start to feel less like you're trying to fix things and more like you're just sating your own bloodlust on acceptable targets.

I mean, look at what Hanno used to do: just spin a coin for anyone, and if they got the wrong result he'd just kill them immediately. Oh he was happy to comply with the laws, he even accepted going on trial and being judged by his peers. But for other people? Nah, they don't need another trial, the Angels already found them guilty!

Matt

Looks to me like both claimants will be broken and lose their claim. I think it will be Prince Frederick who will be in a position to step up.

AceOfSword

I think Cordelia will have to face some harsh truths and be broken down, but I don't think either of them will automatically lose their claim.

I think whichever manages to adapt to the criticism and broaden the scope of their vision first will get to become the Warden.

beleester

Hanno **specifically said** that he doesn't spin the coin for just anyone. That you don't stand trial without committing a crime, just like any other court. He had a whole conversation about that with Cat!

AceOfSword

What about that time he spun the coin for a merchant whose store was being looted? I don't think she was committing any crime at the time, unless you're counting being the victim of a crime as participating in it.

Insanenoodlyguy

I mean for all she needed to die, I don't really think we can blame seen a swords for that sort of thing. Yeah I'm sure she made some power vacuums and that was a problem but like wiping out the band camp is what she's therefore. It's not really a mark against her that she doesn't know how to reform the system so criminals don't re-emerge that's a tall order and that's not her role. The problem is the more ambiguous targets, and as if not more importantly, the implied authority. Who the hell is this lady that she can just come and kill the local mayor? Even if the law of the land ends up agreeing he committed crimes, even ones worthy of execution, why is this sword wielding hardass empowered to make those decisions? Because the first thought when you hear somebody just showed up and started killing people, it's not "oh a

hero must have dispensed justice" it's "oh fuck we have a murderous lunatic running rampant here!" And Saint herself notes, heroes can turn, can go mad, or even sometimes comes the day they make a mistake, best of intentions but just plain screw up and kill the wrong person, or there is collateral damage? Why are they given a "oops, well you were trying to do the right thing" when anybody else would be hunted down for this? Because Hanno would make that call, at least on occasion. Like cat said, there's some people out there who are sick of the heroes shit.

SpacyRicochet

So basically, we're arguing that the common people don't have an issue with Heroes, because the ones with cause to dislike them have been wiped from the face of Creation, along with all their neighbors? This is true, I suppose.

The only ones left complaining about Tariq's village are Nobles and other authority figures.

Zggt

Remember when The Gray Pilgrim did a war crime (literal biological warfare) to save time? Or smothered a child in his sleep because said child might grow up to be good, but not good in a way he wanted? Or justified another brutal conquest of Callow for no other reason other than political expediency (Cat was willing to give him everything, including stepping down after helping to conquer Praes, which he failed to do because of said choice, bringing us to this point)? The Bard nearly succeeded in her plan of "heroic genocide of an entire continent via Angel". Warlock was brought down through heroic genocidal horror as well. The list does go on.

"Good" is not "good for the people", it's "what the Gods Above deem a part of their plan". That's literally in the prologue. There is a big difference between the two. Heroes keep on trying to create a Good future, but are completely blind to the fact that there will always be Villains because that's how humans work.

They're not wrong in wanting to stop the worst of them. But they are wrong in not trying to work with some. Mentioned in passing that Yan Tei, a successful empire on a different continent, where their rulers are always a Hero and a Villain, so it seems that there exists a possibility of working together. But other than Cat trying to create rules of engagement, this has largely not even imagined in Calernia.

During the Conquest, for the majority of Callowans, taxes were lower. There were no bloody wars. And all that ended because of intervention of outside forces, by Good (via a doomed to fail

rebellion, the Courts of the Fae, and a Crusade) as well as Evil. After Procerean clergy called Cat arch-heretic, it seems that the definition of Good is also at least somewhat politically motivated.

Hanno is correct in as much as the Choirs are concerned. But we have an advantage of perspective he does not. The first books made a point of saying, repeatedly, through both metaphor and directly, that the people themselves can create change on a deeper level than Named can. And Callowans, with their streak of vindictiveness, are probably fed up with Heroes not of their own. And rightly so.

The people who gave them back their self-rule, dignity, and strength back were by and large Villains, in spite of Heroes. And we all know that Callowans are big on spite.

beleester

>Or smothered a child in his sleep because said child might grow up to be good, but not good in a way he wanted?

The "good" the child intended, as I recall, was to wage a war against Procer because they had his mother assassinated. Which is, well, a questionable decision whether you're judging by Goodness or Practicality.

>Warlock was brought down through heroic genocidal horror as well. The list does go on.

Warlock was brought down because he turned the entire city he was defending into a nuke in order to destroy the weird God-thing the Ashurans had brought with them. We don't know anything about what it would have done, let alone that it was genocidal. All we know is that it nearly killed his son and that was enough reason to go all-out.

shikkarasu

Yep, self sacrifice to save a loved one from an extra-dimensional invader. Frankly I think Warlock's last action was pretty Heroic, and if he had survived there should have been repercussions no matter what gods he kept to.

goldstar971

He was dying though. The god thing had inflicted mortal injuries on him he couldn't heal. So it wasn't really self-sacrifice. Below never gives power until you are dying/about to die.

Unrecovered

“even if you disagree with their actions that is the goal, you have to follow the blueprint from the Gods Above or you fall”

Yeah, like when Choir of Contrition mindcontrolled a full fucking CITY to join the Crusade and die on the walls of Keter. How's this for a blueprint? Oh, they tried to make the world better alright. But it's the result that counts, and result of that Crusade was Dead King getting stronger, having alot of new additions to his army and heroes. And alot of people dying.

I've said it before, it's not Good vs Evil, it's Above vs Below. The contest of whoever can come up with a better story.

Rey d`Tutto

Common Sapient Morality & Laws are based on an idea of “Black vs White w/Grey shades aplenty”.
Above and Below are “Orange vs Blue (w/Shades of Brown)”.

This is the conflict Cat is trying to resolve, and any potential WotW needs to grok this.

Vortex

I think the peasants who love heroes might have had second thoughts if they were in the room when the Saint of Swords told Cordelia that the Chosen of Heaven were perfectly happy to sacrifice the entire country of Procer to evil and let it burn down for the greater good to win out in the end.

Just because the average peasant has a good impression of heroes doesn't mean that every hero has their best interests in mind. Some of the heroes in the story were quite nasty in their own way. The Red Axe was perfectly happy to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of people in the war against the dead king so she could kill the guy who wronged her.

Bishop

In Callow the priesthood split because Procer tried to name Cat Arch-heretic. The “Good” Callowan people were also pissed that Proceran heroes were coming to “save” them from their villainous queen.

Also the Praesi were proud of Akua an honored to have fought on her side. They may not have understood the whole situation, but the same can be said of the peasants not knowing how Tariq killed a village to get the jump on Black. Perhaps due to ignorance the local heroes or villains get the support of the populace. Hanno as he was would still back crusades into Praes and Callow, thinking backlash against heroes was simply ignorance of the heroes good intentions, but now he might actually rethink it.

Bishop

It would be a false equivalence if villains only sought to kill people and heroes only sought to save people. However, the issue is that egocentric leaders and Named, whether good or evil, treat common people as collateral damage. How many patriotic Callowan soldiers did the Proceran heroes kill in their Crusade? Heroes would argue it couldn't be helped, but they could have just invaded Callow as a band of five and avoided making trouble for the citizens, like the first group we saw attempt to assassinate Cat. But then they would have lost, like that group did. So heroes will do anything to win, even if it means ordinary people suffer, and that makes them equivalent to villains. Heck, villains might not even kill people to win, but save or prolong their lives, like the alchemist the Saint of Swords spared, then killed. In the end they're just collateral damage – but the Warden is a leader for ordinary people and Named, and Hanno needs to be able to hold heroes to task if they act against the people's interests, which he doesn't grasp.

Idk if it's intentional but it might be a metaphor to his understanding of how to build a wall – he sees the stones as the most important so he thinks stones is all it needs, and Cat needs to teach him without mortar the stones won't hold.

jamesc9

I like the wall metaphor, especially if we can stretch it so it covers the other thread, where non-named make more difference to the world in the long run.

Kiara

It's not a false equivalency.

Almost all people – Heroes and Villains as well as real world “villains” think they have good motives.

Think of the story (this is bad since I don't recall their Names) of the two kids who took parallel paths to try and save their villages, one was Good because she prayed and was lucky enough to be answered. One was Evil because he killed everyone who could stop the plague (notably feeling horrible about it but succeeding in saving more lives). That's bullshit to call his motives inherently bad.

Black and Malicia and co were also motivated by trying to save Praes.

As the saying goes, there's no one as dangerous as someone who believes their acting for a moral cause, and the heroes keep proving this.

Knight

"My tutors taught me that's called a false equivalence," Vivienne said conversationally. "The pretence that the obvious failings in the customs of a people that slaughter each other and their neighbours for sport every other decade are somehow the same as the flaws in the customs of Callow.

You're thinking like Viv 3.0. We're on Viv 5.0 now though, you should consider upgrading to the newest model.

Linnus42

I mean why did this whole mess occur? Sure Bard got involved but what shattered the Grand Alliance is a Villain deciding to rape a girl and murder a whole village for **** and giggles. Bard exploited it but she is not the catalyst. You can say the cracks between Cordelia and Hanno were already there and that a Villain doing that to some village was basically inevitable as a flaw built into the T&T. However, its interesting that is rarely acknowledged when two characters debate about the issues in the GA.

Not to mention you don't see any Heroes giving less then 100% on the front unlike say Princes still during an apocalypse trying to dodge Taxes. Have Heroes played a roll in crisis sure during this war but when you look at the root cause its mostly been Princes and Villains.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Hanno IS still right about a lot of things, and Cordelia's way cannot work the way she presented it in all honesty. It ain't over 'till the fat lady sings.

dadycoool

Yeah, while Hanno is very wrong, so is Cordelia. Until now, we've had two flawed and unsuitable Claimants thinking themselves completely right and the other to be completely wrong. We've shown one of them the grey, now we just need to show the other and see what happens.

Linnus42

My issue is more I think this feels a bit like railroading where Cat is making some major False Equivalencies that just go uncountered. Though I suppose it might tie into her Justifications only matter to the Just Ethos. So she only cares about the End Result...my point is I think even if you don't think the why a Hero does something matter...the cause of most these GA related messes does. And that Cause has primarily been a Corrupt Prince or a Villain.

Miles

I think you're making a bunch of false equivalences and then blaming Cat.

It's the goblin fire incident all over again.

But no, just because there was a corrupt leader somewhere doesn't mean the correct move is to murder them and then leave to let the situation devolve into a war zone. If it were as easy as that they wouldn't have been in power in the first place.

Albert Wen

Okay, but that's not relevant to Catherine's argument at all. The flaw in Hanno's worldview, which is also the flaw in your argument, is that the good intentions of a hero somehow excuse the damage they do. That the Red Axe was a hero (with good intentions, I'll remind you) didn't stop her from deliberately sabotaging the the entire Grand Alliance, looking to throw all of Procer to the Dead King, just like the Saint of Swords, because she thought the Truce and Terms was a worse outcome.

Jdburger

So I think the first issue here is Cat's speech is tailored for Hanno. She is using it to teach him a lesson so going into Cordelia's flaw without her present is not helpful for teaching.

Two she is right about him charging of to confront here about the Book of Somethings. Cat took it from the Bard who was both an enemy Named and servant of the Above and Below. You can argue that the Book is properly of the Warden's since their role is to oversee Named, but with Cat being the only Warden at the moment that means she has the only word that matters. Hanno and Cordellia have a claim to the name, but that does not matter until they have the name. So his justification for charging the Tower ultimately falls flat.

The third point is Cat is taking a long view on this and the Wardenship. Not all of Cat's problems and regular people's problem with Hero can be tied to corruption / villains.

The attempt to use the Choir of Contrition to force a Crusade in Callow, one historically and one failed – would have sent thousands to their death, young, old, hale, or infirm. It would not have matter to the Hero only that these people were doing "Good".

The Heroic bands who showed up in Callow following the Doom to depose Catherine who was a servant of the Below. From what we could tell Catherine was doing right by Callow and the people were content-ish. The bands came to depose the lawfully appointed non-corrupt ruler of a country and when giving the option to leave peacefully chose to fight her, and why because she belonged to the Below.

Saint of Swords was going to ensure the Crusade continued against Callow which would devastate it and kill hundreds of thousands – and why because they supported a Below name (because I am pretty sure Cat's abdication had already been offered at that point).

Tariq's plague upon a village to capture Black. Just because Cordellia's plan, that was not implemented, would have been worst does not mean his actions were justified nor the mortals are still dead.

I am going to skip Red Axe since this has been overly tread upon for now. Effectively in a story about villains we have multiple instances where Heroes in the pursuit of "Good" go too far by their own actions and decisions.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cat has long regretted that axiom on her banner.

But I think cat herself is a good representation. She did good for her kingdom. She was a villan, yes. But did the kingdom need saving? She improved quality of life, she wasn't sacrificing virgins or taking every firstborn child for her army or summoning demons or any of those atrocities. She was doing ruthless things, but the sort of things that Queen of Blades probably got up to and that one was called a hero. Cat was doing a good job, and we've seen the people's perspective that agree she's doing a good job. The heroes in that were somewhat disturbed by the populace but didn't take the real message from it: nobody here was crying out to be Saved. But she was a villian and so she must go, and after? Well things would work out.

They were good people, giving 100% to do the right thing. And Cat was right to kill them after it was clear they could not be reasoned with. And Hanno as he is can't understand that, many heroes can't understand that, and that is a problem.

hakureireimu

The Villain destroyed a few villages. The Hero tried to destroy the whole alliance. It's obvious who would do more damage.

Linnus42

Let me ask you a question Haku? Lets say you got raped and saw your whole village and everyone you know brutally murdered in front of your eyes? And lets say you have what a few weeks at most to get over this trauma before seeing your tormentor? How logical is your decision making going when someone shows up right after that trauma and tells you about their plan to destroy such a corrupt institution in your mind that is protecting monsters. Try some empathy....killing a village and raping people for fun aint the same as Red Axe's motivation.

hakureireimu

Red Axe would have been fine if he only killed the Wicked Enchanter. But she tried to kill Frederick and the T&T too, both in cold blood. She's an attempted mass murderer. Being raped does not entitle you to do mass murder.

Linnus42

Really you think the Villains would have been fine at large with Cat not demanding the death penalty? After Red Axe killed one of their own. If so I suggest you go read up on the pressure Cat was under.

hakureireimu

Fine in the sense that she did the right thing and isn't worse than her rapist. Of course she still deserves death penalty for breaking the law. That's what law means. By trying to destroy the T&T, she's worse than her rapist because she literally tried to do far more damage than he did.

aurikdomi

Haku then you agree with Cat's point/where Hanno disagrees. there needs to be laws that can apply to heroes...

Albert Wen

Yes, that's what everyone except Linnus has been saying. We're all in agreement that Hanno was wrong and this chapter made sense.

Jdburger

I am sorry what.... The issue with Red Axe was not here Death. Hanno was already onboard with executing her, without including the attempt on Kingfisher. He even had

a conversation with the other heroes on-site explaining his decision.

The issue with Red Axe is similar to what Hanno complains about in this chapter. Kingfisher has two hats, like Cat, he is both named and regional noble. When Red Axe attempts to kill Kingfisher she tried to kill both a hero but a ruler of Procer. This creates a conflict between both Cordellia and Hanno because both have to ensure justice is served and the people they represent are satisfied. If Cat had not acted by raising the corpse of Red Axe – Procer would be denied justice for Red Axes crime and established a precedence that named taken priority over governments.

To give you a modern day example – I believe if a criminal commits murder in multiple USA states each state has the right to try them even if one has already determined they should receive the death penalty.

Annya

You are missing the point by a mile. “Your village got destroyed by villains”. The villains would be brought to justice/killed. “Your village got destroyed by the heroes”. Let them go, don’t punish them, they did it for the greater good.

These two consequences are not the same, are they? And yet, the village is gone and the people are dead. If you will argue that one is more morally justified and some of the corpses would agree with that, okay but that’s objectively not changing the situation.

Linnus42

Ah but the point is under the Truce and Terms. The Villain would never have been punished at all. Unless he committed another crime later and even then it might not have been death penalty worthy. The Truce and Terms gives total amnesty to Villains for all crimes committed before they sign up. There would have been no justice for Red Axe’s Village or herself whatsoever. That is the flaw in the system, a necessary flaw you can argue but nonetheless its present. Hence a Red Axe would have always arisen eventually.

Annya

Then you need to check again what the T&T say because your whole argument sets on a false premise of no consequences for the villains. Signing into them gives them a clean slate but everything AFTER that is counted.

The concept of amnesty is not new and there are stricter rules under T&T than out of them. Because the Red Axe was horribly victimised and was raped and a whole village destroyed... and then nothing happened to the person who caused it, under existing way of handling things. I understand her having an issue with that but she literally tried to destroy the thing that intends to handle that kind of shit from now on so there would be consequences for events like that in the future? She basically fought to have the status quo, which literally led to her situation and to the lack of consequences, instead of having the model changed in a way that would help avoid or handle situations like that in the future? Where is the logic there for you? I absolutely understand emotionally the Red Axe and I absolutely understand why she is wrong. Destroying an attempt of handling an issue better in the future in a way that does not achieve anything but reinforcing the current system is just pointless. The Red Axe was manipulated and either she was perfectly fine with it because she chose her own hurt over the long-term positive consequences or she didn't fully understand the consequences of her actions, the end result is that it perfectly illustrates that good has an issue with shortsightedness. She remained a hero until the end even though her actions were objectively long-term worse than the T&T. And Hanno has the gall to complain about heroes experiencing consequences for trying to destabilise the whole continent and trying to murder other heroes, because the individual person prioritised her trauma over everybody else. One can understand the Axe and still understand why it is not right. Hanno does not even want to admit that. Because she is Good and a hero. He is doing exactly what he is criticising the villains of. "even the worse of us are not malicious" is what he said. Sorry, but this is really not true and the Axe illustrated that you don't have to be intentionally malicious for your actions to be beyond that as far as consequences go.

Malek_Deneith

Truce and Terms are only in effect for duration of the war. If my memory serves me right Cat even explicitly mentioned she'd have no issues with Enchanter being hunted down afterwards.

Agent J

There was no justice for the village Tariq plagued either. No, his Good intentions don't excuse that. No, the fields and granaries Black burnt do not justify it.

Neither does the Red Axe's trauma excuse trying to collapse the war after holding back THE LITERAL APOCALYPSE! You're mistaking 'sympathetic' with 'just'. You are, in many ways, doing exactly what Hanno does.

Acting like the Accords are about making a compromise with Evil. That Good, whatever harm it causes, can and should be excused because at least they're not intentionally malicious like Evil. This is the problem. Their intentions are no balm for the people harmed by their action. If Red Axe had succeeded, broken the T&T, shattered the Grand Alliance, and DK swallows Procer whole... do you think the dying continent would give one iota of a fuck about her tragic backstory? Do you think the innocent civilians that were massacred by Tariq the Plaguebearer care one whit about the trolley dilemma he always seems to view the world through?

Hanno wants to be a Warden when he doesn't even understand what the Accords are about.

It's not a compromise with Evil, it's a compromise with Named.

jamesc9

I wonder if a retrospectively revised T&T needed to allow duelling, so that people who are aggrieved by events before other people joined can seek a managed private remedy.

ninegardens

I mean, we all remember that time Tariq Killed a Village right?
And NO ONE got to call him on it.

And like... his logic was good, and I even like the guy.
BUT... He killed a village and was above the law, and that is kinda messed up.

Linnus42

I mean Cordelia's solution was trap the Legion in a city and burn it down with Civilians inside.
Black's plan was break them by burning up the country side leaving them to starve and DK gets an easy win.

Tariq took the least bad option of the bunch.
Considering Cordelia's plan was going to kill more people I don't put much stock in her rage. Being really about the poor villagers being killed and more about

Tariq didn't do what she wanted even if her plan was worse.

ninegardens

Absolutely!

I agree with! Tariq DID prevent unnecessary suffering. It was good and right.

... and he should **still** be put on trial for it. The trial might find him innocent. Or it might find him guilty and decide to let him free anyway. I do not think he should be damned for what he did. I just think that he should be **answerable** to **someone**.

Linnus42

I am fine with your argument if you think Cordelia would need to be put on trial if they went with her plan to burn a whole city down with the Legion and Civilians inside killing even more people.

Reader in the Night

Cordelia is answerable: To the Highest Assembly. She can be voted out at any moment.

Insanenoodlyguy

That's her call as a ruler. She was elected to make the hard decisions. And she'd understand why some would never forgive her for that. Tariq is an outsider who answered to no one and just because his call was lesser doesn't mean it was his call to make. If he'd gone to Cordelia and said "I have a plan. It's horrible but it will stop him for minimal

Loss" she might have even supported it! But he didn't. It wouldn't have even occurred to him to do it, because maybe he'd be refused and why would he need to ask in the first place? He's a god blessed hero. And this hurt his relationship with Cordelia in a way a warden of the west couldn't afford to do with a big powers ruler, and a way Hanno absolutely would do or allow. He recognized this chapter how he'd eroded trust he needs. It'd have taken a lot more, time they don't have to realize it himself.

Linnus42

She was elected from among a pool of Princes by her fellow Princes. Princes inherit their power

based on having the right bloodline primarily with some other secondary factors.

The average civilian in the village Tariq plagued or the city she wanted to burn has no control over the government in Procer. If they wanted justice and the other Princes didn't vote to remove her they basically need to start a coup well their relatives would they all be dead.

Legality doesn't mean Moral. And no I don't agree if she was elected by the People and the law technically grants her that power its make her in the right. Even if she was in a democracy and not an oligarchy.

Insanenoodlyguy

But if it's not her decision to make, what makes it Tariq's?

Konstantin von Karstein

No one is saying otherwise. Everyone was thinking that the Enchanter do served to be killed. The problem is that her death was necessary for the T&T, and with them the whole continent. Sure the morality of that is awful, but one of the theme of the Guide is that practicality wins.

Abrakadabra

And Kingfisher Just happened to deserve the almost decapitation because of what exactly? Because another man was an evil killer? Or because Red Axe decided that to destroy truce and terms the death of Kingfisher was worth it? See, she Just treated Kingfishers life as collateral damage, no not even that, as a tool.

Sir Nil

This felt like it needed more setup.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think this is over yet.

dadycoool

She just BROKE his Story! She was able to tell him exactly how he's wrong and did so in a way that stuck, and that's amazing! Now if she can cut the ground out from Cordelia's feet, too, she'll have made way for a Claimant who hasn't been involved in this pissing match.

Adrian_V

Nahh, the whole point is seeing wich of these 2 can change and grow as a person, because both were unwilling or unable to do that, and that was the danger, this is new age and the wardens should represent that change.

RoflCat

Also hinting at them what I said before:

The Warden of the East came to be BECAUSE she has BOTH the Nation and the Names.

The current claimants of the West are EITHER Nation OR Names, not both. So neither are her 'equal'.

This is Catherine teaching them that they need to have both.

Adrian_V

Yeah, that and if they only have 1 even if they somehow get the name they would be weaker than Cat, there would be a fatal flaw in the system creating an imbalance, not sure how that would affect the story but the warden of the West would be weaker for sure.

Kletanio

Stick your Claim where the Light shineth not, Hanno.

ninegardens

I mean.... this is Hanno right? How sure are we that the Light Shineth not from his hindquarters? Pretty sure he could manage it.

Tenthyr

God DAMN Cat tore into him.

I wonder if Hanno is far enough out of his own ass now to realise what she just did was give him a chance to heroically learn his lesson and claim his true power.

arcanavitae15

Holy shit I loved that just god, so that is what the warden of the East looks like I just god damn. I loved that argument it was a long time coming and I like how it was handled with both of them making good point, I like how Catherine pointed a lot of things that needs to be said the same with hanno, I hope they both grow from this, looking forward to more.

*arcanavita*15

I also like how Catherine quoted Amadeus, "you have not earned it and this offends me"

Reader in the Night

This is gonna be one of those chapters from the Guide I come back to read once in a while just because it's so awesome. Catherine quoting Black was... *shivers*.

Raved Thrad

Hanno doesn't wear a helm, right? Otherwise that ringing he thought was truth might just have been Indrani's mailed glove smacking him on the back of the head. 😊

Frivolous

If you're naked from the belt up when you're hanging upside down, does that mean you're wearing no shirt or no pants?

I hope it's no pants

[boballab](#)

Sorry that isn't Hanno, that is Jason Asano in "He Who Fights With Monsters" that hangs up side down without pants.

SpeckofStardust

To quote cat.

"My help is a decision,"

Named have power, they make choices, and when those choices cause problems they like every other group need to be reprimanded.

This very argument has been set up from the start.

Heroes causing less problems is irrelevant if your unwillingly to punish them for the problems they do cause. The warden and accord system is to set up people who can carry those punishments out before it gets out of hand.

The wardens are meant to protect the unnamed from the Named or to at least migrate the damage to those who aren't named from Named actions.

[boballab](#)

That's the thing though, there is multiple chapters and story arcs that show that Hero's don't cause less problems. The problems they cause have been swept under the rug of "The Villain made me do it". William going to turn an entire city into mindless fanatics to start the 10th Crusade all because the Hero's couldn't get things going in Callow. The Bard and Saint telling Cordy that she needs to let a huge chunk of her people die to bring in a new golden age for Hero's in Procer.

In the regular course of events after the Hero's half destroy a city or village to get the Villain they don't stay around and help rebuild or help bury the dead. It's something that has been pointed out about Superhero comics for a long time, you never see the hero stick around or pay the price of picking up some working stiff's car and throwing it at the villain, and knocking him through the same stiff's place of work. Great you got the villain but it doesn't help that ordinary guy who no longer has a car or a job anymore.

Raved Thrad

That superhero argument reminds me of "Kingdom Come."

SpeckofStardust

Just because you have a hate on for heroes doesn't mean they cause more problems. Like for below's sake there is a reason villains are 'evil' but heroes are 'good' PR only gets you so far. And as we saw during the flashbacks to the Dead King's time before being the dead king below wasn't 'evil' and above wasn't 'good'.

Going at my they cause "less problems" as me giving them a blank check was missing my point.
Cat having more problems with heroes does not mean heroes cause more problem to the average person.

[boballab](#)

Hate to break the news to ya but I don't have a hate on for hero's but they do cause just as many problems and it is because they work for control freaks... or did you forget the whole reason the gods split was not over "good" and "evil" (those were mortal terms) but over how the gods should interact with mortals.

SpeckofStardust

Yes the guide vs control, which considering the relative lack of guiding from the Below in the story leads me to believe that the above isn't simply the control crowd. (of the thought that above and below don't follow the divide that simply).

[Adrian V](#)

"You have not earned it," Catherine Foundling said, smiling thin and sharp, "and this offends me."

**In some extraplanar level of hell Amadeus of the Green Stretch is seeing this and going all "see this my little girl is quoting me" to all the surrounding demons and tortured souls xD

And yeah i was right both Hanno and Cordelia need character development, or rather grow, the one that is able to grow more or quicker is the one that should be warden since both of their methods/ideologies are doomed, the whole premise of the new age is change, some named it the Age of Order but all it boils down to is the world changing and if they can't change with it then they aren't fit for it.

Also this was Hanno's chastising lets see if Cordelia gets one too, to her face that is

sidehammer056302

I always liked Hanno, so it hurt to see him so utterly torn apart, but goddamn did it feel good watching Cat thrive in her element.

"All that's left is violence. And I'm better at it than you..."

XD

Frivolous

Where the hell is Masego? He should be present to Witness. He should have demanded to be present.

The Book of Some Things is being eaten, and he should be fascinated by it. Either he should be using someone else's Wrested magic to observe the procedure, or he should be running itself with Wrested Night.

[sengachi](#)

Hmm, that's a good point. I'd guess:

- 1) He is watching, just from a remote viewing location with better equipment than he could fit into the ritual room itself.
- 2) Cat needs him for something else, which he's doing or waiting to do right now.
- 3) They are still fighting the Dead King after all, and no matter how much he wants to see this, he's needed to close a Greater Breach or something.

shikkarasu

Cat can always let him view her memory. We know he can **Witness** through other people's eyes. It was how he gained **Witness** in the first place en route to Keter and later how he attempted to recreate his father. He just needs a goo, reliable point of view. The woman who did the thing should suffice.

They are long past issues with copy/pasting memories between one another. It just comes with a migraine sometimes.

Isaac Martinez

Cat has her dream of throwing people from towers realized, and evades the story of the chained monster, or damsel in need of rescue. Yup.

[Kletanio](#)

Such a shame that Hanno is For Sure Dead from being thrown off the tower. There is no way he survived, and there is no way he will possibly recover from this defeat. Woe unto him.

Linnus42

Oh one more thing I say the argument about well you have to National Support and experience running a town, city, province, country, etc would work a whole lot better in a world where you know most people don't get that position by dint of being born from the right pair of Loins. Though he does have experience running a military and Heroes but the point stands I suppose.

I mean Cat didn't need to but getting to her current position was a lot of hardwork and being adopted by the right person. Hanno was not liable to be in such position to run anything in Ashur given how low he started in their rigid caste system. Even if sure the overall point is sound, its a lot less sound when its not as easy as run for an election and win.

Funny enough he could have gotten such experience you know if Cordelia didn't stop him from getting made Prince by the ascent of the people.

Konstantin von Karstein

And how would he have won experience governing while in the middle of the apocalypse? Even if he was made a Prince he would still basically do the same things he was doing. Even if he tried to actually rule while fighting the End Times, he wouldn't have been good at it, which the GA can't afford.

Linnus42

Indeed that is kinda my point though Cat makes a good point in practice though its basically an impossible ask lol in context. Though we don't know how good he be after some time, just that they don't have the time.

nimmo

The issue isn't entirely to do with governing. It's to do with leading. Hanno is a leader of small bands and never of more than that.

"The choices don't stay nice and clean when you have to think about more than a hundred people at a time. How very convenient that you've limited how many you need to care about to that number.""

Hanno has never stepped up and lead anything more than a group of heroes and it shows. Sure they are in the middle of a big old war and so he cant take a throne but why not an army? Hanno has been at the front lines of every battle but Cat has planned her fights AND then fought from the front. That's the difference, a Warden is not just a Name with a big stick, it's a Name that leads other Names, all other Names and Hanno does not have that big picture experience.

Two dozen snakes

You're not getting it. Cat's not criticizing Hanno because he has no experience ruling, she's criticizing him because he has no interest in doing so. She just pointed out the flaws in his way of handling the job as Hero-in-charge of the GA, and the fact that as WotW he intends to just keep doing what he's doing. Hanno treats Heroes and Villains like they exist in a vacuum, ignoring the effect their actions have on the people of Calernia as a whole. And that's unacceptable, because the whole point of the Accords and the Wardens is to limit the effect of their actions on the common people. The actions of the Red Axe are entirely understandable, justified even for her, but doesn't change the sheer damage she nearly caused. And for Hanno to completely ignore the social and political ramifications, refusing to bend to the reality of the situation and nearly causing the collapse of the GA is unacceptable. The WotW is supposed to be in charge of Good, they can't be someone who looks the other way while a hero starts the next continental war just because the hero is Good. Hanno's blind spot is that the consequences of a hero's actions aren't automatically "everyone lived happily ever after", and so the Warden can't be someone who won't step in to stop them *before* that happens, or unwilling to take actions to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control after the fact. This isn't about right or wrong, the moral/ethical choice over the unethical one. It's about ensuring the least amount of damage to the continent. The Name is WARDEN, not Guide or Paragon...

nimelennar

I can't help but worry that this breaks her promise to Tariq, though. From Book 6, Chapter 75:

"I'd already sworn oath to Tariq that I'd not meddle with how the White Knight overcame his doubts, and that meant not letting myself be drawn into too pivotal a conversation."

Maybe Hanno has already had his pivot (by becoming Prince White), so this is inflicting doubts and not overcoming them? But if that was the case, I'd have expected to have seen the fulfilment of the promise acknowledged.

ninegardens

““I'd already sworn oath to Tariq that I'd not meddle with how the White Knight overcame his doubts, and that meant not letting myself be drawn into too pivotal a conversation.””

Cat Got released from that promise.

At the end of the last book, Tariq was all like “Okay, you can stop steering clear of Hanno now. Go be pals again. Also, I need you to babysit for me, and I'll borrow Robber for a bit”



nimelennar

“‘Make peace with the White Knight,’ Tariq asked. ‘That this civility may one day pass to all in service of Above and Bellow.’”

I mean, that /might/ be giving her permission to interfere with the White Knight overcoming his doubts, but it doesn't read that way to me.

Jdburger

I think we did see the the fulfillment of the promise in Claimant (Repeat). Hanno has overcomes his doubts – taking a role of leadership and announced his beliefs upon what the Role of the Warden of the West is.

With Hanno no longer plagued by doubt and trying to make a decisive decision that will affect Calernia she can set in. Furthermore she is kind of stepping in as the harsh teacher / mentor role make him realize his failings... but I would argue that is the mentor figure Cat is most familiar with.

nimelennar

Yeah, that might be the pivot, too. I'm just unclear why it wouldn't have been acknowledged as releasing her from her promise if it was.

Avandar

A point that often gets forgotten is that “Heroes” are way more subjective than Hanno likes to admit. How many people die when the Choir of Contrition gets involved?

A hero from one nation could very likely be viewed as a villain by another nation. Levantines, based on what both named and non-named have said in the books, don't have a great view of Proceran heroes. Remember in Hanno's POV arc, he was constantly mediating between the heroes in his band of five? The Levantines clearly viewed the Proceran heroes as enemies, even though they were both "Good" nations.

Recall that William the Lone Swordsman butchered his sister and became a hero, while the Barrow Sword is a villain because of... grave robbing? Arthur Foundling's epiphany about the difference between right vs. wrong and above vs. below is what I hope Hanno arrives at. Aside from fighting, we don't often see Hanno making a positive difference for the world.

A final point from Interlude: Wicked – "The Queen of Callow still bore one of the strongest wishes he had ever seen, pulsing with her heartbeat: peace, peace, peace. It was like watching a flower bloom anew with every beat. Even now it was all he could do not to laugh until his throat bled, for what an exquisite jest it was that one of Below's finest servants in the long history of Calernia was at heart one of Above's!"

Silverking

I think I recall Cat saying that she knows that monologue are generally hazardous to her health, but that she had often felt the urge to really lay into them "like rubbing a dog's nose into the mess they made on the carpet." As for the argument "Heroes are generally better intentioned than Villains, so having them answerable to authority is counterproductive", there's a few contentious examples that spring to mind.

The Saint of Swords smiled at the thought of Procer burning in order to bring forth "a better world from the ashes", and decided that she would rather let the sky fall and crush 3 full armies on the eve of the war against the Dead King rather than enter a bargain with a Villain for a microsecond. While the Red Axe had a true grievance against the Wicked Enchanter, her murder was a cold calculated strike against the Accords, and she tried to kill the innocent Kingfisher Prince for no other reason than to stir the pot further. These people weren't misguided or confused; they performed their actions with eyes wide open, even with the knowledge that it could make things worse for a lot more people. At some point, you've got to bring the hammer down, and the Role of "Guiding Counselor" that Hanno is forming may not actually be good at that.

I think the main thing that Cat was trying to convey (or at least, the main thing that Hanno took from the meeting) was that, regardless of what's actually true or not, the perception of Heroes as "the people who will get others killed for their ideals instead of their appetites" has permeated the fabric of Story to

the degree that someone who feels that Heroes should be brought to heel is deemed a possible claimant to the name of Warden. Put it another way "If you're 100% right, and she's 100% wrong, then why does the glass slipper fit BOTH of you?"

agumentic

>she would rather let the sky fall and crush 3 full armies on the eve of the war against the Dead King rather than enter a bargain with a Villain for a microsecond

Being fair to old Laurence, she was willing to risk that, not simply let it happen.

Gabe Meadow

Well, a key element of her stated attitude was that she figured 'Good will win in the end.' That there's no way her uncompromising stance could possibly endanger all of Calernia, could it?

Which adds another element of the issue with Hanno and the heroic mindset – not just that being Good and in the service of Above immunizes them from consequences morally/legally – but that Providence immunizes them on a practical level. That they can't truly fail or make things worse.

I know people before have mentioned the vacuum belief, but it's this second element that in particular needs emphasizing. Because it's wrong.

A long time ago, from Interlude: Nemeses in vol. 2:

"It doesn't matter if she summons a whole army, though she didn't do any summoning at all. Heiress loses, in the end. That's her story. She makes a mess, but in the end she can't win. These... practical Evil types. They can win, if we let them."

"It wouldn't be the first time Evil wins," the hero said grimly. "Nor will it be the last, if we should be defeated."

"They don't win like this, William," Almorava said quietly. "This monstrosity of a plan the madman and the tyrant have cooked up? It changes things. Opens a door that can't be closed ever again."

From the Wandering Bard herself. And while she's completely unreliable, we've seen it demonstrated throughout the story. From everything Cat's done, to Kairos' trap for Judgement, to the end of vol. 6 where Magnificent Undead Bastard Neshamah uses Tariq's angelic Heroic Sacrifice as narrative

justification to unleash his Ultra-Hellgate Surprise, and lock Providence out of the equation.

Because as explained when Kairos delivered his fatal lie:

"Stories were such a funny thing, weren't they? Like, say, 'wicked villain is sentenced never to lie again by the champion of a Choir, then in a moment of delightful hubris speaks such a lie'. It was the kind of story that'd need a thundering, righteous Choir to smite that uppity servant of Below. Not the sort of thing you could do while simultaneously serving as the hidden knife of the Heavens in someone else's tale. It wouldn't matter that the Choir had the capacity to serve in both roles concurrently. Fate would punish such lackluster commitment with failure on both fronts."

The hero mindset Hanno's espoused implicitly believes Fate is inherently on their side. It's not. Villains can get Fate on their side too. And Fate trumps both Choirs and Providence.

And that builds to Hanno's realization about Cordelia being a claimant. Not just that perception and stories have built up that take a jaundiced view of heroes, but that Fate declared it valid means it's not a heroic cheerleader.

jamesc9

> the perception of Heroes as "the people who will get others killed for their ideals instead of their appetites"

Thank you; that's a very nice summary.

Juff

Typo Thread:

allowing to see > allowing him to see
act stop > act to stop
it would Callow > it owed Callow
then I for some > then for some
Her haze > Her gaze
As pain raised > As if pain raised
Was it you put up (something wrong here)
learned my > learned from my
guide to heroes > guide heroes (or be a guide)

CharcoalSpider

So this seems very much "Cat good and smart, heroes always dumb." I mean, Hanno could have easily responded to most of Cat's arguments, especially the one about Cat being there "as a decision." Every hero that joined the defense of Procer did so

without having to be corralled like Cat did to the villains. The fact that this was enough to somehow “beat” Hanno is pretty disappointing, especially when a large number of the troubles before and during the war can laid at Cat’s feet.

I was kinda that this event would have been a huge mis-play from Cat; that Hanno and Cordelia were really trying to find some way to (individually) work out their differences, or that someone would take Cat to task for how much her hubris and need to control everything led to so many issues that everyone is currently facing. But alas, my prediction is that she will find Cordelia, lay the same verbal smackdown on her and Cordelia will simply be unable to respond in any way, and then Cat will dictate what will happen to the Name of Warden.

ninegardens

>> “The fact that this was enough to somehow “beat” Hanno is pretty disappointing,”

I think you missing the crux of the argument here. She wasn’t saying “I choose to be here, therefore I have the moral high ground over you”, she was saying “I choose to be here and *you lot are taking that for granted*”

ohJohn

re: corralling

@ninegardens already addressed the main point, but beyond that I think this is a mischaracterization.

Villains have their own motivation to oppose the DK taking over Procer/Calernia – namely that the Hidden Horror would kill them just as dead as the heroes, should he succeed. It’s historically common for villains to (temporarily) team up against a stronger villain. And even the Berserker, who was not the sharpest of their lot, recognized that the Accords would be advantageous for her. The main deterrent to them joining the war at first was the assumption that heroes would try to kill them if they showed their faces; once the T&T granted amnesty for past crimes and protected them from heroic attacks, they joined in droves. Removing that strong disincentive is hardly ‘corralling’, and it seems weird to pat the heroes on the head for not having been affected by it in the first place?

It’s also worth pointing out that the heroes absolutely *did* need to be corralled for the sake of the war effort – like, uh, *everything that happened at the Arsenal* – so this would be an extremely hypocritical point for Hanno to raise. Even ignoring the Red Axe, the Mirror Knight tried to steal a critical war asset, opposed one high officer and tried to depose another, incited a brawl between heroes where he almost killed one and

mutilated another, and in the end Hanno had to beat the absolute ever-loving shit out of him.

IDKWhoitis

Soooo, I felt like this confrontation was a long time coming. Could a couple of Cat's points be argued with (or outright a trick of perspective)? Yeah, but the big thing is the smack down on Hanno for not really changing or learning from the tectonic shifts that have occurred around him. For all that Cat has flaws (we are in the seventh book of exploring them for Below's sake) she did point out that Cordy and Hanno have been nothing but slowly pulling apart the foundation of the Grand Alliance. Each one more preoccupied with the other's authority or power, slowly rotting the core and faith in Heroes and seeing the next day.

Cat was faced with the harder problem, of instilling enough discipline into the Villains that most people are accepting of their contributions and presence. She is unquestionably the leader, and they do follow her commands, and she did this without murdering one of them or racing to the bottom of the barrel. Cat is a Warden of Evil.

Cordy has failed, not on her own accord, the odds were really stacked against her. Procer as a concept is slowly bleeding out on the floor. The princes are in revolt (the pricks), the supplies and reinforcements are delayed (or nonexistent) and the ability of the crown's word to be taken seriously is at an all time low. The faith in the government is in an all time low. Her authority is very questionable at the moment, only being held together by a desperate deal with her princes.

This does not leave Hanno clear either, as with the failures compounding on Cordy's head, the one place that people should be turning to in their hour of need are the Heroes. But it's not in Hanno's (or any other heroes') shadow they look for respite. They are turning to Villains, to Cat specifically. By the limited the scope and responsibilities that Heroes have, losing the faith and hope of people is a crippling failure on their part. It can't even be excused because the Dead King has been a particular brand of bastard, because against all odds Heroes are supposed to Hold the Line. They are supposed to triumph and capture the imagination of the common soldiers and folk into believing that the end of days can be turned back. But given the state of things that Cat has walked back into at Salia, with everyone huddling together in the muck praying in despair for an end, I would make the case the Heroes, and Hanno included, have failed. There is a schism in faith, and a house divided will not stand.

Because in the end, Hanno and Cordy spent more time strategically positioning themselves to benefit at each other's expense. It was not a simple competition (as much as they want to beautify it), because the whole time, everything was burning around them.

Neither emerged as a leader, only deeping cracks, and fortifying trenches, hoping that SOMEONE would tilt things to their favor. Because it was "the right thing to do" or for a fucking bribe. This whole rant is to say, if they needed Cat to hand over a book to prove themselves the leader of a side, they really can't be seen as a worthwhile leader at all. Cordy schemed and Hanno demanded, but ultimately both their positions are too weak a foundation for an actual Warden.

This isn't a case of Cat is cheating or melodrama. This is not a case of false weights and trading in on old fuck ups. The failure in character, on display, is both Hanno's and Cordy's to bear. The Book should burn, or be handed to a third party. I willing to entertain a crack theory of Akua, Roland, or Gods Above help him, Frederick become the Warden. Frederick actually inspired and held together a neat little coalition, and Cordy is only really even a claimant because he put duty above personal gain.

I am happy of this chapter, it felt like some of the good stuff from a couple books ago. It made me happy to tune in at midnight on Friday again.

Linnus42

I mean I think most of your points are sound even if you are more charitable to Cordelia then Hanno. I would also argue Villains can be kept inline with sufficient Force, Force alone does not keep Heroes and Princes inline. But I get the major point.

However why should Frederic get Warden. As both a Prince and Hero should he not be trying to mitigate any rift between the White Knight and First Prince. And yet when has he ever acted to do so? As you note all Frederic ever does in a conflict between Cordelia and Hanno is back Cordelia immediately. He doesn't try to get them to come to a table together or try to convince either one that the other side isn't as bad as they think. He does as you note nothing because of duty...which is weird cause when we saw his flashback he initially rejected joining the Civil War even when Cordelia begged. That suggested a much more independent spirit then the current version.

I would also argue his choices surrounding Red Axe be it his failure to not get jumped by her, him helping to start a Hero brawl against MK and primarily his refusal to charge Red Axe at all helped create this crisis. For a man who supposedly trained in Politics and has the experience Cat says should be needed, he has been terrible at diplomacy.

IDKWhoitis

By his honor code, there isn't a question about backing Cordy. He isn't a zealot, he is a prince, and she's not Evil.

Thus in any conflict, he doesn't try to overcomplicate it, there's a right and wrong action laid out by a clear logic (Of a lawful good prince). I made another comment expanding on my analysis of Frederick. I wouldn't blame him for getting attacked by Red Axe, she was literally under an illusion and he was tasked to protect her, literally with his back to her.

My charity to Cordy is more out of apathy of "ah shucks" because I don't take her claimant status too seriously. She played the best she could being dealt a particularly shit hand (Black burning the fields, DK going nuclear, Human nature and Vultures circling overhead).

I'm going to sleep, but might reply late tomorrow.

IDKWhoitis

And damn the lack of an edit button.

It wasn't his responsibility to mend a rift, who was he to try? It would be stepping over bounds. But Frederick did at least support a resolution, by backing Cordy and helping get the support of the other princes.

Linnus42

He was a Prince and Hero. He is probably in the best position to try to mend the rift seeing as he is on both sides and knows both well enough. Surely if he should be Warden he should step and do something to stop this thing from blowing up. But there is no implication he did anything but quickly take Cordelia's side.

As for Red Axe, the issue is not getting jumped per se. It's the fact that despite having the qualities Cat implies one should have, he is a failure. He is trained in politics and diplomacy yet along with Roland and Christophe provokes a heroic brawl, should he not know better and be the adult in the room? Hanno even notes that Frederic was itching to go for his sword. He doesn't de-escalate, he provokes the conflict. As for Red Axe, he didn't consider the political situation in Procer when he decided to bring no charges against Red Axe. If he had made the charges and swung the sword to execute her this current issue is unlikely to occur at all (maybe there is some other trigger but one he played a big roll in). Sure maybe not charging Red Axe was honorable but isn't Hanno being shredded for not being Practical, putting personal code first and seeing the bigger picture by Cat here? The difference is Frederic checks all Cat's boxes and is supposed to be trained for War and Politics but never shows it.

The funny thing is Frederic is the perfect example of what Cat is suggesting on paper but when you look at his record its the opposite. He ruins her argument.

Sinead

Minor question: Does Fredric ruin Cat's argument, or does he just not actually fit her criteria of applying politics to Heros?

He seems to keep the two worlds separate, which leads to his failings here.

I'm just asking because it reads as a jump from listing Fredric's failings to 'Cat is entirely wrong' but I could easily be missing a key detail here.

Linnus42

That is one possible interpretation. Not mine but I can see how you get to that conclusion.

Sinead

I wasn't clear then.

My question is 'Would you elaborate on your interpretation?' Because I see how Fredric 'checks all the boxes on paper, but still fails'. I do not see how your last line of 'He ruins her argument' stands as just because Fredric doesn't uphold the standard doesn't mean Cat's argument is invalid. Unless that is your point?

IDKWhoitis

Really thinking about it, Frederick has played his role loyally, and pretty straight through on what a Hero should be while balancing the responsibilities of authority and pragmatic realities. I am very much in favor of him becoming Warden. He isn't just Cat with a better coat of paint, but rather someone who looks at what MUST be done, and without debating or pushing, just leaps in front of it. He's not particularly zealous, but he doesn't scorn others for pursuing other avenues. Even when stabbed by the Red Axe, if I remember, he didn't want her dead. He wept for his own assassin.

Yeah, I can really throw my support behind him. I think the other princes would be a little more motivated to elevate him, even if it is to snub Cordy...But he does have the proper training, mindset, and prestige. The people of the North, behind Redcrown, would likely bend the knee. And he is of the South, embodying every flamboyant trait and flaw. And lets not pretend that Cat's

a little sweet on him, for totally pragmatic reasons, willing to work together.

Frederick for Warden of the West!

[sengachi](#)

The most fascinating thing for me, in this chapter, is the realization of just how *thoroughly* the Heroes have come to rely on Cat playing nice. Like, I knew she was playing nice with them, obviously. I knew they took it for granted, obviously. But even so, wow, I really wasn't seeing the magnitude of that.

You know what this chapter really drove home for me? Catherine has a new tier of Evil meta-Name, leads the freaking Woe, controls the strongest (living) military power on the continent (and has the next two strongest powers, the Drow and the Praesi, under her authority), has the ur-artifact of Good in her possession, is backed by gods famous for eating power ... and not a single person on Good's side was freaking out about it until she did her tower thing.

Because everyone on Good's side trusts her not to abuse that power.

Every single one of Hanno's actions here was predicated on the idea that Cat would meekly stay beaten if he won. That she wouldn't jeopardize the greater good if she lost. That she would carefully evaluate the political picture and avoid retaliatory plays which might disrupt too much if she won.

Good has come to take so much for granted from her, and wow, did this chapter ever drive that home.

IDKWhoitis

I fully believe she was entitled to that Monologue for the past 3 books and counting, but her staying quiet is saving no one. If there's a time to lance the wound, it's now.

[Kletanio](#)

She wanted to gloat *so badly* when Cordelia knelt before her and acknowledged how badly Procer had fucked up. And instead, Cat told her to get back up. Because it was the right thing to do.

Hanno, in contrast, never actually acknowledged that Cat has been right about a lot of stuff, that he's been put in charge of the Heroes in the T&T mostly by virtue of Cat needing there to be a hero people would listen to, not because Hanno was ever her true equal. And then Hanno starts lecturing here.

Yeah, she has the story at her back now. Of *course* she's going to rub it in.

nimelennar

It probably would have caused no end of problems in keeping the the rest of the Alliance on-side... but I can't help but feel that "Arch-Heretic of the East" would have been a more kick-ass, appropriate, and earned Name for Cat, with basically the same connotations.

[sengachi](#)

This is something I think is worth dissecting.

"You pretend that villains and heroes are the same, that their difference is a simple matter of... abstract philosophy," he said, "but it is not. Even the most vicious of us are trying to end evil, not spread it. You stand instead for rapists, cannibals and callous murderers."

On the one hand Hanno is right. But also ... this kind of shows how he doesn't get it. Cat doesn't stand for those people and those actions. It is her job to manage the people who do those actions, through whatever mix of incentives and consequences does the trick. But Hanno doesn't see the job as managing Named at all, he sees it as representing them. And that, above all else, might be why he doesn't deserve the job.

IDKWhoitis

I think a fair amount of Asymmetry is to be expected in the Warden roles and how they exert authority and power. My issue with Hanno really gets to his lack of understanding, or any meaningful attempts to. For the Wardens to function, it's a give and take relationship, based on trust, willing to limit the worst aspects of their own sides. His whole makeup fundamentally rejects that on several accounts, and without some character growth speed run, he can't be a Warden.

Because if you read carefully, he afraid of the Villains to revert to their base nature and Cat to not do much, because that was what he was going to do on some level for the Heroes.

[sengachi](#)

You're definitely right about the asymmetry. And Hanno really fails to see that asymmetry. He's judging Cat as if her Role is the Role he'd prefer to take as Warden. But that's just not how she plays the game.

beleester

Yeah, I think this is the crux of it. Like, we can all debate on how well this or that hero is living up to their ideals in specific instances, but Hanno is right that the Warden of the West isn't just going to be the Warden of the East with a different coat of paint. You can't ask someone to be the Leader of Heroes and then get upset that they promote traditional heroic things like forgiveness, moral inflexibility, or a willingness to bet on faith and luck instead of ruthless certainty.

[sengachi](#)

Well, I mean, clearly you can, because there's another option on the table (Cordelia) who is very willing to do things differently.

Reader in the Night

W000! That was SAVAGE! Nice to finally see everything wrong with Cordelia's perspective I've been pointing out acknowledged through Hanno's point of view, and then having Hanno himself be called out on the fact that he's so deep into the Stories, he forgot muggles get to have an opinion too.

When basically your entire social life is composed of Named as far back as you can remember, you sort of forget that the commoner folk is more than just window dressing for Heroics.

Now to see Cordelia called out on her casual prejudice towards Heroes.

Two dozen snakes

Ultimately one of Cat's salient points is that she IS Warden of the East, whereas Hanno(and Cordy) are merely claimants. Therefore, the WotW must be someone who counterbalances her. It can't be an extremist who will put their principles above her grievances, because if Cat has a serious grievance she might not be able or even willing to bend herself, and what happens if the Wardens can't come to a compromise over a serious enough issue?

[sengachi](#)

This is Hanno's fundamental problem, I think. He's not treating the Warden position as a management position, where the point is controlling one's Named and compromising with the other Warden to avoid damage to the common folk. He views the point as championing his Named's interests and narratives above all else, being the purest representative of them possible.

He's entirely missing the point of this new position, treating it like White Knight+. And Cat is finally not having it.

Orby

Rule of Law(Cordelia) vs. Libertarianism(Hanno)

ChillyPepper

I'm reminded of the name dream Cat had. with her good and bad sides fighting her human side? and I'm beginning to wonder if that was the whole replace the Bard dream, and she is breaking the mold.

Also, Akua for Cat's equal. (Or one of those Gargoyles, I'm not picky, EE.)

Daniel E

Catherine's quip about normal folks being sick of Heroes just as much as they are of Villains got me thinking; perhaps the Age of Order is meant to do away with the supernatural in this world. Starting with a decline in the power & relevance of Named, until eventually even magic & Light are but distant memories.

Konstantin von Karstein

I don't think so. You don't have to be Named to use either of them. And as long as the Gnomes continue to enforce their ban, magic and Light are the only way to significantly improve their technology and society. That's also the only way to feed such a massive population. There's no way any ruler is trying to forbid both of them and stay in power.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I don't think what he was suggesting was a ban so much as people just sort of being weaned off of reliance on such things, perhaps even unintentionally; but I agree that that seems unlikely, both for the reasons you stated and simply because learning to use tools and resources responsibly is easier and more effective than discarding them. Plus, Names and those who hold them are clearly not going away, they're merely being rendered accountable whereas they were previously above any authority save that of one another in most cases. The advent of the new Age has already resulted in a net increase in the total number of Names that exist for the people of Calernia to potentially claim.

RoflCat

So I think Cat is going for either:

1. The 'preferred' option – Teach both Cord and Hanno that they need BOTH Nation and Names to be her proper equivalent, and neither of them has that at the moment.

2. If both fail to rise, she will just eat the fucking book and become Warden of Calernia. After all, as she pointed out here the Nations of the West would support her right now, and eating the book would give her power over the Names.

Either option would let them be done with this internal conflict and get back to dealing with the still very much advancing army of Dead King.

ChillyPepper

Option three: Providence will see both claimants failing, and will get a solid third claimant, powered with story and claim, to grab the book before she devours it!

superkeaton

Now, I wonder, what she has in store for Cordelia. Or if being forced to work face-to-face with heroes who aren't interested in politics will be trial enough.

IDKWhoitis

This is my ongoing assumption for how Cordy's claimancy is going to end, the Named won't follow her or will keep treating her like a Rookie (which in many ways, she is). However, given the nature of the role in question, one cannot simply be an administrator nor a judge, but rather an active participant in the war. Cordy has never struck me as particularly martial nor zealous.

[Mincheriit](#)

Thanks for the chapter. Damn i really hope theres cordelia side counterpart to this ch. I feel like theres been less problems openly caused by heroes than corrupt/abusive rulers but imo that kinda makes sense, theres less heroes than rulers n the like. It seems like the hero caused issues also tend to be less... direct and straightforward.

On another note, cats plan is basically if they cant get their shit together and theres no warden 'equal'to her, there doesnt need to be a shit warden either and theres better odds she can do something after consuming the book of some things. Rough tldr. I think...

kinigget

Well for starters, that all happened well before the Truce and Terms, so saying that it's what shattered the Grand Alliance is not only factually incorrect, but kind of insulting. Red Axe looked at the T&T, decided they didn't meet her own moral judgement, and purposefully went about trying to kill them. You may remember that Cat even said that had she killed the Wicked

Enchanter in pretty much any other way she would have turned a blind eye and done what she could to cover.

The worst part though?

Red Axe never presented any alternative. She just told Cat she had to do better. As if her principles would absolve her of responsibility for whatever fallout there might be of the T&T collapsing.

And all I see from you is more of the same.

Linnus42

Do you really expect a random farm girl in a what medieval setting to be able to hammer out the complex issues that make up the Truce and Terms and Grand Alliance?

[sengachi](#)

Alright, I'm gonna talk more about Hanno, because godsdamn this chapter inspires essays.

I think I've finally put my finger on **the** key hypocrisy of Hanno's arguments this last chapter. Which is that he insists on rhetorically treating Cat's position as one thing, but then by his actions treats her completely differently, and he's not actually prepared to deal with a Cat who is what he claims he is.

Because his actions treat her as this reasonable person who actively restrains the worst impulses of the Evil side. He treats her as someone who would rather take a loss than blow up the Grand Alliance when they're fighting the Dead King. He takes it for granted that she'll have already figured out all the political stuff, so there won't be any messy fallout from her actions. He assumes she'll be reasonable and, working from that assumption, takes it as license to be unreasonable.

Like, she is a freaking Evil ruler descending from the sky in a dark tower to eat an artifact of Good, and he takes it totally for granted that he can walk into her tower, kick her ass, take the artifact, and that she will accept the loss, **keep fighting alongside him**, and even actively soothe over political consequences of the fight. Like, holy shit, there are precious few Heroes in this story who could be so blithely assumed to be so compromising about that. Maybe none who would be so if it was a Villain that did that to them.

But the thing is, his moral license to take shit from her and push her around is that she's in the position of being **the** Representative of Evil and he has **no fucking idea** what he would do if she actually was that. His whole plan for confronting her is based on her not being the thing he paints her as. So when she

says, "haha, no, fuck you, I refuse to be the reasonable one who compromises, I have the power here, *you* compromise" ... he has no plan.

Hanno, the guy whose whole schtick is being the uncompromising champion of Good, doesn't actually have any fucking clue what to do with Evil that can choose not to compromise with him and still win.

It's, you know, a bit of a problem with his ideology.

ninegardens

On the one hand, I agree with this, on the other hand, Cat repeatedly REPRESENTS her position in one way, while actually her position is another.

For example now: She went out of her way to land a flying fortress, attack the book of some things, and paint 50 ft high letters of fire saying "Dungeon fortress, Oh no, heroes better not enter".

And then afterwards she captures Hanno and is all like "Dude, why you invading my fortress? You being a dick and trying to illegally steal my mystical artifact?" Which would... like... ring a lot less hollow if that wasn't *the entire point of her actions*.

Like, if I put a sign on my house saying "Secret pitfighting ring", and then stand around in a boxing ring downstairs, and then put my fists up when people enter, I don't really have the right to complain if someone throws a punch at me.

And to be clear- this isn't here MAIN argument, but I totally don't blame Hanno for not always taking Cat seriously, when she has consistently proven that she is a lying liar who lies. Cat is a crazy person pretending to be a reasonable person pretending to be a crazy person (or maybe its R->C->R->C->R, who knows). About half the shit that she is saying and doing here is deliberately sarcastic and arguing in bad faith, in that she is putting on a show of being an asshole and then throwing that back in Hanno's face as "Your stuff is similar."

... but like... if you are going out of your way to pretend to be an asshole, sometimes people are going to treat you like you're an asshole. Even if deep down they believe you are a reasonable person.

avandartheservant

sengachi, you have nailed the point that I think the chapter is trying to make. Hanno's hypocrisy is what Cat has such a deep issue with. The utter reliance on Cat being "good" without the

capital, so they can pretend to be "Good". Heroes are not TRYING to end evil. They just want to ride a story and pay lip service to ending it. Cat and the Woe, and the Calamities before them are/were making a conscious, deliberate attempt at making the world a better place, using methods that the Wandering Bard and the Grey Pilgrim employ regularly.

In the comments some people seem to take it literally when Hanno says "Even the most vicious of us are trying to end evil, not spread it. You stand instead for rapists, cannibals and callous murderers. Our exceptions are your rule." THAT SEEMS TO BE A BLANTANT LIE.

Especially since Cat literally does everything in her power to protect people from evil and let them live their lives in peace, minimizing collateral damage; yet the HELLGODS have chosen her as their champion and most favored daughter?

Some of Below's damned barely meet any of those criteria except for "callous murderer", and the Saint of Swords and basically every other martial Above named definitely qualify.

Aside from being sponsored by "Below", what EVIL are the following characters working towards? Adjutant/Warlord, Archer, Hierophant, Barrow Sword, The Scorched Apostate, Forgetful Librarian.

ISiejek

Some people in the comments seem to think that this doesn't make sense as well as other arcs with the plot but I totally disagree, the reason the political problems aren't being spoken about as often is because the person who was put in charge of managing them is managing them! Admittedly there are some struggles and difficulties because politicians are arseholes, but the person placed in charge to manage it is doing their damned best they can, however, the guy in charge of the heroes is the one causing the problems a lot of the time! This means dealing with the bullshit hero "good "crap is more important, also in the case of many villains the villain he is not significantly worse than the repeated reckless "goodness "of the heroes.

Yeah this chapter was brilliant for me, the point actually finally in a very small way scraping its way into the brain of Hanno. Loved it.

Also because it makes me feel better to say it:
Hanno is an arse 😂

ninegardens

Okay- new claim for WotW: Anaraxes. All of Cordelia's beurocracy, all of Hanno's unyeilding idealism, AND a partisan of below. Everyone can get along with him.

jamesc9

In which case they need to resurrect Kairos to help steer him.

Interlude: Occidental III

"In the Free Cities a general has more to fear from victory than defeat."

– Aretha the Raven, Nicaean general

Cordelia was not certain which part struck her as more absurd: that house-sized herons dwelled in Arcadia or that the Valiant Champion had apparently *tamed* one.

"Is mine now," the Champion insisted. "Called Wizard."

"Having inspected it, I can tell you thatshe is in fact female," the Forsworn Healer note, his faint Atalante accent thickening the drawl. "Perhaps Witch would be more fitting."

How? she wondered. *Is part of your Name to have magical bird taming powers? Is it an aspect? You cannot have been in the presence of that heron for more than an hour.* The same heron that must weigh as much as a company of infantry and was nipping at the Levantine's shoulder lovingly.

"Wizard is genderless noun," the Valiant Champion smugly said. "You ignorant."

Cordelia's brow slightly creased before she remembered to smooth it away. The heroine put up a good front, but when she'd spoken the words there had been a glint in her eyes. Sadness, Cordelia decided, or perhaps regret. The Lycaonese princess had long wondered how much of that cheerful brutishness was a mask. Rafaella of Alava often acted like a lout, but it had not made Cordelia forget that she was both one of the longest-serving heroes and a survivor of several disastrous engagements. The Healer narrowed his eyes at the Levantine heroine, visibly irritated, and the princess stepped in before bickering could ensue.

"We need to get moving," Cordelia cut in. "I understand that five is the preferred number for a band of -Named and now we have five heroes gathered here. The tower awaits."

The Kingfisher Prince, the Valiant Champion, the Forsworn Healer, the Painted Knife and the Mirror Knight. It would have to do. Hopefully Cordelia had changed Chosen for Named quickly enough that no one had noticed the stumbling of her tongue. Though her people's terms of Chosen and Damned were not wrong, in her opinion, they were used solely by her countrymen. There was no need to remind foreign heroes that she was a ruling princess of Procer, a fact that already did much to damage her standing among them.

"There is no leader to our band," the Mirror Knight said. "It won't work."

She saw him wince a moment later, both at the implied insult to her rank – which she suspected he cared more about than any other Chosen here – and the blunt dismissal of her opinion. He tacked on a mortified 'Your Highness' afterwards, trying to make up for it. She smiled gently at him to show no offence had been taken, patiently setting aside her irritation, but the damage had already been done. The door to objections had been opened and half of authority was people not knowing they could disagree.

"Agreed," the Forsworn Healer said. "We should gather the others, aim for overwhelming might instead. I saw Apprentice land in an orchard to the southwest, I think."

"I sent Helmgard east to join up with Sidonia and the Astrologer," the Mirror Knight said. "That's three of us, so perhaps we should start there."

"The First Prince is right," the Painted Knife flatly disagreed. "The tower is what matters. The mightiest army in the world will still lose the battle if it does not show up to fight."

Frederic glanced at Cordelia sideways, as if hesitating, then joined his voice when her face remained without expression.

"The Warden of the East laid down a gauntlet through her tower," the Kingfisher Prince agreed. "Refusing to pick it up can only end in our loss."

She would have to take him aside and remind him not to balk this way again, she thought. In this company he did not owe her the deference the Prince of Brus would owe the First Prince of Procer. They were here as Chosen and claimant. On the contrary, it would be to their common disadvantage should he obey her without reason: it would create the appearance of Cordelia trying to merge together the office of First Prince and the Name of

Warden of the West. The fair-haired woman knew well that the backlash to even the semblance of this would be harsh and swift.

"So both of you go with her," the Healer suggested. "Meanwhile Christophe and I can head east into the hills. The Vagrant Spear and I can use Light to mark our positions."

The priest from Atalante kept a dark eye on her as he spoke. Watching for her reactions. *He has been trained*, Cordelia decided. The man was said to have earned his Name by swearing away a great fortune and position in the city-state to become a wandering healer, which would explain it. Was he a foe? It was too early to tell.

"Separating would be a mistake," Cordelia said.

A few surprised looks went her way. Not, she thought, at her opinion so much as the fact she was voicing one at all. As if she had no right to. *Named business*, she thought scornfully, *and so only Named should decide it*. In their eyes her claim mattered less than her title as First Prince. She hid the sharp spike of anger.

"Lord Christophe tells me that the Myrmidon and the Blood Sword fell into a lake," she continued. "The only one we have seen is far out west, so they are unlikely to join us in time. I have already sent riders with spare horses to make the attempt, but there is little more to do."

The Painted Knife let out a hum, face considering.

"The Warden could have sent any of us that far out instead," Kallia of Levante said. "If she chose those two, it was for a reason."

"Akatha and Gernot strong but no quick," the Valiant Champion said, petting her giant heron's head. "Swim slows them. Out of battle, like First Prince said."

Though what she'd said was true, Cordelia thought, that had not been the Painted Knife's train of thought. She was asking why Catherine Foundling had chosen these two Named of all those that could be sent furthest. And in her eyes, there was one obvious common thread between the two.

"Both are warriors," Cordelia pointed out. "She might lack fighters of her own and so seek to limit the length our shield wall."

"There are plenty of Bestowed in her service than can match us in a brawl," the Painted Knife skeptically said, then snuck a sideways look at the Mirror Knight. "Most of us anyway."

Cordelia hid a smile. The heroine had not refused her turn of phrase. 'Our shield wall'. One stone after another, she would lay her foundation.

"You've never had to share a front with them, Kallia, wandering around as you have," the Forsworn Healer said. "I'd bet the First Prince is right. If the Warden wants to keep this conflict amicable few of them would be fit for it. I cannot imagine the Red Knight or the Headhunter showing restraint in a duel."

The Painted Knife frowned, then conceded with a sharp nod.

"Her strength must be indirect," Cordelia said. "Mages and tricksters."

Which meant a swift, direct assault might just yield success.

"She will have handpicked those with a fight in mind," Frederic cautioned. "It would be dangerous to assume weakness."

It would be even more dangerous to linger, in her mind. Christophe de Pavanie turned to her, mien serious.

"He's right, Your Highness," the Mirror Knight said. "The tower itself will be hard to breach regardless of defenders. We were baited in last time but now the Warden will truly defend it. I won't claim we need every Chosen we brought, but we should at least find Adanna."

The Blessed Artificer's name, a woman whose mastery of Light would admittedly be a boon when facing Night. It was a fair point.

"Do we know where the Artificer is?" Cordelia asked.

No one had seen her since the drop, but Lady Kallia had a guess.

"One of the mountains beyond the hills collapsed," the Painted Knife said. "I saw it happen from atop the lighthouse. If it wasn't the Mirror Knight responsible, it can only be her."

The man looked embarrassed but did not deny the conclusion.

"Then this will take time," the Forsworn Healer said. "Perhaps we should split up, at least temporarily. I am told you have a knack for finding those in need of aid, Kingfisher Prince?"

His eye was on her again. *A foe, then*, Cordelia thought. He was not simply attempting to read her, he had intentions she was being measured for.

"You might say that," Frederic smiled, brushing back his curls.

The Painted Knife stared at him, manifestly distracted by the sight. Cordelia sympathized. Frederic Goethal had long mastered the art of artless distraction and his disinclination to marry had been the despair of many a highborn lady over the years. Frederic did not elaborate and no one pressed. Cordelia had learned that inquiring in detail about another's aspects was considered exceedingly rude.

"Then you should ride out to find Adanna," the Healer suggested. "Kallia is a tracker of great skill, she can follow you into the hills and find the Vagrant Spear while there."

Cordelia's eyes imperceptibly narrowed. She knew the look in the man's eyes, the too-casual tone. She had dealt with the likes of it before. Frederic was a strong supporter and the Painted Knife had agreed with her on every broad stroke so far. She was also respected among Chosen, a captain of their kind. The Forsworn Healer was trying to send away individuals who shared her opinions. *This is a trap*, the princess considered. The man had offered himself undertaking that same task earlier in a manner that would be quicker. But it would split him from the group, which he would not want.

So unless he was a fool, this was a trap. Cordelia, unfortunately, could not grasp the nature of said snare. She still knew too little of namelore. *Then I must flush you out*, she thought.

"Your earlier suggestion of using Light as a beacon would be even faster than tracking," Cordelia idly said.

Triumph, not as well hid as he thought. She had read him correctly.

"I might be needed to heal comrades rejoining us," the dark-haired hero said. "But you are right that Light might be quicker, Your Highness. Christophe, can you still flare your plate bright enough to be seen from far away?"

"I can," the Mirror Knight said, almost eager as he looked at her. "It would be my pleasure, Your Highness."

He was after Christophe from the start, Cordelia thought. Aiming to send away to the two Proceran heroes present. It was a crude ploy but not senseless. Yet it was too small a prize for the effort he had put into the intrigue, she decided. What patterns of namelore did she know? Numbers, mostly. *He means to send three Chosen in the hills and mountains, where three more await*. Therefore not a 'band of five', which had been her guess. She was yet missing a detail. Cordelia did not know enough about the Chosen, what they could or could not do. She'd read reports and even spoken with some, but always as the First Prince of Procer.

She did not know them, had never been one of them. That was Hanno's strength and her weakness.

"No good to fight tower then," the Valiant Champion bluntly spoke up. "Archer there. Will fuck us up the bootocks if Mirror Knight not there to take arrows."

There was a general air at dismay at the prospect of fighting Indrani the Archer, even from the Levantines. Catherine Foundling's s lieutenant had earned the wary respect of everyone who'd ever seen her fight.

"Perhaps the time would be better spent fetching the Apprentice, then," the Forsworn Healer mildly said. "Kallia, the First Prince and I could ride out to get her. Perhaps even the Bloody Sword and the Myrmidon, as we ought to be close by then. The five of us can serve as another wedge of attack when they return."

So that had been the angle, Cordelia thought. The man did not think they would return from the trip in time and that was the entire point. He was trying to keep her out of the fight, away from the tower. *He is buying time for the Sword of Judgement.* His game was plainly revealed: he was a loyalist, backing his preferred candidate as best he could. The Painted Knife immediately disagreed with the proposal, arguing she was the only here capable of scaling the tower if need be, and when others jumped in every inch of progress that had been made towards a decision since the conversation began soon collapsed. The Healer did not look displeased by the turn, not that Cordelia had expected him to.

The hero believed that Hanno would win, given long enough, and so preventing a decision from being reached here was already a victory. Unfortunately for the Forsworn Healer, however, she was not a wet-behind-the-ear debutante. She would not fall apart after the first setback, and he had handed her the very key to outplaying him.

"Lady Kallia, you mentioned that a mountain collapsed," Cordelia said, cutting into the chaos. "Is this not true?"

"It is," the Painted Knife frowned.

"Then the Blessed Artificer might be in danger as we speak," the blonde princess seriously said. "For all her power, she is hardly immune to falling rocks. She could be in dire need of a healer."

The Atalantian priest stiffened.

"Is true," the Valiant Champion frowned. "Douka, you need to help."

So that was the Forsworn Healer's name? Interesting. Now for the further nail.

"And therefore is no need to further split our numbers," Cordelia smiled. "Our friend the Healer can signal the Vagrant Spear and the Astrologer as he sets out for the mountains."

"Five Bestowed," the Painted Knife appreciatively said. "A knife held back should we falter. A fine plan."

Cordelia received a respectful nod, which she returned. The Healer's calm soured.

"Arcadia can be dangerous," he said. "Perhaps an escort would be in order when I set out."

"It will not be more dangerous than trying the Black Queen's lair," the Mirror Knight frankly said. "And your going alone weakens us least."

Christophe stiffened.

"Not that I would call you weak," the Knight hastily tacked on. "But this way only one of us goes."

The Champion was still on the fence, Cordelia saw. In need of a nudge to tip her over the edge.

"If you have worries, I can lend you an escort of riders," she kindly offered. "Twenty should be enough, I would think."

It was a done thing after that. The Forsworn Healer glared at her darkly, cornered and unable to extricate himself from the snare he'd laid. His opposition to her did not come from malice. Cordelia reminded herself of that, every time she felt her stomach clench in irritation. Yet while power had swelled in the distance, the great tower of darkness pulsing as Named bickered in circles, Cordelia had not been able to help but think that this was everything she despised about heroes. The disorder, the aimlessness, the *arrogance*. The Forsworn Healer was perfectly willing to risk the darkness to the north getting its way simply because he believed that the Sword of Judgement would win.

Because he would not consider otherwise. Try as she might, Cordelia was seeing no thought given to making a contingency should Hanno of Arwad fail. The priest had simply decided to bet it all on the Sword of Judgement's success. Showing no hesitation in making alone a decision that might affect the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

Catherine Foundling did not play for anything but keeps.

"Let us set out promptly," Cordelia said. "The tower still awaits."

—

The Painted Knife was the first to approach her as they rode. The younger woman was not a comfortable rider, another reminder that though Kallia of Levante was nobility in name in practice she was no such thing. Coming into a Name had raised her to the higher echelons of Levante's hierarchy, but that ascension was largely decorative. All her power was personal.

"You have heard of the gathering that was to take place in Carrouges," the Painted Knife said.

It was not a question.

"I have," Cordelia replied.

She had enough eyes on the heroes and around them that there had been no question of hiding it from her. She did not believe the Sword of Judgement had even tried. Frantically setting aside the research that might yet save Calernia to prepare for such an assembly had left a bitter taste in her mouth. She'd thought to circumvent the matter entirely by going to Catherine directly, but the Warden of the East had proved reluctant. It had been frustrating, but Cordelia understood the reasons for the tacit refusal. Respected them, even.

But it had left her with only desperate measures to take, until Catherine Foundling's eye-catching entrance had rendered them all unnecessary.

"I was there when the tower parted the sky and the talks ended before they could begin," Kallia of Levante said. "And I will say this: in that swamp lay a dug-up dwarven gate."

Cordelia's breath stilled. Of course, she darkly thought. How had she dared to hope that the soldier would deign to live diplomacy to the trained diplomats? He was Prince White, beloved of people and Chosen, surely that was enough to give him the right to speak for the Grand Alliance and succeed where those who had practised diplomacy their entire lives had been stymied. The Sword of Judgement had not only summoned the heroes to crown himself Warden of the West, he'd been seeking their support to open talks with the Kingdom Under behind the back of the Grand Alliance.

Surprise had turned to cold, deep fury but Cordelia smoothed out her emotions.

"Knowledge most welcome," the fair-haired princess replied. "Though I wonder as to why you brought it to me."

The Painted Knife glanced in front of them, where the Valiant Champion rode to the side of the Mirror Knight.

"The Blood takes no side," Kallia of Levante said. "One of us stands by the Sword of Judgement's side, so balances must be struck even."

Hedging their bets, Cordelia thought, as well as keeping to a tortured line of honour. She thanked the other woman with a nod and the heroine peeled away, leaving the princess to her thoughts. Would Hanno of Arwad truly do this, Cordelia wondered? Risk everything and everyone so recklessly? She was not unaware that her growing dislike for the man was tainting her opinion, but even careful consideration led to the same conclusion: he would.

He would do it because it was right, Cordelia thought. Because he was following his principles. Because in the eyes of so many heroes, doing right was enough to give you the right. And that was the conceit that Cordelia could not stomach, because even the highest of Procer did not dare claim so high a perch. She came from a land where even royalty could be put on trial. Not easily and often not as fairly as it should be, but even the mightiest of princes could be put to trial. But who was it that called the Chosen to account, when they abused the powers the Gods had granted them?

Nobody.

When the second Levantine of their party came to ride by her side, Cordelia was not surprised. Rafaella of Alava was very much a partisan of the Sword of Judgement, one of his oldest comrades. It had only been a matter of time until one of those approached her on his behalf. Better her than the Witch of the Woods, whose importance to the defences of Salia made complicated to deal with.

"First Prince."

"Valiant Champion."

The heroine's long braid swung back and forth across her back, freed by the snarling badger helmet she held in her hands.

"I be blunt," the Champion said. "Will not work. You can-not be Warden of the West."

"A bold claim to make to a claimant," Cordelia mildly replied.

"You sneaky," the Champion said. "And clever, like fox. But you have no steel. So you can-not be Warden of the West."

"There is more to victory than swords," she evenly replied.

"Maybe," the Valiant Champion said, then flicked a look at the tower in the distance. "But Warden of the East is clever *and* has sword. Against her, you lose."

"Even if that were true," Cordelia said, "what makes your man better?"

"Hanno can learn sneaky," the Champion said. "You cannot learn sword. Not perfect man, but best there is. Peregrine would have been better."

"I disagree," Cordelia replied, tone cooling even further.

"Ashen Gods agree, is what matters," Rafaella shrugged. "Can't fight the sea, is why we make boats."

The princess's eyes narrowed. That was a Levantine proverb paraphrased: 'if you cannot fight the sea, build a boat'. It meant that one should make accommodations with the inevitable, make the best of what could not be changed.

"You want me to strike a deal with him," she said. "To exact terms in exchange for withdrawing my claim."

The other woman sharply nodded.

"No one is happy, everyone gets something," the Valiant Champion said. "Is politics."

"And if I were disciplined from striking such a bargain?" Cordelia calmly asked

"Should," the Champion said. "Mistake not to. Even if you clever way to Warden, won't work. Some refuse to obey after."

The dark-haired heroine eyed her frankly.

"I may be one," Rafaella of Alava told her. "So make your boat, First Prince."

Neither of them bothered with the pretence of a courteous goodbye. It was as if the world was hammering the nails in one after another, Cordelia thought. First the arrogance, and now the other side of the coin: heroes did not believe in rules. Even villains bent easier to law! After all, for most it had been a given all their lives that should they behave heinously there would be someone punishing them: the heroes. The servants of the Hellgods were often cruel and almost always selfish, but they were also governable. They were used to be governed, however indirectly, used to there being an authority above them – even if that authority was simple force.

Heroes were not. They followed their belief to the end, bolstered by the accolades that were Light and Name. Why should they doubt,

when the Gods Above themselves gave them what they saw as a tacit nod of approval?

But you are not better, Cordelia sharply thought. *Not really. You make mistakes too.* She ought to know, having spent the last few years cleaning them up. It had been when Prince Gaspard's plot came out that she saw the heart of the trouble. The Prince of Cleves had tried to make the Mirror Knight into his puppet son-in-law, to use the hero's fame and power as fuel for his ambitions. In the wake of the affair being outed Cordelia had mended the break as best she could, and still the Firstborn had marched out of Cleves. Gaspard was forced to abdicate the moment she had the influence to see it done, but there lay the problem: while she handled the prince, the Mirror Knight was neither taught nor punished.

He was just... left to keep on going as he would.

The White Knight was meant to lead the heroes, had claimed that duty before Gods and men when he became a high officer of the Grand Alliance, but he had never taken them in hand. Cordelia could punish princes who schemed with heroes all she wished, had done so several times, but what was the point when no one punished the heroes who schemed with earthly powers? Again and again, a hundred small justices – proud, personal principles – had eaten away at the laws of the Grand Alliance from the inside as the White Knight simply watched.

The Red Axe had tried to unravel the Truce and Terms, to murder a prince of the blood, and some of the Chosen had actually *agreed* with her actions. The Mirror Knight had – him again! – mutilated a high officer of the Grand Alliance and was then let off with a slap on the wrist. The Peregrine had murdered an entire village of Procerans in his hunt of the Black Knight, and he had been influential enough that Cordelia had never been able to so much as chide him for it. Hanging the old monster, as he deserved to be, would have started a war. And the Saint of Swords, the first madwoman of the lot, had been the worst of them.

She'd been willing for all of Procer to burn, if the pyre might take the Dead King with it.

Cordelia had bled herself dry trying to keep the wall that stood behind Calernia and annihilation from breaking while the White Knight let his charges rip out stones without saying a word. Heroes hid behind their Light by claiming that holy duty set them apart from mortal laws and then, after rubbing elbows with those same mundane powers to disastrous effect, retreated behind that protection when consequences came knocking. One law for them, one for everyone else. And Hanno of Arwad did not believe that heroes could be called to account by anyone but the Gods, he had proven that much through his actions,

Cordelia had had enough. If no one else discharged the duty properly, then she would. And if the likes of the Forsworn Healer and the Valiant Champion insisted on getting in her way, she would sweep them aside. There was no compromise to be had with duty. Emerging from the boiling thoughts with her mind clear, sharpened, Cordelia's gaze found the tower had neared. They were close, nearly there.

"And now," the blue-eyed princess murmured, "violence."

They slowed when standing in the tower's shade, below the dark monolith whose darkness stood out even in the dark of night.

Cordelia knew better than to try to direct a fight between Named. Not yet. Instead it was Frederic who took the lead, sending the Painted Knife up the walls and assaulting the bottom of the tower. Even steel-barded wood could not long resist the strength of the Mirror Knight, and so after a shattering blow the three Chosen stepped into the dark. Cordelia would follow but not immediately. In the thick of the fight she would only be a hindrance, a potential hostage. She would be of use when it came to talking, not while the blades were out. Until then she would wait out in the plains, the moon high above and the roiling shadows all around her. It was a beautiful night, she thought, for such a dangerous one.

The noise of combat came from the inside, but curses and shouts and the sound of steel clashing, but as time passed it came from further and further away. The tower swallowed noise just as it swallowed light, Cordelia thought. The very nature of Night was taking, and more of that dark power had been gathered here than the princess had ever seen before. It hinted at the scope of the Warden of the East's ambitions. *It has to be the Book of Some Things*, she thought. It was the threat guaranteed to get the two claimants to the wardenship of the West knocking at her door and no small prize should it be taken, devoured? She was not sure of the method that would be employed, but the Black Queen of Callow was infamous for her skill at stealing the power of others and making it her own. Even her fearsome armies had first been taken from the Legions of Terror.

"Yet you do not believe in forcing choices where you can lose," Cordelia murmured, looking at the tower. "So what is that you gain here, should you not eat the Book?"

She would have a reason for beginning all this. Catherine was reckless, but it was a calculated sort of recklessness: leashed to her purposes, not allowed to run loose. Cordelia had first thought this was an exercise to make herself and the Sword of Judgement allies of fortune, but the longer she stood here the more she doubted it. *Something* was coming to an end tonight, she could feel it in her bones. Lost in her thoughts as she was, she

did not notice it at first. The movement. And even when the tall grass moved, she thought it to be the wind.

It was only when the first rider fell and his horse panicked that Cordelia realized they were under attack. The riders spread out as swords were bared, two of her retinue immediately covering her sides with shields, but there was nothing around for them to fight. Only strands of shadow, of Night, rearing up from the grass to take men by their limbs and tie them to the ground. They could not win.

"Inside," Cordelia yelled out. "Send word that the Warden is attacking from the back."

Two riders tried, but the shadows caught them. Tripped the horses and bound the men. One by one her escort was disappearing into the grass, as if swallowed whole by coffins of green.

"Your Highness," her captain said with forced calm, "we need to leave. *Now.*"

He was right. Fleeing was better than allowing herself to be taken prisoner. She nodded her agreement and pulled at her reins. East, they must head east. There were allies there. A heartbeat later a tendril of Night covered the captain's mouth, silencing the scream as he was ripped off his horse. There were so few of them left, Cordelia saw, only a handful.

"Retreat," the First Prince shouted. "East, get the other Chos-"
Darkness.

Sinead

Great Chapter! And my guess that they would arrive to find Hanno on the ground is incorrect. Either he is still inside at the time of this assault (and they never make it far), or he had already left by the time they arrived.

[Adrian_V](#)

My own guess when reading the chapter is that he would fall right in front of them at some point, probably just before Cordelia was taken away

SpacyRicochet

I am still hoping for a 'Wilhelm scream' moment.

[onedollargum](#)

I'm guessing that Cordelia will be captured at the same time that Hanno is dumped out the window for symmetry purposes.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

The sad thing is, Cordelia is not wrong ...

caoimhinh

She is wrong in nearly everything.

She says that nobody calls Heroes into account and punishes them for their actions, which is factually a lie, as we have examples in the story from both governments and Named ordering, regulating, and punishing Heroes.

She wanted to punish Mirror Knight because of the ambitions that the Prince of Cleves had? He hadn't even done anything, Gaspard was planning to use him, but there's nothing that Mirror Knight had done that was wrong.

And despite seeing just 2 chapters ago (a few minutes for Cordelia) that Cristophe has learned and matured after spending time with Pilgrim as punishment for violently opposing to the execution of Red Axe and attacking Hanno, she forgets it right away and thinks that he wasn't punished at all. Failing to see that in both instances Cristophe had been a pawn of another person's schemes, and thus needed to learn how to not be manipulated like that, which he seems to have done to some degree.

Red Axe tried to unravel T&T, but Cordelia made the situation worse by demanding Red Axe be judged by Procer instead of by T&T as the agreement stated.

Saint of Swords was fine with Procer burning as a result of the Crusade, but who started that fire? Cordelia.

The only thing where she is not wrong is in regard to the Grey Pilgrim, and then again that's an example of influence and political authority, not personal strength. She couldn't touch Pilgrim not because he would defend himself and escape, but because Levant would rise to war the moment accusations were raised against him.

And she still fails to see how corruption and the abuse of influence is the worst thing in all of those situations, where ambition and politics were the roots of those problems and were also the main obstacle towards their resolution, preventing those involved from doing what was right or delivering justice.

Orby

Cordeila, I should note, hasn't read the last two chapters.

This is rule of law vs. libertarianism.

We have an outside, imperfect view as well. Choosing who you back for Warden, should be fine with a lot of thought.

daniel

> Cordeila, I should note, hasn't read the last two chapters.

She lived one of them and caoimhinh was quoting her own thoughts which she has since forgotten.

"Cordelia's eyes narrowed the slightest bit. That was more awareness than she'd expected of a man of his reputation. Had his time under the Grey Pilgrim truly tempered him? When the punishment had been doled out she'd thought it nonsense, just another example of the White Knight letting off his charges with a slap on the wrist after they behaved atrociously – Christophe de Pavanie had accused the Queen of Callow of cooperating with the Dead King before mutilating a high officer of the Grand Alliance – but perhaps there had been some use to it."

Annya

It was a singular, isolated sentence and context. I don't know how quickly and easily you change your mind but nothing about Cordelia speaks about jumping to conclusions and easily changing her mind because of an isolated moment.

daniel

That's a solid argument.

Fiction by the necessity of brevity deals with anecdotes so it's fair to generalise from them much more than it would in real life. I think in the context of the story of her (and Hanno's) implacability in the face of mitigating evidence is part of the Problem.

Ultimately, whether she's objectively right or not, in the fictional world she lives in we can make an educated guess that she and Hanno are both right and wrong and that third way that strikes a balance is the correct one, the story is really hammering that as the conclusion that's shaping.

I don't know whether the right-or-wrong of Calernia is interesting for others to debate when divorced from the real world, but that's what I'm doing.

Salt

I think it's actually pretty reasonable to find that debate interesting for this particular bit of fiction. EE as far as I can tell draws quite heavily from real world philosophies or schools of thought in the first place. Double whammy gives the story depth by borrowing centuries of development and makes for good discussion as well. I.E utilitarianism for Mercy, Deontology for Judgement, Poem of Force a la Simone Weil for Ranger, etc...

This is (as far as I can tell) rule of law vs divine right in terms of the aspect of authority, and moral natural law vs legal positivism in terms of flaws in the aspect of ethics. I'm inclined to believe it's intentional to at least some degree, considering how often character/faction perspectives line up almost exactly with the basic premise of major opposing schools of thought IRL.

caoimhinh

It's not really law vs libertarianism.

It's not like Hanno wants to let Heroes do whatever they want, that's just Cordelia's super biased perception.

They are two aspects of Law, and if anything it's Hanno who has enforced laws more than Cordelia, who went back on her signed agreement and made demands due to political considerations then got angry at Hanno for enforcing the stated rules that everyone had agreed on.

Cordelia wants to govern Heroes with vindictiveness, claiming that she will make rules that control them and punish them if they don't obey, but that's just her own grudges and hypocrisy moving her, besides, such an approach does not work with Heroes, and Hanno knows it. He knows very well that if someone were to try to control Heroes and attempt to command them through force, they will rise in rebellion against that and have the story on their side to end the tyranny.

Hanno doesn't want to rule Heroes, he wants to guide them, and we have consistently seen what his leadership is like. He is not forceful, he is consiliatory, a listener, and advisor. He is a guide and mentor, someone that other people look up to and respect.

And, when the time comes to bring them to heel, to stop them from getting out of line, he will do it, just like he did with Mirror Knight.

For all that Hanno is much more inflexible when it comes to enforcing law, he is more humane than Cordelia. Whereas Cordelia preaches about Procer this, Procer that, and hypocritically turns a blind eye to the huge mess that the members of the Highest Assembly have consistently made for the Grand Alliance, and for all that she claims to be planning to enforce laws, we have already seen that she balks at enforcing laws whenever it is politically inconvenient for her.

[Liliet](#)

> Red Axe tried to unravel T&T, but Cordelia made the situation worse by demanding Red Axe be judged by Procer instead of by T&T as the agreement stated. Saint of Swords was fine with Procer burning as a result of the Crusade, but who started that fire? Cordelia.

Cordelia didnt' start that fire. It was the demand of the Highest Assembly falling apart under her.

caoimhinh

Of course she did, Cordelia started the Crusade because of her own political objectives, and then kept it going because stopping at that point would cost her too much politically.

Come on, it's even in the Summary of the story: "*The greatest danger lies to the west, where the First Prince of Procer has finally claimed her throne: her people sundered, **she wonders if a crusade might not be the way to secure her reign.***"

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Cordelia also thought it was the right thing to do
™.

And both of those are completely irrelevant to her WoTW claim.

[Liliet](#)

wait, fuck, i confused what you were replying to

also you are right i thought of the demand to give over Red Axe

Lord Haart

TBF it was really decades of antagonism from Malicia that triggered the Crusade as much as anything in Cordelia's nature.

Was still the utterly wrong choice but it was as much due to Named as it was due to politics.

Flameburst

Except everything you said is wrong. Sure, MK was manipulated, but he still chose to support a plan to fuck over the people dieing to protect others, to steal a priceless relic from the alliance and to almost start a civil war amongst named, none of which he was punished for. Cordi isn't forgetting he grew as a person, it simply doesn't matter to her because MK is a criminal who is apparently above the law.

She didn't demand the red axe shouldn't be judged by the T&T, but that she also be judged by procer for the crime that specifically didn't fall under the T&T.

She doesn't fail to see that corruption and institutions were part of the problems, because she saw all of them punished for yheir wrongdoings. What galls her is that heroes aren't held to the same responsibility.

LInnus42

MK had never officially agreed to any plan to betray the Drow. You are trying to convict him for having a thought crime. Besides cleaning up Princes is Cordelia's job If Gaspard is getting that far in a plot to betray the Drow and its his idea that is Cordelia's department to sort out. Now the Heroes. He didn't steal the relic. He picked it up as a last resort during a Demon Invasion. Would you prefer he didn't pick it up and let the Demons destroy Arsenal?

It doesn't matter who Red Axe perpetuated the crime on. Any Hero's Crime is Hanno's sole department to punish. There are no exceptions required by the agreement the Grand Alliance made. Certainly not for Cordelia needing red meat to sort out Proceran Political Issues. Compromises are not required in this matter. Red Axe got the death penalty, she was punished.

Cordelia wants compromise when it aids her but doesn't want to compromise when it doesn't benefit her. Ergo she does not believe in compromise.

Annya

Because the compromise expected from her here going against their goal.

Salt

Compromise is by definition settling a dispute by making concessions, not by getting everything you want.

It wouldn't be compromise unless both sides (which would include both Hanno and Cordelia) give up on at least part of their goals.

Cicero

And Cordellia did compromise, with Cat. Because Cat was able to see her viewpoint, and got Cordellia to see her view point, and so the compromise of Cordellia "executing" the Red Axe's zombieified corpse was adopted.

Cordellia didn't get everything she wanted, nor did Cat. They compromised with each other. Hanno is the one that refused to compromise.

caoimhinh

A) Christophe didn't choose to support the plan, Gaspard's daughter was trying to sweet-talk him into agreeing, selling the deal as if Christophe would be ruling those lands with her by his side. And yet the last we saw he had not agreed to it. He can't be punished for something he did not do.

B) He didn't steal the Severance, he took it to fight against the Demons. He kept it afterwards, but nobody actually asked him to return the weapon. No crime there either.

C) He didn't almost start a civil war amongst Named, he had one fight involving the few Heroes's that were in the Arsenal at the moment and fought Hanno. And for *that* he was punished, publically chastised and sent to be tutored by Pilgrim while continuing his service to the war efforts because he is a powerful warrior whose value is undeniable.

D) Red Axe's actions specifically fall into the jurisdiction of the T&T because she was Named and she had signed the agreement. By the T&T, all crimes committed by Named are judged by the tribunal and the sentence decided by their representative, Hanno for Heroes and Catherine for Villains. The fact that Red Axe attacked a Proceran Prince does not make it an exception, and such a thing was definitely in the signed agreement, but Cordelia wanted to back off because it was a threat to the authority of the Highest Assembly. Catherine also stated how she could not let Cordelia have her way because it would weaken the foundations of the Liesse Accords if the T&T were not enforced. If it had indeed not been a situation contemplated in the T&T, none of them would have had a problem with having Red Axe judged by Procer.

Also, the Grey Pilgrim, the one Hero Cordelia could not touch no matter how much she hated him, was untouchable not because of his personal power or characteristics as a Hero, but because of his political influence and the support he had by the whole of Levant.

jamesc9

Re (D) above, I wonder if there could have been a plan that worked. Sentencing to Red Axe to loss of personhood under the T&T, and transfer to Procer, and if Procer mislays her still alive, we still want to kill her.

It would need a lot of explaining, the conditions under which a Named can be declared a non-person for the purposes of the T&T. It would probably have to be under the conditions where they were also effectively being sentenced to death.

[TheCelestialEquation](#)

Damn I started out reading your post sure you were wrong but you made some excellent points.

The Ignorant Student

Absolutely agree. Cordelia makes SOME good points about the arrogance of Heroes, but she actively hates them and doesn't want to take up the role of Warden so much as tyrant and torturer. If you ask me, Mirror Knight (odd as it sounds) is the best choice for Warden. He's a Named whose role is to protect and endure, he's seen the pitfalls Heroes can fall in, experienced the treachery of nobles, and actively works to better himself and correct his mistakes. He's not perfect, but he's a hell of a lot better than White (privilege) Knight, and angsty Cordelia (I can't think of a good pun but we all know what her problem is) Hasenbach.

P.S yes, i know Hanno isn't white, so before someone jumps down my throat I'm using the term because we all know what white pricked he refers to and that is definitely how Hanno is acting.

Bart

Spending time with the Grey Pilgrim isn't punishment – even if it leads to reform, it's a cushy vacation compared to what any non-hero would get.

And the Prince who would have used the Knight was stripped of all authority. A pretty fitting punishment.

[Mincheriit](#)

Thats the whole point of them both being claimants. They are noth not wrong. But its not enough to merely be not wrong, hence Cats making a play.

burnsy

I liked Cordelia as the Warden of the West from the start, but this sealed it for me. She's going to be the one to institute the concept of 'consequences for your actions' into the heroes, which is exactly what the Liesse Accords are all about.

jack

She's right, morally, but she makes a poor hero.

During the debate about who should go where, she was still playing politics instead of playing stories. For the raid on the tower, she was useless. Merely a hindrance in her own words.

Against the night ambush she couldn't do anything at all.

In the end, she's all talk.

So long as people can be convinced by words, she's great, but she's not a fighter or a leader of men.

She's not qualified.

willfultrooper

Not a leader of men? excuse me but what? When an attempted Coup occurred she managed to wrestle loyalists to her side despite the surprise of the coup. When she grasped the coin when the White Knight flipped it she all but earned the respect of everyone in that room even the White Knight.

Swinging a sword doesn't mean you're a great leader it means you can swing a sword. Augustus the First Emperor of Rome was considered a fantastic leader but he relied on his generals to win his wars. Queen Catherine the Great of Russia was seen as a fantastic leader but hardly won any battles. Winston Churchill was a politician and considered a great leader but he wasn't a general.

It is practically stated that both White Knight and Cordellia are both great leaders but just with different visions. I don't get where you think Cordellia isn't a leader from because since her first appearance Cordellia has all but shown she is a leader.

Frivolous

Yeah, I agree with willfultrooper. Jack is just mistaken.

Also you can't expect equivalent levels of contribution from a claimant and someone already holding a Name.

Rynjin

Cordelia is a terrible leader, in part because she has never LED. She has the same noble arrogance as all of the other nobility around her, she's just too blind to see it. This chapter makes it pretty clear that she sees everyone else around her as incompetent, despite being completely out of her depth. Say what you will about Catherine's ego, at least when she talks shit (or thinks it) she knows how to roll with the hit. Cordelia doesn't.

This chapter cinched it for me. Cordelia does not wish to be a leader, and never has. That's Hanno's bag, as imperfect as he is at it.

What she wishes to be, and has always wished to be is exactly what everyone in Procer has feared she would become: a Tyrant. She wants an iron-fisted grip over everything the light touches. She's made great strides on making that come true for the people of Procer, all for their "greater good". Perhaps justifiably.

Now she wishes to reach further and ensnare the Heroes as well, so she can have her own obedient army of superhumans that exist only for the will of the State.

Worse, this chapter proves that Cordelia is incredibly shortsighted. I've reamed out the Pilgrim for his massacre of those innocent villagers many a time, but summarily executing the man was something she wished to do? With no thought whatsoever save for the POLITICAL ramifications of doing so, like losing one of the most powerful Named in the world while they're in the middle of a direct conflict with what was, to her, a deranged psychopath with godlike powers.

She has time and time again proven that thought with her actions as well. Taking short term gains for long term drawbacks. Some justified (such as in the war against the Dead King), and many not. She's been trying to consolidate all the power of Procer into her own hands since before she took office, and I don't think once she's stopped to consider the ramifications of turning Procer from a flawed, corrupt oligarchy into a flawed, and potentially even MORE corrupt in the future dictatorship.

willfultrooper

Cordelia has never led? what are you talking about? She's one of the leaders of the Grand Alliance.

And guess what? Politics is a huge part of waging a war and I don't understand how you think being considerate over the political ramifications isn't being a leader. Strategy involves politics so denying the political ramifications can have on the war effort is really naïve. Have you not been reading this current volume? Cordelia and Catherine have been in talks with the Dwarves, the League, their own alliance members about how to keep the war going.

My previous post details all the leaders who would be a "Cordelia"-like leader.

What's the point of having a powerful Named if they refuse to obey orders? what if the war effort needed that powerful Named defending that city but he decides its better to defend that village instead? Cordelia wants oversight over the heroes where the White Knight puts his complete faith in them, letting them do whatever they want because they are "Good".

The reason why I favor Cordelia over the White Knight is not because I think he's incompetent or not a good leader but because PGtE all but shows that heroes can be wrong in horrific ways, William unleashing angelic mind control over a city, the Red Axe threatening the T&T (I am not claiming she is not justified in wanting to kill the villain but that she threatened the T&T), the Mirror Knight threatening the Drow Alliance.

I don't mind people supporting the White Knight their opinions are their own, but to claim Cordelia isn't a leader? come on dude, have you not been reading this fic at all?

Rynjin

As I said (maybe not clearly enough?), Cordelia does not lead. She rules. There's a stark difference between the two things, even if the concepts are sometimes used interchangeably.

She gives orders and expects to be obeyed. She would prefer not to negotiate with anyone. She does not set any good example for her people to follow, she does not inspire. She does not LEAD in either figurative or literal senses of the word. Her people fight her tooth and claw at every turn because she lacks their respect. The nobles scheme against her and the common folk find her out of touch. As we see here, the same applies to the Named she would rule over.

Certainly, she rejected the power of the Warden of the West at one point. Not because she did not want to bring Procer under her thumb, but because she believed a Named should not rule Procer. She has seemingly kept to that principle, given how she is arranging to throw away her rulership of Procer to take the Warden of the West mantle.

She still seems to have the same general plan for action as the Warden of the West, however. Consolidate power in the hands of a single person, because she believes she knows better than everyone else.

And that will have disastrous consequences down the line. As people have said against Hanno's side (and rightfully), just because Cordelia, or Hanno is a great Warden of the West using their methodology, that does not mean their successor, or successor's successor on down the line will always be so.

And personally, I think setting a precedent that the Warden of the West is a RULER of Named rather than a LEADER of Named is going to be by far the more disastrous in the long run of the two.

This is, in my eyes, the entire clash between Hanno's and Cordelia's ideologies. Rulership vs leadership, iron fist vs guiding hand. Neither is a perfect truth, applicable to all circumstances.

willfultrooper

There have been several notable leaders who've relied on the authority of their position in order to be a leader. William the Conqueror, Augustus the First Emperor of Rome, Catherine the Great, Otto Von Bismarck, Alfred the Great. Each and every single one relied on the authority gained through their position to lead their nations. Some of them even having people rebel against them.

William the Conqueror led an England with a large amount of Ethnic tensions which he suppressed with an Iron fist and still he was considered a good leader by history. Catherine the Great utterly crushed the greatest peasant uprising in her time and still she was considered a great leader. Augustus Caesar had to fight multiple civil wars because people opposed him, some of them even former allies and friends.

Each and every single one of those people relied on their positions authority to lead their nations and some of them were quite ruthless in enforcing their

will and yet they're considered some of the greatest leaders of history.

Being opposed in their leadership isn't a mark of bad leadership, it just means not everyone agrees with their style of leadership. What a surprise, who knew humans can disagree with one another? A good leader isn't someone who doesn't face opposition, a good leader is someone who can face their opposition and still come out on top.

Also, Cordelia has negotiated for her position. Don't you remember how some princes were convinced by Cordelia to turn against one of the other candidates for First Prince? How she convinced a Levantine leader to turn away from raiding her lands to being an ally?

Cordelia is also quite inspiring, I mean Prince Fredrick is such a diehard supporter of Cordelia because he was inspired by her. She has the respect of a good majority of the princes of Procer and let's not forget Catherine. She's adored by the people in the city she rules.

All in all I think she's quite an effective leader, how is she not a good leader both figuratively or literally speaking? she literally does what most leaders have done throughout history. I'll be honest I have no idea about how she can be a figurative leader, if you could give me an example of how she isn't a figurative leader then I'll get back to you.

jamesc9

@Rynjin,

> Consolidate power in the hands of a single person, because she believes she knows better than everyone else.

Isn't the believing part of that basically a summary of what Heroes are?

Cicero

Except Cordellia could have made herself a tyrant by claiming the Warden of the West back when she was the only claimant. People seem to forget that arc, where she actually rejected the power of becoming a Chosen because she thought that the Prince of Procer (her) should be subject to the law too.

Rynjin

See above. She rejected the concept of being a Named tyrant, but still moved to become a more mundane one.

Daniel E

The more I read of Cordelia's PoV, the more I sympathize with her. That said, I submit for approval my own crackpot theory: After all is set and done here, she and Hanno will conclude that the only sensible decision is for Cat to become Warden of the West as well. She eats The Book and becomes ... Warden of the Weast! 😊 (or maybe just plain old Warden).

dadycoool

At some point last chapter, I started expecting this to all end with the Night succeeding in devouring the Book of Some Things, only for Cat to be caught off guard by the sudden surge and go "What just happened?" since utterly winning has never happened to her before.

Gabe Meadow

I think that just before this happens, the Rogue Sorcerer will arrive, tell Cat there has to be two Wardens, not one, end up revealing his true identity in the process of telling her why she should give him the book, and become the Warden of the West.

Hell(gods), he's already worked on the Book of Some Things with Hierophant, he would know how to use it to greater effect to begin with.

waffleblaster

Agreed. He has managed a group of Named before, he understands the need for compromise, and he has proven willing to deal with the more uh, "disagreeable" members.

masterofbones

Yeah rogue sorcerer is definitely the best pick.

He works well with the warden of the East, without serving her. He is a friend without being one of her pawns.

He is well liked among heroes, and has experience leading.

He is flexible in his powers, and is well versed in stealing power. Sound familiar?

He has the classic heroic tale of reluctant leadership. Additionally, he's very experienced in legal matters and diplomacy.

Zach

One argument against this is that narratively there's nothing clearly leading to it.

Also, probably more importantly, Names ultimately stem from some deep conviction on the part of a Named. Rogue Sorcerer has never demonstrated some deep desire to exert control over all Heroic Named.

Gabe Meadow

While that's true in the outward sense, we've seen him become steadily more and more frustrated with his fellow Heroes over the course of the past few books. It's plausible to imagine he's become disenchanted with Hanno's lack of effective leadership and maneuvering.

All it takes is the last straw to set off Roland exploding – metaphorically, not literally.

samshadar

That doesn't seem impossible. Considering the Dead King is free to pursue victory, why shouldn't Cat be?

ethericsentinel

Nah, the only possible Name in that case is the Warden of the Eats.

edrey

i really sympathize with cordelia, the lack of perspective of the bigger picture from the heroes is far too ridiculous. the healer is the perfect example, one thing is the trust you have in your leader another is being a immature and irresponsible person. even after the warden is choosen, the heroes would need to learn that their actions have consequences.

jack

They're both as bad as each-other.

She was playing politics against the Healer instead of trying to build a proper band of heroes to take the tower.

She's completely unsuited to lead the charge against the gates of Keter, and that's what the warden of the west needs to be.

She needs to learn how to fight and direct stories. Cramming The Book of Some Things into her soul might help, but not by much.

WuseMajor

Yeah, but...Cordy doesn't understand or even *like* Heroes. She fundamentally doesn't *get* it, so she can't *lead* them, she can only call them to account.

Which means that the Heroes will scatter and for an alliance *against* her, like Hanno thinks.

They're both, fundamentally, poor choices for Warden, until they get their heads out of their asses and realize that they both have failings and need to learn the things the other knows.

Nairne .01

EE is good at reflecting the real world in this story.

ISiejek

Yes thank you for saying it the hero's are worse than the villains in some ways, at least the villains know that they are 'Evil'

Kennedy

Cordelia sees what Hanno failed to see. Although heroes are in general better people than villains just because they're objectively Good doesn't mean every single action they take is objectively good, and therefore impossible to reproach. Heroes do make mistakes and need to be held accountable for them in the same way that had a villain done the same thing would be.

Salt

At least she and Hanno have one thing in common. They're both ludicrously, hilariously, blind to their own failings.

How is it possible to get so self-righteous about how Named are behaving here, and not see the parallel in how she treated with Catherine the Squire, back when she wasn't so deeply in her debt that the Kingdom Under couldn't dig her out? How she still treats looks down on even people like Frederic?

She killed tens, hundreds of thousands starting a Crusade, refused to treat with Catherine out of disdain for her lowborn origins exactly the same way as the Band of Five just looked down on her for not being Named, refused to compromise at the cost of other people's lives when Catherine bent her own neck repeatedly to sue for peace (just like a certain set of Shiny Boots), and even when confronted with it by Rafaella refuses to compromise on her principles while inwardly criticizing Hanno for refusing to compromise on his.

Royalty being put on trial? Doesn't happen, unless it's by other Royalty, and not even then if you're just clever enough. How is Royalty not being held accountable by anyone except themselves, somehow more responsible than Named not being held accountable by anyone except themselves? Is it somehow better that complete immunity from consequences comes from wealth, bloodline, and cleverness, rather than principle and mandate?

Honestly, the world that Cordelia wants is one where Catherine the Orphan never becomes the Warden of the East. It's one where the Squire is executed halfway through the second volume because her lack of etiquette and lineage disqualifies her from challenging the likes of Malicia, while Cordelia and Malicia drive the continent into ruin while pretending that there's any consequences for their actions.

Linnus42

Didn't Cordelia just acknowledge last in chapter one of this Occidental arc that Christophe had learned a lesson? Now she is ignoring it.

Red Axe wasn't even a real member of the T&T since she signed up to backstab before Indrani got to her via Bard. Also really Cordelia have some goddamn empathy. I don't think the Red Axe made the right choices but I can see why a girl who got raped and saw their whole village massacred for **** and giggles would think the system is corrupt and needs tearing down. She has severe mental trauma and one cannot expect a village girl in roughly medieval setting to be up to date on geopolitics.

Is Hanno losing three fingers really maiming? But beyond that Christophe had never even agreed to the Gaspard plot to backstab the Drow. Is Cordelia suggesting we charge him for thought crimes on that one? Also its amazing she is more salty about Chris cutting off three fingers than Hanno.

As for Tariq, Cordelia fails to acknowledge her plan would have burned Black and the Legions to death in a city which would have killed even more civilians then Tariq's plan. She thinks Tariq should be held to account for his crimes. My question is does she think she should stand trail for burning a whole city to the ground with civilians inside? And its not like her plan was operational yet. I am going to take the plan that kills less people personally as tragic as it is.

Saint was right about Procer it is a corrupt cesspool even her solution is terrible but she only got the chance to try that as you note because Cordelia started the crusade. A crusade she started purely for political reasons. A crusade where some Princes final solution to Praes was GENOCIDE.

What punishment did Cordelia handout to all the Princes she heard them cheating their Taxes during the Apocalypse? Absolutely nothing. She also stopped Hanno from killing a bunch of Holies and Conspirators? Did she give them harsh punishments? I don't think so. She claims she dealt with Gaspard but what her plan before Arsenal Went Down? I seem to remember her having none and stonewalling Cat and Sve Noc. Now one can argue well we cannot toss out all the leadership during a crisis. Which is fine but Cordelia doesn't apply that to Heroes who are worth their weight in gold in this current fight.

Laws don't really restrict, constrain or limit the powerful. Be they rich entitled princes or Heroes chosen by the Gods Above. For a whole host of reasons they keep commoners in line but not the powerful. Which Cordelia should know given all the coups, tax fraud, etc the Princes pull.

aurikdomi

Christophe was going to kill Hanno if he didn't surrender his position of authority to him iirc, and it was only Hanno's badassery that turned that down into only 3 fingers. the city was planned to be evacuated but not until the last moment so as to not tip their hand iirc, and Saint thought every last thing about Procer was worth utterly destroying so she could let other people build in the ashes something that might theoretically be better I.E. hoping the power vacuum would be better, and it wasn't just procer she wanted to burn, she wanted Callow and possibly quite a bit more. She punished those cheating taxes she could, but also they aren't exactly paragons of evil by pulling their resources and money back to protect their own people. Weak and cowardly but those aren't vile actions like slaughtering an entire town of innocents with the sword or a death plague. she completely ruined the holies? most were made to go serve on the frontlines fighting the dead king, large swathes of their properties and wealth were confiscated and used to help fight the dead king, and their political power was unmade. She had to be careful with Gaspard because she isn't trying to be a tyrant who immediately beheads those who plot against her, but he definitely got his comeuppance.

Cordy acknowledges the rich and powerful are hard to give consequences to but not impossible, her claim is Hanno intends to keep it impossible for Good Named to be held accountable.

Linnus42

But Named do get held accountable.
Saint and Red Axe are dead. Also Saint only got a chance to implement her policy because Cordelia started the Crusade

for purely political reasons domestically. Tariq didn't get prosecuted because it was both a Name and Political Issue. And Cordelia's solution was worse anyway. If Tariq had the same position in Levant and didn't have a name but poisoned the water supply or something, he still could have skated.

As for Chris, go reread Hanno explicitly did what he did to prevent MK from getting executed.

Also there are still fighting a war against extinction so kinda cannot afford to simply execute or handout long prison terms laissez faire to Named.

Your assuming they dodged Taxes for good reasons. That is not confirmed in the text. The Heroes also make their choices cause they think its the right or good move so its the right or good move is not a great defense that you seem to think it is. Unless you want to apply it consistently.

Vortex

I would argue that Cordelia's crusade was a necessity for governance, aimed specifically at uniting her allies and enemies in Procer against her ultimate antagonist, the Empress who had been funding a brutal civil war for decades. Cat getting run over by the crusade in Callow was just collateral damage.

Unfortunately, her crusade made Cat desperate and gave Malicia, Cat, and most importantly, the Wandering Bard, leverage to unleash the Dead King.

Salt

This wasn't the case at all, you're misremembering.

It's mentioned outright in volume 4 chapter 3 that the army invading callow was almost entirely Cordelia's opposition in the assembly. It wasn't an attempt to unite her enemies and allies, it was a blatant attempt to bleed her enemies on the highest assembly by sending them war on Callow. It's also mentioned that she did this as a means to get around the fact that they were her checking her power over Procer.

The negotiations also failed partly because Cordelia wanted to dethrone Catherine specifically. Exact quote out or Cordelia's own mouth:

> "A villain ruling over Callow is not an acceptable outcome for this war", the first prince said. ...'

The war wasn't morally justified, it was very specifically a politically motivated move, she had other options, and she deliberately torpedoed the negotiations with Catherine

because she didn't want a Villainous "warlord" like her to stay in power.

Even if all of the above weren't true, it still wasn't some defensive reaction to a one sided Malicia scheme. Cordelia was doing the same in Praes, and outright admitted at the arsenal that she indirectly bankrolled the Doom of Liesse in the process

Meaning that the largest unnecessary war and cause of in the story prior to the Dead King himself was started by her for political reasons, and the largest genocide in the story prior to the Dead King bankrolled by her for entirely political reasons.

Both of which she accomplished specifically by actively circumventing the very same Proceran Laws that were supposed to check her own power so one person wouldn't be able to wield the power of the entire nation this way. She has a lot to answer for, which she never has even considered allowing herself to be put on trial for, and she spent most of the story undermining the legitimacy of the same laws that she believes should govern all of Good.

Linnus42

Yeah the difference between Hanno and Cordelia is Hypocrisy/Elitism really.

Cordelia is a major cause for a whole lot of crisis and takes little to no accountability for it. Sure Hanno caused some issues but the difference is he didn't notice he was. Even if yeah he should have.

She also likes laws and compromise so long as they benefit her. She is not pro compromise and law when it doesn't aid her. She says as much in her internal monologue in this chapter. But that makes her mostly the same as all the other Princes besides like Rozala, Otto and Frederic lol. So the vast majority of the Princes have that issues.

Further more you can say Hanno thinks Heroes are special but by the rules of the world they are as confirmed by the Gods (who aren't abstract in this world but confirmed). Cordelia thinks Princes are special because? Well she was born into that special class and so has a vested interest in protecting them.

But honestly my biggest question about this world is the level of political theory. States don't really constrain the Elites, the same way they constrain normal citizens. Any analysis of what happens when a rich person and poor person breaks the same law tells you this much. Its also true in

Procer where we see how much stuff Princes getaway with Cordelia included but Cordelia never acknowledges this issue. The Heroes and Named really are just another class of Elites. Except the prime contributor for most of them where they are, is not being born to the right family. There are more of meritocracy.

Then there is a fundamental issue. Heroes are a response to failures in the system which is why they are liable to challenge existing Laws. They also serve as the only reliable check I have seen on Princely abuses in this series. Ergo Cordelia has the same issue Hanno does but much worse, she lacks the personal power to check Heroes and doesn't have the support of strong enough Name to do it either. Which is the only way her system would work but that works for Cat because Villains are inclined to bow before Power. Heroes though are used to helping or being the underdog a lack of power isn't going to deter them the same way. Power is more to bring them to heel as a last resort not a fundamental part of governing.

kinigget

Okay, so, while Cordelia definitely does have her problems, hypocrisy is decidedly not one of them. All the things the guy above mentioned happened 5 or more years ago at this point. Today's Cordelia is not that person any more, and judging her that way does her a disservice.

Cordelia doesn't think Princes are special, what she thinks is that Heroes *aren't*, that they need to have accountability to someone other than themselves and the God's Above so that things like Saint of Swords deciding that it would be For The Best if Procer burned to the ground and then *trying to make that happen*.

You also seem to have some fundamental misconceptions about what Heroes are and how they function. They're not responses to flaws in the system, they're just those empowered by the God's Above, directly or otherwise. They seek out what they perceive to be Wrongs and Right them. Sometimes it's as you say and they go up against corrupt nobles and unjust laws, but you also have people like Christoph, who was a nationalistic bag of dicks up until Hanno had to punt him for trying to destabilize the Truce and Terms.

Heroes are Good, but that's not the same as good.

Salt

Well, yes and no. There's a reason they're both lacking as claimants

The Mirror Knight and Pilgrim changed too, and their crimes were in the past. But Cordelia still wanted to put them on trial, because that's how universal accountability works – you can't just claim that you've had character development or that it's old news and never face consequences for your actions.

She's not wrong about that. Her sentiment there is correct. But that's also where the problem is – she doesn't apply it to herself or to her fellow rulers.

Where it gets hypocritical is not also having plans to hold herself and princes to the same standard. Her being better now and the Crusade being in the past shouldn't absolve her or the other princes of the accountability of being put on trial any more than Tariq or Christophe. In that, she's the poster girl for hypocrisy.

More importantly, she still doesn't recognize that how well the law functions in practice and how closely aligned it is with the original intent of the law, matters just as much as having everyone under its authority and following it in letter. This has always been her failing, and it shows blatantly here in how she outright disregards whether or not the Proceran legal system actually functions properly, in favor of focusing on whether or not everyone is under its authority.

The most telling, recently-applicable and not a "it's five years ago so it doesn't count" example is the Arsenal itself. The only person in those trials that cared about the universal and fair applicability of the law under the terms was Hanno, or all people, not Cordelia. Cordelia plotted with Cat to circumvent the legal process to get the outcomes that she wanted, while Hanno held everyone's feet to the fire to ensure that the trial actually functioned the way it should, according to both the letter AND intent of said universally-applicable law.

Heroes aren't always good, and need to be held accountable, but putting them under the authority of a system or person who's just as or more flawed than the Heroes just makes the situation even worse.

masterofbones

If your nation's survival requires running roughshod over every innocent country on the continent, that isn't actually an argument for why your country's way is morally superior.

dadycool

Yeah, I think a lot of people, myself included, forget what Cordelia was like before this war. Her being First Among Princes simply means she's the worst of the lot. Honestly, Cat very well could've let Procer rot and essentially nothing of value would've been lost.

Konstantin von Karstein

Except maybe the biggest contributor of men and resources to the war?

shikkarasu

Yeah... Procer's royalty may be pretty messed up, but they have been keeping the Dead King and Chain of Hunger in check for centuries. Not to mention the subjects are not guilty of their leaders' decisions. I feel this statement hard, and we all get to be salty about Procer's actions up until the Everdark, but there is a lot more to the country than their bloodthirsty and pompous upper class.

Xinci

The only ones who can take credit for that are the Lycaonese. They are basically a sacrificing subgroup of Procer in total. With their demise, the rest of the maledictions of Procer have no supporting institution to mitigate their tendency to muck everything up. Procer was only fine before now because the matters of the south didn't actually matter for defending the rest of it.

masterofbones

I find that surprising honestly. Her personality never changed. She has, from day one, followed the script of "oh I'd love to be reasonable, but politics you know? I *have* to stab you in the back for no reason, its the rules"

dadycool

I think the difference is perspective. Before the Everdark, we were at the stabby end, but it's been so long since she realized what an asset Cat is that we've forgotten that she does it. Especially since we only hear the successful result of her keeping the other Princes in line.

[avandartheservant](#)

Want to comment on this part "Royalty being put on trial? Doesn't happen, unless it's by other Royalty, and not even then if you're just clever enough." Which would be true if it wasn't for the Regicide – Saint even killed princes, and was beyond the consequences. Which implies that Named are superior to

Royalty, and what offends Cordelia and bothers me, is no one agreed to that. What Cat has as Warden of the East is a balance between secular and named power, with both subject to her oversight, with consequences for both spelled out.

A separate point – Cat could see the “mote” of Viv as Princess, a Chosen name – because she has secular power in the east. How are Cordelia or Hanno going to handle having a Damned name under their purview in the west?

[laguz24](#)

Yes, but I also love how blind she is to the problem of the princes that she has to wrangle. Since some princes can dodge laws. Who will wrangle the schemers after she is gone?

Linnus42

Its not just that they are dodging Laws. Its that they are doing it in the most dire of circumstances

If you are not going to pay your taxes when DK is threatening you with extinction. Are you ever paying your taxes?

Konstantin von Karstein

I guess that's what Cat will be addressing.

Insanenoodlyguy

“I may be one,” Rafaella of Alava told her. “So make your boost, First Prince.”

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letouriste

So next chapter we get Cat mashing out Cordelia until she tear up and then, as both her and dear Hanno are not good enough, she meld them together in an amazing chimera hating itself.

Then Frederic get free of his loyalty spell and claim the Warden title while everyone else is vomiting by the simple fact he's the only one present barely capable to match Cat both in wits, force and conviction (on the Heroic side)

caoimhinh

Honestly, Rozala should take the Name of Warden of the West.

She is both princess and general, and has ample experience dealing with both scheming politicians and Named, she is able to push aside her personal feelings for the betterment of the realm and work alongside the woman who killed her mother, and

still has strong enough principles that she made an oath binding her whole bloodline to rise in rebellion should the Principate stab their allies in the back once this mess is over.

She is not perfect, and neither is she Catherine's equal, but she is a great middle point between the two extreme points that are Hanno and Cordelia and can still use them both as support and advice in the matters to come.

IDKWhoitis

While I am still partial to Freddy, Rozy wouldn't be much worse...

But until now, Rozy has been completely off the stage, she's not nearby or shown an inch of interest in dealing with heroes. Philosophically, she's not that far off from being an ok candidate, but narratively I don't see it coming through.

Linnus42

Rozala has been offscreen for too long even if she does have that sword in the hill trigger but she left field at this point especially with EE saying the resolution to this plot is soon.

Frederic has been a sniveling yes man with less independent though than Christophe. He has DQ himself more than once in my book but is Crystal Clear in this issue.

I don't think there is a third option from Good/Heroes in the West. Either they share, one wins or the position gets cancelled in my book.

IDKWhoitis

I can agree that the position gets cancelled is quite likely, maybe with a trap for bard thrown in for good measure too.

However, I can see Cat confronting the heroes in the Tower and asking them "What do you want in your Warden?" And let them pseudo-nominate each other. I don't think anyone is as crass to go "Me, Myself, and I" but rather as they talk it through, it can emerge that either Cat is the best option, or someone in the room is. Sprinkle in some revelation mid-fight of "Cordy? I tagged and bagged her like Hanno, you guys need to figure your own shit out or give me a good reason to take either one of them seriously."

Freddy hasn't been independent yet, but I don't think that necessarily disqualifies him, since someone who respects order and has restraint is probably one of the most important qualities to the Warden of the West in the coming Age of ORDER. Someone who can have principles but find alternative manners in achieving them, giving and taking in compromises. Both Cordy and Hanno were given opportunities to show their flaws on display, if Freddy's flaw is "Stand on your own two feet" That's by far the easiest to address in a chapter or two out of the other candidates.

Linnus42

Is he though? Sure he has some qualities of both but how much worse is he then either?

We saw in terms of combat that he is outclassed at Arsenal.

In terms of politics, he botched the whole Red Axe mess by not thinking about the politics before he gave Red Axe a free pass.

Sure in theory he can be a compromise option in practice though....

shikkarasu

I think the point is that he has a baseline amount of both sneaky and sword. He isn't perfect by a long shot, but may be better material for the Boat That Needs Building. I still like Cordelia (after Cat gives her the Talk) as my favourite candidate, but I can certainly accept Frederic as an alternative

Reader in the Night

I think the thing Cordelia is most blind to is herself. Who calls the First Prince to account? In theory, the Highest Assembly. In practice, she has been actong exactly like a Hero and forcing what she thinks is best down their collective throats for about 3 books now.

But I enjoyed seeing her attempt to learn Name lore, and will further enjoy watching Cat take her apart next chapter.

ninegardens

>>"Cordelia had had enough. If no one else discharged the duty properly, then she would. And if the likes of the Forsworn Healer and the Valiant Champion insisted on getting in her way, she would sweep them aside. There was no compromise to be had with duty. "

Lols.

"Oh no- named are too unruly, and will not be swerved from there purpose. They need someone to govern them, and *I* will do that. There will be ****no compromise**** in that duty".

I think this is one of the moments where we get to really see why Cordelia is a claimant for a NAME... but also why it is so self contradictory for her to have one.

Also, her get zonked so easily at the entrance to the tower: anyone could have seen that coming, and that the fact that she didn't, and got caught ***so easily*** really is a strike against her claim.

Like... bringing Hanno in was ****hard****.

I love her. She has great points. But reading this chapter, I see all the reasons why she can't be Warden of the West.

nick012000

Yeah. She had a Band of Five to lead, and then she sat in the back and let the other four do all the work, and entirely squandered the gift that providence dropped into her lap.

Linnus42

Also I do find it funny that Cordelia is mad Hanno didn't compromise over Red Axe. When the Laws everyone agreed to said he didn't have to. So she is Pro Law when it favors her and against it when it doesn't which makes her the same as like all the other Proceran Princes.

jamesc9

I wonder if there are any elites who are anti-law when the laws favour them.

IDKWhoitis

The Champ had a very valid point about her not having a sword, she lacks the martial mentality to get one. That alone weighs against her heavily, because you can't depend on armies or laws to bend Heroes to your will. Cat's sword is hardly about the armies, its the manner in which she plunges into the fray and grabs victory from the jaws of defeat with a sickening crack.

That Cordy didn't even really get a conflict or even enter the tower realllllly lowers my opinion of her claimancy. Sure, claimants are naturely weaker, but so far down the list they get captured by plot points, ehm, tendrils of Night? Nah, that's Cat and the story judging her not worth putting her on the stage for a fight. Because how much does cleverness get you when you can just get speared through the throat by a Reverant?

The Warden must be at the frontlines, so Cordy will just be a liability in this war.

I'm really hoping one of those that went into the dark during this chapter gets it (I'm blatantly supporting ya boi, Freddy)

Linnus42

I mean Villains are also more inclined to just follow the strongest as well. But the issue is Cordelia has not the personal power or the support of strong enough Heroes to back her plan to rule.

Konstantin von Karstein

Maybe Cordelia will become a sort of Warden opposed to the one Hanno is trying to become, and make sure WotW doesn't need too much personal power?

Linnus42

I mean the issue is she wants to making sweeping reforms that are bound to be unpopular. Valiant Champion has already said she is not going to fall in line behind Cordelia. So without personal power or a bunch of strong Heroes willing to go all the way to back her to the hilt how is she enforcing any legal reforms? Ignoring the fact that Laws are not going to stop Heroes based on their fundamental nature.

So far she has her cousin who is not a combat Named but I suppose can act like a magical NSA and wiretap Heroes. And Frederic who is not exactly an elite fighter in Martial Heroic Terms. You can say she can rely on Cat for backup but that is probably not liable to help her support. Painted Knife seems to be hedging on either way for the good of Levant but there is a big difference between saying your willing to give Cordelia a shot at running things and being a true pro Cordelia Partisan. Willing to enforce unpopular edicts on fellow Heroes with violence...such edicts could flip people away from Cordelia or get them to stay Neutral.

IDKWhoitis

I present the only case study we have of such names: Dread Emperors.

Similar to Good Kings of Callow (which have been very opaque besides, so I chose the one with more data points) they don't take to the field sword in hand.

They have a chain of loyalties and lieutenants to manage different aspects of running an organization (country) and several named (Calamities recently, but history does

indicate that a Black Knight, Warlock, and a handful of other names popped up too).

These sorts of roles depend on (at least in evil's case) managing the wants and needs of different keys of power (the high seats and factions). The greatest roadblock however, lies in that they also depend on an ideology that all the supporters subscribe to. Emperors also cheat, because they can afford to be in a shadow civil war with their own countrymen as long as they have the support of 51%.

The heroes have no such unified ideology, partly because they come from such different cultures and backgrounds, that creating a chain of loyalty becomes hellishly difficult without heavy factionalism. Creating those cracks within the heroes and T&T would make such a Warden infeasible. Evil can get away with it because the mantra of "Fuck you got mine" is so much easier to work with than "Do Good Unto the World" which has drastically different means and meanings depending on the culture we are talking about. Cordy would need not only Freddy's help, but also Hanno's and possibly Roland's to create such a chain of loyalties. And we know that half the people on that list already hate Cordy's plans.

Short of the Gods Above putting their finger on the scales, it would be difficult to convince all the heroes to follow Cordy.

Xinci

Cordelia to form a consolidated mega-identity basically, using interconnected information networks of pro-social values, information on events affecting Good to promote group action, and a net of interconnected relationships across cultures. A

Hypothetically it would get easier the more consolidated the areas of Heroic activity get as Cardinal is made. So by becoming its ruler and managing the institutions that will support Heroes, she can get at least the foundation for consolidation. The formation of things like the order of the red lion can and likely will extend into a new analog in Cardinal due to the bureaucratic holes it will need to be filled. The formation of more universal codifications of behavior can be had by studying Heroic literature/axioms, the Heroes themselves, and forming diplomatic relationships with them. Which she will need if she wants to form a system of law for them that won't implode within a generation. The formation of diplomatic ties would be similar to her previous goal of forming positive generational relationships with other nations and Procer, this is just an extra-national version of it. It is a massive undertaking but is already within her goals...

BargleNawdleZouss

1. Frederic Goethal as Warden of the West – has experience as a hero, war leader, and ruler of large number of people. His “negotiating” sessions with Cat will occur with frequency! 😊

or

2. Cat as simply The Warden – she oversees all Named.

and/or

3. This whole thing is just a trap (or ALSO a trap) to bait out the Wandering Bard once again and give Cat & Masego another shot at her.

Further thoughts:

4. Who were the Kingfisher Prince, the Valiant Champion, the Painted Knife and the Mirror Knight fighting in the Tower? If Cat was staying at the top of the tower and if the Hunted Magician was able to fully heal himself and the Barrow Sword before the Heroes arrived (a big IF), that will still leave the two men plus Archer outnumbered, even more so with heavyweights like Valiant and Mirror up front. As far as we know, Pilfering Dicer and Harrowed Witch were not coming back, and Royal Conjurer may not have had time to return after fishing Blessed Artificer out of the lake.

Frivolous

Valiant Champion better be praying HARD that Catherine doesn't become Warden for all Named.

If she does, Rafaella will sooner or later receive an order, or be put in a situation, wherein she is guaranteed to die heroically.

Lying in wait for her to refuse or to avoid the trap will be beautiful and very convincing accusations from multiple heroes of Cowardice and Desertion. And they will think it is all their own idea.

IDKWhoitis

Hypothetically, when a villain is fighting a proper band of heroes, they get a power up to match the threat. So Archer + Cat + Maybe Mighty flanking could be enough to give the band a run for their money.

Also, it could have been an illusion played by Cat, playing the sounds of battle to disorient the heroes and get Cordy to walk in (lets be real, if Hanno was kicked out at this point, she was certainly watching the new cohort show up).

None of the heroes they have in that band are particularly versed in magic or illusions, so some degree of tomfuckery may be anticipated. I would also not put it past Cat to throw the Tombmaker at them to burn some time.

IDKWhoitis

Im looking forward to any/all of these resolutions to this shitshow. Cat really does seem nominally to trend the line between Hero and Villain often, but deep down she is a bit too far gone I think...Even then, the heroes sure as shit respect her, even if they don't like her.

Salt

Kairos actually commented on this when he looked at everyone with Wish. Found it hilarious that her deepest wish was PEACE, considering it meant that Below's favorite daughter was Above-inclined at heart.

Bad@games

Al im saying is the only hero good enough for this is the Rouge Sorcerer. Literally best boy

[Adrian_V](#)

Cordelia fails to realize that she has the very same flaws she is angry about, the difference is that her faith lies where her own authority is so she thinks the system works better in the end, what she is most failing to see is that heroes only exist because there is a grave need for them, basically they only appear when everything is going to shit or worse (by going i mean that they appear because there is still a chance to save the day but without them the situation is fucked)

Is like that epigraph where some king said that for every great good to appear a great evil must exist FIRST.

Linnus42

Yeah Heroes don't appreciate Laws because they are a reaction to some failing in society. They are like an immune system response.

Konstantin von Karstein

Not necessarily. A counter example is the Named Magistrate that went to Mercantis, and who was obsessed by the law. I agree that Heroes are often very good for the society they live in, but when they screw up there's no one that can make them accountable. See MK, SoS and GP. Now I'm not saying that GP's actions weren't justified (I don't think he would deserved to be harshly punished), but a trial by Procer were

he could explain and justify his decision to judges, like anyone else in that situation, sounds more just abs could punish horrible acts that weren't justified.

Linnus42

Right but Magistrate is following those Laws because he believes in the Law. Not because someone told him he had to cause its written on a piece of paper.

Saint of Swords and was going to succeed or die trying so she cannot be punished. Unless you mean when she redirected the Crusade in which case I do not believe its illegal for Saint or Bard to make their case to the Holies on who she be Arch Heretic. Not agreeing with Cordelia is not a crime.

MK got punished for his brawl at Arsenal. Cordelia can complain it wasn't harsh enough but its Hanno's Domain. Much like I doubt Cordelia would be receptive if Hanno told her how to handle those Holies and Princes who were in the coup against her. The Gaspard affair, he never agreed to betray the Drow so that be Cordelia wanting a thought Crime Conviction.

Would Cordelia go on trial if she ordered a city burned with the Civilians, Legion and Black trapped inside? That was her original plan ad it would have killed more. Cordelia is mad cause Tariq didn't respect her authority not because she cares that much about Civilian deaths. I don't believe government leaders can just order atrocities committed in their country and claim legality as a defense. She didn't even bring charges against Tariq, she just stewed about because politically she could not afford to. Levant would revolt.

Which is really the crux of the matter you can argue harsher punishments for Tariq and Christophe but they are trying to win a war against the Dead King. Cordelia originally wanted to put Christophe in jail for a month at minimum. Now think about how many more would die without MK on the front...same for Tariq. They could be the difference between breakthroughs, mass casualties and Dead Named.

[Adrian_V](#)

Yes, the problem is context, in the case of GP if they went to trial on Procer nothing good would have come out of it, procer may as well have moral miopia as their hat, they have done similar things if not worse across history but since it isn't them is alright.

I am not sur ehow to explain what i think here but Cordelia trusts too much in the system and doesn't allow for

individuality or circumstances, she also has too much faith in the ideals of Procer, from what we have seen the sentiment is a nice one but she is beating on a dead horse, and not 1 like zombie xD

shikkarasu

As anyone with allergies will tell you, immune systems can be in serious need of curtailment. They need to exist, but they can get some toxic ideas regarding 'doing their job.'

[Adrian V](#)

That just makes the analogy all the better, all we are saying is that the situation is complex and Cordelia is trying to minimize, tries to shift the blame on the other side and ignore the flaws in her system, plus her own patriotic spirit is blinding her, she needs to accept Procer is death for all purposes.

Miles

The problem here is that while Hanno was able to keep the heroes in check but unwilling, and Cordelia was willing but unable, the Warden of the West needs to be both. Other options here include Christophe – but he's like Hanno, maybe Frederick – but he's like Cordelia.

We don't really have a possible candidate who can do both things and whom we've seen here. Bard could do both but then she'd have to give up her current Name. Maybe someone else is out there dealing with the mess.

Or maybe Abigail will score a win on the front lines just in time to prove she's the One True Claimant.

Abigail For Warden. Thank You all for coming.

nimelennar

I know this is going to be a controversial pick but:

Mirror Knight for Warden of the West.

He knows Heroes make mistakes; he has made them.

He knows that imposing consequences is effective: he's had those consequences imposed, and has been improved by them.

It's been noted how much he's improved under the tutelage of Hanno (or was it Tariq?), and is no longer the brute force that he used to be. In this very chapter, he shows knowledge of name lore, leadership, but also humility and the seeds of some diplomacy.

Hanno and Cordelia are both unfit for the role; the Kingfisher Prince is too loyal to Cordelia to be a candidate, and while I love the idea of Warden Abigail, if she had any inclination she were even being considered for the role, she would break through that door to the Kingdom Underground before the end of the sentence reached her ears.

There is no best choice, but a Hero who can both lead and who knows that Heroes need to be kept under control is what is needed, and Christophe qualifies.

Linnus42

He has grown but they don't actually let Chris lead bands usually. And Hanno said Chris wants to stay faraway from Politics. But honestly Chris is a better Dark Horse then Frederic in my book. At least he has independent thought.

Abrakadabra

The Kingfisher has no independent thought? Fuck no! He has too many, and because He understands Both sides, that makes him hesitate to Pick a side. He is the understanding type, the guy WHO watches on silently and observes everithing, while the loudmouths (Hanno and Cordy in this case) making an ass out of themselves. What He needs, is to throw away hesitation and be decisive. That is almost the same kind of choice that Adjutant made. No suitable candidate for warlord? Then I will do it. No suitable candidate for warden? Then I will do it.

ninegardens

Mostly... I wish they had sent Christoph to deal with the bridge at the end of the last book instead of Hanno.

Christoph *WAS* at the stage of deserving to lead a band of 5. Tariq was training him up, and it was such a perfect moment to have it play out.

....I'm not sure I see MK being the Warden here... but I can totally see him being a powerful voice of reason in a dark moment, and that is... kind of cool, in terms of Character development.

Like... when he was first introduced, he was just "That low key racist asshole that Hanno was babysitting"

Linnus42

I think what Christophe is likely to serve as is a counterbalance to Frederic. You kinda want at least two Named from every region that can offer opposing views on the major issues. More of a Jedi Council approach though without

the late stage screwups. So Painted Knife can check Valiant Champ. Etc for other countries.

caoimhinh

Rozala Malanza has experience dealing and leading armies, politicians and Named. She is lacking in the Named department, but she was still able to work appropriately with them and incorporate them into her military operations.

She has powerful principles, enough so she swore to rise in rebellion should Procer pull a Procer and backstab everyone once the war is over, but she is also pragmatic enough that she can set aside her hatred towards Cordelia and work efficiently for the sake of their nation.

To me, she is the most adequate middle ground between Cordelia and Hanno:

A princess, noticeably the only one who didn't squabble in an emergency and readily gave up her crown during the Princes' Graveyard. A skilled politician that made herself the head of the opposition to Cordelia one step at a time, and veteran general that has consistently been able to achieve success against ridiculous odds, with only Catherine so far outmatching her.

She can then use Cordelia and Hanno as advisors in her Role as Warden of the West.

Linnus42

The issue is more the setup for her has been lacking. She is a good compromise on paper but the setup is just not there.

I think people want a third choice so they are reaching for Frederic, Christophe and Rozala.

Then you got stuff like Cat getting both which works insofar as she the main character

Evgeny Permyakov

Relentless Magistrate?

Konstantin von Karstein

Yes, I support Cordelia but I can't see how she could win.

Tavar

I think Fredric is going to be the eventual warden, which will satisfy both Cordellia and Hanno. He's both royalty and well regarded commander of named. He's also bonked Catherine, which is parallel in its own way.

AbraKadabra

And it May be another loss for Cat. She forced the warden issue on her terms And the sacrifice She must pay is that She loses Frederick. She loses him to the position of warden And politics.

Reader in the Night

Now the real question is: Will Catherine strip Cordelia from the waist up then hang her upside down?

Because if so that's kinky, but I ship it.

Frivolous

I was going to ask that too!

Also, do claimants to a heroic Name get to survive being thrown off a cliff, or is that just for solidified Names?

RoflCat

Pretty sure as long as you're on a path to possibly becoming Name, you're immune to cliffing unless it's specifically against another claimant in a duel for the prize (in which case the cliff is usually extra lethal instead)

Miles

I think Hanno lost his Name a bit before the last time we saw him? Iirc there was a one line to that effect somewhere. He also lost his claim before she defenestrated him so I hope he's alright.

Silverking

Actually, I just thought of something worse.

Cat: Ah, good, you're finally awake. We have things we must discuss.

Cordelia: ...You didn't even bother to tie me up?

Cat: Why would I do that? It's not like you can do anything but talk, right? I mean, I suppose you could do a mad dash into the center of my ritual to try and snatch the Book of Some Things, but if you had the guts for that kind of gamble, we wouldn't be here.

BargleNawdleZouss

Silverking: this is how I expect the next chapter to open, with Vale summer wine or possibly aragh on a table between them. Definitely not tea, however! 😊

[boballab](#)

Naw nothing so pleasant as Vale Summer Wine, it would be that rotgut that Cat likes to drink.

ethericsentinel

Amusing as the idea is, Catherine won't get her preferred solution by such painless trickery. Her Role is to drag others into it (ahd herself be dragged into it) kicking and screaming.

shikkarasu

I don't see anything painless or tricky about the above suggestion. Cordelia needs to be confronted with her lack of hard power, and being told that she wasn't a threat worth preparing for will be the most painful thing she's heard since "Prince Klaus was among the fallen." Cordelia has sacrificed everything she has left for the Warden gambit. There will be nothing easy about the realisation of just how far she is from having a real chance.

Juff

Typo Thread:

thatshe > that she
Healer note > Healer noted
must weigh > must have weighed
length our > length of our
away to the > away the
detail.Cordeliadid > detail. Cordelia did
Foundling's s lieutenant > Foundling's lieutenant
only here > only one here
frowned. "Douka (extra space)
therefore is > therefore there's
live diplomacy > leave diplomacy
made complicated > made her complicated
to be governed > to being governed
behind Calernia > between Calernia
through his actions, > through his actions.
The was > There was
but curses > curses
what is that > what is it

Anon

Disciplined > disinclined

Frivolous

I want to say that I really really dislike and despise Rafaela the Valiant Champion here.

She's being an asshole and a bully, telling Cordelia that she better give up, and even threatening her with disobedience even if she does become Warden of the West.

She's actually not correct. WoTWC may come with an aspect or something that gives the Name the power to compel heroes.

And even if she does disobey, who cares? She is dispensable.

I'd really like to see Catherine string her upside down, or maybe just have Indrani fill her full of arrows.

nimelennar

Don't tempt Cat; she'll actually do it.

Konstantin von Karstein

She's telling Cordelia she won't support her because she don't think she would be a good Warden. So what? Maybe the way she told her was a little rude, but there's worse flaws.

Yes, the Name could come with an Aspect to help control Heroes. Compelling them outright seems quite Villainous. But that's not a given, and could very well not always be sufficient (or a « nuclear option », like Speaking). Raphaella has a point when thinking that not being able to force your decision on the people you try to command is bad.

Why such hate? I'm not a fan of her, but she doesn't deserve to die.

Linnus42

Protag centered morality and cause she killed Captain and wore her as a coat.

Despite Black being the one who led unprovoked the attacks against Hanno's Team. Despite Warlock offing two of her friends. Despite her cultural allowing taking mementos. People aren't consistent on because there is not the same level of outrage when the Orcs eat the corpses of humans that seems like desecration to me.

Cat hates her so most of the famous does as well as anyone else who gets in Cat's way or Cat doesn't like for the most part.

Yeah an Aspect that forces Compliance seems unlikely for a Heroic Name to have.

But yeah nothing wrong with Champ saying she thinks Cordelia would be bad and she won't support her. I mean part of the reason Cat intervened between Hanno and Cordelia is cause she thought Hanno would win with the Dwarf Gambit and Cordelia would not lose gracefully and do something stupid. Somehow I doubt Cordelia fans would be outraged by such actions if their girl was doing it.

Also if Cat tried to kill Champ it start a Civil War that Doom everyone to DK.

Abtrakadabra

Now Now putting words into others mouth...

shikkarasu

I agree. I personally love Raphella in that "don't blame the one who survives" way. Am I salty that we don't have Sabah anymore? Sure. Is the Champion any less of a treasure for it? I truly don't think so.

I will always support Cat in her undying hatred, but she lost an Aunt. That's a whole other thing.

Eris

> compelling them outright seems quite villainous
Uhhh, are you sure we read the same book series?

Frivolous

Konstantin: I despise her because of this:

Heroes are supposed to be about free will, right? The earnest desire to do Good, even if they argue about the way to do Good?

Even though the Interludes: Paragons and Epitomes ended in disaster, I admired Hanno's total evenhandedness, even if it didn't work out very well and it took too much time as compared to Catherine's meeting with the villains in Interlude: Reprobates. He never even drew his sword.

And here Rafaella is threatening to disobey the Warden of the West if that Warden turns out to be Cordelia. It's shameful and I hate her for it. It's like the dishonor of the democratic process, insofar as picking the WotW is in any way democratic.

I also think it's terribly counterproductive. Heroes don't bend very easily. It probably just made Cordelia more determined to get her own way.

It would make sense if they were all villains and Indrani was doing the bullying. At least for villains might makes right. Also Indrani has better grammar.

Frivolous

To add to my recent post: It reminds me too much of an electoral candidate's armed thugs and goons telling an opposing candidate to stand down, she can't win anyway, and if she does, something bad will happen to her.

Thus I believe Rafaella is bad. I would take pleasure in Catherine's exacting vengeance upon her.

Hmmmmmm

I think the difference is that if they were electoral candidates it'd be a singular person, working on behalf of the other candidate, trying to intimidate her.

But it's not that and this isn't an election- it's an audition/job interview.

It's an audition for the gods/powers that be, where you have to show you can play the part, but it's more like a job interview when it comes to the other characters because if they decide you're incompetent then it doesn't matter if the big boss upstairs hires you, they're going to be working around you.

Then there's the fact that the Named are a much smaller group than the typical electorate. The Champion is a powerful Named with pull, so it's not really so much 'a goon marches up to the opposing candidate' and more 'the entire state of Maine has declared they will succeed from the USA if this person is elected.'

Like yeah, it's just Maine (no offence to Maine, it's a lovely place just small) but it still indicates a worrying split in the people Cordelia hopes to rule if they're so unwilling to accept her because they think she'll get them killed that they would side against her even if she wins the favor of the literal gods.

Could VC have been nicer about it? Yes. But failing to tell the beauracrat who now wants to be a military commander and vanguard warrior that she needs to shape up before anyone will follow her and they legitimately don't have time for that since everyone might die otherwise would be pretty dangerous. She didn't threaten Cordelia, she warned her, which is something that other people have been trying to do repeatedly if more subtly and politically mindedly.

I don't really like the VC, I find her grating and not in a fun way and some of her choises are...bad. But having the guts to walk up to the ruler of a nation and genuinely say 'I

think you're about to get a lot of people killed if you're stupid, don't do that. We won't follow you if you do' isn't intimidation, it's someone Cordelia is looking to rule genuinely informing her that she doesn't qualify for that rulership position in the eyes of many of the Named. Or she was just being blunt, which is also possible. It's still not intimidation, though. 'I don't like/trust you enough to follow you to my probable death' is a very reasonable thing to say, and also something that kind of kills the credibility of anyone trying to lead Named in this world.

Frivolous

Hmmmmmm: I agree with most of your points.

I disagree mostly on the nuances and semantics. Subjective interpretation stuff.

In Cordelia's place, I would have definitely felt threatened.

Reveen

She's a fucking monarch. There's nothing wrong with bullying her.

Miles

Oh yes. I forgot Above aren't above a spot of mind-rape between friends and coworkers, and random citizens who happen to be within a couple hundred square miles.

[308924810a](#)

Okay, we've seen two Claimants get beaten. And Cordelia is beaten. Catherine knows that her primary threat is being able to talk her around to something, and as such should either avoid Cordelia, or put the ability to eject the woman from the tower out of her own hands.

Now where's the third Claimant?
and who?
A dwarf?

Jason Ipswitch

Akua is the third Claimant, unless it's Cat herself taking both roles to become a sort of Villain who instructs (but does not mentor) heroes. If this new Wardens and Cardinal setup is going to replace Bard's endless meddling, the Warden of the West needs to be someone who can match Cat. Hanno and Cordelia have just demonstrated that they cannot, and never will.

Akua is definitely on a redemption path, is unquestionably closer to being an equal to Cat, and has both significant story knowledge, significant experience with Named, and both a degree of personal power and experience handling rulers and nobles. If she swoops in to save the day, or simply gets chosen by both Hanno and Cordelia as a compromise (possibly on the theory that Cat and the other Hero will never accept it), then that completes it

On the other side, Cat seems like she's not entirely prepared for what happens if her ritual succeeds (although maybe I'm reading that wrong). But if it does, she'll very much be in a position to have "stolen" the mantle of Warden of the West. And her groove in Creation for stealing power is very deep by now.

And there's another groove that she's been cutting as well. While she's been careful to avoid anything that's explicitly mentoring, she's been instructing heroes for a while now: Princess, the Knight Errant (even if she tried to sucker him into killing for her), and now she's teaching lessons to Claimants. She's never going to be good, but she is effective at what she does. A sort of Evil but Practical Guide, if you will.



Silverking

I had theorized that this encounter was Cordelia's chance to finally ride a Story and see what all the fuss is about. Imagine watching her riding along into Named battle for the first time and seeing things...Just Work. This is the true reason behind all the silly rituals and the unwavering conviction: Above rewards Heroes for attempting the impossible by making it actually HAPPEN. Everything they do is based on this, and thinking that someone can become the Warden of the Heroes without understanding this is like expecting Hanno to take on the role of the First Prince: you just see a bunch of selfish short-sighted fools doing what they please, and you swing around your sword in frustration until you conk yourself on the head.

Instead, she makes the safe play, the smart play, and Cat shows that if Cordelia doesn't even attempt to be a Hero, then Evil doesn't need to even be clever to take her down. Heck, Vivienne now has the non-martial name of Princess, and she would have lasted longer than you...

Actually, that might not be a bad idea. Oh, not Vivienne becoming the Warden, but Cordelia going to talk to Vivienne about what being a Hero is like. Vivienne understands wielding both personal and political power, and she's a more objective perspective than the submissive allies or stubborn foes that Cordelia has been dealing with up to this point. She'll also be much better company compared to Cat's upcoming speech of "You're barely even a contender at this point! Get better or please stop!"

Sugar Roll

If the Herald of the Deeps is a claimant, I'll put my money on him instead. Hanno and Cordelia as they are now are both bad candidates.

Konstantin von Karstein

There's no way. His Story is very different, and even his Name has a very different « taste » than any on the surface. Also, no Hero would accept a Dwarven ruler.

Sugar Roll

True, it was wishful thinking on my part. It's just that there's just no one else, other than the dwarf, with enough influence to be on par with the Warden of the East.

Miles

I mean this is Above we're talking about. All they really need is a willingness to put in a bit of effort, a pretty face, and not murder their dad for the chance at a quicker victory.

Frivolous

I want and hope that Indrani makes a couple of wooden sculptures to commemorate this. Muscular sweaty Hanno half naked and hanging upside down for one, Cordelia for the other.

Brown wood for Hanno, something like Earth's mahogany, and yellow wood for Cordelia.

And then Indrani should show off the sculptures to everybody.

Daniel E

Something I've learned in this series is that the author loves subtle one-line callbacks. After rereading this chapter, Champion's correction about the grammar of 'Wizard' being marked with sadness prompted me to go searching. A few Google's later:

Heroic Interlude: Arraignment – (Hedge Wizard after transforming into an eagle and back again) “Champion helped her up to her feet, then clapped her back. Hanno saw the mage repress a wince. “Eagle trick, very great,” the Levantine heroine said, her tradertalk heavily accented. “Witch can have many rabbits after victory.” “Wizard,” Hedge corrected absent-mindedly. “It's a genderless noun.” The Champion ignored that as cheerfully as she usually did.”

Hedge Wizard died in Calamity III, along with Sabah.

ninegardens

Ouch. All the more poignant, because it explicitly says that Champion was *ignoring* what was said. clearly, she wasn't.

Miles

Wait. Shut up. Hold on a second.

Valiant Champion is the Heroic Idrani.

[marillius](#)

Catherine isn't just testing Corde and Whitey, she's testing all the heroes. Neither of the two claimants work and both are needed. If one wins they both break the Alliance in some way. Neither can serve the role perfectly.

Catherine isn't really looking to test either of them, or at least not JUST test them... She's given the opportunity for every Hero around to take the test too.

Dreamer

Comment section became much more judgemental in the last few chapters. As in judging writing – actions of characters. Anyone else noticed it as well?

Feels like some theories were replaced by judgements of Cordy here and Boots/Cat in the last few chapters.

Is it from the dissatisfaction of writing and that's just venting?

I used to love heading into comment section, but not so much anymore... Feels like it begun in Warden of the West arc.

/rantoff

In general seems like we have:

Warden of the west(territory) – Cordy

Warden of the West(heroes) – Hanno

Neither is both. Similar to what Bard wanted to do to Catherine. What's the solution? Not a single clue.

Writing this, made me think these are great grounds for Cordy to get closer to leader of Heroes than it is for Hanno to become leader of lands/princes.

Linnus42

First Fandom War? This always happens when a winner take all setup occurs between two popular characters. Though yes I am

sure dissatisfaction with the characterization and writing also factors in.

ninegardens

I wouldn't take it too badly.

It's always our game to try to guess what will happen next. It just so happens that "What will happen next" is inherently about judging the character... not in a mean way, but in the same way as judging a diving contest. This involves examining each claimant's strengths and faults. Not so much Venom in it (at least, not in comparison to the Ater Arc, which felt far harsher... and I'll make no pretense, I was part of that)

[sengachi](#)

It's just two new commenters starting shit, I think. Hopefully they'll lay off soon.

[Liliet](#)

Hedge ;~;

Daniel E

She's in a better place now. Some place where she doesn't have a Hellfire spear imbedded in her face 😏 On a serious note, did we ever get a specific explanation of what happened to her sister? Or was she just killed between chapters?

[Liliet](#)

Wekesa redirected the curse Kairos had concocted for Captain onto her. She would have survived with Hedge sharing half the curse and it being not enough to kill both of them if Bard had not stolen the weight of that story, so instead she just died like a normal chump.

Daniel E

I must be blind, can you point me to which Interlude that happens?

Daniel E

Nevermind I found it. Such a brief few lines, blink and you'll miss it.

[Liliet](#)

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/20/villainous-interlude-cadenza/>

Additionally explained in

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/25/villainous-interlude-thunder/>

sengachi

This is such a fascinating perspective chapter. I totally get Cordelia's points and she's *right*, even as I can't help but notice her missing little details, like the fact that the Mirror Knight actually is improving. (Quite a lot actually, it's sweet to see him trying to do better).

But also ... holy shit does the end of this chapter make me realize Raefella is right. For the Warden of the West to not also be a sword is such a huge weakness.

Clmineith

I can't say who I would support for WoT. I don't know, really.

But there, I think Cordelia was tested, given opportunities, and failed.

Possibly, she could have persuaded the other heroes but she didn't try, instead playing politics. I'm not sure.

What seems obvious, is:

- 1/ She didn't try to lead the group of five
- 2/ She didn't enter the Tower with the hero, instead counting on her guard to protect her. If she had stay alone doing *something* (waiting as reinforcement, or else) it would have been ok, but she was separating herself from the group: one side with four zeros, one side with her and her guards
- 3/ The worst, in my opinion: "Fleeing was better than allowing herself to be taken prisoner. She nodded her agreement and pulled at her reins. East, they must head east. There were allies there". Just... it's how a princess works, not a heroin.

Cordelia intends to get a title and using it, but she didn't intend to *live* it.

Darkening

Would have been nice if there were a bunch of minor off screen incidents Cordelia could bring up here, those 'hundred small justices', to reinforce her point. Hammering away at those same 4 incidents is just kind of tired at this point.

beleester

Yeah, that's been my beef with this arc. Hanno's turn to antagonist has been mostly offscreen, and so has much of Cordelia's empire-management (for understandable reasons). The Praes arc was something we'd been building up to for six books.

"How does we fix Praes?" was an interesting and thorny problem that naturally tied in to Cat becoming Warden of the East. "Who gets the magic book?" isn't really a question with the same weight.

Eris

And isn't that just it? Nothing whatsoever about WoTW gives it near the same weight as WoTE has at the moment.

The story isn't revolving around a worn and weary duality pattern, but rather about a new Villainous groove – and a major one at that – being carved into creation over the span of a measly half a decade or so, and the Heroic side having to play catch-up with it.

Salt

It actually wouldn't even be against the direction the story's been going if there just wasn't a Warden of the West straight up.

One of the big things is that the whole Good vs Evil thing is just awful for everyone that isn't Named, and often still awful even if you are Named. Breaking up that directly opposing symmetry is kind of in line with Catherine's whole schtick about not being crabs in the bucket from the Everdark arc.

Symmetry in terms of story would still be there, considering the closest rival/direct antagonist to Catherine is currently the Bard more than anyone else. Eating the book of some things is an eye for an eye mirror to the Bard playing hardball by shutting down all the Below stories.

beleester

Maybe we've been looking at this the wrong way. Cat framed this as an argument of philosophy – what sort of person should the WoTW be? The hero who upholds their ideals the best? The one who's willing to bend those ideals to work with the other Warden? The one who's best at fighting the other Warden? Etc. But idealism vs cynicism has been like, the central hero-villain debate for the entire story – we could keep debating it until doomsday and not get a satisfying resolution, and the true answer will always depend on how much the plot favors you, anyway. Let's ask a more concrete question: What role will the Warden of the West play in the war?

Warden of the East was pretty straightforward: "Get the East in order, the hard way." Cat's role was to go into Praes, and either kill or dethrone everyone standing in the way of sending an army of diabolists marching west. There was a lot of complexity as to

who got killed and how, but it was never in doubt that her mission was to lay down the law to villains.

What problem is Warden of the West here to solve? Procer is already in the war, the problem is they've been in the war so long they're breaking under the strain. People are giving up and bailing out, or demanding they get paid back for their hard work, and the Alliance can't afford that. Cat's strategy won't work here – taking the throne through violence isn't a Proceran tradition like it is in Praes, there are too many thrones to claim, and we can't afford a civil war anyway. What Procer needs is someone who can give people hope and convince them that things will get better, that if they just wait one more season it'll all be worth it.

Hmm. That sounds like the Kingfisher Prince, to me. Cordelia and Hanno both have ideals, but Frederic is the guy who can really *sell* a heroic ideal. That's basically his whole thing – “not all pretty things are lies.”

ethericsentinel

Agree that Cat's strategy, as presented here, can't work alone. But I strongly suspect that the violence is only a front. Cat isn't aiming to let one or the other seize the win through violence; she's aiming to force the direct confrontation that both Cordelia and Hanno were previously angling to avoid. Will that end with a third winner like Fredric or Roland? I wouldn't be surprised, but whoever wins it won't be by force of arms..

SufficientVelocity

The most important thing: Where is new best bird Wizard? Did she go with the Valient Champion? Does she for tell a new Knightley Order of Heron Riders? I feel like the comments are really distracted from what matters here.

Abrakadabra

My take is that Cordelia will become a warden of named, and Hanno a warden of earthly powers.
To be a balance against them.

mamm0nn

Most of the comments seem to overlook the big picture for the details. The specifics of what Cordelia and Hanno think and say matter little, instead it's all about who gets chosen in the end and the end result.

Cordelia has shown this chapter more than ever before that she is pretty much another Cat. She believes in pretty much all the same things when it comes to Hero-hating and governing. Hanno is Cat's opposite, everything she hates about heroes and opposes without

having any hard crimes against him like MK, Saint or Pilgrim had. Cat clearly prefers Cordelia because she is more alike Cat and Cat's eventual long-term victory view, but as Archer said Hanno is currently what they need.

The question lies more in what the Wardens have to be. Two opposing forces, morally and in believes? Or two forces that are similar but bullying and rooting out the same believes together in a way that will yield rebel resistance and pruning of creation? Equivalent Conflict, or Unified Tyranny vs the Repressed?

I personally see neither to be the best choice now, though I doubt we're getting a surprise third Claimant. Cordelia has my personal preference and her personal points hold more merit, but from the big picture Hanno is the better option.

Zach

Narratively speaking, I'm expecting Hanno. It's easy for me to see a situation where Hanno – whose failure we saw first – ends up coming back and succeeding in the end. We also have Catherine's pledge to reconcile with him and the greater side narrative of Hanno changing as a person. Cordelia is much better as she currently is, but she hasn't really experienced much change to her character or goals. So there aren't really as many interesting places to go with her.

Also, Hanno seems like he might have some sort of big epiphany after getting owned, so maybe it is possible for him to change (though Catherine herself expressed the idea that his convictions are unchangeable).

Zach

One area where I disagree somewhat with Cordelia is the "Villains being governable and Heroes ungovernable" part. I think that her perception is biased by Catherine having a tight leash on Villains during the war (and Hanno refusing to do the same to the Heroes absent the most dire circumstances, like when he had to physically stop Mirror Knight). Within Evil-aligned Nations, where Villains are the leaders, there aren't really consequences beyond that of powerful Heroes coming from elsewhere, but the same can be said for Good-aligned Nations when they're in a direct conflict with another major Evil-aligned Nation – Praes is always coming for Callow in the same way Callow is coming for Praes.

Her perspective is skewed due to her only exposure to villains being in Procer (where they're weak) and the war (when they were firmly leashed by Catherine, who is an unusually reasonable villain). Though she also had lots of experience with Malicia, so I'm not sure why she's not factoring that into the equation.

That being said, she's still a much better option than Hanno. She desires to see Heroes leashed in the same way Villains currently are, and that's far more similar to Catherine's role than Hanno (who seemingly just wants to be a leader who advises Heroes, like some sort of institutional Grey Pilgrim). Valiant Champion was correct that Cordelia can't really be any sort of equal to Catherine (due to Catherine having both the brains *and* the brawn, so to speak), but the same is true of Hanno, only in an ideological way. Hanno can be clever, but he is firmly ideologically opposed to one of the key roles of a Warden – he is unwilling to directly exert authority over Heroes.

Drk

As thing goes kingfisher prince gonna get The Book and Name

Practicalfanofevil

While i wont say that its for the best. It seems like cordelia is going to get the book. In Guideverse terms Hanno has the weight but not the story. On the other hand Cordelia has the right story but not enough weight to sink the knife in. Unfortunately for Hanno i dont think having enough strength will get him what he wants without a proper story to back him up and he will end up as another skeleton in the dragons cave as cat puts it. Im guessing Cordelia will by the end of this arc get the warden name and an aspect that helps her to take away Names from heroes through some kind of voting process.

Eris

I for one don't get the hate Cordelia is getting in the comments section. Yes she has her flaws in her argument, but I don't understand the support for Hanno. If Hanno wins, I don't think the Truce and Terms could even function. Hanno would always do what he thinks the right thing is, even if it breaks laws. The T&T wouldn't work, because as soon as there is something Hanno doesn't want to do, he won't compromise or anything. Heroes under his reign would have just as much power and little accountability as before.

Salt

You have it backwards. The only person in the story we've seen that has been able or even willing to attempt upholding the existing T&T when push comes to shove is Hanno. Not Cordelia.

The Arsenal arc showed this best. When Cordelia plotted with Catherine to undermine the T&T in order to get the results they wanted in the trials, Hanno was the roadblock that forced them to respect the T&T and follow some semblance of due process for the trial. Hanno was the one willing to bleed in order to

resolve the situation without breaking the conditions of the T&T.

Hanno's problem was, instead, putting far too much faith in Heroes which in large part led to the crisis in the first place; but it was Cordelia who tried to ignore the T&T to do what she thought was right after the crisis developed.

Basically, Hanno isn't good enough because he won't recognize the problems with Heroes, and allow these crisis' to develop far too often in the first place. Problems that could've been prevented will happen anyway because he had too much faith in a divine mandate to see what's in front of his eyes. He puts way too much emphasis on principle.

Cordelia isn't good enough because as soon as a Crisis happens, she'll undermine and ignore the law – including the future Liesse Accords – to do whatever she wants. Exactly the same way she did with the T&T, as well as the highest assembly. Laws and rules aren't protected when Cordelia is in charge, they're bent and undermined whenever convenient for her personal goals. She has far too little principle.

Linnus42

I mean I disagree insofar Hanno was not really around to stop Cordelia's four main complaints.

Red Axe....Hanno was nowhere around for this and never even met Red Axe before she did what she did. Maybe you could have talked her down if you beat Bard to her. But her plan was also to destroy the Rules and Regs, no Laws Cordelia dreams of passing could have stopped Red Axe.

Tariq plaguing the Village. Hanno was nowhere close to stop that. Cordelia never filed a real complaint because politics. And even if he was with Tariq, I doubt he could have talked the man out of nor per se was it a bad plan. It was the least bad of the options being burning a whole City from Cordelia or letting Black burn all the crops.

Saint is very much ditto. She is not going to listen to Hanno, she didn't even listen to Tariq at the end. Before that she told Cordelia that Procer was rotten not a crime. She also switched the target with Bard of Arch Heretic. Which is not a crime cause having a political difference with Cordelia is not a crime and before any of the system was developed. Its not Saint's fault Cordelia launched a Crusade despite having zero inroads with Heroes and the Holies hating her. Hanno also not around to stop any of that.

Christophe, for one he never agreed to betray the Drow with the Gaspard Family. A plan that originates from a Prince

scheming is Cordelia's job to sort out not Hannos. Not to mention Cat only sussed out his involvement by spying on him when he was sleeping. Now Cordelia probably would be down for Thought Crime Punishments and Mass Heroic Surveillance but I doubt Hanno or many Heroes would be. So really you can only say that he could have stopped the Heroic Debate between Chris, Fred and Roland escalating. Chris was feeling himself after massacring Demons with Severance and seeing Cat corruption in Action (Bad Move). However, the issue here is Frederic was going out of his way to provoke a fight. A fight he couldn't even win.

That is the issue with Cordelia's complaints in my book. Only one crime was Hanno even in a position to intervene and he did intervene for that one even if he could have done it faster. But should he really be stifling free and open debate among Heroes? As for punishment...Cordelia never filed a complaint about Tariq, curious she wants to hang him, I doubt she be hanging herself if they went with her burn down the city plan. Saint died in the act and seems like the type who is unlikely to surrender. Red Axe got executed by Hanno and Cordelia is more mad Hanno didn't let him try Red Axe under Proceran Law despite that going against the terms. Christophe got punished, maybe not harshly enough but they are fighting a war against ruin.

Ergo the only way to stop most of these actions is to curtail free speech such that discussing stuff Cordelia doesn't like is a crime and mass surveillance presumably from Cordelia's cousin with future sight predictions on top of that.

BargleNawdleZouss

I know we're going to learn more in about four hours, but I haven't seen much discussion here of what will happen if Cat is actually successful in "eating" the Book Of Some Things. Do heroes lose their powers? Does Providence simply not tilt the field in Heroes' favor when in conflict? Does this sweep the board clear for the Game Of The Gods? Let's hear your thoughts on the effects of Night having a BOST Sandwich(tm)!

Interlude: Occidental IV

"It is not enough to win. If you do not destroy the very foundation on which your enemy stood, all you have done is change the face of the man who will kill you."

– Dread Emperor Benevolent

Cordelia woke up looking at the moon.

The sky spread out above her, a river of darkness with glistening jewels for stars and brightest among them the crown jewel of night. *The midnight eye*, she thought. She was not manacled, the fair-haired princess found, but she was chained. Someone had set her down on a throne of stone from which twisting chords of Night slithered out, forming into shackles around her hands and feet. Trying to rise up, Cordelia found her legs wobbly and half-fell back into the seat. She groaned as she bruised the back of her knees against the stone, forcing aside the pain to look around. She must be atop the tower, she thought. The view could come from nowhere else.

And there was only one person who could have brought her here.

"I do not believe," Cordelia said, "that you would abduct me only to then ignore my presence. Shall we dispense with the theatrics, Catherine?"

A long moment passed and she wondered if she had not just made a fool of herself, but from behind her came the sound of a match being struck. Though she felt the urge to twist around on the seat and look back, Cordelia forced herself not to. Appearances mattered even more when you were at a disadvantage. Instead the acrid smell of wakeleaf drifted to her, lazily carried by the breeze, and she heard that familiar limp drag itself across the stone. A soft step and then the sharp rap of the staff on stone, all a fabricated display of weakness. The Warden of the East could still move as swiftly and gracefully as a cat when she needed to.

Catherine Foundling limped into sight from her left, moonlight lapping at her back like the tide at the shore. Even the jarring colours of the Mantle of Woe were drowned in strands of Night, as if she wore a cloak woven from it, and only the cherry-red burn of the pipe allowed Cordelia to see anything at all under the dark of the hood. One piercing brown eye set in a face carved by hatchet, all sharp angles and severity. It was only those ever-expressive lips that broke from the blade edges: always smiling and smirking, grinning and baring teeth.

The Warden drew back the pipe to blow a long stream of smoke, veiling her face in darkness for a moment, and Cordelia was left without a window to gaze through. When the red burn returned, it was to an amused little quirk of the lips. Like she knew a joke no one else did.

"Hanno would have seen the trap coming," the Warden of the East lightly said. "You do know that, right?"

Cordelia let the barb pass through her. This was a negotiation, diplomacy. Allowing the woman on the other side of the table to irritate her was handing her further advantage when she already had many.

"It is decent manners to offer refreshments when entertaining a guest," Cordelia calmly replied. "I believe a tart red is the traditional kind vintage for stargazing. A bottle from lakeside Aequitan if you have one."

Unlike the rest of the principality the large cities near the coast had never truly become Arlesite even after the Aquitanii were conquered, so the ancient tart grapes were still used in the vineyards. Aequitan reds from the south were unpleasantly sweet, Cordelia had found, best drunk with small game or not at all.

"How fortunate, then, that you are not a guest," the Warden drawled. "If you insist on wine, Hasenbach, there should be a bottle by the seat. You can pour for yourself."

Cordelia did grope around, finding to her relief that her legs were steady, and hid her dismay when she saw that it was half-empty bottle of Vale summer wine that rested on a low table. She could have used a drink that did not taste like it had been mixed with cider to settle her nerves. The Queen of Callow's hopelessly provincial taste in wine had been speculated by some to be a clever way to display Callowan pride, given the famously poor reputation of those vintages, but Cordelia had sadly learned better. She took a deep drink of the glass she'd poured, much more than was polite.

Awful.

"You'll be able to stand before long, if that's what you were trying to do," Catherine idly said. "The binding was just a little rougher than I meant it to be."

She had little practice with bindings, Cordelia thought, because she so rarely took prisoners. Had the sideways reminder been on purpose?

"Duly noted," she replied. "As we have now both found a vice to nurse, given the circumstances I believe it would be forgivable to do way with the usual courtesies."

The face disappeared into the dark, a cloud of smoke flowing out.

"Indeed?" the Warden amusedly said.

"Indeed," Cordelia confirmed. "I imagine that your plans for the Book of Some Things are nearing their end, which invites urgency in our talks."

For a moment she thought she saw the other woman wince at the mention of the artefact, but it might have been a trick of the light. A single fleck of red cast just as many shadows as it did their opposite.

"We'll be ending this soon," Catherine Foundling casually agreed. "The attack on the tower is going south in a hurry and-"

She suddenly paused, then sighed and snapped her fingers. There was a flare of Night and a curse from someone else's mouth. Cordelia rose to her feet just in time to see a shape being tossed over the edge of the tower. The one-eyed queen limped there, then cast an irritated look downwards.

"I can see *in the dark*, Kallia," the Warden peevishly called out, "and I've traded the one eye for a hundred. Try that again when you're actually invisible, not just quiet."

There was a loud thump and a snap, then a hoarse shout.

"Crows," Catherine Foundling muttered, shaking her head. "If she doesn't stay down with the second leg broken I'm going to need to have a talk with that girl. There's a difference between determined and goddamn stubborn."

Cordelia glanced down at her glass, allowed herself a grimace and then polished off a third in a single swallow. It seemed that there would be no rescuers coming to free her, which was unfortunate. Buying time for them to come had been in the back of her mind, but she would have to negotiate without that card up her sleeve. Adjusting her angle accordingly, the blonde princess discarded any thought of a bargain from even relative strength. The only way she would pass through this victorious was by discovering what it was that Catherine Foundling truly wanted and how it could be leveraged into a compromise.

Cordelia took a few steps around the stone seat, finding that her Night chains followed without restraining her, and laid her elbows against the back of the throne. She felt Catherine's eye back on her even as the wink of red was taken away, replaced by a plume of smoke that drifted up to the cloudless sky.

"I was given to understand that the Book of Some Things is a manifestation of Good stories," Cordelia calmly said. "Though I do not believe there is precedent for such an act, one might assume that destroying such an artefact would have dire consequences."

The Warden of the East smiled.

"Assume," she repeated. "That's been a problem lately hasn't it, Cordelia? How often you're forced to *assume*."

The wrong approach, the princess acknowledged without missing a beat. That had not been a personal attack made because the one-eyed queen was feeling defensive, it had been a barb made out of derision. *I misread signs and was mocked for it.* She did not mind. That, too, was actionable information. The Book was not the keystone then, either destroying or ingesting it. There was another motive underlying all this chaos. What? If she found this, she found the key to it all.

"Then disabuse me, Catherine, by all means," she pleasantly said. "If I have made an error let us resolve it."

Even from a change of subject she should be able to glean a hint. The Warden's smiled turned sharp and Cordelia's heart sunk. She had mistepped again. *I will lose every time until I learn what game it is we are playing,* she darkly thought.

"Have you ever wondered why it is that you're held in high esteem by so many rulers," Catherine Foundling nonchalantly said, "but when heroes look at you, deep down most of them believe you're a failure?"

Cordelia straightened, elbows leaving the back of the throne as she set down her cup on it.

"Only a handful of Named alive have ever ruled," she replied. "Or even held high office. Few understand what those responsibilities entail or what the limitations of a crown are."

Heroes, in particular, grew strong through uncompromising conviction. It encouraged the belief that simple solutions would suffice no matter the situation, which was wildly untrue. Strength grew into ever more complicated a word the higher you came to stand.

"That's true," the Warden amiably replied. "It's not what most of them are built for, even if they don't want to admit it. But then they're hardly alone in that, since you're only looking at the half of the truth that you like."

An idle step forward, even as Cordelia warily took her cup in hand.

"They see you as a failure," the Warden of the East said, "because you *did* fail."

The tall princess's eyes narrowed imperceptibly, the first genuine stirring of anger of this conversation rearing up its ugly head until she smoothed it away.

"That's the gap in perspective, Cordelia, that you're not seeing," the one-eyed queen continued. "A lady, a king, they look at what you did and applaud. It was an impossible task but you

moved mountains and held up the sky, compliments galore. But heroes?"

The Damned shrugged.

"What they see is that Cordelia Hasenbach took up an impossible task and then she failed," the Warden said, "when victory against impossible odds is the very foundation of what a hero *is*."

It was a moment of cold, cutting clarity that followed the words. The pieces fit, suddenly and cruelly. The sneers she had found buried deep in the gaze of so many Chosen, that simple marrow-deep disbelief that she had not been able to fix everything and prevent the inevitable. The ugly assumption not so much as whispered but ever present that somehow, she had chosen Procer should fall.

Impossible was not a word any of them genuinely believed in.

"Bearing a Name would not have made keeping the Principate together easier," Cordelia evenly said. "Given the Truce and Terms, it would have instead significantly complicated my efforts."

She would have been both above and under the White Knight in authority, the boundaries of jurisdiction so blurred as to be useless. Cordelia entertained the thought, briefly, but could only see a disaster in the making.

"And that would matter if Procer was your wheelhouse," Catherine said, rapping her staff against the side of the throne.

The sound almost made her flinch. It was like rattling the cage of a songbird that'd sung out of tune.

"But that's not the duty you're after, is it?" she continued. "You've thrown your hat in the ring to be Warden of the West and that's a very different creature."

And there, Cordelia thought, her line of argument collapsed. She drank from the cup, the too-rich taste filling her palate, and set down it down again on the stone to a neat little note.

"You speak as if not having been Named is a mistake crippling my ambition, that I cannot see the world the way many heroes do," the blue-eyed princess said, "but you are wrong."

She stepped back, chains following so lightly she would have thought them made of feathers if not for the shackles.

"That distance, Catherine, that estrangement? They are the very foundation of my claim," Cordelia said. "I have seen heroes as someone who is not one of them. Witnessed their flaws as only

someone who stood outside of their circle can. I can learn namelore, aspects and tricks. All Named do."

All heroes had to learn their nature, the unseen rules of their trade, and not all received the help of a mentor. There was no shame in this, or in her remaining lack. She was a quick study.

"What *cannot* be learned is the understanding of where heroes falter," she told the Warden, meeting the dark eye lit in red. "Where they step beyond the bounds of duty and do more harm than good."

She never would have sought to be Warden of the West without it, so the princess thought it almost absurd to count it a weakness. It was not unlike chastising a bird for having wings.

"Our gap in perspective can and will be bridged," Cordelia plainly told her. "I am not unaware of its costs. But I count it a worthwhile trade for having removed the scales from my eyes."

"You're not listening," Catherine said. "What is it that you've used to push your claim, Cordelia?"

The other woman limped around the throne, leaning her back against it. It was not a restful stance, for all that it was motionless. Cordelia took in the silhouette and could only think of a snake drawing back to strike.

"Armies," the Warden of the East said, enunciating every syllable. "Nobles. Treaties. Everything except people you'd actually be leading. A First Prince in everything but Name."

The princess's lips thinned.

"I do not yet have the sup-"

"*You're not listening,*" Catherine Foundling interrupted in a hiss. "Your claim is a test, and you are *failing* it."

She pushed off cloak of shadows sweeping behind her as she limped forward and Cordelia stepped back.

"You can learn namelore," the Warden said. "Of course you can. Just like he can learn politics. But that's not what a Name is, what a Role is. It's not asking you if you're going to be the right person in five years, it's asking if you are *right now*. Are you?"

Cordelia's eyes hardened. No more steps back. Any fruit grew beyond reach if you raised the branch high enough and kept raising it as soon as the hand neared.

"And were you a perfect fit, Catherine, when you became the Squire?" she challenged. "Was Tariq Isbili, when he became the

Grey Pilgrim? I imagine most Named were not, and so it seems to me that the requirements to wardenship rise every time you are at risk of having an equal."

The last touch had been a barb and an investigation both, trying to find what lay behind this tirade, but the princess immediately knew she had not drawn blood. The words washed over the other woman like water over a duck's back.

"That's the thing, Cordelia," the Warden smiled. "You're not my equal. And if that's hard to swallow, you only have yourself to blame: you had months, years to learn namelore on your own."

Cordelia scoffed. Quite the simplification.

"Would you have taught me, Catherine, if I had asked?" she mocked. "Are tutors in the art so easy to find? For some skills time is the only teacher."

It was not as if she had not sought instruction. But namelore was not committed to books, its rules were often obscure and there was only so far reading stories would get Cordelia when she had to deal with heroes from all over Calernia. The few heroes she had been in a position to interrogate were usually new and shallow in learning: even Frederic, perhaps the most seasoned hero on her side, freely admitted that he still had much to learn.

"I'm a villain, there would have been no point," the Warden dismissed. "Which you might have known if you'd asked me. Or if you'd asked any hero but those few you trust – that is, those who already obey you."

"Is having allies a black mark as well, now?" Cordelia said. "An interesting development."

The insinuation that she only trusted through control was particularly rich, coming from the Black Queen. The same woman who had put a knife to the throat of every living being on Calernia to force her enshrinement into the Grand Alliance.

"Not a large one," Catherine scorned. "How many heroes would even back you in an election, First Prince of the Chosen?"

A pregnant pause.

"Ten, fifteen?" she ventured.

The number was roughly accurate, in all likeliness. That the vast majority of these were Proceran was another bitter pill to swallow. It was a weakness, but one she had not had great opportunity to mend. Nearly all Chosen had been on the fronts, far from Salia, and private correspondence with any would justly

have been seen by the Highest Assembly as a political act. In a cut of irony, now that the heroes were nearly all in Salia it was even more complicated to approach any of them in private.

The perception that she intended to become Warden through a coup would have... grave consequences, she had grasped.

"Not even a third of the heroes, the very people you're supposed to lead," the Warden of the East said, shaking her head.

"I have not yet made my case to them," Cordelia said, maintaining an even tone. "I would prefer to make it from a stronger position, it is true, but do not mistake timing for inability."

"So confident they'll bend your way after a speech," the Warden chuckled. "How the Hells would you know if that'll work, Cordelia? You've spent years seething about heroes do wrong, but have you actually ever learned what makes them tick? Why do they act the way they do?"

A litany of variations on 'I believed it was right' and 'I followed instinct' had been her answer when she asked, usually.

"The reason is not as important as the result," Cordelia replied instead.

The Warden squinted at her.

"Is that you, Tariq?" she said, grinning nastily. "You're looking good, for a dead man."

The blue-eyed princess kept the twitch of fury the barb had caused away from her face, instead dismissing the rejoinder with a curt gesture.

"That the Grey Pilgrim committed atrocities does not mean his every act and word was wrong," Cordelia said, heat bleeding into her tone. "Only that he committed atrocities and was the kind of man who would."

Calm, she must be calm as the surface of a pond. Catherine thrived in chaos, in the heat of argument. Cordelia would win by keeping her head and grasping why this conversation seemed to have no end point.

"And that is my very point, Warden," she pressed. "Why Tariq Fleetfoot murdered a town full of innocents does not matter. His reasons, his reasoning, they do not matter: only that he did. I do not need to understand his every thought to condemn his actions."

Centering herself, smoothing away the last of the anger, she leaned into the opening.

"Besides, for all your harping on about understanding heroes how many of them agree on anything of note?" Cordelia continued. "You pretend there is some sort of common heroic mindset, but half of them would be at each other's throats without a greater threat looming over them. You reproach me the lack of something that, by and large, does not exist."

That rejoinder bought her a moment to think. *There is no gain for you through this conversation, Cordelia thought. Berating me into dropping my claim is a waste of time when you have half a dozen more direct tools to ensure I lose.* And she'd had the impression that Catherine favoured her claim, besides. Was this a favour, then, an attempt to help Cordelia sharpen her claim? It seemed unlikely. *So what is it that you are attempting to accomplish, Catherine?*

The Warden scoffed.

"Now you're being naïve," Catherine said. "Do you think Hanno is popular with heroes because he's pleasant and good with a sword? He understands what they want, knows what lines they'll fight him over, and navigates that terrain. You, on the other hand?"

Even in the faint red glow, the outline of a sneer could be seen.

"You're a diplomat who never learned the language of the other side of the table. You can get by, sure, but in every conversation how much do you miss?"

Which was not untrue in principle, she thought, but stood an empty objection in practice.

"Hypotheticals," Cordelia calmly replied, circling the throne as she spoke. "Generalities. You stick to those because there are no true examples to draw in, Catherine. Those that you could, you agreed with my answer. Sometimes even supported it."

The Warden of the East stood behind the throne, the princess before it, and she took back the cup she had left on the stone. The wine was still terrible, but to a parched throat it would be better than nothing.

"You have no practicals, Cordelia," Catherine harshly said. "That's the entire fucking point of what I'm saying: your record with heroes is line after line of nothings. It's not enough to avoid most mistakes. It's not something that lands in your lap if you're the least wrong, you have to *win* it."

She snorted, face disappearing as a stream of smoke spewed out.

"But here's a practical, since you like them so much," the Warden of the East said. "You want to be a leader of heroes, Cordelia,

when you know so little of them it would barely fill a thimble and most of them wouldn't trust you to empty a chamber pot."

Trust could be won. It was not an auspicious beginning, she would concede, but beginnings were what you made of them.

"But bad as that is," Catherine continued, "worse is that you never considered making the sacrifices that would have made up for your lack. You know who might have filled you in on namelore, done it eagerly even?"

The smiled turned sharp.

"Hanno of Arwad."

"A rival claimant," Cordelia replied. "This is nonsense."

"Would he be your rival right now, if you'd asked him a year ago?" Catherine retorted. "If you'd reached out after the Arsenal, tried to understand the heroes instead of sitting on your anger and pride?"

Yes, Cordelia's mind whispered, but she was not as certain as she would have liked. She was not without faults. If she were, the last words she had spoken to her uncle would not have been in anger.

"Much can be changed if one shuffles around the past," Cordelia said. "And regrets are easily found. Or are you still proud of your journey to Keter?"

"It was a fruitful disaster," the Warden easily replied.

Unashamed even now.

"You have known many of those," she mildly said. "From the Liesse Rebellion to the bloody end of the Dread Empire. Are you so certain you want to revisit old mistakes?"

She drank from the cup, more to wet her lips and win breathing room than to drink. *You are going to shrug it off again, Cordelia thought. Because this is not a match in your eyes, is it? You do not win by getting the better part of the argument.*

"We'd be here all night, but I'm game," the Warden laughed. "It's not my time that's running out."

The Lycaonese princess stilled in surprise.

"Now now, Cordelia," Catherine chided. "Surely you didn't think keeping me talking would delay the ritual, did you? It can keep going without my hand guiding it."

It made no sense, she angrily thought. If all that Catherine wanted was to consume the Book of Some Things, then there was no need for all this theatre. Cordelia was a valuable hostage, she could have been kept in a cell and left to rot. Instead she was here, circling an empty throne and talking with the person whose time was most valuable in all this affair. The Warden was getting something out of this conversation, otherwise she would not be having it, but Cordelia simply could not tell *what*.

"What happened to the Sword of Judgement when he came to the tower?" Cordelia asked.

"We had a pleasant talk," Catherine easily replied. "And he was tossed back out."

You cannot beat us through this, Cordelia thought. No, that was untrue. *In every way that matters you have already beaten us, so why is it that you are still playing?* Even if some feline impulse of cruelty had taken her, the Warden did not have the time to torment the defeated. It made no sense. Why would she keep playing a game she had already won? The princess drank the last of the wine, washed it down. And as she set it down hastily, almost dropping it, she froze. Remembered another time she had stood across a very dangerous woman and heard a cup topple down.

You kept playing a game, Cordelia thought, when you had not yet won. And simply because she was defeated, because Hanno of Arwad was defeated, did not mean Catherine Foundling had won. She found the Warden of the East's dark eye, glimmering red. *It was never us you were playing against, was it?* Her pulse thrummed, she straightened her back. She had found the thread, now she only needed to follow it down to the end.

"And how many sins did you hang around dear Hanno's neck?" Cordelia too lightly asked.

"Enough," she laughed. "You know, I actually think that all this enmity between you two goes back to a single moment."

"Do you now?"

The Warden breathed in deep, face veiled by the dark, and answered through a wreath of smoke.

"The first time you saw each other," Catherine said. "When he entered that Chamber, spun that coin and you caught it. You each thought you understood the other, for a moment. And you've paid the price for that ever since."

She ran a hand atop the back of the throne, as if amused.

"He thought he was looking at someone who was Good enough to be heroine," the Warden told her, "and so your every compromise since has been a disappointment. You, on the other hand?"

"By all means," Cordelia pleasantly smiled, "do deign to inform me of what I believe."

The one-eyed queen wagged a finger at her.

"You, Cordelia, saw that he respected your stepping in," the Warden of the East said. "And you thought that meant he respected law, respected how Procer is run. That made him the good hero, the trustworthy one."

Cordelia's belly clenched, for that had the faintest ring of truth to it.

"Only he didn't actually care for either of those things," Catherine said. "He accepted it as a courtesy, from Named to Named. Because the way you saw it, you might not have the power but you have the conviction – and that's the part that matters, anyway."

"You revisit the past so often one might believe you would rather live there," Cordelia sharply replied.

"It's an interesting night, that's all," the one-eyed queen said, elbow against the throne and chin on her hand. "Plenty there to ponder about. Like the way that you turned down a Name that night, Cordelia."

"It would not have made anything better," the princess replied, and meant every word.

"I don't entirely disagree," Catherine said. "It was a wise decision in some ways, but it also speaks to the one sin I'll hang around your neck that outweighs all of Hanno's: you don't actually *want* to be Named."

A sliver of incredulous laughter escaped her lips before she could smother it.

"Then pray tell, what exactly has all this been in the service of?" Cordelia said, gesturing at the night around them.

"Not wanting it," the Warden smiled. "You're doing it because you think it's your responsibility, your duty, but fight all you like under that flaking coat of paint I still see the same woman that was on the floor of the Highest Assembly that night."

Cordelia took a step back, jaw clenching.

"The one who snatched Judgement's verdict out of the air and swore mortal laws for mortal men."

"It is not that simple," she bit out.

"It never is," the Warden said. "And I think you're right about a lot of things, Cordelia. Heroes *should* have someone calling them to account. But it's not enough to be right. To be clever or to be wise. You also have to win it. Because know who else believes that just being right is enough?

She saw the end of that sentence before it came, but that did nothing to dull the sting.

"The same lot you say you're going to make toe the line."

"It is *not the same thing*," Cordelia snarled.

The calm, the calm failed her. How dare she?

"A Name isn't a crown," the Warden of the East said. "You don't just get to have it because it fits your head, Cordelia. And the way I see it, you're not Good enough to be anointed or strong enough to be a tyrant so what's left? *Inheritance?*"

The one-eyed queen leaned closer, as if to whisper a confidence.

"Whose death is going to give you your power this time, Cordelia?" she gently asked. "Even if you spend the Augur down to the last inch, you'll run out of kin long before you stand my equal."

And as the words slid between her ribs like a knife, the cruelty of it opened her eye. It was not an accident, so barbed a phrase. And yet it won nothing. *So the cruelty is the point.* The Warden of the East had come for her certainties, her belief, with methodical brutality. One after another, sparing nothing. *And that is the point. That is what you gain.*

Inflicting that before she was tossed out of the tower to land at Hanno's side in the grass.

"Are you truly so eager," Cordelia Hasenbach quietly said, "to make yourself the villain?"

"It's habit by now," Catherine Foundling confessed, sounding just a touch too grieved to be lying. "But there's power in it, always has been. So ask yourself, Cordelia, before you make yourself into a heroine" what is that you want that power for?"

She rose as she spoke, hand knocking over the cup that had been left there, and as Cordelia saw it tumbling down she felt a whisper.

Darkness.

She woke up in the grass, a man standing over her. Cordelia Hasenbach met Hanno of Arwad's eyes and a long moment passed.

"Rough night?" the Sword of Judgement drily asked.

TRUELIKEtheRIVER

oh boy it's gonna go down

Linnus42

I really don't think Cat went for the Jugular here. She could have brought up Cordelia launching the Crusade and refusing to cut a deal with Cat because Cat was a lowborn warlord. Cordelia bothers to cut a deal and Cat probably never goes after DK or the Drow.

Gabe Meadow

Because it's completely irrelevant here? The only things that matter relate to Cordelia's suitability or lack thereof to be Warden of the West.

Soronel Haetir

I would say even Cordelia's behavior immediately prior to being captured speaks to her unsuitability. She was facing an impossible position and her instinct was 'retreat' rather than 'bull my way through'.

[*Liliet*](#)

That would be because unlike you, Catherine actually follows Cordelia's logic there.

concerned

Time after time, I see a rude comment and look at the name to see "Liliet" above the rudeness.

You know you can just be pleasant instead of a jerk?

[*Liliet*](#)

I generally try to, actually. What was the previous time?

[*milieu*](#)

Not concerned, but responded below

[Liliet](#)

Thank you. I mean I argue but I do appreciate the fact of response to this request. Feedback is useful 0.0

Miles

That's why you look at the name regardless of your opinions about what they said, so you don't come away with such a twisted perspective on a person.

Zggt

And also took a page from the Tyrant playbook (hence the eye motif), only in reverse. The Tyrant looked for an enemy so grand that the Gods would make him their equal (and settled on the Bard for the ability to get at a Choir). Cat is doing the opposite, she's dragging Cordelia and Hanno to her metaphorical level by making them confront her... Now they can group up and have the ability to draw against her in the next confrontation, as she is done with the first part of that plan.

[Liliet](#)

the Tyrant was looking to entertain Gods, not have them make him their equal...

Xinci

No real difference really. To entertain the conflicting methodologies must have given unique points for the given interaction, just like theatre honestly.

Ciara

Singular they, referring to the enemies he was looking for

[Liliet](#)

oh ok

gingerlygrump

Being autistic doesn't mean you get to be mean to other people without apologizing.

gingerlygrump

Ugh and I meant to leave that comment on another chain



ninegardens

Trying to become his enemies equal, not the gods.

Also: How do we think young Kairos would fare at the moment, in this weird, post-story world for Villians? Would he adapt instantly, or end up as a fish out of water?

My instinct is that he'd pull back and batton down the hatches initially, once he realized he no longer had certain stories on his side... and then he'd flip to the reverse and happily play into the stories that were *meant* to punish him... not for any tangible gain, but just because he could.

[Liliet](#)

Yesssss.

Miles

I'm pretty sure he'd die instantly. His Name was keeping him alive.

Actually... do villains age now? I'm pretty sure the age stasis was a story thing but I guess this was never confirmed. 😊😊😊😞😞😞

jamesc9

Age stasis was indirectly confirmed when Amadeus lost a name and started ageing.

[milieu](#)

I wasn't party to the conversation above on rudeness, but I do agree with the impression that other commenter had put forth.

I would consider this message as an example of another time. Your tone in this post assumes others are addled in the brain, which is a rude assertion.

[Liliet](#)

It... doesn't? I have talked to a great many people in this fandom who don't remmeber specifics of earlier events. The Tyrant plot was in Book 5. I do not think that people hypothetically misremembering what it was about makes them "addled in the brain".

(Being autistic can be described as doing that, though, and I am, so there's that.)

Cpt. Obvious

You are probably the most prolific contributor of comments to the discussions about the Guide here on wp. At least yours is the name that stands out to me.

Something I've learned over the years is that if you post a lot of your thoughts and feelings anywhere where they will be read you will also end up making some posts that not necessarily shine a pleasant light on your name.

Sometimes it's a failure to "read the room". What was meant to be a light hearted comment comes off as rude crude and nasty.

Sometimes you were in a bad mood, or trying to hammer down a point and forget that's there's a person on the other side of the argument. And sometimes you might just feel justified in slapping someone down a peg or two, which is usually a really bad idea.

There's also times when you learn to know someone through numerous and long discussions. Sometimes that can lead to jokes and comments that to someone who comes into the discussion without prior knowledge seems downright horrible.

And then there's the simple mistakes. A dropped letter or word can sometimes make a huge difference in how a post reads.

My point is that if you make a thousand posts and ten of those end up sounding nasty, then those ten is what a lot of people are going to remember.

I know that generally I don't look all that much on the name of the poster unless I'm either very impressed by a certain post, or I look because I wonder who it was that were that toxic.

So don't let the occasional comment bear too heavy on your mind. But if you start to hear similar things regularly then you might want to take a step back and see if what you posted matches what you want to be remembered for.

AbraKadabra

Some of these commenters are really addled in the brain. Just saying.

Cicero

Not so sure of that. Cordelia might have responded to that by confessing she was wrong and had erred, and that wouldn't

give the result that Cat wanted. For both her and Hanno to be shaken in their securities and then for them to talk.

Flameburst

No, because the error she would be admitting to would be that of a ruler, not a named. It wouldn't impact her claim at all.

stevenneiman

The point was that she was attacking both of them for things which would make them bad Wardens. While consolidating her power with a war of aggression was unreasonable, I don't think it was really a mark against her as a Warden claimant specifically. I suspect that her goal is something like splitting the Name, and so she's focusing on failings the other could have warned each of them away from. And say what you will about it's reasonableness, one thing that the tenth crusade was not was a mistake Hanno would have warned Cordelia away from if they'd been listening to each other.

Salt

Hanno definitely wouldn't have supported the Tenth Crusade lol. He probably would've actively turned to violence to stop it, if he'd been there at the time.

Can't really characterize him as someone who'd support morally ambiguous compromises like the Crusade, when one Cordelia's major problems with him in the first place is his complete and utter refusal to make morally ambiguous compromises, even when she believes them absolutely necessary. Even the Choir he served was basically the mirror opposite of Mercy – Judgement is all about "is it Just", as opposed to Mercy's "does it minimize suffering despite being Unjust".

It's kind of what happened at the Arsenal too – Cordelia believed the only way to resolve the problem was to put the Red Axe under a Proceran trial, at which point he just brick-walled her and told her to figure out another solution. It's not Just or Lawful, it's against the spirit of what was agreed upon in the T&T, therefore not happening regardless what anyone says about it being necessary.

Salt

Actually wait, maybe I'm wrong, I don't remember that part of the timeline that well. He hadn't personally met Catherine back then, just Black? He probably would've been OK with it even if he knew why Cordelia was starting it

Gorbox

He fought for the Crusade, but i don't think he would have agreed with the reasoning behind it, as Cordelia started the tenth Crusade because she saw it as the only way to keep Procer from falling back into civil war, and to unite the "Good" nations and make an alliance with the Dominion. Not for a holy reason, or for Justice.

Two dozen snakes

You keep looking at Cordelia and Hanno through the lens of what they did and what they believe in, and not through their suitability to the role of Warden of the West. Hanno fails because he's too uncompromising, because he believes that being a hero automatically means being right, all the time, on everything. Cordelia fails because she doesn't understand what it means to be a heroine. Their points of failure are very different, and Cat is doing this in the hope that one of them will grow from it into the right fit for Warden of the West. She's not going after them personally, she's going after what makes them unfit for the role

Nairne .01

That is also not entirely true.

Hanno doesn't believe being a hero means the individual is always right. He believes that those meaning good but in the wrong should be guided so they don't make the same mistakes again.

Abrakadabra

Only he Just does not make them behave. Cordelia do not want to lead the heroes, she want to constrain them, Hanno do not want to lead the heroes either he Just want to free them to do whatever they want. One of them looks at the heroes as lawyer WHO is against them, the other like a lawyer which is with them, but none of them is really them. One is judging them too harshly the other does not judge them at all.

[sengachi](#)

The Venn diagram of "things Cordelia has does which put her on Cat's bad side" and "Cordelia's disqualifying traits for the Name Warden of the West" are not a circle, and in fact do not overlap in many places.

Abrakadabra

False. Cordelia did not make peace because she was too Good for that. Later when she realized she has no choice she made peace which makes her not Good enough to be Named.

AbraKadabra

Now I am totally sure there will be two warden of the west. Cords is like a prosecutor for heroes, while Hanno is their lawyer. There NEEDS to be two of them to judge the heroes fairly, otherwise it all comes down to personal preference. Cordy would be too harsh on heroes, Hanno would be too lenient. They need each other. They need each other on so many levels. One understands heroes the other understands governing and politics.

The two can make a balance. On the villains side there is no need for balance because might makes right. But on the hero side they desperately need it.

Tenthyr

I'm going to be honest, the fact it took her that long to realise Catherine was playing the Villian to demand the story summon a hero to match her is a bit embarrassing.

That Hanno didn't realise that until perhaps the end even more so. No wonder Catherine was enjoying that as much as it stressed her.

Linnus42

Hanno realized Cat was playing a game from the start. That is why he is trying to talk down every single Villain when he could just smash through them.

Tenthyr

No, he thought she was playing one game when she was playing another.

She wasn't trying to make Hanno better, or teach him a lesson, or strike him down so Cordelia could rise.

She was making herself the Villain, and the one thing Catherine kept hammering home that he didn't get is that the only person who can currently stop her is someone who is actually her equal.

Hanno didn't actually internalise until then that he wasn't Catherine's equal at all.

Linnus42

I mean the whole point of this is to make them better a game can have multiple levels.
Cat simply has contingencies.

dadycoool

Great, now I'm imagining Cat going into a Big Bad monolog, including "If no one worthy of the Book of Some Things can step forward, then I shall be forced to take it into myself," and right before she says that, Bard opens her mouth, unmuting the Below stories and placing a trap right where Cat's about to step, making Cat the new Wandering Bard or some equivalent, finally releasing Bard and imprisoning Cat forever.

Sinead

That's why Akua's lounging around in the shadows with a knife.

It's only a theory, but Akua has been compared to Hierophant before. And I could totally see Maseago consulting with Akua to refine his anti Wandering schema.

Longshot theory, but I think having Bard (who has called Maseago popping out of the woodwork twice to be boring) getting surprised stabbed by Akua (who no one planned for) would be great.

dadycool

Well, I was thinking less a matter of Bard actually making a move and more her releasing the grip she has, which would have an immediate, widespread, and unstoppable effect, including punishing grandstanding Villains. The current "No consequences" thing is probably the only reason why Cat's tower is still standing.

Oh gods ever burning, she's just tossed two people off that precipice. As she was developing her Name, there was a significant precipice, significant enough I was 100% convinced she'd get tossed off one to trigger her Name. Now I'm kinda scared for next week, though I'm probably as widely off-base as normal.

caoimhinh

I wonder if Bard slowing down Below's stories (since she didn't kill them, just stopped them from working for now) isn't what's gonna end up screwing the Dead King for good.

I mean, the moment he felt that the constraint was gone, he abused the shit out of that bug right away and used dozens of Demons and attacked without any regard for what a narrative mistake that would be in normal circumstances (again showing that despite what they say about the undead, he can indeed learn and adapt, as he

jumped at that opportunity casting aside the pattern of behavior he had been practicing for his whole existence which spans millennia).

Is it going to be like someone finding out that gravity has started to behave weirdly, and thus starts juggling with lots of heavy objects over his head, only to be brutally crushed by those the moment gravity starts working normally again?

[boballab](#)

I was thinking that too. What if there is a karmic storyline backlash type of thing when the rules go back into effect?

[Liliet](#)

I'm at least half certain that was the point of all the song and dance Bard arranged in Ater. She sure as hell wasn't seriously going after Catherine's life, so what's left? Well, this, for one, lines up well with what I had been again half sure (and Catherine has been revealed to agree with a lot of premises for that) was her game in Book 5. Baiting DK into overextending.

Sinead

To be honest, if this comes down to yet another 'Cat fucks up', I'm gonna be pissed. What is this, Book 6?

But really, having a statement in a world run by narrative of 'The Bard cannot really interfere for the next 5 days (or what ever the timeframe is) and just have her cosmically slap down Cat because even when the cosmic rules of 'villains get their comeuppance' is turned off, the story makes sure that it still catches Cat going and coming back?!

I'm hoping that we either see Hanno and Cordelia do a united front against Cat and 'stop' Cat, or that if Cat eats the Book, she then is able to balance the scale with the villain stories for whoever is WotW.

medailyfun

is Cat developing *Toss* Aspect?

Sykomantis

I'd wager ****Topple**** might fit better

[boballab](#)

Oooh that's right villains are not tied to story right now and Hanno tried to use the lone hero storming the castle trope after his helpers got picked off, then tried the monologuing villain trope after being caught never once thinking it through. He automatically assumed that the traditional uncompromising hero storyline would work...then it didn't. No wonder of the two getting tossed out Hanno seemed the most shaken, Cordy didn't have her core foundation broken as bad as Hanno. The end line is showing how resilient mentally Hanno can be, Tariq would be proud of him right now. It is a shame Tariq got stuck with the Mirror Knight and wasn't able to tutor Hanno, Hanno would have been a much better student for him. Then again thankfully Saint isn't around anymore to influence people like the Mirror Knight.

[Liliet](#)

Tariq got Christophe after TWO YEARS of war. Hanno could have gotten his tutoring if he wanted, but noooo, he has Recall and already knows everything he needs, right?

Insanenoodlyguy

Actually you got me thinking Akua is going to take the book. She was a villian. Then she liked acting the hero. Then she started pretending to be redeemed. Then she started actually repenting. Then she rejected everything she once wanted. Even Hakram said Akua always stood across from Cat in a way he wanted. What if it's about to become a thing? It makes no goddamn sense of you actually stop to think about it but maybe that's why it works when somehow Akua of all people snows up to storm the tower rallying the others in a big damn heroes moment to stop it at the last second. Then she becomes the Warden, punches Cat in the face hard enough to loosen a tooth and then kisses her hard. Or maybe those last two in reverse.

[milieu](#)

This is such a fairytale ending that is so "it can't possibly end that straightforward and well right??" that I am starting to have hope it might 😊

[Barthumphries](#)

Yeah, that could work. Akua completes her heel-face turn and spends the rest of her life as a Hero trying to atone for her prior mistakes. The Repentant Shade or something like that.

Miles

Bard: Tell me what you have

Akua: A KNIFE!

Bard: NO!

Linnus42

Compromise seems likely that political marriage crack theory seems less insane lol.

Gabe Meadow

These two will have an interesting talk. And I suppose what happened in Occidental II and here are each fitting.

Cat deals with Hanno, the man of principle, with a principled argument.

Cat deals with Cordelia, the Prince of pragmatism, with a pragmatic argument.

ninegardens

Always gotta argue with people based on **their** ideals. Otherwise what's the point? Otherwise, all you got is power and authority.

[sengachi](#)

Which, to be fair, Catherine also has **plenty** of right now.

shikkarasu

When you have X, no matter what X is or how much of it you have, don't let it be described as *mere* X. That's when the hubris catches up.

Albert Wen

Are you ninestrings? If so, why did you delete your Reddit account?

ninegardens

I am not nineStrings, and thus can not answer as to why nineStringes deleated their reddit account. Perhaps the gnomes got to them?

Albert Wen

Someone suggested Demon of Absence on Reddit. It's quite sad, he wrote all sorts of masterpieces, such as:

"Cordelia: I know we've barely spoken, or expressed even the smallest piece of attraction to each other in any context but being emotionally ransacked, beaten, restrained and thrown out of a tower has me in an incredibly romantic mood.

Hanno: Truly proximity, mild dislike and recent shared trauma shall be the rock upon which we build this relationship. Let us make sweet love here in the grass while our coworkers and friends are crippled just metres away, and Cat absorbs an energy field larger than her head."

ninegardens

That sounds horrifying.

It also sounds like how sexual attraction works for some people, which tbh is even more horrifying.

Thanks, I hate it.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

There are more than a few "hero stories". The Book of Some Things is no mere trade paperback. There are at least three dozen "heroes journey" stories I can shake a stick at without any references to tropes.com. And Anti-hero counts as Hero here.

The Book of Some Things is at least a large reference hardback book, and 9 inch (23 cm) by 12 inch (30+ cm) (small reference book size cover) is bigger in at least two dimensions than my head.

Cat is not a 6'4" (1.95m) tall male, she's a short-ish female human. My head is bigger than hers, tho that assumes Callowan heads aren't much bigger than average humans.

Metalshop

Hell yes.

Reader in the Night

It felt like Cat was considerably gentler with Cordelia than she was with Hanno. I suppose a part of it is the way the First Prince's brain works, she's a woman of Goals while Hanno runs on Principles. For Hanno, Cat had to point out the flaw in his Principles and he pretty much folded by himself, while for Cordelia, she had to show her that her Goals could not be achieved by her current means.

But still. Hanno's felt like "you are wrong and you don't have the power to oppose me", while Cordelia's felt like "you're

right, but you don't have the power to make it stick". I expected Cat would be very even-handed on this, but it still feels like she favors Cordelia.

Linnus42

Preach, No Lie Detected. Espeically when you consider Cordelia has screwed Callow over more then once by bank rolling Akua's Liesse Project to refusing to ever cut a deal with Cat because she was an upstart lowborn warlord Villain but she gets the kid gloves here.

Snappy270

I partly agree but there also another point here. I think both cordy and cat have moved past that point (the crusades ect), they have began to under stand each other. Remember cat was also willing to sell a principality to the dead king with is a terrible fate.

Cats current anger at cordy is quite new. She wanted cordy to win, but even she admit cordy would be bad at it. And is disappointed that the pissing match is happening now. Hanno on the other side is getting her anger against all heros not just Hanno, which has always been building up.

So i can see why she would be more savage with him.

shikkarasu

I think she used the right tools for the right job. The bigger part is that Hanno was hit by a personal hypocrisy, the fact that he is used to being the Bigger Man in any conversation. Normally he is, but right now? He just had violence. He has become what he hates.

Cordelia was just shown that she doubled down on a losing hand. It hurts, especially with the jabs about her family dying along the way, but it wasn't the same personal attack on everything she was. Not because Cat doesn't want to hurt Cordelia, but because the same opportunity wasn't there and wouldn't have been directly necessary.

....Also Cordelia is not as defenestration-proof as Hanno.

ninegardens

She is giving them the "High stakes conversation" that each is suited to. Cordelia is **trained** to know how to be a political prisoner, and Hanno knows the schtick with a Hero hanging over a pit. In some sense, for all the "pain" Hanno went through, she was in some sense making him Comfortable, by playing the part of a familiar story.

And for both of them she said "By ignoring each other, you are betraying your own principles" – Hanno was ignoring a fellow hero, and Cordelia was ignoring a potential ally, a chance to learn.

masterofbones

I think its a sign of respect for Hanno. She lays out the problems clearly and simply for him, because she knows he can take it. Cordelia is devastated by a much lighter touch, and wouldn't have been able to handle the harsher treatment Hanno got. He's used to heroes pointing out the moment they see someone do wrong. She's used to yes-men saying that shes perfect and incapable of making a mistake(right up until they stab her in the back).

ohJohN

Ah yes, nothing gentler than preying on Cordelia's deep-rooted shame and guilt about relying on her favorite cousin (and last surviving relative she's close with) in a way that eats away at her sanity, just to twist the knife.

masterofbones

In comparison to what Hanno got? Yeah a little bit of guilt tripping is a soft touch

flashburn283

So, who is she waiting for to take up the mantle, or is this once again to fuck with the Bard?

Gabe Meadow

There is a little bit of that.

"The princess drank the last of the wine, washed it down. And as she set it down hastily, almost dropping it, she froze. Remembered another time she had stood across a very dangerous woman and heard a cup topple down. (...) You kept playing a game, Cordelia thought, when you had not yet won. And simply because she was defeated, because Hanno of Arwad was defeated, did not mean Catherine Foundling had won. She found the Warden of the East's dark eye, glimmering red. It was never us you were playing against, was it?"

The last time is obviously a callback to Fatalism III where the Bard was implied to be meeting with the Saint and dropped the cup – all just before Cordelia entered the room. And the Bard's the one who set up Cordelia and Hanno to be at loggerheads like this.

Intercessor's gotta come out of the woodwork lest Cat ruin her work here, and Cat's waiting for that.

MrRigger

And if the Intercessor comes out to talk, she's not concentrating on blocking Below's stories anymore. Which means the Dead King's suddenly a Villain overreaching.

Reader in the Night

I think Cat might be pushing for this, really. Looking at it in a bigger picture sort of frame, the entire War on Keter is still part of the Game of the Gods, so the Bard can afford to let it happen.

But Cat's threatening to *eat* part of the Rulebook of the Game, while making a huge production of the fact that no-one can stop her now, and the Intercessor is still the referee before she is anything else.

I think Bard will be forced to stop holding back Below's stories even if she knows it's a trap just so Cat can lose here, because you *know* that if Cat eats that Book then Above is never getting their stories back.

Catherine might genuinely be attempting to bully the Choirs into bullying the Intercessor into releasing the stories.

Miles

You know... I think the reason Cat can keep the ritual going is because she's not the one actually eating the book. MASEGO is! She's just the distraction.

Or maybe it's enough for him to witness it being eaten. Either way, I bet the reason we haven't seen him since the beginning is that he's about to get a much needed power boost.

[Barthumphries](#)

I think you're right. But it's not Masego eating the book. He is far too pragmatic and uncaring to ever be a hero. But as someone else pointed out earlier, Akua, who we already know is present...

caoimhinh

She leans on Cordelia's side because of her own personal reasons, as Catherine believes Cordelia would back her more in the plans she has planned such as the Liesse Accords and Cardinal, even though Catherine knows that objectively Hanno is

the best choice but he would be more dangerous than Cordelia because while Cordelia may haggle her for every single thing she would still bend in the end, while Hanno would agree on most things yet have lines that he won't cross, and thus whenever he chooses to draw the line he will fight to the death. Or at least that's what Catherine believes.

As of now, it seems like Cat's strategy is twofold:

- A) Making each of them realize their mistakes and what they lack, and thus no matter who wins, they will have a bit of the other and be less of an extreme case than before this night.
- B) Catherine is still trying to find what the scheme of the Bard is, and how to foil it. All she knows is that leaving these two to their devices would have been a mistake.

At least she knows that this conflict between Hanno and Cordelia will not be of benefit anyone, so she must make it so they can compete without turning it into a division in the Grand Alliance, as this is not the time to be divided, since they are soon to make the final campaign in the war against Keter.

burlindw

I think that, even now, she's still avoiding backing either of them. One of the complaints that she leveled to both of them was a lack of sacrifice for the role. My guess is that she taking each of them apart to see which one puts themselves back together better. Whoever wins that will have more weight to their claim by virtue of actually overcoming a personal struggle to reach it.

RoflCat

More like it's the same with the Tower again, where to compromise is to lose.

She CAN'T back either of them as they are now, since to recognize/favor one as Warden would imply they in that state is her equal.

And between them getting some kind of revelation to grow into her equal versus her own Warden Name weakens down to their level? Pretty high chance the latter will happen if she go with that.

But the two were prideful, stubborn people who refuse to grow, so Catherine decide it's time for villainous intervention to push them out of their comfort zone to force the necessary growth.

And if all else fail I still think she would just eat the damn book and become Warden of Calernia.

Insanenoodlyguy

I now float the theory that Cat gets a “let’s face it, you only have ever had one equal” and turns to find Akua eating the book.

Frivolous

Seems quite possible yes. Akua would be completely out of left field, but Catherine does respect her as an equal.

Importantly, Akua is also not beholden to Catherine apart from the whole guilt thing. And she definitely has the chops to be Warden of the West. She’s a genius and a charmer par excellence.

She does have the whole Doom of Liesse and Diabolist thing hanging over her head and making heroes hate her, but repentance is a hero thing, though usually the repentant hero doesn’t have a past quite so vile and mass murderous.

[Barthumphries](#)

Except Cat just had a “you only see Akua as your equal” from Hakram.

MoreBeer

The big problem with Akua is no one would trust or follow her. Not heroes, not nations (of the West anyways). The heroes would see her as a card carrying villain, the nations an enemy, and the whole thing will be called a plot to make Cat ruler of Calernia. As satisfying as it might be for her to become a hero, she’d never be accepted as a leader of them.

shikkarasu

I didn’t get this until reading the comments section today, but I don’t think Cat cares. She set up a situation that only the Warden of the West can resolve: The WotE about to fundamentally change the struggles of all heroes forever (bc there would always be a Villain with Bard-level foresight into their plans) and all the non-Wardens are failing to climb the Tower in time. She has created a Story that *demands* the best candidate in Creation show up and stop her, and if they don’t? Cat gets to sift through the Heroic Stories to track down the Warden she likes best, assuming one exists.

It’s just so elegant.

ninegardens

For all his conviction and such, and all that Cordelia is "wiser" etc etc....

She is just way less good at listening than Hanno. At least, this time, that's what this looked like.

Too busy playing the game, trying to find the angle, trying "understand", but in doing so, ignoring what is actually being said and not actually asking (or, she did "ask", but as part of the game).

And the weird part is.... for all that Cat threw her certainties in her face, tried to hurt her.... It was also one hell of a compliment:

"The reason you can't be warden is because you believe in something. Mortal laws for mortal men." – Cat *respects* her for that... it just makes her a poor fit for the job.

Reader in the Night

Sure, but I argue that her having mad respect for Cordy (and props where props is due, the Lady deserves it) shouldn't actually have influenced the way the conversation needed to go:

The reason Catherine respects is because she would be awful at the job, and Catherine should have made sure to hammer that home. In some parts, it looks weirdly like Cordelia *understood* the insult, but.

How is "mortal laws for mortal men" actually an indictment of Cordelia?

Two dozen snakes

>How is "mortal laws for mortal men" actually an indictment of Cordelia?

How is it not? She's trying to become the Warden of the West here! She can't keep thinking of heroes as subjects, as if she'd just trade the office of ruler of procer for that of ruler of heroes. The Warden of the West can only be a ruler of heroes if they have the martial might to enforce it

shikkarasu

Because Heroes are barely mortal. They don't outlive regular people, but they stand next to gods until the day they die. You don't just show up with a fancy hat and say 'change in management, folks'. That will get you laughed out of the room, or politely escorted somewhere lacking sharp edges on the furniture.

Juff

Typo Thread:

kind vintage > kind of vintage
was half-empty > was a half-empty
do way > do away
in our talks. > in our talks."
down it down > it down
except people > except the people
off cloak > off, the cloak
wereyou > were you
your away > your way
heroes do wrong > heroes doing wrong
me the lack > me for the lack
heroine" > heroine

[pirateddesigns](#)

>>"It's habit by now," Catherine Foundling confessed, sounding just a touch too grieved to be lying. "But there's power in it, always has been. So ask yourself, Cordelia, before you make yourself into a heroine" what is that you want that power for?"

Should be:

"It's habit by now," Catherine Foundling confessed, sounding just a touch too aggrieved to be lying. "But there's power in it, always has been. So ask yourself, Cordelia, before you make yourself into a heroine: what is it that you want that power for?"

Xinci

Nah, grieved is right since she isn't indicating feeling insulted, she is noting melancholy over what she has done.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah grieved is definitely right.

caoimhinh

Hanno be like:

"Hey, you. You're finally awake. You were trying to stop the Warden, right?

Walked right into that Night ambush. Same as us, and Painted Knife over there."

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Vivienne, popping out of nowhere for meme purposes: "Damn you claimants. Calernia was fine before you came along! Keter was nice and lazy."

Hanno: "We're all brothers and sisters in binds now, Thief."

nimelennar

Princess.

RoflCat

Which means the appropriate response would be.

Excuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuse me, princess.

Frivolous

Question: Why did Catherine wince here, if she did?

Quote from above:

"Indeed," Cordelia confirmed. "I imagine that your plans for the Book of Some Things are nearing their end, which invites urgency in our talks.

For a moment she thought she saw the other woman wince at the mention of the artefact, but it might have been a trick of the light. A single fleck of red cast just as many shadows as it did their opposite.

ruduen

I imagine she's going to flinch anytime someone else mentions the Book by the full name.

It probably takes her effort to not groan every time.

Dsce12

Pretty sure that she cringed at the name of the book

[Sugar Roll](#)

That's because Catherine knows the true name of the book is Disney.

sidehammer056302

Someone help me out, just so I'm clear. Hanno's unworthy because he lacks perspective and governing experience. And Cordelia's unworthy because she too lacks perspective, this time of the heroes side, and because she doesn't actually want the Name?

Also, Cat just casually tossing heroes of the tower and breaking limbs? XD Fucking love that!

caoimhinh

Hmm, I think there are quite a few ways to see it, different readers might provide a different perspective.

The way I see it, it's not that Hanno is unworthy, so much as it's that claim causes problems. His success would create a political mess in Procer (to be fair, *everything* is a political mess for Procer's Highest Assembly), plus Catherine is leery about having him as Warden of West because she feels that he will fight her to the death the moment there is a serious disagreement even if he would be cooperative in almost everything, while she thinks Cordelia can be made to bend even if she would have to haggle for every single thing. On paper, Hanno is the best choice, but due to realpolitik (as in, Proceran Political Bullshit), there are several issues that would arise from it, like that Princess that wants to deliver her crown to Hanno.

Cordelia is unworthy because she is letting her own bias and resentment blind her to the hypocrisy of her position. How she puts Proceran nobles' benefit above everything (she is constantly worried about setting precedents that might threaten the Princes' privileges), and then coats it on higher obedience to the law. She is a politician, not a hero. She is a ruler, not a leader.

Cordelia doesn't really want to be Named, she just thinks that's what will let her do what she wants, she sees it as her duty, but she really does not believe that Named should have such authority, and that is a contradiction when she is trying to become a Named of authority over Named.

Thing is, Hanno wants to be a guide for the Heroes, while Cordelia wants to be their First Prince and rule over them and judge them and punish them. Cordelia's claim becomes problematic because she wants to make her Role an inherently vindictive one, always eager to persecute them, and that kind of approach runs counter to what being a Hero is, and will only be perceived as tyranny by the Heroes, it's doomed to fail, so she needs to drop that kind of mentality if she wants to continue.

Evgeny Permyakov

Proceran politics is tertiary to Cat. The main Hanno's sin both in Cat's and Cordelia's eyes was his unwillingness to police the heroes. He was going to lead, teach and console them, and that's an entirely different thing. Wardens do not lead or teach, they supervise and enforce rules.

> Cordelia's claim becomes problematic because she wants to make her Role an inherently vindictive one, always eager to persecute them, and that kind of approach runs counter to what being a Hero is,

No it doesn't. A righteous vengeance and maintaining law&order is a perfect Hero thing.

caoimhinh

But she doesn't have a righteous vengeance, just grudges born out of her blaming other people for the messes of her own court.

Also, oppression and vindictive persecution are not the same as maintaining law and order. She is not saying "when one of them steps out of line, I will bring them to heel" she is saying "They are like that, and they need to be punished, and they need to be handled with an iron fist because otherwise they will not behave" which is a gross generalization, shows lack of understanding, and shows ill-intentions.

She isn't so much saying "I'm gonna fight crime" as saying "There is this group of people who are the ones who commit crimes, and I'm gonna go down on them."

Two completely different kinds of discourses.

Evgeny Permyakov

>But she doesn't have a righteous vengeance,

She personally doesn't. But she certainly can ride such a story.

> She is not saying "when one of them steps out of line, I will bring them to heel" she is saying "They are like that, and they need to be punished, and they need to be handled with an iron fist because otherwise they will not behave"

You are mixing opinion with public position.

Cordelia, having to deal with the shit Heroes regularly put on her plate, has every right to be mad at them. Cordelia, being a politician, is not stupid enough to think she can cancel Heroes. So, she is going for the next best thing: to regulate them. Whether she hates Heroes is irrelevant in this context, her being capable of fulfilling the Role and acting within it matters.

Salt

> her being capable of fulfilling the Role and acting within it matters.

Which is actually the problem, because as Catherine pointed out, she can't fulfill the Role. She doesn't have the competence and expertise to do so

Much the same way that Cordelia herself was pretty miffed at Hanno for touching the dwarven negotiations

with nonexistent diplomatic expertise, and Named for judging her as a ruler with nonexistent experience with rule, she's also the same when it comes to claiming the Name of Warden.

She's trying to fulfill the Role with absolutely no understanding of how Names or Roles work, has demonstrated a lack of interest in even attempting to find out (as Catherine pointed out, she had lots of chances and threw them all away), and is passing Judgement on half the Named on the continent with nonexistent experience with what being Named means.

Cordelia's story regarding her and Named is about as much "righteous vengeance", as the Lone Swordsman blindly criticizing Catherine without knowing anything about her was "righteous vengeance".

Evgeny Permyakov

>Which is actually the problem, because as Catherine pointed out, she can't fulfill the Role.

Yes, it is a problem, because

>She's trying to fulfill the Role with absolutely no understanding of how Names or Roles work,

This I don't disagree with.

>has demonstrated a lack of interest in even attempting to find out

This, on the other hand, is blatantly wrong. Cordelia do have an interest, because she needs it to accept the role, and uses Augur to work through it.

Salt

She's had her entire life to learn Namelore, including the five years since she started really getting into continental-scale conflicts with Named, and made a decision to start looking into it just recently while claiming the title of Warden.

That's like Hanno making a bid to be elected First Prince and recently doing some light reading on diplomacy to prepare for it, solely because he decided he wanted to be First Prince last week.

In both cases, it wouldn't make any sense to rely on such a shallow understanding of the subject to attempt fulfilling such an insanely critical role.

Relying so heavily on the Augur is actually more proof of her inexperience and lack of suitability than a point in her favor here. It's extremely basic Namelore that oracles are notoriously prone to failing or being unreliable at critical moments. That kind of basic mistake just cannot be made by a Named with half the authority of the Bard herself.

[*milieu*](#)

This thread is awesome for illustrating the depth of PGtE

Abrakadabra

Hanno actually did that though. He decided to become a ruler without preparation while cordy did the same, she wants to be named without preparation.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

>"There is this group of people who are the ones who commit crimes, and I'm gonna go down on them."

That's almost as lewd as that time Masego and Cat held hands. 😊

sidehammer056302

It's hard for me to see that the Name cares anything about politics, only power and the Role. If this was truly Cat's decision, I think she'd make it and be done with it, but that's not what she's doing. It's the Name's choice, and it finds both candidates wanting.

I appreciate you mentioning hypocrisy on Cordelia's part, that's a fine way to put it, but at the same time, I'm not sure having an overseer for good is a contradiction in terms, unless the Divine truly views Heroes as above question and all their actions as inherently Good. Which I don't think is the case, because they have things like anti-heroes and anti-villains, people change allegiances, so it's known that Good can lose its way. If Good can lose its way, couldn't that necessitate a Warden to keep them on track and dole out punishment? Does the Role care whether the intentions of the individual behind that function are purely noble so long as the function is fulfilled?

caoimhinh

Yep, what I meant is that there are political consequences no matter which one of them gets the Name in the end. The Name doesn't care about politics, but the claimant does,

especially Cordelia, since she is moved and restrained by political considerations.

The Role is a nascent one, so it is heavily influenced by who the first bearer of the Name is. While they both would fulfill the functions, they have different approaches to it.

It's not that having an overseer for Good is a bad thing, but there is a difference between a person who is ready to punish and a person who is eager to punish.

Hanno wants to guide Heroes and be there for what they need, as a guide and leader, not as a ruler or prosecutor. He has also proved that he can intervene and punish them if they lose their way, like he did with Mirror Knight. When the time comes to enforce a rule or law, Hanno will do it, but in every other instance, he will be there providing advice and guidance so that there doesn't need to be a punishment.

Cordelia wants to be like a First Prince who rules over them, to bind them to her mandate, and she is actively looking to punish them for what she perceives as their failure to adhere to the right way of things. Yet Heroes will never tolerate having a tyrant over them, a politician trying to control their actions and punish them for not following the bureaucracy.

And between Hanno and Cordelia, she is the one who has shown that she can bend her principles and righteousness due to politics, going back on her words and even keep an atrocity like the Crusade ongoing because it would have been personally inconvenient to stop it.

Evgeny Permyakov

>When the time comes to enforce a rule or law, Hanno will do it

Chapter 33 disagrees.

>If he believed a law unjust he would not follow it, and would not expect anyone in his place to do otherwise.

>"That is," Hanno of Arwad said, "what the Warden of the West must be. Not a king or a judge but the intercessor between necessity and faith. Neither leash nor lash, a guide to the lost and hand to faltering.

Linnus42

Not all Laws are good. Do you think he should enforce slavery because its the Law of some land?

If a Hero steps out of line Hanno will bring down the hammer to put them back in line.

Evgeny Permyakov

>Not all Laws are good.

Laws are not good or bad, they are not people. Laws are either practical or not. Impractical laws may be repelled, but until then they are to be enforced. That's exactly the point of having laws: to have a publicly codified universal code of conduct.

>If a Hero steps out of line Hanno will bring down the hammer to put them back in line.

You are actively ignoring what was written in the story.

Linnus42

Did you just really justify enforcing slavery?

Mirror Knight stepped out of line and Hanno brought him back into line.

Red Axe got executed.

Tariq, Cordelia never brought charges.

Saint died in the attempt.

So no i think its you who is not reading but what does one expect from a slavery SIMP.

Frivolous

Insulting someone in a comments section over an interpretation demonstrates poor character.

I don't see why anyone should bother to respond to you again. Not worth it.

Evgeny, condolences on the insult. Hope you are okay and can ignore it and the one who launched it. Reflects on them rather than on you.

Evgeny Permyakov

Yes, if a country has laws supporting slavery, and it has deep enough roots in culture and it makes sense economically, enforcing slavery laws might be a good idea for continual existence of said society.

If you are unhappy with such society, you should change it or destroy it outright. But selectively

ignoring some of its laws will make more harm than good.

And stop ignoring chapter 33 already.

Agent J

Well, he'll bring down a slap on the wrist at least. A lack of willingness to hammer is one of the main contentions with Hanno's candidacy.

caoimhinh

But the thing is, Chapter 33 is not from Hanno's perspective; that statement is just Catherine's impression. You cannot use Cat's opinion as if it were an absolutely correct thing.

Of course, there is a limit to what can be asked of him (or any person) through a rule or law. It's not like he will blindly obey if an abusive law is passed. Not even the common people do that, hence why there are protests, uprisings, revolutions, and amendments to laws and even constitutions.

Still, the point is that so far, between Hanno and Cordelia, he is the one that has stood by the agreements he signed, the promises he made, and enforced the rules he was charged to enforce. Sure, he is has a line that he won't cross, like anybody else, but that's a matter of principle and that point is not so easily reached, as we have seen that Hanno is one of the most reasonable people in the story, and he is always willing to listen to others.

Whereas Cordelia has bent to political demands, went back on signed agreement, started a Crusade for political ambitions and then kept it going because it was politically inconvenient for her to stop. She is not without morals nor is she malicious, but her good intentions can be bound and strangled by bureaucracy and politics. Which is not what anyone wants nor needs

Another difference is that Hanno has consistently shown that before going for punishment, he will try lots of different things and help people avoid needing to be punished.

Take his fight against Mirror Knight, for example. Before that point, Hanno talked with him and made arguments, while in his head he was constantly looking for a way to end things in such a way that he didn't have to kill Christophe. He was ready to do it, he didn't want to punish him in such a way, but would do it if Mirror Knight forced him. Hanno wasn't eager to dole

out punishment, and instead was conciliatory until the end, even if he was ready to do what was necessary, and thanks to his efforts he managed to reach a solution where none of the Heroes died.

Compare to Cordelia, who is eagerly desiring to punish the Heroes for the slights she perceives, and funnily enough in those examples the ones most responsible weren't the Heroes but rather the politics involved, and it's easy to see how she might be a superb Proceran politician, she is not fit to be a leader of Heroes.

Evgeny Permyakov

> You cannot use Cat's opinion as if it were an absolutely correct thing.

I totally can, because guess what, the situation is about *what Cat and Cordelia think about Hanno*. Besides, Cat's opinion is basically a summary of what Hanno told her.

>She is not without morals nor is she malicious, but her good intentions can be bound and strangled by bureaucracy and politics.

Which is exactly what is the point of the Wardens: to make Named less disastrous for everyday functioning of society of mortals, i.e. politics.

>Another difference is that Hanno has consistently shown that before going for punishment, he will try lots of different things and help people avoid needing to be punished.

Basically, you are telling that Hanno helps Heroes to avoid the rule of the law which is exactly the thing Cat and Cordelia want to quench. How does it make Hanno a good Warden? It makes him a Good Warden, but this isn't what Cordelia or Cat want.

sidehammer056302

"...there is a difference between a person who is ready to punish and a person who is eager to punish."

Is there, though? That's really what I'm wondering here. Objectively, yes, I agree, and once again I appreciate you boiling it down to the exact difference being "ready" and "eager" but in a story where Above and Below have painted Labels on everything in this vague cosmic game of theirs, I'm not too sure.

Nascent as the Name is, will it really care so long as the Role is carried out? Maybe it will, and Good will have a chance to surprise us, but I think it's been demonstrated enough that Good is just as ruthless as Evil when it comes to enacting its will.

caoimhinh

Hmm, I think there is indeed a difference.

Here we have two very capable people who have different opinions on what the new policy of the group should be, and while they both have the potential to fulfill their tasks, the attitude with which they are going to go at it will make a world of difference.

As it currently stands, there is no set Role for what the Warden of the West is or must do, so whatever they think must be the Role, will be the Role, at least to some degree.

Cordelia wants to police the Heroes because she thinks they are untouched and nobody has made them responsible of anything nor punished them for their mistakes and crimes. So she not only is looking forward to punish them, she already considers them guilty.

Hanno will be a leader and counselor, not a boss watching over their shoulders to make sure they are working properly. It's not as if Hanno wants to have a hands-off approach and let them do whatever they want, but he won't be after them all the time, only intervening when necessary. And yet when he does intervene, he will be ready to do what needs to be done, but will look for various alternatives first, like he did with Mirror Knight: Hanno knew that he might have to end up killing Christophe but still was conciliatory, calm, and reasonable, and though he was ready to kill Mirror Knight, he looked for a solution where he didn't have to.

Plus, Hanno did not hold grudges over his own wounds, instead choosing to dole out a punishment not aimed at hurting Christophe but towards making him a better person.

So yeah, their attitude and vision on what the Warden of the West must be like will make a big difference, since their way of doing things is different, their policies are different, and the duties they are going to set for themselves are different.

It's why two people occupying the same office are not the same, and the mandates of two presidents of a nation

can be so different (of course, there are a whole plethora of other factors, but you get the point).

sidehammer056302

Very well said. I just wonder if divinely; cosmically, their methods will matter. We don't hear much from Above or Below; I'd be interested to gain some more insight, maybe from the Bard or perhaps the Dead King someday? Above seems like all the bad stuff from standard Judeo-Christian deities and Below... haven't they been completely silent? I may be forgetting, but I think the closest we've gotten has been the Sisters, no? And they're not so bad. Hmm.

Anyway, this has been a fun discussion. Hope we have something to debate in the next chapter as well! 😊

AbraKadabra

Hanno is not a leader. He is an enabler. He do not judge...Cordy is not a leader, she is a punisher. She judges heroes too harshly. Non of them leading the heroes nor will they. Only together can they do the job.

Insanenoodlyguy

She's smashing coal together till she gets a diamond. It doesn't even matter which one becomes the diamond, only that one emerges. The point is she's the villian and no half hearted claimant is going to stop her. Only her true equal can. What finally does come up those stairs and does so will be, whoever that person is.

Vortex

Hanno if he becomes warden will let heroes run unrestrained, no matter the price to his allies or the war against Keter. He is perfectly willing to allow everyone else to suffer and choke and die so a hero can follow their convictions, even if that conviction leads to stabbing his allies in the back and shattering key treaties.

Cordelia simply lacks understanding of how to lead heroes, and as she currently is, elevating her role to warden in will be divisive and many heroes will not agree to it.

There are other considerations too. Cordelia is seen as a better peacetime leader while Hanno has lots of military achievements under his name. Cordelia is probably the better leader in the long run but Hanno's story weight might be desperately needed in the war.

jesdynf

"Before we begin, let's get one thing straight. We're still sure the Dead King's worse than her, right?"

"After tonight? Bit of a coin toss. I can stitch wounds, but the Light won't heal these burns. Can we just let her eat the Book and make her go to Keter and be personally hurtful to people who deserve it?"

"I won't say I'm not sympathetic, but who does that leave for Warden?"

"How badly do you want make her regret this exercise?"

And that's how Indrani, Warden of the West, helped save Calernia.

[Liliet](#)

Bless.

IDKWhoitis

Well, I'm not entirely surprised that Archer was somehow able to fight that many heroes with a little help, but I am deeply curious as to **how**. Probably a series of illusions and traps lanced with some downright unsporting cheating.

As for Cordy, it felt...long?

I do wonder how Hanno's night went after being tossed out. Was he just sitting there thinking, watching the sky, then suddenly snapped back into it as Kallia fell? I wonder how the following conversation is going to go. Will Cordy be beat down enough to relinquish the claim? Not that it would make Hanno the automatic winner by far, but between the two of them, I think Cordy got a worst thrashing of the pride and beliefs. It could also be Cordy does sit down and start going through Hanno's thought process (and maybe, just maybe learns to trust it a **little** more.)

I do think the Heroes are going to crash into the throne room, and I hope that's the next chapter. Although if they were thrown out the tower that would also make sense.

The last question I'm left pondering...Could the Tombmaker use the Mirror knight as a particularly dense blunt weapon on the other heroes? It certainly would complicate things for the heroes...

caoimhinh

Time has been working weirdly that whole night. Remember how a few chapters ago, Catherine sent the Heroes to Arcadia, and then *took three steps*, and received news about what they had already done in Arcadia?

But yeah, Hanno was probably just sitting there meditating about what Catherine told him. He is pretty prone to

introspection and reflection, given his constant practice of meditation since he became a White Knight.

Adrian V

Honestly is that trait of Hanno that makes me wanna see him as the warden, even now i think Hanno reflected a lot more than Cordelia, but the night still isn't finished so who knows who will learn more in the end.

Honestly if it wasn't because of weird name rules the obvious best choice for the title is the one capable of step aside for the sake of everyone else (since the crux of the conflict here is that the way they were fighting for it both would fail)

boballab

"Well, I'm not entirely surprised that Archer was somehow able to fight that many heroes with a little help, but I am deeply curious as to *how*. Probably a series of illusions and traps lanced with some downright unsporting cheating."

The answer was given by Hanno when he fought Indrani back in Occidental I by Hanno:

"She was good, but those instincts were- Hanno's eyes narrowed as he studied her once more. The ease she handled those two longknives with, the way they just seemed to fit. Those instincts were not an Archer's instincts. "You're becoming the Ranger," Hanno said."

I said it a while back and the story line has proven me right: The Ranger Name is OP. Indrani is a claimant to that name, and it was a clue about how Hanno needed to fit a new name, and she is changing to that Name, becoming less the Archer and fight more like Ranger and Ranger can fight that many opponents without illusions.

Liliet

Funny how I've seen the opinion Cat was harsher on Hanno than Cordelia, too.

Reader in the Night

I really feel like Cat went super-easy on Cordelia. Like, not punishing this ridiculously wrong claim:

>"What cannot be learned is the understanding of where heroes falter," she told the Warden, meeting the dark eye lit in red. "Where they step beyond the bounds of duty and do more harm than good."The insinuation that she only trusted through control was particularly rich, coming from the Black Queen. The same woman who had put a knife to the throat of every living being on Calernia to force her enshrinement into the Grand Alliance."You

have no practicals, Cordelia," Catherine harshly said. "That's the entire fucking point of what I'm saying: your record with heroes is line after line of nothings. It's not enough to avoid most mistakes. <

It's not a line of nothings, it's an actual line of mistakes and blunders. Mostly with Hanno, but Hanno genuinely represents Heroic interests. Cordelia's dislike of Heroes has influenced her every interaction with them, so most don't like her any more than she likes them.

Reader in the Night

GAH, WordPress mauled my post!

Reader in the Night

Well, nevermind. Before WordPress ate most of my post I was pointing out that Cordelia's claim that perspective cannot be learned is utter nonsense, as Cristophe clearly learned and Hanno is learning it right now.

Then I pointed out that Cordelia saying she's less Evil than the Warden of the Freaking East is an utterly idiotic argument, because she's gunning for the Role of Leader of Heroes, her standards need to be not only higher but flawless.

And thirdly, yeah, Cordy burning bridges.

Trupo

Cat giving relationship therapy to Hanno and Cordelia; now I saw everything.

Ten silvers say she's going to make them share the Name via marriage.

shikkarasu

10 Denarii says Warden of the West will stay one Name, but one or both of Hanno/Cordelia gain a Name focused on supporting the Warden not unlike Adjutant, Scribe, or Captain.

Insanenoodlyguy

They will both be great supports for Warden Akua. Meanwhile Vivienne face heel turns again and becomes the first Black Princess.

nimelennar

I don't think they can share a Name; a few chapters back, they said it's usually only siblings who can.

shikkarasu

Shush, I'm about to make 10 denarii off of this.

[boballab](#)

The word "usually" means that it is only most of the time not all of the time and does not bar a different type of pairing. So yes they can share a Name, but they would need to meet some type of condition...probably something like marriage. In most western style religious marriages and partly in secular marriages the official overseeing the ceremony will say something about 2 becoming 1 and EE could use that here.

RoflCat

If there isn't a precedent, BE one.

They are facing the person who literally is the first Warden of the East (among many other firsts in her list), that excuse of there being no precedent doesn't fly.

ohJohN

It's notable that this is from Cordy's POV, who (we're continuously reminded) is shit at namelore, and her conclusion is based on only the historical records available to her. Remember that Amadeus (with a very deep understanding of namelore and access to more & likely better historical records about Named) was surprised by Hanno's coin aspect, and the Bard remarked that type appeared rarely enough he probably wouldn't have heard of it.

This is an assumption Cordelia makes about the world based on the evidence at hand, not a True Fact Passed Down By The Gods.

ohJohN

This theory keeps cropping up, and I just straight up don't understand how them getting married would *help* anything.

My money's still on them sharing/splitting the Name, and it seems likely that next chapter will involve them reconciling at least a little. But what advantage would they gain by being married vs. just generally on good terms and willing to work together? It's equally unprecedented for non-siblings to share a Name whether they're married or not.

[Liliet](#)

You're missing the shipping point. This isn't about in-universe concerns.

ohJohN

Fair enough. There've been a few comments that seemed like they thought it made sense for plot reasons (the comment I replied to isn't particularly representative, it was just the final straw of 'wow people sure are talking about this marriage theory a lot??') and that probably colored my perception of the obvious shipposting ones 😊

Liliet

I mean, making serious plot-tying-together analysis about shitposting claims is half the fun of shitposting,

Michael J Mooney

Because of the story/statement it makes. Coming together in marriage is a unifying act that throughout history has been used to unite countries, armies, tribes, or even just families. So them getting married would act to unify their claims to be Warden.

ChillyPepper

I'm not sure why, but i feel like the argument blade cut towards Hanno a bit deeper than towards Cord. Perhaps different approaches for different people, a harsher approach for him and a more logical one for her.

It felt a bit softer on Cord's side (for me), and I feel a bit disappointed.

ohJohN

Hard disagree. Hanno was a lot more aggressive in his conversation and Cat responded in kind, but she primarily tore into him about his hypocrisy and arrogance, both warranted. Cordelia approached the conversation less confrontationally and so Cat was more superficially amiable, but she was still pretty brutal and bluntly laid out how Cordelia fucked up, wasn't her equal, etc. – even saying that not actually wanting the Name was *worse* than Hanno's deficiencies. (And was I the only one who read the comment Cat made about the Augur this chapter? That seemed way crueler than anything she said to Hanno.)

Sugar Roll

A sleeping princess and a white knight. The question is, did Hanno wake her up with a kiss?

shikkarasu

The only think I hate more than this trope is how hard I blushed when I read it. Take my ****ing upvote.

Frivolous

When Cordelia refers to Hanno as 'dear Hanno', that was so very Praesi. Very Malicia.

It might kill Cordelia if she were told that. And in truth, to defeat Malicia, or even to hold off Malicia in the political and economic wars she had been waging against her, Cordelia had to become just a little like Malicia.

Loonie

if this is all just a "now kiss" play by Catherine, this is the most awkward and stretched out build-up one could imagine.

warden of the East, matchmaker of the West?

[boballab](#)

Yeah that would be funny centuries down the road and there is a new Warden of the West finding one of his aspects being "Marriage of Wardens".

RoflCat

It's the villain mentor play imo, mainly for Cordelia and Hanno but she's still teaching the others too.

Like teaching the Artificer to not use explosion (of Light) when in confined spaces, or the Painted Knives in this chapter 'being quiet alone isn't enough to be sneaky'

The only exception is of course the Apprentice, cuz she's a gud girl.

Rynjin

Glad to see the serial itself backing up exactly what I've been saying for the last 4 chapters.

[laguz24](#)

I don't get the headcannon that Cordelia was unwilling to deal with cat because she was a lowborn villain. She's far too pragmatic for that. It was more because her internal political problems and her foreign allies in the grand alliance made it politically unfeasible. Plus she didn't have as much control over the 10th crusade as she pretended she did.

[boballab](#)

That was exactly the main part of the problem, where Hanno would never compromise the reverse was very true of Cordy especially back then. She would always look for the compromise and never take a stand and say "I am right and you will fall in line" something she would need as Warden of the East. Remember

even to get to this point in her claim she had to make a compromise with the other Princes of Procer in a secret meeting. That was the whole thrust of what Cat was saying, you can't compromise your way into a Name, you have to stand and seize it. Cat even warned her she would regret to bowing to that internal political compromise and she was right and we saw later on in the story there was ways for a First Prince to ram something through... she just wasn't willing to pay the price or make the sacrifice to achieve it which was something also Cat pointed out. She always had someone else pay the price or sacrifice for it thus the reason for Cat's dig about her running out of relatives.

[Liliet](#)

yeah that's One Guy who has the most interesting Cordelia takes
ohJohN

Same, I thought it was pretty explicit by this point that she couldn't budge on the crusade due to political necessity. Cat even notices after her 'look, despite being a villain I'm not a deranged cannibal, I want peace and will make VERY SIGNIFICANT concessions' speech, Cordelia seems to believe her and genuinely considers it but, maddeningly and inexplicably, still refuses.

Cordelia *underestimated* her for those reasons, but she was willing to do the monthly domain-meetings and pretty clearly had a reason beyond petty prejudice why she couldn't compromise.

beleester

Wow, even Cordelia is pointing out that this whole debate has been vague generalities.

Daniel E

I'd like to take a moment for us all to appreciate the fact that Cat is now frequently throwing Heroes off the top of an evil tower. Dread Empress Erroneous would be proud.

The Ignorant Student

THANK YOU!!! Finally! This is exactly what I hate about Cordelia, that she is probably the single most ignorant character when it comes to Names, that she actively hates them, and that her only motivation to become Warden is so that a Named doesn't get the title!

But anyway, I feel like part of the problem with both Hanno and Cordelia is that they both think the West Warden has to be the same as East Warden, when it really shouldn't be. Everyone agrees

Tariq would have been the perfect Warden, and when you look at him you see someone who was willing to do the hard things, but always did them himself. And when he could avoid violence he worked to do so. West Warden is less of an active role because Heroes don't need the same iron fist that Villains do. I see West Warden as something closer to Hierarch, they aren't an active ruler or leader, but push comes to shove and they will take down entire Choirs. East needs to show off and keep their boot to the neck of anyone thinking of acting up. West needs to leave Heroes to do their job and only step in when someone goes too far. Above and Below are different people with different perspectives and Roles, but Hanno and Cordelia both act like they have to be a mirror image of Cat.

[boballab](#)

I mostly agree with you but it isn't the fact that Cordy has problems with hero's that makes her a bad claimant, it is her tendency to always compromise and never take a stand and pay the price herself. If she tried to be the head of the hero's the way she led Procer it would be a disaster because the favor trading that she is used to wouldn't work. The classic example is the Mirror Knight situation, Cordy wouldn't pay the price of stopping him like Hanno did, she would try and find a compromise and when that failed (MK isn't known for being a compromising sort) have someone else do the dirty work. Cordy and Hanno have basically completely reversed problems being the Warden. Hanno never compromises first and Cordy always tries and compromise first, neither knows how to pick and choose, which was why Tariq would have been so good as Warden. Respected by both Named and un Named and knew when to bend and when not to. He had the years of experiences to get him to that point (as we saw in his backstory) something Hanno and Cordy both lack yet. It is why it would have been better if Tariq had mentored Hanno and not MK because learning when to bend is basically all Hanno needs to learn.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Tariq would have been a perfect WotW.

[ChillyPepper](#)

He would've been horrible, the only reason he became reasonable was because he was met with opposing and probably stronger force. Imagine if he was on the same scale.

Abnaxis

My prediction: Hanno and Cordelia will both abdicate, Cat will wind up eating the Book, and the principal alienation from absorbing all that power will fuck with her mind so much she'll wish she was the Sovereign of Moonless Nights again.

Insanenoodlyguy

She prepares for just that and then Akua eats the book

Someperson

Well, I dunno about the specifics, but I reckon I might see the thrust of this story.

Catherine is threatening all of the powers that stand behind Good. A little bit like when she got some angels to resurrect her way back when, only with higher stakes.

If her “villainous plan” succeeds, then the Book of Some Things gets devoured, and both of the Warden of the West claimants are fully discredited. Probably there is no Warden of the West. Possibly Catherine just becomes The Warden, period. The institution of Heroism itself might be shaken.

Only Catherine probably won’t succeed. I don’t think she plans on succeeding at eating the book (although win or lose she still gets the essentials of what she wants). She is making a credible threat that if nobody else can step up and do “Warden of the West” right, then *she will.*

And if the heroes and the gods and the angels and the heroic stories don’t like that, they’d better do something about it. They’d better fast-track having a worthy Warden *right now*, and not in five years.

BargleNawdleZouss

I still say this is all a cunning plan to get Cat another shot at the Wandering Bard/Intercessor. TBD!

superkeaton

Lovely.

[sengachi](#)

I’ve been thinking more about what Cat was criticizing of Cordelia in this most recent chapter and (forgive me if someone’s already pointed this out)-

Well I don’t think Cat was criticizing Cordelia’s policies or her ideas or what she wants to do with the Warden position. Any day of the week, Cat would pick Cordelia’s position over Hanno’s. What she was criticizing was simply whether or not Cordelia could pull it off.

Yes, it would be great to have someone reign the heroes in. Yes, Cat would love to have a counterpart who agrees with her on that.

Yes Cat would indeed like to see equal rule of law apply to all Named. These are things they agree would be good to have.

But all that is pie in the sky if Cordelia *can't make that happen*. And that's the problem. Cordelia thought that if she earned the Warden of the West Name by proving to Cat that she's the right person for the job, she'll be able to make that happen. What was missing, and why she fails as a candidate, isn't her policies. (Cat may not necessarily agree with all of them, but they're not disqualifying in the way Hanno's are). The problem is that Cordelia simply lacks the personal power to enforce her edicts.

It's not that she'd be a bad Warden. It's that, as is, she simply can't be a Warden at all. She's not a bad option, she's a *non*-option.

Zopilote 506

Its been like 3 months but I finalmy caught up. Man Cathererine is playing them like a fiddle

Steven Silver

I'm calling it now: Cat's going to repurpose the ritual to fuse the White Knight and First Prince Cordelia into the perfect claimant! Enter First White Prince Knight Cordelianno of Hassenwad, Warden of the West!

[*Barthumphries*](#)

First White Prince, Knight Cordelianno of Hassenwad. When adjectives come from the same category there must be a comma between them. *shrug*

[*Barthumphries*](#)

A lot of people have written a lot about the difference between Hanno and Cordelia. Here's the difference in a nutshell.
Hanno is now Neutral Good.
Cordelia has become Lawful Neutral.
Cat was presented the choice between Good and Lawful. What she wants is Lawful Good.

Interlude: Occidental V

"Adversity tempers, power tests."

– Helikean saying

It was as if all the world had been cut down to three sights: the night sky above, the pale plains below and the tall tower bridging them. The dark was quiet, and there was not another soul to be found for miles around them.

"We are returned to Creation," Hanno said, offering his hand to the prone princess.

Cordelia Hasenbach looked at it as it were a snake, then something like contempt flickered across her face. Jaw squared, she took the hand and he helped her rise from the grass. Her legs were unsteady but the First Prince was a stubborn woman: she toughed it out until her stance firmed.

"Do you know how much time has passed?" the princess asked.

"Since you were taken? I can only guess," he replied. "But between my arrival here and yours, barely time enough for a kettle of water to boil. Arcadia makes sport of any who would measure its time."

Had it been hours for those in the realm of the fae, moments? More the former than the latter, he guessed, but guesses were all he had to give. Hanno waited as Hasenbach gathered her bearings, taking in the utter emptiness of the plain around them before her gaze moved to the tower. The gate that Christophe had smashed open still lay sagging on its hinges, almost an invitation.

"I suspect," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "that passing the threshold unprepared would be a costly mistake."

"It ends soon," Hanno quietly agreed. "Have your instincts grown enough to feel it?"

Cool blue eyes considered him. No answer came.

"It is in the air," Hanno told her. "The roads grow short for the lack of ground left to tread."

It was like a shortness of breath or unease in the limbs. The sensation that the story would soon reach its conclusion and that he was not ready. Here and now, the two of them alone under the sky, was the last chance to turn it around.

"Like an edge," the princess finally said. "It feels like the moment before defeat, when the wheels and cogs are already moving but just before they snap into place."

Hanno nodded. It was impressive, he thought, that even as a claimant she would have so sharp an impression. But then the First Prince had always been an impressive woman, hadn't she? That had never been the trouble with her.

"The threshold is the point of no return," the dark-skinned man pensively said. "But we have time before that, all the room that can be found in the boundary between Arcadia and Creation."

That was what the world whispered to him, the current his crippled hand could almost feel. Time was undefined now, made... malleable by the gap between the two realms. But the story would lock into place the moment they crossed the threshold, leaving only the closure.

"Of course we do," the First Prince said, sounding disgusted. "How many steps ahead did she plan this?"

Hanno's lips thinned.

"Too many," he said.

Blues eyes left the tower, returning to him.

"Then this conversation," Cordelia Hasenbach calmly said, "is what determines victory and defeat."

Victory and defeat, huh. Loaded words, on a night like this one: whose meaning for them was to be taken as gospel? His, the First Prince's, Catherine's? Or maybe that was the point of it all, he thought. Choosing whose lines in the sand determined the nature of the game.

"I am beginning to believe," Hanno said, "that thinking in those terms is the first mistake. In a fight, someone must lose."

"And what would you call this instead?" the First Prince of Procer said, gesturing around them.

Grass painted pale by moonlight, the depthless dark above and in between the tower that belonged to neither. Like stairs joining the heavens and the dirt. *Going up or going down?* Not something you could know, Hanno thought, before your foot first touched the stone.

"A journey, perhaps," the Sword of Judgement finally replied.

Something with a beginning and an end, but not a battle. Not without struggle, for so few things were, but not something *defined* by struggle.

"A journey," Cordelia Hasenbach repeated, tone musing.

The princess's hand rose, fingers extended, as below them both the grass shivered from the breeze. Like she was trying to catch the wind.

"Maybe," the fair-haired woman said. "But I am not so certain you and I are on the same one, Hanno of Arwad."

A reply came to mind silver-quick, from the old law-riddles of Arishot's Ruminations. *Can strangers ever be on the same journey?* He'd loved those scrolls as a young court scribe in Arwad, the way they forced you to think. Arishot had not written to make laws but instead lawmakers, asking questions that bent one's understanding until flaws were revealed. That riddle warned against common blame, Hanno had thought, against faulting a rower and a captain the same way for a crime. *But which of us is the rower, Cordelia Hasenbach, and the captain?*

"I had thought," Hanno admitted, "that this would end by the ascription of fault."

The First Prince studied him, gaze composed.

"But no longer?"

Hanno snorted, suddenly tired in a way that had nothing to do with the hour.

"What does it matter," he said, "if the pool one of us drowns in is a few feet deeper than the other's?"

Hasenbach looked away as if burned by the sight of him.

"She took you to task as well," the First Prince said.

"With method and great enthusiasm," Hanno replied.

Some of that he knew she must have sat on for years. Too much of that had felt like a valve being opened, a sac of venom being drained.

"I as well," the First Prince said, then hesitated.

Hanno patiently waited.

"She is convincing, I know," the princess said. "That does not mean she is right."

"I spent most of my time on the grass," he admitted, "finishing the argument in my mind. Speaking the retorts I could not place, that escaped me in the moment."

He could see now, looking back, that she had angered him on purpose. He would have spoken better calm, seen more clearly. He could have pointed it out it was absurd to pretend that the Saint or the Pilgrim to killing innocents in the pursuit of ending an evil was equivalent to a villain simply killing for evil. That her sacrifices, the weight they had given her Name, did not make her *worthy*. Just strong. That Hanno himself had made mistakes, but that if those disqualified him from wardenship then her own would make her the last woman allowed anywhere her title.

Like a fencing match, he had played it again and again in his mind. Every time swatting away more of her points, scoring more of his own. But one had never budged no matter what he cast against it.

"Did it change anything?" Hasenbach asked.

He breathed out slowly.

"Nothing that matters," he admitted.

That was the difference between a fencing match and a duel, when it came down to it. One was won on points, the other ended when the opponent was killed. A thousand small cuts mattered nothing in the face of that single blow going through the heart. *Do you think claimants grow on trees, Hanno?* And no matter how much he turned around the words in his palm, looking for the fault, he had found none. Cool blue eyes were studying him again, looking for something in the cast of his face.

"What is it that she said that shook you so?" the First Prince asked.

An unpleasant truth, the dark-skinned hero thought. That I never stopped to consider that you might be right and I might be wrong. That your claim could be the equal to mine instead of an obstacle to overcome.

"That I should have asked you a question years ago," Hanno replied. "W-

—

"-hat is it that you want, Cordelia Hasenbach?"

His tone was as serious as it was earnest, and still Cordelia almost laughed. She looked away so he might not notice, eyes finding the vast stretch of the plains. The sea of grass where strands of shadow and light interwove, under the starlit ink of the endless sky above them. Two seeming eternities pressing down on the stark silhouette of the tower, a stubborn nail refusing to be hammered in. But nothing could fight forever, Cordelia knew. Instead you were used up grain by grain until not a speck was left, the defeat so quiet and creeping you did not know of it before it embraced you.

What did she want?

For her uncle to be alive, her family with him. That the realm she had spent half her life healing had not become a wasteland ruin, that she could have kept everyone alive. That she had won more and lost less, that she had been the kind of woman who could have saved Procer instead of being the custodian of its death

throes. That Calernia might know one long and lasting summer, a golden peace and time of plenty. That she was not carrying with her so many ugly choices, so many bitter compromises. And maybe, beneath it all, that she was still the same woman than before all the sacrifices she had made.

But that was looking back, and not even the Gods could return the arrow of time to the quiver. So instead Cordelia looked forward and sought her answer, shaving away the dross one cut at a time until there was only the bone of it left. It was even simpler than she had thought.

"I want my successor to be able to hang the Peregrine," the princess said, then frowned.

That was not quite it. The arrow missed by a thumb.

"No, I speak untrue."

She breathed out, groping at the truth, and finally the words came to her,

"I want a world where it is a given the Peregrine will hang," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "Where there is no doubt that someone, *anyone*, who murders an entire town of innocents will die for it. That there will be no excuse, no protection, no talk of a Choir giving absolution or a greater good hiding behind the mountain of corpses."

Catherine had talked about so many heroes, about that night in the Chamber of Assembly and the crossroads of the Arsenal, but these were not the source from which it all flowed. It was that brutal campaign through the heartlands, the Black Knight burning granaries and villages to kill thousands in starvation. It was the Grey Pilgrim condemning hundreds of innocents to a painful death to catch his foe, only to then *keep him alive*. It had been the seed of the realization that rules, laws, did not really apply to them. That only Named were entitled to dole out justice to Named, that whatever the first colour of the cloak it always ended up red.

The Sword of Judgement took a step back, turning to face her instead of standing side by side, and Cordelia knew it had begun.

"Princes can destroy towns as well," the Sword of Judgement said, tone even. "Many have. How many were brought to justice by law?"

I fought the Great War as girl, Cordelia thought. *Do you truly think you have anything at all to teach me about the cruelties of princes?* She had not led her people south as an army because peace somehow did not occur to her. No one raised in the shadow of the Crown and the Plague could be ignorant of the costs of wars, even the most necessary ones.

"How many were brought to justice by heroes?" Cordelia replied.

Before the man could reply she pushed on.

"And I do not mean in the last decade," the blue-eyed princess said. "That is the scale of the immediate, the short precedent. It is not an honest examination of the past. Since the Principate was founded, Hanno of Arwad, how many princes and princesses have deservedly been slain by heroes?"

The brown-eyed man frowned.

"Given a few hours I would be able to give you a precise answer," Hanno said, "but at the moment I cannot."

Cordelia waved that away. She was not trying to ambush him, pretend that lacking an exact number would mean she somehow won the argument.

"Imprecise would be enough," she replied. "Thirty, forty, a hundred?"

He mulled that, eyes going distant for a few heartbeats. The air pulsed faintly with power. *Aspect*, she thought.

"Less than eighty," he finally said. "More than thirty."

And more than she had expected, but not enough to prove her wrong.

"It is a drop in the bucket," Cordelia told him. "There have been thousands of princes since the founding of Procer. Hundreds of them must have been genuinely vile and malicious. Some lived out their lives keeping their throne, I have no doubt, but most of them did not."

A crown was not power absolute and uncontested. Chosen struggled with understanding that when it came to doing Good, but even more when it came to the other side of the coin: no royalty on Calernia would be able to be truly, genuinely evil without consequence even if there were not a single hero in existence. People did not enjoy being ruled by tyrants, even skillful ones. And in the end, a ruler only had power so long as people followed them.

"Some were tried before the Highest Assembly, but I would wager not so many more than heroes have slain," she continued. "It is not a common procedure. Most were removed by their families, by the outrage of the people, by blades or poison."

Hanno shook his head.

"You think of heroes as wandering forces," he said, "but that is true of very few."

Cordelia hid her irritation. That was not at all what they had been discussing.

"For every Pilgrim and Saint there are dozens who became Named seeking to end an injustice and would then not stray far from that mandate," he said. "When finished they will beat the sword back into a ploughshare, return the enchanted ring to the old woman in the woods."

"We stray from the topic," she told him.

"We do not," Hanno calmly replied. "Named are not born out of the Gods waving a hand: those that killed princes were, in all likeliness, brutalized by those same princes. All those means to unseat tyrants you lay out failed for so long and in the face of so great a cruelty that a champion was empowered by Above to end that evil."

The blonde princess paused, genuinely taken aback. It had not occurred to her, truly, that most of the Chosen who had killed Procerans princes would be Procerans as well. In the back of her mind she had always thought of it as a foreign intervention. An outside force meddling. It was jarring to realize there was no solid reason to believe that was true.

"That such heroes existed at all," Hanno of Arwad continued, "is the mark of the utter failure of the means you defend."

He shook his head.

"You even defend the poison and blades of others while condemning the same tools in a hero's hands," he said. "I will not force on you my belief that becoming a hero means one seeks to do Good, but are you truly going to argue that it makes people less worthy?"

He was not wrong, Cordelia thought, to chide her for having let her gaze shy away from part of the truth. But that did not mean he was right. His blinders were no smaller than her own.

"It does not," the tall princess replied, "but neither does becoming Named take someone beyond laws. It is true, I cannot deny, that you have spoken the truth: the Highest Assembly, the natural means, they fail. Have failed and will fail again."

This was not a revelation for her. Cordelia had spent years convincing, arm-twisting and sometimes outright bribing the Assembly into backing what she believed to be necessary reforms. She had no illusions about the average character of royalty.

"Yet that does not mean decisions about the lives of thousands – sometimes even millions! – should be blindly entrusted to whoever first arbitrarily received power from Above," she retorted. "Good

intentions are not *enough*: principle will not make up for a bad tax policy or lopsided trade rights."

Christophe de Pavanie was the man she thought of then. Well-meaning in so many ways, but even now still of narrow perspective and limited in judgement. Paired with power as a Named that could make him rise among the most influential of an empire, it was a recipe for disaster. At best he would be a puppet, at worse a stone around the neck of the people he had taken upon himself to rule.

"Ruling, making the decisions of a ruler, is a skill," Cordelia said. "One that requires a lifetime of training and that very few Chosen have cultivated. A bad decision by a good man will inflict a great deal more suffering than a good decision by a bad man."

A deep breath, steadying herself after the long tirade.

"You are right, the... order of things is imperfect," the princess said. "But that does not mean heroes should be allowed to do as they wish, it means *the order must be fixed*."

"Then fix it," the Sword of Judgement bluntly replied. "Why would any of us oppose the world being bettered?"

"You do not have to oppose it," Cordelia harshly said. "You make it unnecessary by being who you are. Why should there be significant reform to anything at all, when no matter how dire the situation becomes a hero will emerge to save the day?"

"You are arguing in the favour of disaster," Hanno slowly said, incredulous. "That lives should not have been saved?"

"I am arguing," she said, "that heroes have been killing villains and wicked princes since the founding of the Principate and it has fixed nothing. That Chosen excise tumours but do not, cannot heal the sickness that causes them."

And because of that, Cordelia realized in a moment of clarity, she had come to think of them as being part of the trouble. One of the reasons for it. But that was unfair of her. A suspicion born of the souring experiences she had had with Chosen. Blaming them for existing was like blaming a man for not allowing his throat to be cut. About that much the Sword of Judgement was right and she had been wrong.

"And that does not mean they should not exist," Cordelia said, "but it means that so long as Chosen remain the final arbiters of what is good, we cannot *grow*. So long as we leave the decision of what can be allowed and what must be refused in the hands of a handful smiled on by the Gods Above, nothing can change."

And that was what the Liesse Accords were, deep down, the reason that the Lycaonese princess had fought tooth and nail over provisions and sections but never once doubted she would sign it when the negotiations ended. It was a treaty that let mortals dictate rules to Named.

"That world cannot be built so long as laws do not apply to everyone," Cordelia said. "Until it is Calernia, not the Chosen few, that decide what the lines in the sand are."

The dark-haired man had gone still as stone, looking at her as if he had never seen her before.

"They gave us a choice, Hanno of Arwad, the only one that really matters," she quietly said. "Let us *make* it."

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The irony, Hanno thought, was that in many ways Cordelia Hasenbach was like the very people she distrusted. The ironclad conviction that made up her spine, that he had not grasped was at the heart of all she did, was the very trait that led people to become Named. It was something Creation reacted to, embraced. And though Hasenbach might despise him for the comparison, as she spoke she had reminded him of no one so much as Tariq Isbili. The Pilgrim's own iron law had been different – the alleviation of suffering, no matter the cost – but looking at the First Prince of Procer he saw in her the same alloy of idealism and brutal pragmatism that had been the Peregrine's signature.

It was an unsettling thought.

"The changes you speak of," Hanno said, "the world would be better off for them."

The princess's lips quirked into a smile that did not reach her eyes.

"But," Cordelia Hasenbach said.

"So long as the first step to them is making heroes obey corrupt authorities," he told her, "there is no chance of them ever coming to pass."

If the foundation of her reform was to make Named bow to the very evil they had risen to defeat, then the ideal was nothing but fool's gold.

"Then let them obey something else," she said. "Rules that crowns had a hand in making but do not belong to the crowns."

He was not a fool, to need every word spelled out to him.

"The Liesse Accords," Hanno said.

Catherine Foundling's dream, the justification for her every atrocity: a muzzle on every atrocity that would come after her. As was so often the way of the Warden of the East, it was the finest of intentions raised atop a mountain of corpses. Hanno believed in their worth, but not that way that Catherine did. The rules would do good for Calernia, curb excesses, but in time they would become a tool for oppression as well. He had no illusions about their permanence, that their ability to better the world would be more than temporary.

"They can accomplish what queens and princesses cannot," the First Prince said. "A set of rules all will abide by. A first step heroes will accept."

"And for that you would become Warden of the West," Hanno thoughtfully said. "To ensure that heroes follow the rules."

The blonde princess looked faintly embarrassed as she nodded.

"I am not unaware of my weaknesses as a claimant," Cordelia said. "I lack knowledge of namelore and have not cultivated many close relationships with heroes."

Hanno hummed.

"But for what you envision the Warden of the West to be, even with those weaknesses you remain the better candidate," he plainly stated.

What she described might be best described as the heroes of Calernia being made into a guild and Cordelia Hasenbach as the head of that guild. It was not a position that would require skill at arms or even a great deal of personal power: her function would be that of an administrator and a diplomat, not a captain. It was also a position that would require her to abdicate all power in Procer, Hanno knew, a sacrifice that would earn her some respect. That she was willing to make that sacrifice did not surprise him as much as it would have an hour ago.

Tariq had never taken the Tattered Throne.

"I was expecting more of an argument from you," the First Prince delicately said.

"I do not agree with your vision," Hanno clarified. "But I do understand that from your perspective pressing your claim is the most sensible answer."

"Yet you disagree," the princess said.

"Not with your intentions," he replied. "There have been enough misunderstandings between us, so I will speak plainly: you do not need to be Warden of the West to achieve this."

It would help her, certainly, but it was not *necessary*. And it was turning the Role to a direction that it did not need to be turned – or should, considering that a guildmistress would not be what Above's champions would need in the wake of the war on Keter. Coolness returned to the blue eyes considering him.

"Indeed?"

"Cardinal will be the seat of the Accords," Hanno said. "And your interest lies in them more than in Named themselves. Taking up a position there as a high officer and a diplomat will place you in a position to shape laws and curb abuses exactly as you wish."

And it would not force her into the position of leader of the heroes, a position she would not enjoy or be particularly skilled at.

"If your worry is lack of influence over Named, then change the Accords to reflect what you believe is necessary," he told her. "I would support this. And as Warden, I would have no difficulty working with you."

She studied him for a long moment, then slowly nodded.

"To my own surprise," the blue-eye princess said, "I find myself believing you would try."

Hanno grimaced.

"But," he echoed.

"The question has been long in coming from my side as well," Cordelia said. "What is it that you want, Hanno of Arwad?"

For all the gravity of the situation, Hanno thought, it felt as if they were children declaiming a play at each other. Taking turns, trading tirades. They were, in a way. Fate was heavy around them, like the air before a storm, and so far in the journey every word mattered. They had run out of room to maneuver. So Hanno considered his answer carefully even though the words came easy, looking for the heart of it. It was too late for grievances to matter, for might-have-beens to be worth bringing up. Instead he looked for the source, the kernel moment of why he had come to stand here.

It was not the Arsenal, he realized to his faint surprise. The disappointments of that fortnight had been long in the coming, more flower than root.

"I want a world," Hanno said, "where you could not have called the Tenth Crusade."

The First Prince flinched. She had reason to. It all went back to that first mistake, didn't it? The moment where the woman in front of him had decided to raise Above's banner without understanding what that decision meant. Where she had put the lives of tens of thousands, of most heroes on the continent, on the line because of terribly mundane reasons. Because Procer had been plagued by disaffected mercenaries, because it had been wary of a resurgent and hostile Callow on its flank. The real reasons for the Tenth Crusade had nothing to do with the Black Queen or the Doom of Liesse: the groundwork for it being called had begun being laid years before.

"I do not believe heroes should rule," Hanno said. "We are forged for a reason, to combat an evil, and that defines what we should be: exceptional power granted to fight an exceptional evil. Come and gone in a few moons, like fireflies."

How many Grey Pilgrims and Saints of Swords were there, really? Sometimes not even a single one in a generation. Hanno believed that a dozen heroes fighting under the Grand Alliance would no longer be Named by now if they had not been drafted into the war against Keter. Their foe and mandate had been clear, stretched into the present only by the great threat looming over all the living.

"But we no longer live in a world where that is possible," he told her. "Calernia is not the same place it was even a century ago: the kingdoms are more powerful, the cities larger, the borders push ever further into the wilds. It is no longer a place where someone can simply *disappear*."

A century ago, the thought of something like the Truce and Terms would have been laughable. Named were too hard to find, too spread out, and who could even enforce these rules even should they be set down? Now half the younger heroes took them for granted and even the older ones expected that when a great Evil next came to Calernia the same bargain would be struck with villains.

"It is no longer possible to take up the sword and retire into obscurity after having hung it back above the mantle," Hanno said. "Heroes are sought, followed, drawn out by mortal powers. And then they are used for purposes beyond what they were meant for. From that, evil flows."

Like Christophe, whose power and candour had driven the House of Langevin to try to entrap him into some plot. The Mirror Knight should have never so much as spoken to a Langevin: he had come into his Name to protect the Elfin Dames, to face the Wicked Enchantress that would come to destroy them. If not for the Dead

King's march, he might never have left the lakeside town of his birth. Hanno had not been offended to learn that the Langevins had sunk hooks into him. Why would he be, when the plain truth of the matter was that unscrupulous souls had taken advantage of the vulnerability a good man had risk to save every living being on Calernia?

And it would keep happening again and again, the corrupt and powerful twisting power meant to do Good, so long as there was no one standing between heroes and earthly crowns. Someone who could free their hands to do Good and steer them away from being used.

"There is some truth in that," the fair-haired princess finally said. "I did not understand what I was unleashing, when I called the Tenth Crusade. I erred and many paid for it."

He slowly nodded. It was only the shallowest layer of what he had said, but it was the beginning of an understanding.

"But your words are not entirely true, are they?" the First Prince said. "Heroes seek crowns as well, 'Prince White'."

The disdain for the title was palpable but Hanno was not offended. How could he be when he agreed?

"Yes," he enthused. "*Exactly*. I should not be holding the authority that I took up."

For the first time since he had met her, he saw the First Prince of Procer visibly taken aback.

"I have had to because Named and kingdoms have become so intertwined as to be indistinguishable," Hanno said, "which is not a state of affairs that should exist."

It was not as if he had wanted to seize the reins. But what other choice had there been, when failing to do so might doom all of Calernia? If Hanno did not become the Warden of the West, did not lead Good's forces against the walls of Keter, he foresaw no victory. The First Prince was fit to rule, but for all that it needed a foundation of authority the Name was not about ruling.

"I have not deluded myself into thinking I am a fit ruler, Cordelia Hasenbach," Hanno told her. "I have to bear a crown, let it be a firefly's crown: gone in a few moons, when the darkness abates. And after the need has passed--"

"You would set it down and stand as Warden of the West," the First Prince calmly said. "Spending your days ensuring that heroes stay true to their purpose by keeping them apart from earthly powers, stand as the intercessor between them."

"It is not that the world is corrupt and heroes without fault," he said. "Above's blessing does not make Named more than men, beyond pettiness or cruelty. But that power comes in recognition of a need to do Good, to make the world a little better."

And maybe the princess was right and one day the world would have no need for heroes, but that day had not come. Perhaps Calernia had changed, but heroes could as well: they could meet the Age of Order on their feet instead of being overtaken by it.

"All the world needs to do is let them," Hanno pleaded.

The night air had stillness to it in the wake of his words, the First Prince's face a bland mask as she studied him in silence.

"I can see it now, I think," Cordelia Hasenbach finally said, tone eerily calm. "The trap."

Hanno frowned.

"The Warden's?" he asked.

"The Intercessor's," the First Prince replied, shaking her head. "Because whoever wins, Hanno, whichever of us steps forward, something *breaks*."

"Something is lost when a claimant wins over another," Hanno slowly said. "That is only natural."

The blue-eyed princess half-smiled but did not explain.

"You do not need to be Warden of the West to achieve what you spoke of," she said instead.

"It is perhaps the only way to achieve it," Hanno replied, shaking his head.

"It was pointed out to me tonight on several occasions," the princess said, "that what Named do not follow laws or titles but the individual. It is power personal, not institutional, and that is the very thing you seek to preserve. Your successors, Hanno will not command the same respect."

"That can be trained," he replied.

"Can it?" she said, tone doubtful. "Even if that is the case, it will not change the bone of the matter: the respect will come again from the individual, not the Name. In other words, *the Name does not matter*."

Hanno stilled. Looked for a reply, a rejoinder, a way to disagree.

"You can do all of this as the White Knight," the First Prince said. "You were already the shield of the heroes, Hanno, and you have little interest in the Accords themselves or the ministry of kingdoms. So why do you need to be the Warden of the West to do all this?"

He groped for his answer, feeling lost in a way he had not since the Light returned to him. And he found that he did not have one. That all the thoughts he had put together, building back the wall broken by the silence of the Tribunal, were built on a foundation that did not exist. It was true, all of it, but it was built on thin air. As if from the very moment he had heard- his stomach clenched. And there it was. The root of the mistake.

"Because," Hanno quietly said, "there is a Warden of the East."

—

Clarity, Cordelia thought, could be such a cruel thing.

"We are not claimants," she said. "We are the bears in the pit."

And no matter who won, the bears always lost. The hero's face drew tight but, tellingly, he did not disagree.

"You believe the Intercessor is behind this," Hanno said. "How?"

"Gods, who knows?" the blonde princess tiredly said. "Perhaps she pulled strings at the Arsenal, or on the night we faced each other in Salia. It could be a hundred other little moments where a push or a pull made a difference and we would never know."

Her smile was bitter.

"Has anyone aside from the Black Queen ever been able to untangle her plots?"

The hero jerked back as if he had been slapped. That was answer enough, Cordelia thought.

"And so we damage Good, whoever becomes Warden," Hanno of Arwad said, sounding appalled.

"We already have," Cordelia said. "To add weight to my claim, I promised by abdication as First Prince to Rozala Malanza and her allies in exchange for their support. There is no going back."

"And I have let myself be crowned prince in all but name," Hanno quietly replied. "The divisions will no go away no matter who becomes Warden of the West."

It was worse than that, she thought. Thinking in the scale of the immediate it was a danger, but there was something else awaiting just beyond the horizon.

"Neither of us would have all of Good behind us," Cordelia said. "Neither of us would be her equal. And on that hobbled leg-"

"-we would venture out to fight the Hidden Horror," Hanno finished through gritted teeth. "That is..."

Cordelia's understanding of namelore was still a shallow thing, but even she could see that it would be a catastrophe for two Wardens to face the Dead King without the full weight of what they claimed to stand for behind them. It would be going to war with a gap in your chainmail.

"Why would the Intercessor ever want this?" the Sword of Judgement asked. "She the Dead King's enemy as much as our own."

"She wants us to lose I think," the princess said. "So that when the darkest hour comes she can save us. Entirely on her terms."

The Wandering Bard had burned too many bridges to get her way otherwise. She could only dictate terms now if the only choice left was between her and annihilation.

"So she poisons the chalice long before we can think to drink," Hanno grimaced. "That fits her unpleasantly well. Foresight is two thirds of what makes her fearsome."

And Catherine Foundling was the one who had caught her out. Again.

"We would have torn each other to pieces until only one was left standing, if she had not done all this," Cordelia admitted.

If she had not come after their every preconception with a knife and dropped them here in the grass, like misbehaving children in need of making up. The dark-skinned hero peered at her closely.

"We have been wrong," Hanno of Arwad conceded. "That does not make her right."

"Bears in the pit, Hanno," Cordelia softly said. "You saw it before I did."

A long moment passed, silence hanging between them. The breeze caressed the grass.

"Journeys, not a battle," the Sword of Judgement murmured. "Yours. Mine. Hers."

Blue eyes met brown, an understanding. They could still end this right.

She did not know who took the first step, but they passed the threshold together.

Gabe Meadow

Wow. That, that was a wonderful catharsis. The venom vented, both sides acknowledging mistakes and flaws, and avoiding the trap that Catherine ran into in Praes. False dichotomies, false choices.

And now, I don't know what happens next, but I'm sure it's going to suck for the Wandering Bard.

Nairne .01

I sure hope so.

stevenneiman

I give it 90% that TWB doesn't show up and her plans are more or less successfully unraveled, and 10% that she shows up in person again and gets maimed further because Cat had plans for that outcome.

Unrecovered

Since Princes Graveyard her Name should be Herder, really.

Cat Herder, horrible pun intended 😊

Thor

Cats anger at her name becoming a pun would be amazing. She'd probably spontaneously combust.

ruduen

Go Boost!

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

Quite a realization for the both of them – not only that neither of them were a great fit, as many had recognized, but that neither of them needed to fit to do what they wanted to do. I think a lot of people (myself included) failed to realize that those awkward fits were being forced into place because of that unspoken assumption that someone has to be able to oppose the Warden of the East – and that that means there has to be a Warden of the West.

Except... there doesn't have to be.

And then the question becomes... If that Role is gone with both of them rejecting it again, what happens to them now? That conviction for their goals still remains, and they both still have parts to play. And what does it mean for Cat's Name, now?

Nairne .01

That Cat will probably become something else.

Aischylos

I think Cat may become just the Warden – potentially being hinted at throughout these chapters as people have started mixing Warden of the East and just Warden

Lictor Magnus

If an extra day leads to chapter like this, take all the time you need. That was beautiful 😭

Mitch

That discussion was very satisfying. I can't wait for the next.

[irritantseraphim](#)

So HannDelia Jäger-ing as Warden of the West? I am stoked for the next chapter.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I think we can do better when it comes to mashing up their names. Cordelianno of Arwsenbachad.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Yeah, I could've. But it was late and I wanted to sleep.

Cordelianno Hasenwad.

Abrakadabra

Hannelia Arbach. 😊

Abrakadabra

Or alternatively Corvad Hannsenbach.

shikkarasu

Corvad? A counterpart to the First Under the Night? Why don't you just drop the pretence and call them Grand Master Ouroboros? That is clearly a D.E. Traitorous pseudonym.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Nice try at deflecting suspicion away from yourself, but I'm onto you. It is clearly you who is Traitorous in disguise!

Linnus42

I mean it makes sense insofar as the West (Good) should not be run like the East (Evil).

Sinead

Good being sociatally so the Role is divided, while Evil has a Warden to knock heads together.

Eris

Dang. And here I thought Abigail was going to become the Warden of the West.

Jk jk amazing chapter! Maybe they can split the role: Knight of the West and Judge of the West maybe

Korr4K

Unless I'm very mistaken, it has been highly implied, since several chapters ago, that they would share the Name. I'm actually a little bit disappointed that it was so predictable

Linnus42

Indeed the only unpredictable or crack part of the theory is if they get married to seal the deal.

Korr4K

That would be a mistake, the "surprise" would be caused only by the fact that it was never hinted and you don't add random things to your story just to make it unpredictable

[Liliet](#)

Tht's what "crack" means.

RoflCat

After this chapter I'm even more in favor of them letting Catherine eat the book.

It'd solve both issues at once.

With the Stories of Good under her, she'd be above 'just' Warden of the East and in fact become something close to

equal and opposite to Bard which is one of their enemies at this one anyway.

And with there existing something on 'Good' side as equal and opposite to Catherine, there's no longer a need for Hanno or Cordelia to become Warden of the West.

Meanwhile Hanno will just return to what he's been doing in Grand Alliance before, because that is already what he want to do.

Cordelia will abdicate as promised but still retain her position as a high officer of Grand Alliance, dedicating her time to refining the Accords.

Rozala has made her oath at the Graveyard so she's a safe bet to keep true to the fight.

dadycool

That's what I've been hoping for for a while. To be perfectly honest, I think I just want Cat to have godlike power and being the not-Wandering Bard would give her that, while also fixing a lot of problems.

xanthir

Well yeah, Cat's been foreshadowed to become the Practical Guide since the beginning :p

[onedollargum](#)

The Practical Guide sure sounds like like a name to me.

AbraKadabra

Or the practical guide to evil is the book that will be made from the stories of Evil.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The Wandering Bard vs the Stationary Bard (since she plans to be the one the rest of the Woe come home to between their individual escapades). She can eat part of the vacant Name Adjutant to work a pun into the "stationary" part.

shikkarasu

Would that make her similar to the creepy crypt oracle under the Theodosian castle? Everyone gets to pilgrimage to the Stationary Bard once per Choosing to get vague advice? It would be a fun double edged sword where she needs to keep her advice useful enough that Named still seek her out, but still self serving enough to leads them to further her agenda.

RoflCat

We clearly need a repeat of Painted Knives and the toss off Tower moment ad infinitum.

She get her own office somewhere high in Cardinal.

Occasionally Heroes and/or Villains come to try and get a surprise on her.

If they're just annoyance, they get tossed out the window immediately + an 'advice' on what they did wrong.

If they actually have some real issues that's blocking their path ahead, she'll give them a thorough grilling to open their mind to the path ahead, THEN toss them out of her office window.

But because the drop is never lethal (because of course) + the long 'teachings' tend to solve their core issues, each person only go to her for this rite of passage once and then proceed to spread the legend of 'the Grumbling Guide atop the Tower'

Korr4K

I have been discussing the idea of Cat becoming the "first(?)" real grey hero, neither from Above nor Below. It made sense because her vision required a warden for both sides but, apart from the Pilgrim, there never was a candidate with her same weight. But then she stated multiple times that she doesn't want anything to do with "Good" (and vice versa), that everybody, especially heroes, will always see her as the greatest from Below, she has already become W. of the East.

The more the story progresses the less it makes sense for her to become W. of the West

[Liliet](#)

And the reason they need to go in is just to give her a hug. Two hugs.

Seriously, that's pretty important. And increasingly urgent.

Sinead

Cat standing imposingly behind the pedestal of the BoST

Hanno and Cordelia: Cat, get some damn therapy!

Cat: very well. *hands over book a dissapears into the shadows*

[Liliet](#)

thats basically what happens, right?

MundaneWalkingHorse

I'm pretty sure the mandate here is shattering the idea of a "Warden of the East" in the first place. They show up and tell Cat to fuck off on making them "choose" a Warden, she celebrates by nomming everything that is good and holy and shouting "I'M FREE!"
The genie is loose.

Bakkasama

I don't think they will share the name. Cordelia already looked into it, the only instances in which a name was shared by two people have always been between siblings.

So it might just be that they both reject it. There is no reason for there to be a Warden of the West just because there is a Warden of the East, otherwise there would have been a Warden of the East every time there has been a Warden of the West before.

lostdeviljho

Has there been a Warden of the West before, though? I recall no mention of precedent for that Name beyond Cat's own.

[Yamageddon](#)

I think it's been mentioned before, but in the past it's not had as grand a status as it has now. I think King Jehan The Wise was a previous Warden of The West? Or was he Wizard of the West?

[Liliet](#)

King Jehan the Wise was a Good King, if Named at all. There was a Wizard of the West who worked with him, though.

Warden of the West is a new Name and a new Role. There is no precedent.

Konstantin von Karstein

Jehan was Good King. There were Wizards of the West, but not Wardens.

ohJohN

It's long been a (purely ceremonial) title claimed by First Princes/ses – due to Procer's regional influence and its role in keeping the Chain of Hunger and the Kingdom of the Dead in check – but so far the only explicit precedent for it being a Name was when Cordelia caught the Seraphim's coin, was offered the mantle (twice, first Good-flavored then Evil-flavored), and refused it (also twice).

Given that Hanno would likely be able to Recall previous (Good) WotWs, and he conspicuously hasn't mentioned doing (or attempting to do) so despite being a claimant and getting into arguments about what the Role should be, I think it's a pretty safe assumption that no one has ever claimed the Name before.

Reader in the Night

Huh. Cordelia's about to reject the Name of Warden for the third consecutive time.

Cicero

Hmmm... I wonder if that has any story implications.

aurikdomi

And further Cat is doing her damndest to break all that remains of the age of wonders, why not then its rules?

Korr4K

This. The story is literally changing its "era", the introduction of new rules wouldn't be strange at all. Cordelia's words are meant to show us how much she is out of "Name lore", she doesn't really grasp the scope of Cat's work and what it would mean for future Named

Cicero

Uh... that wasn't what I got from this chapter. What I got was that there wouldn't be a Warden of the West because they don't need that name or Role.

Flubber

Ooh, things are coming to a head.

Hanno mentioned that Catherine has committed atrocities. What are they? I can't think of any.

Unless maybe he means how she let the Lone Swordsman go all those years ago, which set in motion a disastrous series of events? But even then, I didn't think Hanno knows about that incident.

MagicalFlyingHorse

Catherine spent several years following her dad's playbook of murdering heroes and excising potential insurgents, and is culpable for a number of war-crimes. Very "deserved" war-crimes, ones that no one else would be punished for, but war-crimes none the less.

A lot of it probably is his anti-Evil bias speaking, though; she must have done something bad in this regard, because she is Evil, and Evil does something bad in every regard.

Darkening

She killed a bunch of people in battle in a spooky way at the battle of the camps :V. Remember how much shit people were talking about that? Like Tariq lasering people with solar fire is so noble but Catherine dumping a lake on people is an atrocity.

gingerlygrump

The whole of the Proceran Bestowed really circlejerk on how awful Cat was as the Black Queen, but Tariq was a monster. He was just as much a murderer as Amadeus was.

Thief of Aglets

How many atrocities has Cat committed to her own person, much less forcing poor vintages on the unsuspecting palettes of others? One per page?

Beyond that though there are the untold legions of faceless minions of friend and foe both that she's condemned to die because of her grand plans.

She's even bastardised Stories enough that Above's agents were forced to Rez her properly.

Does that mean that she's coming to be 'touched' enough by both sides she may just become Warden? I don't think so. This world needs things in pairs to balance out. Heroes retire when their calling has passed and there is nothing to oppose them (unless their role is to wander and correct the little wrongs, like a 1/4 sized A-Team), but Villains conjure heroes until they're unseated.

I believe Intercessor has always been a fixit-type, but she's worn the groove so deeply she's poking through to the other side. And now she requires a balance.

What's the Story of the Roles of the Wardens? Constant duellists or star crossed and unable to reconcile due to quirks of Fate?

There must be someone to balance Cat.

Thanks again EE for this amazing story!

tuftears

Oof. What if, absorbing both Good and Evil, transforms Cat into the Warden of the *Living*, the natural opponent to the Dead? Keter's encroachment into the breathing world may then constitute an upsetting of the natural balance, and Cat would be empowered to deal with it.

edrey

well it believe is about the point of view, the crucifixion of mages after Liesse can be counted as one, sure, but most Callowans approved it, not for nothing she is Queen, also the killing of extremist nobles, but only not nobles would be appalled for it. the iron kings in the book were harsher. in the war is about how she dropped the lake, its the medieval thinking of duels, you allow them to defend themselves and show mercy if they lose, for a professional and veteran army that is foolish.

Hanno is in the end a warrior with divine power and lack the understanding of the petty mortal world is the reason he is useless as a prince or well as a normal person, there are reasons why we send professional armies to war and not untrained civilians, first and foremost is your own people what i find really idiotic of Hanno is that he can search the lives of Named rulers, their decisions and their "atrocities" and compare them with Cat's own decisions, to find if he's right or wrong about her.

i pretty sure it will break his mind if he goes too deeply into their memories and perspectives, that Above approve morals completely different than his and that she is a heroine but not a Heroine, and good and Good are not the same. that she has done more good than evil, and he can't be compared to her in doing good.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly I do wish Hanno would elaborate on his perception of atrocities Cat has done. Is he confusing her with Amadeus or what?

shikkarasu

I think we can safely assume that he looked deepest into The Lone Swordsman's memories for context regarding her, and perhaps the Heroes who came for Winter!Cat, which she slaughtered. From Above's perspective that was pretty heinous. I mention TLS specifically because we know that he

learned about Maddie's fighting style by seeing how William dealt with Catherine.

Also worth mentioning:

- Tried to leverage the Hell Gate Machine that Liesse was made into.
- Tried to release the Dead King before it was cool.
- Became the Queen of Winter in the first place.
- Chose mass murder instead of abdicating whenever Tariq offered a 'peaceful resolution to the war.'

There are a lot of good reasons for Cat's choices, and even still she herself regrets a lot of her decisions, but Hanno would see it through the eye of a Hero. One who was personally appalled by her if at all possible. It is, I feel, a mark of his character that he ever sat down to talk with her in the first place instead of just flipping the Coin.

[Liliet](#)

> •Chose mass murder instead of abdicating whenever Tariq offered a 'peaceful resolution to the war.'

You're misremembering. Catherine was the one who offered Tariq her abdication instead of mass murder and asked if he can then protect Callow from getting looted by Princes and he went "well I cannot dictate terms to Procer tho, a war between Levant and it would be worse".

Catherine has brought this up multiple times, with her only condition being safety for Callow. Neither Tariq nor Cordy took her up on it.

>•Became the Queen of Winter in the first place.

Oh you mean when Akua had her mind controlled and she found breaking the restraints on her power to be the only way to fight back? Or when she killed a fae to claim his title and stop the fae incursion into Marchford?

> •Tried to release the Dead King before it was cool.

I mean, she could have if she'd wanted to. Cat's the one who chose to not enter the bidding war with Malicia.

Sure she had the intent to do that on certain conditions. She did not end up doing it. It didn't actually happen.

> •Tried to leverage the Hell Gate Machine that Liesse was made into.

Again the same “didn’t happen” problem, paired with Hanno having no source to know this. No currently-dead heroes were involved.

> Heroes who came for Winter!Cat, which she slaughtered. From Above’s perspective that was pretty heinous.

They attacked her. Hanno well knows she did her best to talk them down. We get his reflection on it at the end of Book 5. Self-defense is not “an atrocity”.

> I think we can safely assume that he looked deepest into The Lone Swordsman’s memories for context regarding her

And what atrocities does William know her to have committed? You think Hanno’s judging her for having let him go that one time? Cause that’s the only less than perfectly ethical decision I recall Cat making in that whole storyline.

shikkarasu

I fully agree with 95% your points. My point is that using **Recall** shows Hanno what those Heroes thought of Cat, the least charitable way to view her. Yes, all those Heroes were the ones in the wrong, but they clearly thought that killing her was direly needed or they wouldn’t have Names in the first place. As Hanno said, most Heroes are one and done, meaning that at least a few of these were Chosen for the express purpose of ending her.

For all that he struggles to see the big picture, these past few chapters have really highlighted just how big his blind spots are and have always been. This is why I don’t blame Hanno for accusing Cat of atrocities, especially in his own head, but instead praise him for taking the time to speak with her in spite of all the heavily biased first hand information he has of her.

[Liliet](#)

Hum.

> Some of the last words the Stalwart Paladin had ever heard. That life had perhaps been the most useful to call on, when studying the Black Queen. The Lone Swordsman had been the rival of her youth, and her struggles there too far removed from the woman she’d become, and none of those who’d died at the Battle of the Camps had seen much of her aside from the terrifying foe that’d been the Sovereign of Moonless Nights. The Stalwart Paladin, though, had walked among

the people of the Callowan city of Dormer and then spoken with the Black Queen for some time. It had been fascinating, hearing through him the offer she'd extended. Go home, Catherine Foundling had offered, looking so very exhausted. She'd offered peaceful means, and bared steel only when pushed.

>

> It was not his place to judge, yet it had troubled Hanno that he could not easily decide what his answer would have been, had he truly stood in the other hero's boots.

Hanno applied SOME critical thinking at least.

But yeah I'm pretty much in agreement with you. I JUST WANT TO HAVE THAT DISCUSSION ON SCREEN NEARLY AS MUCH AS I WANTED THE HANNO/CORDY TALK

Rynjin

I'd say starting a war that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and destabilized half the continent's for the sole purpose of ridding herself of inconvenient political opposition qualifies, yes?

Flubber

It would indeed count, but I didn't think that was known outside maybe the Woe.

(Maybe it is widely known – there is just so much to this story, I forget things.)

So discounting that, is Hanno referring to the crucifixions and the lake-dumping? To call those atrocities (considering the nature of the world in this story) seems a bit silly of Hanno.

zenanii

Hanno knows. He has access to recall, and we know for a fact that he can access Lone Swordsmans memories.

As for other atrocities? Cat was indirectly responsible for the hanging of the Lone Swordsmans conspirators.

She killed the Shining prince. Could she have settled things with him in a peaceful manner? Probably not. Did she try? Not even a little.

Her entire ascent of power has been riding in the wake of The Black Knight, who is very much a terrible person, and makes Cat guilty by association.

She killed The Lone Swordsman. Some might argue that she did a good thing, by stopping the choir of Contrition from being

unleashed, but here's the thing: That is not the reason Cat killed him. She killed him because he was opposing her and she needed a stepping stone to reach greater authority. As before mentioned, she crucified a bunch of praesi nobles. She bound the soul of her rival to her cloak and wore her as a mantle. Afterwards she took to grooming said rival to become the sacrificial sheep for DK.

After becoming the Black Queen she was personally responsible for wiping out several adventuring parties. Yes, she gave them a chance to surrender if they promised to leave her alone, but let's be honest, she wasn't doing that because she was such a bleeding heart who couldn't stand to see those poor heroes hurt, the real reason was to weaken the story against her.

She traveled to Keter with the intention of unleashing the Dead King.

After that failed, she traveled to the Underdark and attempted to enslave an entire people.

Once she returned to the surface, one of the first things she did was rescue the Black Knight, arguably one of the worst people in Calernia.

Then there was the whole Red Axe Incident.

These are just from the top of my head, I'm sure I've missed a couple.

Sinead

I will note that Cat was tired of killing kids, so the story bonus does not really stand. You still have to have the conviction, since just going through the motions will still burn you.

Empty prayers and all that.

[Liliet](#)

Who did that?

shikkarasu

As with any war, a very complicated question, but I think Cat, Cordielia, Malicia, Amadeus, Kairos, Bard, and perhaps a few others have danced to this tune in one book or another. Different wars, but everyone started something they didn't have to for the sake of acquiring, consolidating, or maintaining power.

[Liliet](#)

"for the sake of getting rid of inconvenient political opposition"

who did THAT???

Salt

It was mentioned in vol 4 chapter 3. Cat and Cordelia were debating rule. Cordelia was talking about how the highest assembly was better than a dictatorship despite the squabbling was because it put a check on the power that any one individual could hold, at which point Catherine's rebuttal was asking why the host invading Callow was made up almost entirely out of Cordelia's opposition in the assembly (one of the few times Cordelia wasn't able to muster a response)

I don't think it could be said that the crusade was called solely for the sake of that purpose though. More that she also used it for that purpose.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Cordelia didnt START the war for that, she just directed part of her opposition that way.

Salt

There were a few reasons why she started the Crusade, but restraining her political opponents was definitely one of the big ones. The original reasons were more or less spelled out in the volume 2 prologue

> "Enough for what?"

> "For Procer to be ready to launch the Tenth Crusade," she whispered.

>All of her problems, neatly solved with a single announcement. The Dominion was at least nominally Good, and would not nibble at their borders while they were fighting the Empire. The League of Free Cities would either keep their more Evil-inclined members in line or erupt into civil war, either of which would keep Helike busy. And while the First Prince did not legally have the right to command the private armies of the principalities, all of them were by custom bound to contribute to a Crusade. The troops of her political opponents would be abroad for years, where they could not interfere while she stabilized the Principate. Tens of thousands would die. Callow would be broken for a generation, as the prize being fought over. But it would keep Procer together.

She basically started it to keep Procer's external threats opponents pointed away, and to weaken her

political opponents in the highest assembly. Callow was supposed to be destroyed as basically a prize to be divvied up by the parties she was trying to distract, and the hellgate in Liesse actually had nothing to do with the original reasons – she only about that almost two full volumes after laying all the groundwork for the Crusade to start (one of the Cordelia POV chapters after second Liesse mentions her reading reports of it, I forget which).

It's actually not at all an exaggeration to say she intentionally tried to destroy callow/kill tens of thousands purely for her Principiate-related political needs, considering she blatantly admits to it in her original monologue about planning the crusade to begin with

[Liliet](#)

She had other options, and chose this one as one she believed was Good. It's disingenious to talk like the pragmatic reasons were the ONLY ones that mattered here.

Rynjin

My mistake, I misread the post I was replying to and thought they were talking about Hanno's perception of Cordelia's atrocities, not Cat's. So for clarity: Cordelia did that. She started the Crusade to get rid of inconvenient political opposition, and just all around PEOPLE she found inconvenient (like the mercenaries).

But yeah, the list of Cat's atrocities are so long it's almost like they could fill 6 books or something.

[Liliet](#)

WHICH SPECIFICALLY WERE THE ATROCITIES THOUGH

like, the ones HANNO would call her on???

Rynjin

Hm, if I had to take a guess: bargaining with the Dead King (which didn't go her way, but she still tried it) tops the list. I'm not sure how many of her other war crimes are public knowledge, or at the least knowledge Hanno has access to. Maybe her specifically letting Lone Swordsman go. I'm not sure how he feels about the water blasts of doom during the Crusade. There's a 50/50 chance Hanno

acknowledges it as a necessity of war or looks down on it as Doomsday weapon adjacent.

[Liliet](#)

This is the interesting part!!!

Zach

The worst is probably letting Lone Swordsman survive and purposefully igniting the Callow Civil War (though I kind of doubt Hanno is referring to this). She had basically zero motive for this other than “giving me an opportunity to gain power.”

Attempting to form a deal with the Dead King was also really bad and dumb (and the whole premise – that she had no choice – ended up being wrong).

beleester

Huh. So my complaint that this seemed like an empty and weightless conflict was actually the whole point. The conflict really is just “we want our own Warden” and they’ve noticed the problem with that. I’m impressed.

ninegardens

So... looks like we’ll be having no Warden of the west then. Cool.

Of course, plenty of damage is already done- Cordelia already abdicated. “Prince white” is already a thing (I wonder who started THAT particular phrase)

And mostly... I kind of love the way grey pilgrim slotted into the conversation, Cordelia’s utter hatred for him (or at least... for the aloofness of it), and Hanno’s thoughts of “You are so much like him.” Exquisite.

And both of them have important goals, but *neither* of those goals actually cares about the title... just perfect. I like this. I like this a lot.

Al

“Journeys, not a battle,” (...) “Yours. Mine. Hers.”

I think we’re getting an extra Warden.

East/Evil: Cat

West/Good: Hanno

Cardinal/Center: Cordelia

Nairne .01

I don't think so.

jamesc9

If Good people ~work-for~ the Gods Above, and Evil people ~work ~for~ the Gods Below, then I'm not sure who would empower a middle role.

Xinci

Hmm, I do enjoy it when they actually talk to each other. It is interesting to observe the coalescence of the modern schema for Good in the Age of Order through their conversation. The transient aspect of the regulatory actions of Heroes and Good groups is particularly interesting as it backlights a lot of cooperative pro-social behaviors and the eventual failure of those behaviors. Both Heroes and the groups they serve are transient. Heroes are like immune cells, called up to mitigate threats to the group while it continues to grow. The Good group must maintain effective pro-social rules, sanctions, and values, which generally will corroborate to whatever ideations Good apparently has given them. Dissent is always easily done, however, so eventually even if the Heroes don't fail the group burns itself out or is conquered by some outside influence. But while it does live, it is limited in how bad it can be, by necessary self-regulation for survival.

Thus, Procer's methods of keeping control over its Princes abuses must for the majority of its functions been effective, at the same time many Heroes could have been generated to mitigate or supplement its means of regulation. Cordelia's statement of them needing to grow, is somewhat ironic but entirely fair under such a paradigm. They basically need a ruleset that coadunates ameliorative values to to the point of applying beyond a singular culture and outlasting that culture should it die. It does make sense why Above was fine with them both, even if it was a trap.

The cyclical nature of such regulation naturally also quite accurately applies to the Accords. It will form a base framework to allow the growth of cooperation for both Good and Evil groups, but in time it will fail like any other ruleset. But for a time it will allow a lot of useful baseline growth. I quite look forward to how Cordelia and Hanno will fill niches from here on

sidehammer056302

"coadunates"
"ameliorative"

Well, I learned some new words today. Jesus, what a mouthful...

Eris

Wait, "coadunates" is a word? I assumed it was just a typo from "coagulates", lmao

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Me too, but apparently its meaning is: "to unite into one : combine."

[Yamageddon](#)

Love your analysis! These recent chapters have really backlit my opinion that PGTE is one of the most interesting fictional explorations of philosophy I have ever read. What I especially appreciate is how applicable to our modern day ills these fictional fights, arguments and explorations are. I spend a lot of time and energy on emotional and intellectual labour in pursuit of (my new favourite word you've just given me) coadunating our fractured social spheres on earth. How are we going to move beyond the shallow problems we face? How will we unify in the face existential threats? How are we going to heal the festering divisions in our cultures and between them? I'm not sure yet, but this series, and these recent chapters in particular have given me a lot of food for thought.

I think applying the discourse about heroes and earthly crowns as a metaphorical image to our current situation with systemically unjust laws, activists, police has some serious potential. The discourse about heroes meaning to do well but accidentally causing harm is highly applicable to people who enter government or the police force, only to be co-opted, corrupted, or confused and hindered from actually doing Good!

On one of the previous chapters, somebody had mentioned how the various characters and factions represented various philosophies eg utilitarianism, and I'm fascinated to hear which other philosophies you all see or appreciate in PGTE. Thoughts on my rant??!

FanofFans

This! I live in the US, I wanted to email this wonderful chapter to every elected Representative and Senator in our country ("why can't we be friends, why can't we be..."). But alas, I'm still trying to get my 16 yr old D&D enthralled niece to read PGTE.

sidehammer056302

hey, no shade by the way; i just always considered myself rather well read, but i had never seen those words before, lol

[Adrian_V](#)

Ok we all know that yes choosing one would fuck everyone out, but i still like Hanno more because at her core Cordelia is a hypocrite, it is not a coincidence Hanno compared her to Tariq, for that matter Cordelia all but told us in her narration that what really bothered her about Tariq was the fact that he didn't give Black to her (note also that she was willing to burn a city during that same campaign and fails to remember it).

Simply put she fails at seeing herself in the mirror, Hanno at least does that. There were points that make me think more about it but i am too lazy to reread right now to find them xD

Only thing she has in her favour is that she is smarter than Hanno, or at least more cunning, proof is that she managed to uncover the Bard's plot sooner, of course she still falls short of Cat.

Scavion

Cordelia is not a hypocrite. She was the Lawful ruler of the land and authority over Procer. Elected by her fellow Princes. Tariq should not be able to just wipe out a village to pursue his own goals. Cordelia had a similar plan but she is mortal and under the council of other mortals. Her entire beef is that named just DO things without speaking to anyone and just karma houdini the consequences. If, for example, Cordelia made the same decision then her people(or rather the First Assembly) could potentially take her to trial.

Salt

Well, the reason that mandate of the people, or at least the representatives has so much more legitimacy than divine mandate IRL is because there's essentially no proof of the latter, and no proof that the latter is virtuous or benevolent even if they existed

In the guideverse there's irrefutable proof that said divine mandate comes from near-omniscient entities of pure capital-G Good that extol a specific virtue to its utmost extreme as part of their nature, and even Cordelia knows that the typical character of said representatives in this case (Proceran princes) is absolutely vile.

So there really is a pretty good argument in the current guideverse setting for Tariq's divine mandate having just as, if not more, legitimacy a lot of the time than Cordelia's mandate from regional representatives.

This could change in the future if Cordelia were able to implement her reforms, cut out the cancerous nobles, and kill the disease at it's root – but at the moment, it's kind of a tossup even with choirs being kind of horrifying.

Liliet

Cordelia was given mandate and responsibility to make that choice by people following her, electing her. She'd forced that election with a war, but she did not fight the war solo: she managed to win the war because many backed her.

And Cordelia's plan would not have worked because the man tasked with actually executing it took a second look and decided to not. Checks and balances, and need for compromise.

Tariq just kind of decided it one day and that was that.

Linnus42

She was given a mandate from the Princes not a mandate of the People. Her mandate is from being a Noble by Birth who got elected to First Prince by her fellow Nobles who also primarily got their jobs on bloodline.

Albert Wen

The Princes are the largest group of politically and generally educated people in the entire country. Remember how Roland (Olivier) could trick people because *no one could read*? There isn't even a way to spread information about elections and votes in a reasonable manner. Procer's best solution is to have people with in-depth educations be in the same room for any important matters.

Their blood isn't important, it's their family resources and connections that make them relevant.

Liliet

As with all people whose power is not founded on magic, Cordelia also gets the implicit consent of all people who go around carrying out her orders.

As we've seen this time when that guy decided she didn't actually have his consent to this.

Adrian_V

Like Linnus42 said, plus how is that any different from a choir? Or even taking choirs out of the picture how is that any different from a hero with years of experience and actually on the field deciding to take action? That is why i called her a hypocrite because she the same.

Plus what counts is that she was willing to do it, if anything is worse since she ordered it instead of doing it herself

[Liliet](#)

A hero cannot be stopped by everyone around him deciding they don't agree to let him do the thing.

Choirs are not morally relevant agents here

[Adrian_V](#)

Actually they can, if enough people oppose them, it could be they either lose the narrative or even ANOTHER hero coming into play

[Liliet](#)

That's a significantly higher bar than people simply refusing to cooperate.

[Adrian_V](#)

Outside of a fantasy world maybe, but given how dependent Heroes are of tropes and stories it isn't as impossible as it sounds,

Anyway i still like Hanno more xD

[Liliet](#)

Well, chalk another point up to Cordelia being bad at Namelor?

jamesc9

Could we have a link to the person who decided not to, please? I seem to have forgotten.

[Liliet](#)

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/10/10/interlude-queens-gambit-declined/>

> And yet here he was, reading a report stating the Legions were but a day's march away and considering treason.

>

> There were no two ways about it, disobeying the First Prince's orders would be high treason. [...] The actual text of those was delicate and regretful, but the heart of it a brutal thing: after short defence on the walls, he was to draw the Praesi inside Iserre and set the city on fire around them. His troops were then to evacuate and join the relief forces sent by the Dominion, to fall upon the easterners while they were freshly bloodied. Iserre, as of Prince Milenan's last royal census, counted over a hundred thousand souls between its walls. Gauthier knew it was more

than that, perhaps as much a ten thousand more who were foreigners and so unrecorded or too estranged from the law to want their presence noted in anything as official as a census.

>

> He would not be allowed to evacuate them. Their panic, the letter noted, would prevent the Praesi from pulling out their forces in time by clogging up the streets.

>

> He wrestled with the decision throughout the night. Handpicked men discretely prepared the blazes, for he did not give the order now it would be too late afterwards, and when dawn came Iserre had been turned into a pyre. It was the arithmetic of it that stayed with him. There were, according to reports, perhaps fifteen thousand easterners and not even half that many bandits with them. A host of twenty thousand at most. And his orders were to burn alive five times that many to wound the Praesi. He would be damned in the eyes of the Gods, if he did this. Yet how many more would die in towns and villages, if he did not? Not merely in Iserre, but all over the realm. Duty and faith tugged him different ways. [...]

>

> The words, though defiant, were as ashes in his mouth as he rode back to Iserre. He'd just ensured the city he'd spent his entire life guarding would either suffer fire or a bloody sack. [...] The assault would come soon, he knew, and the decision he must make with it. Duty or good? Gods forgive him, but as the fourth night fell Captain Gauthier made his decision. Better he be known a traitor than a butcher. When the assault came, he would empty the city and ride to Salia for his trial.

Albert Wen

Actually, she is smarter than Cat. Putting aside whether or not Cat has even figured out exactly what Bard's attack is yet (haven't seen any signs of it from her, only moves that increase her advantage in general), Cordelia displayed way stronger political insight during the dwarf meeting, when she always dug one level deeper than Cat while guessing at dwarven internal politics.

shikkarasu

I wouldn't call anyone simply 'smarter'. Cordelia has always been the better diplomat and politician over Cat, Hanno, and basically everyone other than Malicia, who she matched wits with for years. Cat is better at counter-Barding and Machiavellian planning, which takes an unrelated type of genius.

I don't think either one could learn the other's trade to the same level in the next 10 years, and if they did they may be the worse for it, since they would have to slow or halt progress in their own field. As Cordelia and Amadeus have both lamented, there are only so many hours in the day and so many skills to learn.

[Adrian_V](#)

Yeah, smarter isn't exactly the right word, afterall with enough education anyone can appear smart, that is why i said cunning, she is more cunning than Hanno.

zenanii

You're missing the point. Cordelia isn't hating on Pilgrim because he committed an atrocity to t stop Black Knight. Her issue is that he had no one to answer to afterwards.

Yes, she was ready to burn a city, which was arguably just as bad. But unlike Taric, she would answer to the highest assembly for her actions afterwards.

This is her issue with heroes, not that they're worse than nobles, but that they effectively exist outside of the legal system.

[Liliet](#)

This.

[Adrian_V](#)

Err, that is what she says to herself, but in her narration at some points she let slip that she is angry because once it happened she couldn't just hang Black like she wanted, she is partly right because not hanging basically means all those lives were wasted btw, but to me it sounded like she really doesn't care he killed a town but rather his justification for it, and that he didn't ask her neither.

[Adrian_V](#)

Oh also another thought, 3 is almost always an important number, who says there need to be 2 named ruling the accords?

Evgeny Permyakov

There need to be a bloodhound, a judge and an executor.

Linnus42

First, well that was worth the wait in terms of Hanno and Cordy prospective on each other and coming to an accord.

So they realize its a Bard trap and the West does not need to be

run like the East.

Special Bard to me is starting to feel like Kairos behind every plot and flipping the board and yes I get this was setup at Arsenal but still I am tired of Bard lol.

However, I don't think we have gotten fundamental resolution between Hanno and Cordy on how things should be run in the West in regards to Heroes and Governments. That is the biggest thorn also they didn't talk about Viv being Princess and eventually Queen so sure while Named running governments is rarer in the West it still occurs....

dadycoool

I think Callow has always been a middle ground between Preas and Procer, beyond the obvious physical location. Preas and Callow both have Named rulers, while Procer and Callow are both historically aligned with Above, just as an example.

[Liliet](#)

We don't need a "fundamental resolution" on that because the Accords are already a thing and contain all those provisions and specifications.

shikkarasu

This is a trend I am noticing in the comments section. The complaint that there is still more conversation to happen. I really don't see the problem there. We are getting more chapters in which more progress will be made. If Hanno and Cordelia had talked like this two years ago Cat would never have gone full Tyrant / half Triumphant and we would never have seen her crash a flying Tower north of Salia.

Keep having personal failings, my beloved Claimants, I have so much more popcorn left to munch.

Kiara

This chapter finally coalesced what I feel should happen. As others have been saying the obvious answer is splitting the name – But that doesn't quite feel right. Instead I believe Hanno should get Warden of the West and Cordelia some name that implies she speak for the non named. In the world they're creating a voice for villains, heroes, and unnamed just feels like the right balance.

Not sure what the actual Name would be tho,

Sykomantis

Unnamed Advocate maybe?

Casey Glick

Arbiter of the West

egregiousmiscellany

Whenever people bring up potential Names, they never mention The Cardinal. It makes sense for the place, and it makes sense for the person.

plainWonder

Warden of the Rest?

marillius

The vast, disgusting irony of Coredlia judging the Grey Pilgrim for condemning a village while waging a war against a country for little better reason herself. She truly is a disgusting person. And Hanno, who claims that the Black Queen has committed atrocities yet I could name none following her story (certainly battles lost and hard choices made but none save in defense of her realm) and his attitude and certainty that Good Named are always Good despite countless lives laid at their feet.

Zggt

Just as it was said in this very chapter, the Crusade was brewing well before Cordelia announced it. It was the result of a multitude of internal wars, the only way to resolve a muddled succession with a united (and relatively unharmed) Procer. It is why Cordelia chose to do it. There is at least some surface equivalence to Tariq killing an entire village, but there are also important differences, the main one being that Cordelia did not condemn anyone to die outside a battlefield, and the Crusade did find a solution (albeit a very grim one) to the overabundance of fantassins. Not that Cordelia is blameless, but you can point out that Cordelia only took the pragmatic/easy path when her duty required it, while Tariq did so systematically.

This is why the Bard could plan this far ahead, which also fits with one of the main motifs of the story (societal change being an overriding power, even when there are people who wield lakes or lasers).

marillius

What does killing people on the battlefield mean in relation to morality? She was a shit leader who is ultimately responsible for the state of affairs that led to that war and all the deaths that were caused because of it. The people her army killed were in no way less innocent because they were

soldiers. One could argue she's actually worse than Tariq and not just by sheer dint of numbers of dead but because this wasn't the only way but as you say the easiest.

Eris

... Excuse me, what? I get that hating on Cordelia is popular nowadays and all that, but the whole reason she is the First Prince of Procer is because she did all in her power to salvage a functional country out of Procer that was slowly falling apart due to the civil war. She is only responsible for the mess that Procer was in before the Crusade insofar as any Proceran noble can be, and much less so than the vast majority of them at that. So are you arguing it would've been better for everybody if she didn't do that, and let the Proceran civil war rage on? Perhaps the situation would have been saved by heroes, eventually, sure – I'm not so confident in that, admittedly, but let's say it would have been – would it happen before Procer as an entity has effectively collapsed?

Yes, calling for the Crusade was a fuck-up of continental proportions – pun intended – but nothing before that was outside the realm of reasonable.

Salt

> There is at least some surface equivalence to Tariq killing an entire village, but there are also important differences, the main one being that Cordelia did not condemn anyone to die outside a battlefield,

Not entirely, no. There's no moral difference at all for at least 20 thousand of them. Cordelia specifically ordered them conscripted for the Crusade. Them being on the battlefield makes no ethical difference if she forced them onto said battlefield against their will in the first place.

Direct quote from the prologue prior to the crusade starting:

> Cordelia was unwilling to gamble the fate of the Principate on such odds, and so she had taken action: she'd ordered general conscription in Salia. The bottom of the barrel was being scraped raw, but she'd put together twenty thousand levies. Had she further enforced the decree, or even broadened it to neighbouring principalities, she could have easily tripled that amount. There was, unfortunately, no point in doing so. There were no armaments for the conscripts to use, and dwarven representatives had flatly refused any further sale without even bothering to explain why.

Mercenaries and Fantassins, there is a moral difference. Career soldiers, also a difference. They chose to be there. They hold the responsibility for what they chose to do.

For the peasant conscripts, there functionally isn't a moral difference. They were forced onto the battlefield with little training, worse armaments, against their will, and slaughtered there. A lot of them were straight up used to make a bridge of human corpses at the flower vales. Cordelia holds the responsibility for what she chose for them, regardless of their will.

Ethically speaking, if "causing the mass deaths of innocents for the purpose of saving even more lives" is a hangable offence, à la the deontological answer the trolley problem (the value of a life is NOT commensurable), both Cordelia and the Pilgrim should hang. No exceptions. If it's a pardonable offense because it was necessary to save more lives (the value of a life generally IS commensurable), neither should hang.

Liliet

Honestly I think Cordelia's actual point would be more precisely expressed by "could be hanged" rather than "would hang". "Would stand trial". These are all subtly wrong because "could" could mean "if you're strong enough" and "would stand trial" means nothing if the judges won't indict or give a harsh sentence. Would-hang-if-he-did-not-defend-himself-successfully. That's a mouthful and she didn't say it, but the point comes out clearer if you use it as that.

Barrendur

Beautifully crafted chapter; very convincing characterisations. Immensely enjoyed the *absence* of Cat!

dadycool

Yeah, the Interludes have been better than the Chapters for a while, or at least more fun to read.

Reader in the Night

Oh wow! That was really cool and beautifully done. One line of dialogue that bothered me a bit was :

<>

Not because I think it's good or bad, simply because it felt sort of like it didn't fit Cordelia's actual argument? Though maybe I just failed to comprehend it.

It went something like:

Hanno says that what Cordelia wants is Good, and so Heroes wouldn't oppose it; Cordelia says, well, <> , which I took to mean was her saying that Heroes make her changed unnecessary, or at least, seem to be unnecessary; then Hanno says "are you saying Heroes shouldn't save the day?"; and Cordelia concludes "I'm saying Heroes shouldn't get the final say on what 'saving the day' looks like."

I don't think the "You do not have to oppose it, you make it unnecessary by being who you are." line works with the point she's trying to make, since Heroes being who they are is exactly what makes the existence of rules *necessary*.

Maybe she should have said that "you don't have to oppose it, you *resist* it by being who you are"? Because like Hanno says, Heroes are stopgap measurements, so they have a natural tendency to return the situation to what the Status Quo was *before* their big Evil happened, rather than meaningfully improving upon the system.

I don't know. Maybe I'm stepping out of place by trying to tell EE how he should have written their story. I'm just honestly trying to help. Just to repeat that this chapter was masterfully done and I deeply enjoyed it!

Reader in the Night

Sigh I'm getting sick and tired of WordPress' formatting weirdness swallowing parts of my comments. I hope it's still understandable.

What I had placed between the Angle Brackets was:

["You do not have to oppose it," Cordelia harshly said. "You make it unnecessary by being who you are. Why should there be significant reform to anything at all, when no matter how dire the situation becomes a hero will emerge to save the day?"]

Anyways, since I'm already here, another thing I wanted to comment on: ["Journeys, not a battle," the Sword of Judgement murmured. "Yours. Mine. Hers."]

I think this means Hanno and Cordelia are going to go into the Tower and roast Cat (for her own good of course) this time around! That would be so cool to watch!

Also, on the issue of the WotW, I think Hanno and Cordelia are going for some sort of shared position that equates to WotE. That said, if they do go the way of making decisions by council, they really should add a third person, both to serve as a tiebreaker and because of Rule of Three.

If that happens, maybe the third slot could go to an elected representative of the average Calernian muggle, to contrast the interests of the Heroes and the Crowns? Sort of like the House of Commons in the British Parliament.

If that happens, I nominate Abigail! With how terrified of both Named and Politics she is, she'd be the perfect candidate to represent the people who want nothing to do with any of that!

Albert Wen

Angle brackets in WordPress are used for markup. i.e.
`\italics\`: *italics*

Albert Wen

Whoops, no idea how to escape characters.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia means that problems get fixed and so pressure does not build up for systemic reform. Every time there is a coup but no revolution.

Reader in the Night

Yeah, but that goes back to Hanno's point: Should the Heroes stop fixing problems, then?

Kinigget

What Cordelia is pointing out is that Heroes are an impediment to systemic change, because why would you need systemic change when they're around to stab whatever problems crop up?

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Frivolous

I think one of the reasons the Wandering Bard targeted Cordelia and Hanno (as per Akua's comment in chapter 37: Bygones) is because the Wardens of the West might be able to command her.

Also I suspect that the Wardens of the West and the East might make public the Name and description of the Wandering Bard, not just to heroes and villains but to everyone, so that she becomes common knowledge across Calernia.

Still haven't figured out why the WB targeted Kairos Theodosian, though.

Albert Wen

Did WB ever target Kairos? As far as I'm aware, Kairos was one of the people she had less control over, but I'm not sure she ever went after him.

[Liliet](#)

It's what Akua said.

shikkarasu

She used him, that's for sure. I think he was playing the kind of game she approved of, so she never had to go after him. I would even argue that she had all the control over him she needed.

She mentioned way back in Book 2 when talking to William that she would rather 100 Diabolists or Dread Empress Magnificents over a single Amadeus of the Green Stretch or Black Queen. Tyrant was a mad lad who took care of himself in the end, but the Practical Evils? They change the world in ways that threaten her. She can dangle carrots in front of cackling psychopaths, but she cannot deal with systemic reform.

[anonymous4968](#)

I like this resolution, regardless of others opinions I don't dislike either of them.

KarmaA

Gonna call it now. Cat for warden of good, Bard for warden of evil. Bard as eternal jail warden for DK.

Frivolous

I expect the Intercessor will try to interrupt one last time before or shortly after C and H announce that they are the Wardens of the West.

She might come personally again, but I think it just as likely she'll use hidden pieces among the heroes already present. Maybe to kill C or H. Maybe to kill Catherine.

Frivolous

Occurred to me just now: The Book of Some Things is supposed to be all the Stories of Good, right?

Does that include the Intercessor's own Story? Would reading it allow one to reliably predict the Intercessor?

In other news: Unlike virtually every other book, *Some Things* is not something Cordelia can have the Forgetful Librarian read and summarize and analyze for her. The Librarian is a villain.

So who will read it? C and H themselves? Maybe the Augur?

[*Liliet*](#)

Bard isn't either Good or Evil.

shikkarasu

I think she might actually predate the hard concepts of Good and Evil. She certainly predates most of the Tropes that she wields. Probably invented a few just so she would have the best understanding of how her tools functioned.

[*Liliet*](#)

Good and Evil are what Creation was founded on, she cannot predate those.

Wonder

"We have been wrong," Hanno of Arwad conceded. "That does not make her right."

"Bears in the pit, Hanno," Cordelia softly said. "You saw it before I did."

Is Hanno right that Cat is wrong?

pyrohawk21

You missed what I think was meant there. Namely, it was Hanno conceding that Cordelia had been right when she said that earlier. Whilst Cordelia's response was that he had also seen something critical before her.

Basically it's the two of them conceding that whilst they are both right in what they saw, they had not seen the whole picture. And the other had seen parts they were missing. That neither were wrong, but also that neither were entirely right.

Albert Wen

I thought it meant Cat was also a bear in the pit.

[*Liliet*](#)

Technically yes, but only in the sense that they also need to help her as she helped them. Asking "do we need to fight her though" is the wrong question.

Sinead

I wonder if we will see Cat's Name being revised as just Warden.

"Who am I?" I hissed. "I am Below's watchman, the enforcer of the black laws, and I tell you now that if you do not settle your debt in full then I will cast your shivering souls out into the darkness from where is no return."

Yes she has been watching over Below, but if her Role is revised to being the one who collects Below's due (aka death for 'glory') from those who break the Accords, with Hanno as perhaps Ageis (an even bigger shield reflective of his formative years in the Titanomachy)

Nairne .01

My feelings on the matter are very simple... why is it not Friday yet...

Nairne .01

P.S. thank you very much for this chapter EE.

Daniel E

I can see this going two ways. Either they declare joint ownership of the Name, and when prompted that sharing a Name only happens rarely between siblings, they simply say 'too bad, we're making a new Story'. Or, they concede the role to Cat and give their endorsement of her consuming The Book.

pyrohawk21

It's also possible that what forms for them isn't a shared Name or giving up the role. Especially not the latter as they both have agreed that what Cat sees isn't always right.

Instead I wouldn't be surprised if they form some sort of twinned Names. Basically they each have a different name that splits the role of Warden of the West between them, whilst also having both Names work together. Hanno as the Champion of Heroes and Cordelia as the Ruler of Heroes.

Because they've recognised that each of them desire to use the Warden of the West for a certain purpose, which doesn't actually need them being the Warden to achieve. Yet neither does the role each of them believes is needed clash with each other, so long as they are not trying to do so whilst there is a Warden of the West to oppose them. So if neither of them become the Warden, what stops them from taking up another Name which works with the other to achieve the task they desired to see fulfilled?

Jason Ipswitch

I don't understand why people think Hanno & Cordelia are going to share Warden of the West after this. They've just concluded the only reason they "need" a Warden of the West is because there is a Warden of the East and Bard set them up. They agree that neither of them actually wants or needs the name. They're not going into the tower to claim the Name, they're going into the Tower to *change Cat's Name*.

What form that will take, I'm not sure. But my guess is that Cat will end up with more authority, but not with a full "Warden of Calerina" or equivalent name. She's still a Villain, and Hanno & Cordelia know that. and so her final Name/role will lean in that direction. She'll be a sort of evil guide, but a practical one .

(Maybe I'm wrong, and I'll be in for an large surprise over the next week or two. But if my guess is right, it's a testament to the effectiveness of EE's writing that something could be telegraphed so prominently for so long, and yet lots of people still are thinking it will be something else.)

[Liliet](#)

Options so far:

1. Share WotW, because they've fucked up enough they've cornered themselves into the necessity to claim it.
2. Change Cat's Name, and then probably gain different Names themselves? I'm not seeing Cordelia walking out of this WITHOUT a Name, one way or another, and Hanno's in the process of transitioning too.
3. Gain different Names and talk Cat down without changing her Name (boo, lame boring option)

Juff

Typo Thread:

as it were > as if it were
Pilgrim to killing > Pilgrim killing
woman than before (than cannot follow same. more like "the same woman she was before")
that way that > the way that
had risk to > had risked to
what Named > Named
no go away > not go away

[Mincheriit](#)

Thanks for the chapter. Ok im thinking Cat's answer to 'what do you want' deep down, is something along the lines of " a world

where a 'black queen' wouldn't have been needed"/where i wouldn't have existed/become what i am.

I just put it like that to go along with the way Hanno and Cordelia said theirs. No idea which style cat would say it, imo depends on how she's feeling and how... serious she's saying it.

Reader in the Night

That's kinda what she said to Tariq, to be honest: "Where were you when Callow was taken over?"

Bad@games

It makes a twisted sort of sense to me that they would share the name, it's the star wars sith v jedi mentality. 1 super powerful sith vs multiple kinda powerful jedi, who evenly match the dark side by working together

Isi Arnott-Campbell

It's like poetry. It rhymes.

sidehammer056302

So...

Are we going to have Joint Wardens of the West? No Warden of the West?

Will Cat's Name change if there is no Warden of the West? If she devours the Book, which contains Good's stories, will she become the Warden of both sides? Will she simply be THE Warden?

I have to admit, going into this arc, I was siding with Cordelia, and when she voiced what she wanted, that the Tariq's of the world would be hanged, I was won over even more, but Hanno surprised me when he hit back with not wanting a world where Cordelia could call the Tenth Crusade. Cat nigh BEGGED her not to do it, but because of politics and hubris, how many thousands died? All those people she hangs on the Black Knight's tear through her country, those are all ultimately on her. Perhaps even Tariq's crimes as well. I'd forgotten, due to the magnitude of events that have since occurred, necessitating the Alliance, how much all of this stemmed from her orders. That put me hard into Hanno's court.

But! Now that we understand this is a terrible trap, I'm kinda hoping we get no Warden of the West, and that either Cat inherits the powers (by devouring the Book or not) or that there simply is no Westerly Warden.

ninegardens

See... I find it interesting how many people are in the "hang Tariq" camp. (Not a critique, just a contrast).

Like, we are talking about Tariq killing hundreds in the same sentence we talk about Black knight starving THOUSANDS. That was what he was trying to stop.

We also have Cordelia's alternative plan which involved burning down a city with the citizens inside. And... as Hanno and you pointed out, the whole damn Crusade and much that has happened since can be laid at her feet (very much a case of "a good person with a bad policy" as she aptly describes).

I am all for Tariq being put on trail for what he did. I am all for him being pulled up before a tribunal... but Cordelia's phrasing of "I want a world where it is a given the Peregrine will hang" just sat wrong with me, and actually lessened her claim in my eyes.

I want a world where it is a given that the peregrine will be called to account. What the results of that Tribunal are should not be a foregone conclusion however, and Cordelia's phrasing implies a desired *outcome*, not just the desire that the law be applied.

Honestly, in terms of Morals, I'd argue Tariq has better defences than 95% of the princes, generals and main characters in this story.

sidehammer056302

That's interesting, because I find the actions of the Black Knight almost completely justified. Taking the fight to the enemy and striking at their strategic resources is a completely viable tactic, If Cordelia was horrified by the devastation wrought, she really oughtn't have picked the fight. War isn't just a game, nor a business or political maneuver to bust out whenever things start to get dicey at home. To so casually play with the lives of three countries and then be horrified by the repercussions is moronic and any attempt at moralizing is pure sophistry.

I think the hang up on Tariq is his seeming hypocrisy, Tariq insists he and his action serve Good and thus are so, yet he murders an entire village of noncombatants in order to subdue a single legal combatant defending themselves from an invading religious war. At least Amadeus never claimed to be anything other than a warlord.

But I agree with you on Cordelia's skewed desired outcome, hanging instead of trial. Though I suppose it is possible she's speaking with the benefit of hindsight, since she knows at this time that Tariq was guilty of the massacre and he even admits it, if I'm remembering right.

Salt

I think Amadeus' actions are completely unjustified, and significantly worse than both Cordelia and Tariq (who are similar), interestingly enough.

The main difference is that, for all their flaws, both Tariq and Cordelia were actively attempting to save lives, or to make the world a better place. That was their end goal – which they both largely succeeded in, albeit with some pretty awful mistakes in the process as well.

For Amadeus, it was victory, full stop. The man doesn't give a single shit about the lives of innocent Proceran peasants or how much they're suffering, that's why even his adopted daughter unequivocally calls him a monster. What he did was more along the lines of shifting the war away from the agreedupon rules of engagement to total war, mostly so he could win

As far as Cordelia vs the Pilgrim goes, imo neither one is any more or less justified than the other in their "lesser evils for the greater good" style – they'd probably make similar choices in similar situations, most of the time. The Pilgrim at least admits that his lesser evils are horrifying, while Cordelia is largely unrepentant about hers, but I don't think that makes him any more or less guilty. They should be judged and sentenced the same way on account of their actions and intentions being near-identical, whether the verdict is a hanging or an absolution

sidehammer056302

See, I'd have to disagree, respectfully.

Cordelia was having political troubles in Procer that might have lead to another civil war and tried to quash it by pointing to an "enemy" outside of their borders and siccing all the malcontents at them. It was a tried and true tactic of running Procer, in fact. It was literally business as normal. That, to me, is completely reprehensible.

And as to "agreed upon rules of engagement"? I'm sorry, but who exactly agreed to these rules? I know the innocent Callowans never did. War isn't just something you toss around because you're too lazy and inept to sort out your own house. It should be the very LAST resort, in EVERY situation, no matter HOW the ruling powers like to use it to further their ends. If you dare step foot in MY country. try to kill MY people, loot and rape MY peoples' lands, you're going to damn well pay the price. Amadeus, "monstrous" as he was, struck the hardest, most

devastating blow he could against the offending force, depriving them of essential war assets that might have extended the conflict and cost the lives of more of his side's people. So the aggressors die in droves because they can't feed themselves, so what? They're the aggressors! None of this would have happened if Procer wasn't such a terrible and corrupt country in the first place. No loss that I can see. "Oh no, the people we were going to kill and loot and rape and steal land from turned the tables on us and hit US instead! Boohoo! They're so MEAN! Wah!"

Amadeus was completely in the right, in my opinion. Cordelia and her religious fanatics bear FULL responsibility for EVERYTHING that happened as a result.

Forgive me if any of that hostility seemed directed towards you in the slightest, that isn't my intent. I have strongly held opinions on this matter (lol, obviously) and find it absolutely disgusting the way war is used as business tool. Sending people out to die and kill for the benefit of the rich and powerful is abhorrent.

Salt

By rules of engagement I mean the ones Cat and the Pilgrim specifically agreed on for tenth crusade as it was starting, for the express purpose of limiting harm to innocent people on either side/curbing excesses during the course of the war. One of which was not sacking cities. It was meant to be a first step in building trust between them and civilizing the conflicts a bit going forward

The random Proceran villagers and average cityfolk who were probably weeks away from even hearing news of the Crusade fully starting weren't deserving of getting caught in the crossfire any more than the innocent Callowans.

You think some average Proceran farmer had a hand in starting the crusade? The poor know-nothing weaver a thousand miles away from the front that was all geared up to rape and pillage Callow? They weren't part of the "offending force", and they certainly weren't "aggressors". They were people just trying to live their lives, people who regularly got stepped on by the powers of the Principiate who **actually** started the war, and it was them that Black actually ended up harming.

It wasn't princes and generals starving to death as a result of what Black did. Those people have the money and connections to live in luxury even during the quite

literal end of the world. It's normal, average, innocent folk without any special political or economic clout that have their entire family starve to death when there are food shortages. His little counter-crusade across Procer harmed mostly people who had absolutely nothing to do with anything, and had almost no personal effect on the large majority of Proceran top brass who were really responsible for the Crusade.

That makes it abhorrent, in my eyes.

sidehammer056302

You're right, I was looking at the Black Knight's counter-attack as merely damaging the war effort and overlooking the human element. On the personal level, you're absolutely correct, they're just trying to live their lives with no say over how things are done, but on the macro scale, they're supplying our enemies with the means to devastate our home.

Also, I had completely forgotten about the conversation between Cat and the Pilgrim and didn't remember they had agreed on any rules. That's my bad.

In the end, I still very much put the blame on Cordelia and Proceran nobility. If there had been a reasonable way of getting at and punishing them personally, I would choose it a hundred times over, but in reality, the only way to significantly strike at them was to do what Amadeus did. The nobles valued only money and power, and both of those are tied up in how many people they have and how much food they can produce. It's not pretty and it's unfair. but it's also something the rulers of Procer decided to ignore when declaring war unprovoked. That really is the biggest tragedy of the situation, Cordelia and the nobility did NOT know who they were F'ing with and got utterly spanked, yet the real price was paid by the citizenry.

After some time to cool down, and after reading your posts, I'll demote "completely justified" to perhaps something like "necessary evil", I do still think it was the most tactically sound decision given the options, but I'll concede it was in fact monstrous.

PS: But damn, now I'm really wishing Cordelia and the nobles hadn't gotten off so scott free! Do you think the devastation of Procer by the Dead King going on now is in some way EE's karmic vengeance?

jamesc9

When Cat got teleport ability, someone who might have been Juniper pitched assassinations of Proceran leaders, and she turned it down. Finding a link would take a lot of searching.

Lord Haart

IIRC Cat thought it might be fair in theory but in practice would cause the deaths of even more peasants.

Mithras

So I'm coming down on two sides here.

First, we can't lay Cordelia's decision to crusade solely at her doorstep. Sure this is business as normal for Procer, sure everyone was happy to be part of a land grab, sure she refused every treaty presented to her and yeah definitely this situation could have arisen under normal circumstances.

But it didn't, Procer's situation after the long civil war was engineered by Malicia, she set up the bank which drug the war out and which geared Procer for crusade and which ultimately put Cordelia in the untenable situation she found herself. Does that absolve Cordelia of guilt? No but it reminds us that in war there is very rarely absolute morality of responsibility.

On the other hand the idea that Amadeus did not intend to do good is a nonsense. Honestly his goals were one of the most laudable in that part of the story. He wanted to free Praes and Callow from their cycle of endless conflict and population boom and bust, he wanted to dismantle the natural systems which explicitly oppressed the common people. The actions he took in the crusade was explicitly to protect that ideal. What made him a villain was his cast iron certainty that his way was the right one and his willingness to do whatever he needed to do to anyone else to make his version of reality come true (limited by pragmatism of course)... hmm seems like I'm describing Tariq here- the real difference between the two is that Tariq's grand vision basically boiled down to slapping down bad guys, helping heroes and generally maintaining the status quo even when he disagreed with it. Both Names were perfectly happy breaking the eggs they needed to in order to achieve their goals.

Salt

In a broad sense you could say every character, including all the worst ones, were trying to help

something; but that means basically nothing at all. Heck, even the Dead King destroying all life on the continent is trying to help the Serenity/Keter. In terms of caring about the wellbeing of the continent as a whole, there's very few characters that qualify, and most didn't start out with such a broad view. Black certainly doesn't qualify at any point, he's very partisan towards Praes the way early Cordelia only cared about Procer.

The likes of Cat/the Pilgrim are different, in that they're not solely focused on the good of one minority over everyone else, and actually have some lines they won't cross.

Catherine rejected Bonfire. Tariq mainly cares about alleviating suffering for creation as a whole, and never deviates from that. Black primarily cared about Praes, and couldn't care less if the rest of the continent drowns in a sea of blood.

In terms of the specific action that's the topic – him counterattacking through Procer – that wasn't an effort to make Praes or Callow better. He was simply trying to do as much damage as humanly possible to their enemies before dying for Catherine's sake, since at the time he actually believed his life was nearing its end due to the weakening of his Name. It was essentially the Named equivalent of a suicide bombing.

He did take some major actions for a greater good, but you can't just blanket paint every single thing he did in a positive light based on his overall motivations. Awful actions are still awful, regardless whether your overall life goal is to lift up a nation or eat twenty sandwiches.

alelekitaponga

Here's the rub, would thousands starve? Or would thousands starve because the Princes of Procer would refuse to sue for peace and pay for war reparations/ grain from Callow? Remember that War was declared and food supplies are a legitimate military target. No civilians were killed or harmed and Black's Army was civilized enough to PAY for their supplies. If we apply precedent anything Black did wouldn't count as a war crime while Tariq sure as hell would.

That's the reason that we "hang Tariq". The method, because Tariq is only Good and Black Evil if we take into account outcomes and not what's actually being done and their legitimacy in doing it. Black is a wartime general following

standard practices while Tariq is a “nobody” (officially) slaughtering civilians (not even his civilians).

jamesc9

> food supplies are a legitimate military target

If they're food supplies for civilians, in our international framework, then I'm not sure that that's true.

I think that in the framework between Tariq and Cat, it's probably false, because busting the food supply for a city is just an indirect version of city-busting.

Black isn't subject to an agreement between Tariq and Cat.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeh I don't think Tariq was necessarily wrong. However the world Cordelia is talking about is also the world where he *would be*.

Linnus42

I can only respect that world of Cordelia if she be hanging besides him like that meme if they went with her plan. But I don't think Cordelia thinks she should be hung if she made the call to burn a whole city.

[*Liliet*](#)

Honestly that's valid criticism. I see Cordelia's point and I don't think some hypocrisy on this specific matter is too bad – it's like Cat saying that Named should have less power while accumulating power, or like democracies needing to defend themselves from authoritarian ideologies. Sometimes self-consistency is self-defeating, and differentiating the present and the future is meaningful.

And I'm aware I'm making arguments Cordelia is not, but, well. She's running on emotions. I'm analyzing the rational impact of those.

[*Liliet*](#)

(I think Cordelia's point comes across more clearly if you replace “hang” with “stand trial, like an actual trial with an actually impartial judge who isn't incentivized to be lenient with this specific person”. She would stand trial alongside Tariq, willingly. Her point about hanging is not about hanging yourself, it's about submitting to law and outside judgement.)

Reader in the Night

An important distinction that I think should be drawn is between whether or not something is "right" and whether or not it should have "consequences".

Even the fairest Law in the universe will sometimes meet a real-life situation where applying it would be unjust, because that's just how life works. For example, Tariq's necessary genocide of a small town.

You can argue it was just or unjust, necessary or not, but it remains unlawful. And the Law needs to apply in all cases, even if there are excellent reasons for breaking it, because if you start making exceptions the Law itself becomes weakened, and that allows actually evil acts to go unpunished.

So Tariq might have been in the right, but he still needed to have been punished for it. And I think that certainty that they'd be punished itself might weight on the decision-making process of future Heroes:

Is killing that village really worth it, even knowing you'll die for it? If death discourages them, it probably wasn't needed in the first place. If it's truly needed, then the Heroes make the righteous choice and sacrifice themselves along with the village.

Abrakadabra

Starving thousands is not equal to killing thousands. They can be saved at any point if the Principate is willing to do so. For example by sending the food to them instead to the front. While killing hundreds is killing hundreds. There is no going Back.

letouriste

So...i guess the next step is turning back cat from the blinders she got since the time skip?

That was really well written EE 😊

aurikdomi

absolutely worth the delay great stuff

Trupo

Just noticed that the unrealised Hanno / Cordelia dumvirate has the same dynamics that Amadeus / Malicia once had... and Intercessor tried to split them using pretty much the same method. Coincidence?

Liliet

Yo, I fucking love this.

Shoutout to all the people (the one person?) who called out WotE as part of the trap.

This was great and also the best and also excellent. Though I would, like many readers, like Hanno to elaborate on what "atrocities" he means.

mamm0nn

Suuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuure Mirror Knight wasn't meant to ever leave his lakeside village after defeating a probably Fey Villain. Above always hands out Aspects that make you a little stronger every dawn to Heroes that are meant to just exist for a year and then go away again, especially in a world where Below gets an even Due for everything Above gives their side.

ninegardens

This.... is a really really good point.

I kind of wonder if EE just forgot this particular character detail, cause it **is** a detail that hasn't been mentioned for like.... 5 books.

Sinead

I think he was meant to be a whisky barrel.

aka: store away safely age, and then bust out when the party starts hitting hard.

So sending him on a Crusade was good as it tempered him in a way that meditation would not. Christophe probably came into his Name when the Crusade was inevitable, so his investiture would have taken that into account.

legomithras

Yeah I'm sure cordelia's arguments are full of holes but Hanno's wrongness is obvious.

Hanno: 'Heroes were not meant to rule.'
Every Good King Ever, The Blood, The Heirach and a bunch of other Ruling Names: 'You wot m8?!?'

shikkarasu

The Tyrant: "I agree; Heroes were not meant to rule and I think we *all* know what needs to be done." **unhinged grin**
The Dead King: "I *disagree*. Good Kings make good lawn

ornaments.”

The Hierarchy: “no one was meant to rule. What is wrong with you people?”

AndromedaStar

What I’m worried abt is that the Bard, in retaliation for her Warden of the West crippling plan going wrong due to Catherine’s intervention, is going to set in motion a Warden of the East crippling plan and let go of Evil’s stories riiiiiiight about when Catherine is just about to finish consuming an energy field bigger than her head.

[Sugar Roll](#)

It’s been said that there’s a thin line between love and hate. They could not stand each other before but now they’re finishing each other’s sentences. Is the HannoXCordelia ship really going to sail?

Two dozen snakes

Bard is going after the Warden of the West because the Role is the one in direct opposition to the Dead King. It is Above’s answer to the Dead King. That is the story of the West. That is why she first attempted to create the Name in a way she could control, and why now that she can’t control it anymore she wants to weaken it. Because the WotW takes her out of the board, she no longer has a path to taking over the war on Nessie

Hanno and Cordelia were poor fits because both assumed the Warden of the West would stand in opposition to the Warden of the East, to be its Good mirror. But it’s not. The Warden of the West has nothing to do with the Warden of the East, because the stories of the East and West are too different, not enough intertwining between them

As always, Indrani had it right all along 😊

[Ronnie](#)

Given that the Intercessor knows that Catherine can often see through her plots, I wonder if there is a trap within the trap. She has likely baited Catherine to absorb the ‘Good’ stories; perhaps if Catherine is now gifted the ‘Évil’ stories, Catherine, having sight of all stories, automatically becomes the next Intercessor.

We haven’t had the origin story of the Intercessor yet.

chris S

I’m surprised so many comments are discussing splitting/sharing the WotW Name in upcoming chapters.

It just seems people missed the entire point of Hanno and Cordelia's realisation – because WotE exists as a Name, Bard pulled strings to make everyone think that they NEEDED a WotW role to balance it out.

[Liliet](#)

I mean they also realized that while they SHOULDNT have done all that they ALREADY HAVE and now they have to handle the mess somehow.

RoflCat

Something I just thought of in a shower thought moment:

Catherine is basically doing an intervention so that Cord/Hanno doesn't have to go through what she did with Black.

Two people who have opposing goals (specifically for Malicia for those two) that refused to come together and talk on compromise (remember that Catherine also said she wouldn't pursue if Alaya escape across the sea, which for Black would still be acceptable result since she lives) until it's too late and there's no room for further talk or any option besides blood.

And Bard wins regardless of which way things go.

So instead of Hanno/Cord have a lethal confrontation, they get shoved into a time out room to have a talk and avoid the trap.

[Liliet](#)

Mm!

AbraKadabra

Maybe they will let her eat the book of some things, and when they eventually stole the villain stories from the Bard, she will make it into a book, name it the practical guide to evil, and give it to them.

S33K3R

Anyone else see the summer court reference in Cordelia's 'what is it you want' moment?

D. D.

A long moment passed, silence hanging between them. The breeze caressed the grass.

"Journeys, not a battle," the Sword of Judgement murmured.
"Yours. Mine. Hers."

Blue eyes met brown, an understanding. They could still end this right.

She did not know who clicked the first link, but they cast the vote together.

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

Jdburger

So reading this chapter it occurred me that this maybe a bard plot but not just the one Hanno and Cordelia are thinking off. This confrontation has been building for awhile so we can safely assume this was but in motion prior to the Bard conflict with Catherine this book.

Catherine currently has the Book of all Above stories, and the Bard is suppressing all Below Stories. I might have missed something, but why has not be revealed yet. We know WB has a good measure of Cat – I wonder if the Above Stories is actually a trap for Cat.

WB can probably guess Cat would intervene between Hanno and Cordelia, and likely use the Above stories as bait. If Cordelia and Hanno tear each other apart, she wins because the Warden of the West is crippled and so they will need to turn to WB for help. But WB from what we see in Arsenal does not do simple plans... so what if the Book is a contingency. Cat's ritual consumes the Book and it becomes part of her just as the Below stories are part of WB aspect. Hanno and Cordelia cannot or will not be Catherine's opposite from this conversation leaving the closest being the WB.

Not big on Namelore but could that nature influence one of Catherine's developing Aspects – turning it into something similar to the Bard's Wander. It would mean like the WB she is confined to influencing stories rather than leading them. Without Cat influence being checked the Alliance may still fall apart and force them to follow the Bards plan to stop the Dead King.

Sorry if this has already been discussed posting via phone so hard to go through all the comments.

Chapter 39: Name (Redux)

"Carry with you my blessing and my curse: may you ever get what you deserve."

– Extract from the 'Tenets Under Night', Firstborn religious text

The fabric of Arcadia cracked around me and I grinned. I was so very, very close.

The Book of Some Things struggled furiously against the relentless onslaught of Night, but it had begun a slow descent into loss from the moment the first tendril slithered through a fracture. The artefact's power was constrained in a way that was literally inhuman, the precision impossible by mortal hands, but no matter how hard the nut if you hammered at it long enough you'd get something to show for it. Brute force all the way through would have taken days, maybe even an entire week, but that'd never been the plan. All the Night I could channel into relentless pressure without needing to guide the ritual had just been meant to create those fractures.

The precision work came after, widening the cracks and pulling apart the defences around the Book shard by shard. I could dip out for a bit and let brute force fall down again, but I'd been embellishing the truth when I'd told people that the ritual could end without me. It was technically true, but if I wanted it finished tonight then I'd need to be personally involved. It why I'd rustled up my band of valiant villainous defenders in the first place: one I got my licks in with Hanno and Cordelia, I'd need people to cover for me while I did the labour of smothering the divine Light of hope. You know, metaphorically speaking.

... probably. It would have taken more power than this if I was literally killing hope, I reassured myself.

And the thing was that, deep down, I'd not actually expected this to work. I went against everything I'd been taught: I had cackled atop a flying tower, begun a massive ungainly ritual to destroy something Good while there were heroes in riding distance and just generally monologued at people who might be construed as my rivals should you squint a bit. I had, in other words, behaved in a way that would have made my father roll in his graves if he'd not been given to a pyre. Only now I was standing alone in a room so deeply drenched in shadows it might as well be the night sky, prying apart the shell of the Book as it shone like a furious star, and I was *winning*.

The Book burned, for a moment washing away even the slightest of shadows, but I snorted.

"Shouldn't have done that," I informed it. "Sure, as far as I can tell your source of power is pretty much inexhaustible, but your *outflow*..."

The burning Light suddenly flickered, and in the moment of weakness Night swallowed all it had lost and more. The Book struggled, burning bright twice more, but every time it burned shorter and ceded more ground afterwards.

"Like I thought, you have a fixed outflow," I told the Book. "Like veins, yeah? So when you come at me with all that fire, trying to chase me out of the room, you're cramming a lot more blood in those veins than there's supposed to be. Making them burst."

The Book pulsed, shadows shivering around it.

"You damaged yourself," I tutted disapprovingly.

And it opened the veins wider for me to slither through, not that I'd give it warning over that. I was still unsure exactly how intelligent the artefact was. Not sentient, as far as I could tell, but it was far from inert. There was a will in there, dumb and blind as it might be.

Leaning forward, I pulled at the Night. Picking through later after layer would have taken too long, especially the tighter shell nearer to the Book itself, but I'd been going deep instead of wide: I only needed to get to the artefact to finish this, not strip it naked. My flesh eye was half-closed, blinded by the Light, but under my eyecloth Night roiled and let me see through a hundred more. It was easier that way to pick my angle, slide between two jagged shards – invisible even to my weaves, only outlined by the press of Night against them – and slip into a crack. Not deep enough I thought, but I had a way around that.

"Hooks," I ordered, frowning.

Like a thousand little mandibles the Night slipped into the crack bit into the shard, anchoring itself to the power. Like a fishing line I spun out chords of Night from it and hung them behind me, into the great currents of darkness, before rolling a shoulder. Now I just had to put my back into it. All my eyes closed, I breathed out shallowly and emptied my mind. Distractions fell away one after another, swallowed up by the dark, until all that was left was a simple thought: *pull*. I sunk into it, made it fill me up to the brim for what must have been a hundred years.

A loud *crack* jolted me out of the state, the sound rippling across the fabric of Arcadia. A long, thin shard broke away and flew up from the massive pressure, disappearing into the currents of Night. I could feel the tapestry of Arcadia wane around me, like a tapestry used as a cutting board. Creation would have been

more solid, but I'd chosen Arcadia because rules were looser here in the first place. It'd last long enough anyway, I thought as I learned forward even further. Now there was only a small, smooth shell no broader than my thumb keeping me from getting to the Book.

One more good hit and I was in. I sent out my will, Night rippling around me, and found Archer.

"Report," I ordered.

"Band of heroes coming from the hills," Indrani said. "Captured the Royal Conjurer, by the looks of it, but they're having a hard time with horses on the hill paths. The rest of our guests are contained."

There were only so many bands of five I had it in me to swat away tonight, so it'd be best to finish this as soon as possible. I'd given the would-be wardens every chance I had to spare. If they couldn't pull through now, it was on them.

"Do what you can to slow them down," I said.

There was beat.

"Cat, what's wrong?" Indrani asked.

"Nothing," I lied, and cut the tie.

Looking down, I saw that my hands were trembling. From the exertion, I told myself. Not from what I was about to do: attempt to steal Above's power and devour it whole. I clenched my hands.

"It's the best of the bad solutions," I told the Book. "My foundations will be weak, sure, but I'll have the power to take on the Dead King."

Just not, I thought, the power to survive him. When two peerless monsters entered the ring, only ruin ensued. I wasn't sure, couldn't be, but that was my gut said and these days it was so rarely wrong. I'd be fragile strength I took into the fight and the Hidden Horror would make me pay for that. Maybe I'd make it out anyway, merely crawl out broken, but the odds would be leaning the other way. I stared down my hands until they stopped shaking.

I was a few graveyards past a happy ending.

"So let's take a swing," I murmured, "and see where it gets me."

The power came easy: Night loved a winning battle. The Book's power felt smooth as an eggshell, without flaw, but I had broken through that before. The battering ram came down, the mangled globe creaking under the weight as I wielded the power in the

most simple, brutal way it could be wielded. I waited and watched through a hundred eyes and one, following the shape of the power as it distended under the pressure. And, eventually, fissured. A small break, more along the curve of the last shell than inside it, but there was a slight indent.

I flexed my will, turning pressure to liquid as Night poured down through the slight opening before it could close. It would do. It was weak leverage, but when you had enough strength to wield that could be enough. I wove hook after hook, tightened the weave and raised my arm. I took the deep currents in hand, closed my eyes and *pulled*. Was I in the dark, or was I the dark? It was hard to tell where the border was. My own heartbeat felt distant, as if I'd been submerged, but I had a lifeline. The chords of Night in my hand, pulling at me as I had pulled at them.

I came back to the world to a splintering sound that echoed of a scream, the shell cracking and breaking as I breathed out and Night tendrils pulled and picked and ripped it all apart. All that effort, I thought as my eyes opened, to expose no more than a thumb's worth of the Book of Some Things. But exposed it was, and I reached out for the leather-bound book with my hand. Light burned, a sun howling in indignation that I dare to darken it, but I had veiled greater suns than this.

"Fall," I ordered, and Night obeyed.

The Light did not give an inch even as I drowned it in darkness, but the dark was patient. Like a candle starved of air I watched it burn and burn and burn until there was nothing left to consume but itself, and then that pride ate itself hollow. Until there was but a speck left, an ember, and the light dimmed. I had won.

Damn me, I had won.

My fingertips found the leather cold to the touch. Blindly angry, I ripped out the ember from the book and watched it wilt. I held the speck of Light in the palm of my hand and looked through the Night, to the threshold of my tower in this realm and another. The moonlight was blinding, a curtain of pale, but through it cut two stark silhouettes. The First Prince and the Sword of Judgement, crossing the threshold together.

"Good," I said. "*Good*. Now we end this."

—

They climbed the stairs unhindered, I saw to that.

The dark parted for them, like a tide receding, and I heard the sound of their steps on the stone long before they passed through the gate into the tower's heart. Neither of them hurried, neither of them slow: it was a pace like the beat of a drum. It had the

taste of the inexorable to it. And when they came at last, entering a sea of Night broken only by the glow of the ember in my palm, the play of shadows cut the figure of them to the bone. As if only the crux of them was being shined upon, the rest of it claimed by the dark.

Hanno of Arwad, the tall knight with a workman's calloused hands. The sword at his side was little more than a line, his eyes a single streak of calm. Cordelia Hasenbach, the princess with the arrow-straight back. A raised chin and blue eyes burning cold.

Neither of them flinched away from the dark.

"You're late," I said.

My voice echoed across the Night, the only thing it did not swallow. No, instead the words reverberated across the room until the very last note faded, somehow faintly sounding of the cawing of crows. I felt talons digging into my shoulders, the presence of Sve Noc a tangible weight. I had the attention of my patronesses.

"But not too late," he replied.

His movement drew shape from light, the cut of his jaw and the length of the sword still in the sheath.

"Not so sure about that," I said. "Though at least the both of you made it here."

"Bears in the pit," she evenly said. "We saw. There is blinkered and there is blind."

A slash of pale gold across her brow, the whisper of long skirts against the stone.

"And what is it you see?" I scoffed.

"The lady of long strings, pulling at them still," he said. "Poisoning the chalice we are all to drink from."

Lips firmly set, the dull shine of a belt buckle.

"Too little," I said. "And much, much too late. If all you hold is what I hand you..."

My fingers closed around the ember of light, shadows like ribs cast on my face. I did not finish, crush it entirely and eat it whole, but the warning was plain. Better tyranny than a lackluster opposite. That mistake, at least, most of Calernia would live through.

"And what would closing that grip make you, I wonder?" she asked.

Curls like a river going down brocade, a tooth digging into skin to the very edge of piercing.

"The necessary evil," I smiled, all teeth under the hood. "You ought to be used to it by now."

"You are," he replied, blunt. "It is why you reach even when you should not."

Hair cut short I could make out the skin under, cloth hanging loose on his arm.

"What else is there?" I challenged. "I gave you warning. I bet you might live up to the boasts of your Gods, share a victory, but I see none of that before me."

"You see nothing," she said. "Because you are still in the pit."

A cheekbone like a crossguard, a blue sleeve hiding a hand. I almost laughed in Cordelia's face. Of course I was still in the pit. I'd started there, bleeding for silver, and odds were I'd die in there as well. Just because the pit got bigger and the toughs tougher didn't mean anything had changed.

"You've failed," I said, the regret in my voice honest. "Neither of you will stand. There is only one way left now."

Through, I thought.

"That is true," he acknowledged. "If you act alone."

The entire relief of him, for the briefest moment as he passed between two ribs: bruised but not beaten. A bearing of a fragile certainty. They were not yet done. I narrowed my eye at them, staring them down from all sides, but they were half shadows themselves in the depths of the dark.

"So I ask again," I said. "What else is there?"

"Bargain, Warden of the East," she said. "Do you not have the West before you?"

Half of her stood in the light, like she had been split in half: gold and winter and blue, for a heartbeat shone upon.

"Bargain instead of taking."

And she was gone, dress trailing a flutter behind her as she returned to the dark. My fingers, the ones still holding the Night, clenched. Knots formed around them. She was serious, I thought, and Hanno was not contradicting her. They were mad.

"Half the world?" I mused. "That will have a hefty price."

"Is that an excuse for stealing instead?" he asked.

The good hand on the Good sword, a shoulder pulling tight.

"I'll bite," I languidly shrugged. "What is it that you want for your half?"

"Give up power," Cordelia Hasenbach challenged. "Your hands should only hold so much: another must lead the Damned."

A glimpse of light, but all I saw was the eyes: cold and blue and hard as the iron her people had once named kings for. *You want me to step away*, I thought. *To become the sole keeper of the Accords and bind my hands with my own rules*. There would be captains for Above and Below but I would not be one of them, instead an arbiter between. My fingers clenched even further. Did she even begin to understand how much power she was asking me to throw away? Already I was abdicating my throne, was I to burn every last scrap of influence I held along with it? What she described, it would leave me no authority save through the Accords. While they kept their followings intact, giving up empty claims in exchange for the root of my own power.

"And while I cut my own legs the two of you will keep your seats, of course," I replied.

I shook my head, darkly amused.

"You people can never really lose, can you?" I said, smiling my father's smile.

"Can *you*?" Hanno of Arwad retorted.

All I saw in the light was his hand, the fingers cut to the phalange. Hanno's own bargain.

"On the cusp of your oldest trick, another ruin of a victory," he said, "do you have it in you to compromise anyway, Catherine Foundling?"

Night roiled with my anger. Another hero coming out of the cold asking me to meet them halfway after having stepped an inch to my mile. Another fairweather friend demanding my cloak. My fingers closed further around the ember, the shadow ribs pulling closer.

"Compromise takes from both sides," I bit out. "What is it that you're giving up?"

The two of them stood at the edge of the light, little more than silhouettes. The three of us around the heart of the Book, like three strangers huddled around a fire.

"I will abdicate all power in Procer," Cordelia said. "And spend the rest of my life in Cardinal serving the Accords."

"Their laws will have to be enforced on Named," Hanno said. "I will pledge my sword to the duty, under your authority."

I took half a step back. *Lose everything*, they'd demanded of me. And now they were offering everything in return. A simple solution, but the intricacies spun out along with my thoughts. She'd build Cardinal as a city and the skeleton of the Accords applied, the schools and the bureaucracy. And he'd make himself into the enforcer of the laws all Named must abide, the one sent into the breach when horror got loose. The both of them would grant legitimacy that I simply did not have, warlord that I was. And they would also be a noose around my neck: I could not ask dark deeds of that enforcer, I could not plot conquest past that chancellor.

Wings and an anchor at the same time. An elegant, balanced solution.

It just required me to be willing to give up every speck of authority I held beyond treaties that were still nothing more than ink on parchment. To let slip from my grasp every single thing I'd fought for since the night I had almost been strangled to death in an alley. Talons dug into my shoulders. My goddesses were watching, waiting. Wanting to hear my answer. I looked at the two silhouettes in the waning light, feeling the weight of their gazes and silence, wondering. Had the Sisters had felt like this that night in the Everdark, when I had offered Winter and asked for salvation in return?

I got no answer from them but expected nothing else. After all, it was my turn on their side of the altar.

"Crabs in the bucket," I murmured. "It always comes back to that in the end, doesn't it?"

Having to trust that the others wanted to leave the bucket too, that they didn't just want to drag you back down. The leap of faith. And I still remembered what it was like, kneeling before silver eyes and asking the only thing you really could. *Help me. Please.*

"It might fail," I told them.

They waited, silent. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"But that's we always say, isn't it?"

My father had never understood, to the end, that sometimes it wasn't about winning. It'd gotten him killed. And maybe, I thought, this would get me killed too.

But it was the only way out of the pit, and what else could I do but try?

I released the Night, the knots around my hand unmaking themselves. The sea withdrawing around all three of us until the last ember of the Book shone like a firefly cradled in my hand.

"Half the world," I quietly said. "Bargain struck."

Cordelia stepped forward first, reaching out and gently unclasping my fingers. The ember burned against my palm, free. Hanno met my eye, leaning forward over the altar and smiling.

He blew out the Light.

Darkness swallowed whole the room, then it swallowed me too.

—

I woke up standing on ashes.

In the distance the wind howled, kicking up great clouds of ash and dust, and my leg was throbbing. My sword was at my hip, my staff in my hand. Both were cold to the touch. I pulled my cloak tight around me, shivering, and looked ahead. There was a great stone ramp there, leading to a broken city. It had been built in a tall plateau, which lay shattered as ash rained down from the sky and the wind whipped at hollowed out husks. I'd been here before, I knew. I'd fought to defend this city and lost.

"Hainaut," I murmured.

The wind gave no answer. The sky above was an endless stretch of storm clouds, red lightning crackling above and making itself known through the flashes of light. The whole world seemed coated in bleak grey light. I sighed,

"At least it isn't Liesse," I muttered. "We have haunted each other long enough."

Around us was a vast plain of ash, so there was only one way to go: forward, into the city. My leg felt like nails were being driven into it, but I pulled my hood down and limped towards the ramp. With every excruciating step, I could not help but think I had been here before. Not Hainaut, but the rest. This plain of ash. But I could not tell when or how, no more than I remembered how I had come here. All I knew was that my answers lay ahead.

The journey was long. The sky began to darken as the hours passed, shadows lengthening around me. But I reached the bottom of the slope, and there at last it all fell into place. Half-buried in the ash, revealed by a careless twist of wind, I found a corpse. A legionary, one of mine. Just some boy who couldn't have been older than eighteen, his skull split open and his eyes unseeing.

Come to a foreign field to die for strangers.

"Name dream," I said, then shook my head scornfully.

I glanced up at the sky.

"Death did not shake me when I was barely more than a girl," I told it, "and I've waded through oceans of it since. What did you expect?"

"For you to *learn*."

It had been many years since I'd last dreamt one of these dreams, but the woman who'd called out to me still felt like I'd seen her yesterday. Why shouldn't she, when she was wearing my face? Older than me, her hair cut short and her robes pure white, but we were still twins. At her hip a long and slender sword hung from her belt, pure silver, but that wasn't what drew my attention. She was holding some sort of case with a cloth draped over it.

"Added to your arsenal, I see," I amiably replied.

The doppelganger glared at me.

"And you still avoid the reproaches to which you have no answer," my twin said.

"I've learned a lot of things," I told her, half-smiling. "Just not the sort you like."

"Not the sort anyone should like," my twin said. "How many cities' worth of dead now trail in our wake, Catherine? Enough of them it might make up a kingdom. Your very own graveyard crown."

"Better my graveyard than the Dead King's," I flatly replied. "Mine, at least, will sleep in peace."

"They should have drowned us at birth," she said. "Evil as the act would have been, it would still have been better than the plague of a woman we turned into. Again and again you were given the choice to turn away, to do better, and where did that lead you?"

She gestured up at broken Hainaut.

"Ruin heaped on ruin," my twin said. "You are the worst of what we were as a girl, honed to a fine edge."

"You never learned how to compromise either, did you?" I asked. "You still think it's better to accomplish nothing than to do bad things."

"Look around you, Catherine," she gently said. "What is you've accomplished?"

My fingers clenched around my staff.

"You were wrong then," I replied, "and you're wrong now. Doing nothing is worse than being Evil. It's just *going along* with everything that's wrong with the world."

"And is it a better world you've made?" she asked me.

I breathed out, looking up at the sky. I could have been flippant, have made a joke of it, but it would have felt wrong. *This is the last time I'm ever going to see you, isn't it?* If I was to face my doubts manifest, I would face them honestly.

"Ask me when the war's over," I finally said. "When I'm no longer holding my sword."

Face unreadable, she slowly nodded.

"What now?" I asked her.

"I guide you into the city," my twin replied.

She pulled away the cloth, dropping it into the ash and revealing the wooden lantern below. There was no flame inside, I saw. It was an ember of Light, the same I'd seen Hanno blow out. Around us, night fell over the world.

"Follow me closely," she said. "The way is treacherous."

She was not lying. The streets were cracked, houses and towers falling apart as the wind mournfully twisted past them. The rain of ash blinded the view of the sky, the rare lightning and distant starlight crowning the clouds. Hainaut had been turned into a monument to ruin and death, corpses dangling from every edge and crammed in every nook and cranny. Under the lantern's light I glimpsed faces I had known, soldiers I'd once laughed with or ridden by. Once I thought I saw Nauk's face, scarred with Summer fire, but it was too far to be sure.

I made certain never to look too closely at any goblin's face.

"Usually I meet the other one first," I said, following her into the deeper city.

"Evil has always come easier to your hand," my twin curtly replied.

"But not tonight?" I asked.

"It was not it that bought you entry," she said.

Her tone made it clear the conversation was over and she ignored my other attempts to talk. I followed her in silence through the tomb of a maze, recognizing where we were headed: the heart of the city, where there had once been a reservoir of water. It'd been broken during the battle, the plateau split by sorcery and

the wrath of the Firstborn. We found the other one there, sitting on a broken pillar by the edge of the drop as she ran a whetting stone along the edge of her blade. The clouds parted as we padded across the dust-covered stone, moonlight peeking through and wreathing her silhouette.

The other twin still had that pink scar across her nose, her long hair kept in a braid reaching down to her coat of mail. Regular's armour. She had a mangled look about her, worn down from war, but for once I was more worn than her. She wore a blood-specked tabard over the mail and a knife at her hip that I recognized even sheathed.

I would not soon forget the knife I'd used to kill my father.

"Ah, Cat," the Evil twin grinned. "Welcome back, my girl."

"'evening," I drawled. "You look in a fine mood."

The Good twin stepped to the side, silent and glaring.

"Shit, why *wouldn't* I be?" the scarred twin laughed. "It's been a long few years, Catherine, but look at us now."

She waved around the sword, enthused.

"We're basically Queen Bitch of Calernia," the Evil twin said. "Sure, it took a damned lot of killing to get there but that's why we've got a Hell of a throne to lounge on."

Ugh, a pun. There was a reason I'd killed her half the times we'd met. She leaned forward.

"And just between you and me, my girl?" she said. "It makes our legs look *good*."

"I don't do a lot of lounging these days," I noted. "It's actually pretty painful on the leg."

She rolled her eyes at me.

"Yeah, that's the one part I've some issues with," she said. "You need to cut that out. Fix your leg, put on your big girl pants and properly take this continent in hand."

"Should we now," I flatly said.

"You know we could," the Evil twin grinned. "It wouldn't even be that hard. A few clever choices while we pull down Keter on Neshamah's head and there'll be no one left who could stop us. Besides, we both know they're all going to be so pathetically *grateful* once we pull them out of the fire again."

"So the bargain I just made," I said, "I ought to discard it."

She smiled at me.

"Do you why I sit here?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"The view?" I guessed.

"That's one word for it," she said. "Come closer."

I limped forward, the lantern's light burning behind me and the moon above, until I stood at the edge of the drop. The plateau had been shattered, I knew, but down there I saw not a single loose stone. There might be some at the bottom, but how could I tell when a kingdom's worth of mangled corpses had been piled over it? I'd seen a lot of death, since I became the Squire and in the years since, but that sight still gave me pause. How many thousands were down there?

"Who are they?" I quietly asked.

"The city's the people who got us here," the twin said. "Those, they're the people we've killed. With wars, with choices, because it would have cost too much to save them."

My fingers clenched. *They should have drowned us at birth*, the other spirit had said.

"And that's the view you chose?"

"It's what we are, Cat," the spirit smiled. "The girl who did that. I just want you to stop fucking around and *own* it."

I looked down at the dead, unblinking.

"You never learned to lose," I finally said. "That's your mistake."

The spirit eyed me, unimpressed.

"Why would I want to?"

"Because when you look at these you see victories," I said. "It's the only way you know how to live: going from one fight to another, hoping that *one more battle* will fix it all."

I shook my head.

"It's prayer," I said. "Below's favourite kind. All in every time, until inevitably you lose it all."

"We haven't lost yet," the twin said. "I'll take those odds."

"They'll take you," I replied. "It's a rigged game. It's how they've always gotten us."

I looked back at the other spirit, who stood watching us with her lantern in hand. I stepped away from the edge.

"The first time I met you two," I said, "I killed you both."

"Good times," Evil twin grinned.

"The second time," I continued, "I left you behind."

"And the demon broke you," the other spirit replied.

Mistakes, I thought. Both times it'd been mistakes. And I'd never seen them with the Beast.

"It's the end of the road, you know," I quietly said. "There won't be another one after this."

Neither of them answered. Their gazes were on me.

"It's the third time," I said. "Let's make it count."

I breathed out, looking up at the moon through the parted clouds, and let myself loosen. Stopped trying to trick my way out of this, to win it, to use it as a tool. It was a journey, nothing more and nothing less. A hand gripped my right shoulder.

"Do better," she whispered into my ear. "Remember the girl who wanted to save her home. She was always the best of you."

A hand gripped my left shoulder.

"Don't flinch," she whispered into my ear. "Remember the girl who wanted to be the storm. She's the one who got you here."

We stood the three of us under the moon, in the heart of broken Hainaut, as below us the corpses began moved. Not as a horde but as one, a behemoth of a creature rising from the cradle of death made of a hundred thousand corpses. It stood tall and terrible, blotting out the sky, watching me through a sea of dead faces.

"Hello, old friend," I softly greeted the Beast.

It opened a gaping maw, baring fangs made of broken swords and spears and banners. It was a beast, I thought, fit to swallow the world whole. West and East, what did it matter? It would devour it all.

"I once told you I wasn't afraid of you," I smiled. "But it was a lie. Did you know?"

It laughed, the sound a thing of horror.

"Let me tell you again, then," I said. *"I'm not afraid of you."*

The behemoth of corpses climbed out of the pit, standing over me. An entire world of death enveloped me on all sides. I cocked my head to the side.

"Is it a lie now?" I asked it.

Its massive head lowered and it watched me, suddenly snapping out. I did not flinch.

"You know what we are now," I told it. "Who we are."

I looked up into its eyes.

"The Warden," I claimed, and the world shivered with the truth of it.

The Beast roared in approval. *Time to wake up*, I thought, and the great maw of death opened wide.

I never felt it close around me.

thehidno

Well EE you did it!

i made a wordpress account just to comment here.

i have been following this story since you the academy arc all the way back in book one when i started my first study. i did not know what kind of ride i got on back then but i do know your story kept me company during good time and bad times. Right now i am working on the last assignment of my history degree in my second study and i just wanted to let you know how much i appreciate all you have done, and how well you have tied everything together.

because this right here is my new favorite moment in the series finally surpassing Cat and Indranis moment in the library.

thank you for everything you have done i am not the most involved member of the community yet i still want to thank you for all your work.

i wish you the best in finishing your work and wish you the best in whatever you want to do next!

Kind Regards,
TheHidno

Chapter 40: Resolutions

"An empire is a barrel with a hole: you must never cease filling it, lest it spill out at your feet."

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

I'd expected to wake up aching, but it was the opposite: it was like I'd had my best night of sleep in years. Maybe in all my life, I thought as my eyes fluttered open. It was like every ounce of me was sated with rest, a start from a blank state. But, as I found out moving under my covers, there were limits to the magic of that. My bad leg still throbbed like it was going to burst. A look around told me two things: I'd been brought to my rooms in the guest palace, and someone had been keeping watch on my sleep from the other side of the bed.

Seated in a chair wide enough it must have been brought just for him, Hakram met my gaze.

"You look tired," I said, the words escaping my mouth before I could think about it twice.

The tall orc shifted in his seat, the steel of his prosthetic hand brushing loudly against the cushions.

"I am," the Warlord replied. "Long days and short nights. You know how it is."

"Always too few hours in the day," I agreed, then hesitated.

We had been apart for long, but he could still read me better than anyone.

"You've been asleep for three days," Hakram gravelled. "They brought you to Archer in the tower, saying that eating the Book made you fall unconscious."

"It wasn't the Book, I don't think," I muttered. "More the transition itself."

He studied me carefully.

"I can believe that," the Warlord said. "I could feel the pull of your Name from outside the room even when you were unconscious and it is stronger now. More focused."

He wasn't joking, I saw. And the more my gaze lingered the more I saw. Not from my good eye but from the one the Hawk had taken,

the hollow socket. I could... It was like the stars I had seen in the void as Warden of the East, but the perception had been refined. His Name was like a translucent fire raging over him, when I focused, and I could make out beating hearts. Only one had solidified. *He has only one aspect*, I thought. And it went further than that. The more I watched the silhouette, the secret fire, the more I saw that it was connected. Chords spun out, stories I felt I might be able to follow by running my finger along the connection.

I should be able to see more, some bone-deep instinct told me, but I was being hobbled. The Warlord was a villain, and half of my eye was still in my enemy's hands.

"I became the Warden," I said.

His brow creased in surprise.

"Not of something," Hakram slowly said. "Just Warden."

"I suppose there's no need to specify," I replied, "if I'm Warden of everything."

The air shivered in the room. He felt it too. And yet I was still a villain, I thought. Night still came when I called. Transitioning had not changed who or what I was, only amplified it. It would be the same after me: a hero could hold this Name as well. The Role of standing above Named, at the top of the Accords, it did not belong to either Above or Below. It would be what we made of it, because it was *us* who'd made the Liesse Accords. For good or ill, it was in our hands.

Hakram was still watching me, face unreadable.

"All of the Woe have gone through two Names," he said, "save you. It took you three to settle."

I hummed, pensive. That was one way to see it.

"There's always a cost," I said.

I'd given up much to come into this Name, at least in the way that I had. Would I have been a simpler sort of villain, if I'd taken the Book by force instead of taking it with the blessing of the two claimants to the West? My gut said yes. Still a Warden, maybe, but more a Warden of the East bloated for having devoured the other side's strength than the more... balanced mantle I now wore.

Hakram suddenly grimaced, looking away.

"I was not fair, when we spoke in the thicket," he said.

I frowned.

"What's bringing this on?"

"Until I found Archer, I did not know whether you were dead or alive," Hakram said. "I trusted, Catherine, but I could not be sure. And so I thought of our last conversation again, that it might be the last words we ever spoke."

"Lancing a wound is never pretty," I said.

"Aye," Hakram said, "but while it was not only you I was angry with, you still received both helpings of blame."

I made to speak, not sure what I should, but he raised a hand to ask me to let him speak. My teeth clicked shut. Fine.

"Did I ever tell you," he asked, "what the Tyrant saw when he used his perception aspect on me?"

I shook my head. I'd always assumed that Hakram was even keeled enough Kairos had simply seen nothing to use against him.

"Nothing," Hakram quietly said.

My breath caught. That was, well... I took a moment to digest that. What it meant, that he'd had so little in his life except for me and the Woe.

"I used to think it was a virtue," the Warlord said. "That I could step away and see clearly because of it. But that was fear, looking back. It was easier to want the things you did, dream your dreams, than have my own. And maybe if things had gone differently, I would have spent a life satisfied with that."

I breathed in sharply. I could see where this was going.

"But then you saw Scribe," I said.

"I saw too much of myself in her," Hakram said. "And did not like what I saw."

I sighed.

"And what does that mean, Hakram?" I pushed back. "I get it – you thought I might one day do to you what my father did to her. Cut her adrift after a lifetime. But why are you telling me this?"

We'd already tread those grounds, revisiting them would do no good.

"I stand behind much of what I said that day," he said, "but you did not deserve all the anger you received. For that I owe apology."

He paused, reluctant.

"And you were right about one thing."

His jaw clenched.

"I could have come to you with it," Hakram gravelled. "I did not. I do not regret becoming the Warlord, Catherine, but I dislike the thought that part of what drove me was fear – that deep down I thought it easier to return bearing the Name than to speak to you as the Adjutant."

I studied his face for a long time, the craggy green leather of it, and found only calm there. Slowly, I gave a nod. But I did not speak after, because the conversation was not over and it was not for me to finish it. We'd parted on my words, last time. If there was to be an ending it would be of his own ushering, whatever it might be. The silence lengthened.

"You told me it was all in my hands, last time," Hakram finally said.

"And meant it."

He did not hurry to words, which I was not sure whether to curse or appreciate. If it was to be the knife, then let him be quick with it. I'd need the time to lick my wounds.

"I never thought you would ever turn a knife on me," the tall orc admitted. "Leave me behind, maybe, but never steel."

His clenched his fingers of bone into a fist.

"I saw it in your eyes that night," Hakram said. "But I don't think I believed it until you spoke the words out loud."

Part of me felt the urge to apologize, to bury the hatchet at any cost, but I took it by the neck and *squeezed*. I was who I was. Maybe I still had some change left in me, but not so much as that: in the end, if the stakes were high enough I had run out of lines I wasn't willing to cross to win. Suddenly, he snorted.

"It is a crooked thing," he said, "but in a way it reassures me. You didn't just see the Adjutant that night, you saw me."

"I saw you," I evenly replied, "and raised a knife."

He shook his head.

"I came as the Warlord," Hakram said, "and stood against you. I cannot leave your shadow and in the same breath demand its protection."

I studied him quietly.

"And now?"

"I don't know," he quietly laughed. "It is new ground for me as well."

I bit my lip.

"It can't be the way it was before," I said.

"I don't want it to be," Hakram honestly said. "Do you?"

Yes, part of me whispered. But could I really ask that when I now knew what'd it cost him?

"No," I replied, and found I largely meant it. "But now I'm at a loss. I've never-

Lost someone I love to anything but the grave, I thought. I don't even understand how I got your friendship the first time, how could I possibly know what to do now?

"- I've never," I weakly finished.

He laughed at me, the prick.

"Eloquent," he teased, smiling at my rude gesture.

The mirth passed, though never quite entirely left.

"We start from the beginning," Hakram said, leaning forward and offering his arm.

When we'd first met in the valley all those years ago, I remembered, I'd been the one to offer. Lips quirking, I clasped the arm in a legionary's salute. It was steel I felt under my fingers now, and his own found the cloth that these days I wore more often than mail, but it was better this way. We weren't the same kids we'd been in Spite Valley, playing war games in the Tower's shadow. It wasn't the same two people meeting. We parted after a moment and he drew back, rising to his feet.

"There may not be much time, in the coming days," he said.

To meet, he meant. To try to forge the scraps of what we used to be into something else.

"So we'll have to make it," I firmly replied.

He nodded, hesitation coming to his face.

"In Keter," Hakram said, "there will come a time beyond armies. When Named will venture ahead."

I nodded. We both knew the Dead King wouldn't die to anything as mundane as armies.

"When that time comes," he quietly said, "I would like to fight with the Woe."

My heart clenched. To that, at least, I had an answer.

"If the Woe are fighting," I simply replied, "where else would you be?"

I saw a weight leave his shoulders, and some part of me wanted to weep. When had it come to this? *Lancing a wound is never pretty*, I reminded myself. But it was necessary, if the limb was to heal instead of fester. Hakram stiffly nodded at me, and a heartbeat later he was gone. Out the door and into the palace, leaving behind him an absence that felt almost physical. I leaned back into my pillows. Soon enough someone else would enter the room and Creation would come calling, responsibilities dragging me back, but for now I just closed my eyes and listened to the sound of my own breathing. It was a faint thing, barely more than a wisp, but I remembered what hope felt like.

And for the first time in months, I held hope that the pieces of who we'd been might not stop the people we'd become from finding a way to fit together.

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Proceran palaces grew salons like caves grew mushroom, but one of the upsides of that cultural sickness was that you could send for a drink anywhere. I was not surprised in the slightest that Cordelia's personal steward not only knew that I drank an herbal concoction for pain but the exact mix as well. Aisha ought to be flattered that her old family recipe had become subject to foreign espionage, I figured, and it really was quite convenient. I finished the mug – served at the perfect temperature to drink, because *of course* it was – and set it down on a pretty little glass table, trying to tell the Sword of Judgment through my eyes that his hovering was getting on my nerves.

"Another day of rest might be forgiven, given the circumstances," Hanno said.

Evidently, I needed to work on my glares.

"Time's the one thing we can't spare," I replied. "Besides, I'm fine."

I was not, in fact, fine. I was still a little slow on my feet and... unsteady. Sometimes it felt like I didn't fit in my own skin anymore, that I was moving with limbs there weren't my body's. From the steady look the dark-skinned man fixed me with, he was well aware of the lie and debating whether or not he should call me out on it. Fortunately, I had a secret weapon.

"I will not venture an opinion as to Her Excellency's health," Cordelia Hasenbach mildly said, "but she does seem fit for light duties such as discussion."

That Excellency business was going to get old fast, I could already feel it. And it was probably half the reason she was sticking so closely to the title, because underneath all that courtesy Cordelia did have a streak of bitingly polite pettiness.

"See," I smiled, "we're just talking. And we've got a lot of grounds to cover, so let's be about it."

Hanno dared to roll his eyes at me as he took a seat, the absolute ass, and I was not sure whether to be pleased or insulted. It'd taken only moments in the same room to realize that in the aftermath of our little tiff in Arcadia he'd considerably warmed to me. Being willing to take a step back and meet them halfway had not quite restored our relationship to the easy friendship of the early days, but it was a damn sight better than the cool distance that'd followed the Arsenal. I'd had a few looks at him through my dead eye, the one that saw much, and found him covered in burning pale flames. He did not quite have a Name, but it was not far.

I tried to have a look ahead, see what he was moving towards, but it was too tricky when I had to maintain a conversation at the same time.

"There are urgent matters," Cordelia agreed. "Negotiations with the Kingdom Under must be carried out to a finish before we march on Keter, which I consider the priority of the Grand Alliance's foreign diplomacy, but there are internal matters to settle."

She, on the other hand, did not have so much as a fleck of power gathering around her. Cordelia Hasenbach had fallen on the side of being true to the woman she had been on the floor of the Chamber of Assembly: mortal to the bitter end.

"The compromise between the Blood and the Bestowed," I said.

"To begin," Cordelia agreed. "Though on grounds more esoteric, I believe there is question in need of an answer as well."

She slid a look at Hanno when she said 'esoteric', getting a nod out of him.

"The Severance needs a wielder," he plainly said. "The decision must be made before we set out north."

I hummed, leaning back into the plushy seat.

"All of that starts second place," I finally said. "Before anything else, we need to properly enforce the arrangement we made in Arcadia."

Cordelia's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Settling the representatives under the Truce and Terms," she said. "You mean to step down immediately."

"From that position," I agreed. "I'll still be Queen of Callow until we finish things in Keter, at least in principle. In practice I'll begin passing authority to Vivienne as of today."

I didn't even foresee friction there for the rest of the war. Viv wasn't much of a general and knew it, while I'd made a career off of handing off the ruling parts to someone else why I went about the business of being a warlord. It was only fitting that my last war would end my reign with it.

"I am glad," Hanno said. "Princess Vivienne is respected, but your legions would not fight for another queen as they do for you."

I waved that away, though I was a little flattered. It was true, I knew that regardless of him, but hearing it from someone like Hanno added a certain something.

"We've been through a lot of mud together," I said. "But back to the selection: the first thing to settle is whether or not you'll be standing to represent the heroes."

If he did not it would be a race, I figured, but as I saw it there was little chance of anyone else filling the shoes if he wanted to keep them on.

"That is my wish," Hanno said. "Until the fall of Keter I would keep the office, setting it aside when I swear myself to enforce the Accords."

I had no trouble with that, to be honest. I would have accepted it even before our relations thawed, so my approval was only growing. There was one potential source of objections, though, sitting pretty in her seat as she delicately sipped at lemon water. Cordelia noticed my inquisitive glance, which I hadn't tried to make subtle in the slightest.

"It is not my place to argue for or against," the First Prince evenly said. "When we struck a bargain, Your Excellency, I accepted your authority over certain matters. I will not go back on my word."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"And if were to ask for your opinion?" I pressed.

She did not look pleased, but neither did she fight me.

"It is the natural choice," Cordelia admitted. "And it will ease the tradition from the Truce and Terms into the Liesse Accords."

She still didn't like him much, I thought. The esteem they'd once had for each other had been eroded down by years of speaking past each other and it would just as many years for it to be restored. If it ever was. But she was willing to work with him and not the kind of woman to blind herself to someone's virtues because of a personal animosity.

"I'll look forward to you taking your seat again, then," I said, nodding at Hanno.

Then I sighed.

"The selection on my side of the fence is going to be a little more complicated, unfortunately," I admitted.

Of the Woe, both Archer and Hierophant had the strength to be able to claim the seat as well as strong ties to me that'd help them keep it. The trouble was that neither of them would want to get anywhere near that seat given a choice and this wasn't the kind of position to take half-heartedly. Not even just until the end of the war. Keter was going to be vice tightening around Named and we'd need steady hands at the helm if we were going to keep all these very dangerous people from cracking under the pressure.

"You have been grooming the Barrow Sword as a captain for almost two years now," Hanno noted. "Do you not think him fit?"

"There's going to be a brawl," I frankly said. "And I'm not sure he can take the Red Knight, who will absolutely throw her hat into the ring."

And she was strong enough she'd be able to chew through most Named in a fight, but she'd be a fucking disaster as a representative. For one, at least nine tenths of everyone who ever met her couldn't stand her. If she were just awful as a person it'd be one thing, but from the reports I'd read she was unfit to command even a band of five. Hanno grimaced.

"Even Christophe is wary of her," he said. "And he is not a man to scare easily."

It was her aspects that made her a threat. By simple ability she was a very skilled fighter but hardly impossible to handle. When you threw in **Devour**, though, she became a headache to handle. If there was anything that aspect couldn't take a bite out of, we'd yet to encounter it.

"I believe you once sent the Archer to discipline her, after a brawl with other villains," Cordelia noted.

"I'd bet on Indrani over her," I agreed. "But Indrani won't want anything to do with those responsibilities."

She'd made it very clear to me that command of a roving warband was the most she was interested in taking up.

"You misunderstand me," the First Prince said. "I mean to point out that you, the appointed representative for Below, saw it fit to use her as your champion."

Ah, I thought. Clever. Archer wouldn't want the seat, but she would absolutely be willing to fight as Ishaq's champion should he be challenged – and I'd set precedents for that over my own tenure to no objection from my charges. Trust Cordelia Hasenbach to find the loophole no matter the game.

"That might work," I acknowledged. "I'll need to speak with the both of them first."

Hanno politely cleared his throat.

"Have you considered," he asked, "the possibility of the Warlord laying his own claim?"

"He won't," I said, certain. "He's got too much on his plate already, herding the Clans and hammering out the aftermath of the peace in Praes."

I'd had to juggle the duties of a queen and a representative before and I'd found the amount of work crushing even with the likes of Hakram and Scribe supporting me. And that was ruling Callow, leading professional armies. The Clans would need much more personal a touch than my people ever had.

"But if he does?" Hanno pressed.

"Then I won't stand against or for it," I replied.

He'd left me to stand on his own two feet. I would not disrespect that by propping him up should he reach for more. That settled the talk of selection, at least for a moment, so I let Cordelia gently guide the conversation back to other matters.

"The talks with the Blood can be ended promptly," she said, "and it would set a good tone to act swiftly. For a Warden to settle what was before a matter of debate will begin to prove the worth of the office."

Going unsaid was that a lot of heroes would find it hard to swallow no matter what the Sword of Judgment said, even when they felt the pull of my Name against them. Being decisive from the

start would do a lot to convince people it was worth ceding authority to me. It occurred to me, after a moment, that I'd never told either of them what my Name now was. And yet the both of them had been referring to it freely since we met. I almost shivered.

Sometimes fate's hand was less discreet than others.

"You're not going to like what I have to say," I bluntly told her. "The entire point of having a Warden is to have someone who can settle disputes involving Named. Sometimes that will mean having power over signatory nations even if you don't like it. A very narrow sort of power, relating only to Named, but it'll still be there."

She visibly did *not* like what I had to say.

"You have already heard my arguments," the First Prince said. "I believe it a poor precedent to set that a decision of Levant's ruling council might be overturned by Named on account of Named."

She paused, mastering herself.

"Yet that is not my decision to make," Cordelia conceded. "That is the bargain I struck with you. And the existence of a single office instead of rival ones does put to rest certain fears of partisanship I had previously held."

I considered her for a moment, honestly a little doubtful she'd given in so easily. Maybe I shouldn't have been, I eventually thought. She'd been the First Prince, not a queen, and that wasn't the same thing. Especially not the kind of queen that I'd been, inheriting a culled nobility and direct authority over most of the largest cities in Callow as well as the only standing army. I had a lot more power than most Fairfaxes ever did. Cordelia Hasenbach, though, had been wrestling with the Highest Assembly all her reign. She'd had to give ground before, I thought, suffer defeats on matters she very much cared about.

She would exercise the power she could to the letter of the law and no further, taking the defeats when they came and living to fight the battle another day. That was her way.

"Good," I muttered, flicking a glance at Hanno. "And you?"

"I have no more objections now than I did before," the dark-skinned hero shrugged.

Fair enough.

"Then it's settled," I said. "I'll sit down with the Blood tonight and get the terms put to ink."

With that out of the way, Hanno himself brought up the next decision in need of being made.

"Have you given thought to the Severance?" he asked.

I clenched my fingers, unclenched them. Give and take, that was what'd brought us here. I had not come out ahead by listening to the tyrant's whisper in the back of my head.

"Only a hero can wield it," I said, "so that takes it out of my hand. Should you be chosen as representative for Above again, I'll leave the decision in your hands."

My gut said either him or the Mirror Knight, but it was hard to be sure. Hanno watched me with those calm, patient eyes.

"You will want the final word," he stated.

I did want that. Very much. My instincts demanded it, a precaution in case the heroes fucked up again and some unfit idiot ended up wielding the single most important artefact of this war. But it couldn't be that way.

"This only works if I trust your judgement," I made myself say. "So I'll trust your judgement, Hanno."

The translucent flames around him I could see, if I concentrated hard enough, only had a single solid heart within them – and it tasted of memory. **Recall**, had to be. He'd lost the aspect he had once called on every time he flipped that coin of his, likely forever. It was Hanno of Arwad's judgement I was betting on, not the Tribunal's, and trust didn't mean anything if it was offered on the cheap. He did not hide his surprise, or the strange emotion that flickered through his eyes after.

"Thank you," he finally said. "I will keep you informed."

I nodded, uncomfortable, and was dimly grateful when Cordelia nudged the conversation towards what she most cared about. Hanno went along just as easily, which was only natural considering he'd also put quite a bit of his back into dealing with the dwarves.

"A united front when meeting them again would improve our position," Cordelia said. "The three of us, certainly, and perhaps the representative for Below as well."

"Sure," I said, "but that's posturing, not substance. We need something to come at them with. I don't suppose you'd care to share what it is you've been digging up in the Salian archives all this time?"

"Ah," the First Prince faintly smiled, "then it was you."

I cocked an eyebrow, admitting nothing.

"Or Princess Vivienne perhaps," Cordelia said. "Thieves of her skill are passingly rare."

"She's a princess now, you know," I chided. "She doesn't steal anymore."

I let a beat pass.

"When a princess steals from foreigners, it's called diplomacy."

The only born royal out of the three of us was less than amused, but I caught Hanno's lips twitching. Yeah, of course that one would agree. I doubted the fucker had paid taxes to anyone since age sixteen, ascetic vagrant that he was.

"So?" I pressed.

"It occurred to me after our talks with the Herald of the Deep that we were missing the forest for the trees," Cordelia said. "We thought of the cities and why he wanted them, but did not consider *how* they would be held."

"Strength, presumably," I said. "Assuming they get to cram their terms down our throats."

"Strength would involve dwarven arms," the First Prince pointed out.

Well, yes. It wasn't like they were lacking in either manpower or armaments. They'd just seeded colonies across the northern third of Calernia while simultaneously providing arms for large armies across several fronts.

"I don't see your point," I admitted.

"It would mean dwarves on the surface," Hanno said. "Thousands for every city, come to live under the sun permanently."

I blinked. Shit, they were right. I was so used to thinking in terms of the Kingdom Under just being another empire to deal with that I'd forgotten this demand was breaking a long-term policy of isolation from the surface. The most dwarves Calernians usually saw were mercenaries hired through Mercantis.

"That's a lot of people away from their usual centres of power," I muttered. "At a time where their population's being spread out up north."

Was there even a precedent for dwarves ever sharing a city with someone? I couldn't recall one offhand.

"I imagine the Kingdom Under sees it as installing an armed ruling caste," Cordelia said. "They chose cities instead of empty land for a reason. But in practice, the Herald is achieving something else entirely."

"Three city-states sitting atop massively profitable trade routes to the underground," I finished, "and little to no real oversight. Outrageously wealthy pocket kingdoms for him to rule over."

The First Prince nodded.

"I attempted to discern the worth of the trade involved and acquire an idea of the Kingdom Under's wealth," she said. "While you were asleep, I finished the work as much as it will ever be."

I cocked my head to the side.

"And?"

"For at least the next two centuries, the cities would represent more wealth than the entire Fourteenth and Fifteenth Expansion put together," Cordelia said, "while involving less of a tenth of the people involved in these."

So small, rich kingdoms living under the protection of the prominent military power of Calernia.

"Sounds like a golden retirement to me," I frankly said. "With just enough challenges to tackle he won't ever get bored."

"My thoughts exactly," the First Prince coldly smiled.

"You're wrong."

I'd almost forgotten Hanno was there. I turned an eye to him, skeptical.

"There's speculation," I conceded, "but the foundations are solid."

"You are also taking the most uncharitable interpretation as fact," he pointed out. "Not unreasonably, given the Herald's behaviour, but it blinds you to a truth."

"And what would that be?" Cordelia asked, tone cutting.

"I do not know what the Role of a Herald of the Deeps is," Hanno said, "but if he was seeking to leave that life behind his Name would be weakening."

He met my gaze.

"Having been in the same room as him, did you sense such a thing?"

I chewed my lip.

"No," I admitted. "And if it'd been there, I would have sensed it."

My sense of Names had become unusually keen after I became Warden of the East. The dwarven Name had felt odd to my senses, but in no way broken or fading. Which meant Hanno was right.

"So he's trying to fulfill his Role still," I noted. "That's interesting. How would pocket kingdoms help the Kingdom Under?"

"A queen's perspective," Hanno admonished.

I narrowed my eye, mentally taking a step back and looking at it another way.

"He's a hero, so he's trying to help *part* of the kingdom," I corrected. "The downtrodden. Not the whole realm, and certainly not in a ruling sense. The gains their empire make through this are just how he sells it back home. The city-states are what he's *actually* after, not the profits."

"They would earn him the support of the expansionist faction," Cordelia said. "Which he had suspected to be his backers within the Kingdom Under."

Fuck, I thought, that actually made a great deal of sense. Even if the expansionist were assholes, the ones who wanted to make gains at the expense of the people of the surface, the Herald would have nowhere else to go. I could see the pattern now: two leading philosophies underground, one of isolation and one of expansion. Even if there was a dusting of evil or even Evil in the expansionists, the Herald would make common cause with them. He *had* to, because he wanted to reform his people and the only other game in town saw dwarven society as a closed circle.

"It fits with where I first met him," I admitted. "Leading the Fourteenth Expansion, on the very outskirts of dwarven territory. He's trying to get out from under the thumb of people in power by going into the wilds."

The First Prince considered that, then slowly nodded.

"Form the perspective of attempting to reform custom, the city-states described would be an ideal garden," Cordelia said. "Small populations of like-minded dwarves, large wealth based on trade instead of labour and more numerous foreign peoples around them to erode the old ways. It is a well-crafted plan."

One that the Herald had rushed the encirclement of the Dead King to sell to his people, immediately knocking at our door afterwards. The details really did fit, Crows. I could sympathize with the intention if it was really this, even admire it a bit, but none of it changed that all those pretty things would literally be built on our backs. That the Herald was willing to let thousands and thousands die, gamble with the fate of Calernia and blackmail desperate nations to get his reforms. That was... *Fuck me*, I thought. Yeah, not exactly an unfamiliar situation. Just not the way I was used to it.

So this was what it felt like, facing me across a table.

"So we know what he's after," I said. "Now we're in a position to fight back."

"It has been brought to my attention that a dwarven gate was recently unearthed," Cordelia said, the look she flicked Hanno's way rather cool. "We can make use of it to reach out to the isolationists and out his plot."

"Must we?"

I frowned at Hanno. He trusted heroes more than I thought wise, even now, but he wasn't a fool. He wouldn't argue for the cession of three cities – one of which was part of the League, not even the Grand Alliance! – to the Herald because he was trying to accomplish something Good through dubious means. I suspected that, if anything, ye ol' Sword of Judgment would think worse of the Herald's methods than we did. Unlike Cordelia and I, he expected better of heroes.

"What the Herald seeks it not evil or harmful to the rest of Calernia," Hanno elaborated. "It is his approach that is objectionable. If he can get his way without it being at our expense, would it not be better to attempt that bargain?"

"Is there a way for him to get his way save at our expense?" Cordelia skeptically replied.

"If it is a city and the riches of a land the Herald seeks," Hanno said, "there is one we can offer."

It took me a moment to realize what he was getting at.

"Keter," I disbelievably said. "You mean the Crown of the Dead."

"It is a great city, surrounded by lands that were once rich," he said. "And unlike the cities demanded it will stand empty once the war ends."

"Keter is part of the land that was promised to the Firstborn for their participation in this war," I said. "How many homes are the dwarves going to steal from them?"

"Would the drow truly want the city?" he honestly asked. "I was given to understand they made their own in the Duskwood."

"That's twice now powers have tried to go back on that bargain," I coldly warned. "Alliances have been broken over less."

He shook his head.

"I do not mean for a treaty to be breached," Hanno said. "Let them trade the claim, by all means. There must something in the Herald's hands worth more than a claim over a city they might never inhabit."

I hummed. That was, well, more acceptable. Given the losses the Firstborn had taken in the war with Keter, I honestly wasn't sure they could colonize all of the lands that were now the Kingdom of the Dead. They might genuinely be amenable to a trade, if the dwarves offered up something worth the exchange. The problem with that, though, was...

"Nearly all of what makes the demanded cities attractive to both the Herald and the expansionists is absent in Keter," Cordelia said. "It is far from trade and there are no humans within that might be used for labour. They will not accept that bargain."

Yeah, that.

"His backers would not," Hanno said, "but the Herald himself might. We are trying to work past him when we should be working with him."

We were going around the bastard because he was willing let a third of Procer be blighted to get his way, not because we just felt like being *poor sports*, but I forced myself to consider his words anyway. Hanno, for all his flaws, understood heroes better than I did – the way they thought, the way they moved. I closed my eye and opened the other. Not looking at Hanno himself but beyond, fingers running down the strings of story. Was he right, was there a path?

Was there a lever to move the Herald of the Deeps?

I felt myself drift, following the chords until I found something at the other end. A force, a will, a Name. An entity that I could only dimly make out, this far from it, but I could see something. Three hearts, all solid, but there was something... deeper. A glimpse at the strings that would move him, the way they tasted. Love, I saw. The Herald was driven by love. Made greater, projected to many, but at its source intensely personal. And

personal was a creature that could be moved by more than just stick and carrot. I breathed out deeply, closing one eye and opening another.

Both of them were staring at me.

"Catherine?" Hanno cautiously said.

"I was having a look at our friend," I replied, tone steady. "I saw enough to think your method has merit."

Cordelia looked rather skeptical.

"He's doing this out of love," I told her. "That much I'm certain of. Romantic and personal, everything else grows from there."

"Love," the First Prince of Procer said, "is not a sound political strategy."

Hanno looked about to disagree and I wanted no part of that debate so I cut in.

"I agree," I said. "But we lose nothing by attempting to move him first. Prepare the appeal to the opposition in the Kingdom Under, and if the talks with the Herald fail we can proceed with that plan immediately."

"It would be best to negotiate entirely in good faith," Hanno protested.

"So far he hasn't," I pointed out. "I see no need to reward that with trust he has done nothing to earn."

He did not look pleased and neither did the First Prince, but neither of them stormed out of the room. That was something.

"Another compromise," Cordelia said. "You seem to have acquired a taste for those."

"If I have on redeeming quality, Your Highness, it's that I never hesitate to steal the methods other people beat me through," I smiled.

I did not get a laugh, which was only sensible since I'd not truly been joking. With an agreement in principle, we hammered out a few more of the details and split off to see to our parts. It would all have to wait until the representatives were chosen, anyhow, so there was still time.

Too little of it, but wasn't that always the way?

—

I had the talks with the Blood settled by nightfall and a treaty after dinner. By tomorrow the rest of the Grand Alliance would be informed, as even though it was an internal matter of Levant it involved the Liesse Accords. That part, as the First Prince had predicted, benefitted from decisive action. It was the other talks of the two following days that had me itching. The most frustrating part about the representatives being chosen was that I couldn't be directly involved. As the Warden I stood apart, so I would not even have a seat in the council of villains past explaining why it was now needed.

All I could do was stack the deck behind closed doors and hope.

Hanno was chosen on the morning of second day, by a wide margin. It took until Midnight Bell for the villains to finish and the Pilfering Dicer almost died – accused by the Red Knight of having interfered in her duel with Archer. But we got our way, in the end. The Barrow Sword was chosen as the representative, narrowly, after Indrani managed an equally narrow draw against the Red Knight. His position was still weak, but Ishaq was no fool: he'd move to consolidate, aware he had my blessing to take everything in hand.

I doubted Below's lot would be as firmly in hand as when my reputation had been making people think twice, but it would serve. Gods, it would have to. Soon the League and the second wave of Praesi troops would be arriving, and when they did the march north would begin shortly after. There were only a few matters left to settle.

—

Hierophant had told me he needed five days to prove whether the Rogue Sorcerer's theory had been right, and he was punctual to a fault: at noon on the fifth day, I sat before a mirror through which we faced each other.

"Roland was correct," Masego told me. "We were looking for a source of power that might shatter the Intercessor's grip on stories, and we have found one."

I was too early to be relieved, I warned myself.

"So what *is* it, exactly?" I asked.

"Night," Hierophant replied.

I blinked. Was it really going to be that easy?

"More precisely, Night as it was first granted to Sve Noc by the Gods Below," Hierophant specified.

Ah, and there was the pinch.

"I shouldn't need to tell you that pretty much all Night has passed from some Firstborn body at some point," I pointed out.

The drow had been very ardent proponents for centuries of murdering each other for that power.

"Some, yes, but not all," Masego said. "The Sisters have administered the resource since the beginning, Catherine. They still hold the power they used to create their shared godhead, which was bestowed directly by Below."

"So the Crows could do it," I said.

"They could be used to channel Night against the Intercessor, whom you've informed me had a hand in granting it to them in the first place," Hierophant corrected. "They could not do it themselves, by my estimation. At the very least you – or someone of equivalent strength in Night – and myself would need to guide the ritual."

I grimaced.

"You want me to head north just as the armies begin to march on Keter," I said. "That's not a small ask, Masego."

"Nor is breaking the hold of the goddess of stories on her domain," Hierophant bluntly replied. "You asked me for a solution and you have it. There is nothing more I can do."

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Can we really spare you?" I asked. "The crown of Autumn–"

"Has been carved into what we sought," Masego interrupted. "It will be the cursed gift to the Dead King that we planned. And while I would prefer to be there when it is used, should the necessity strike my presence is not required. Roland and the Blessed Artificer would both be capable of using it without me."

And both would be with the armies. I rubbed the bridge of my nose. I didn't like it, to be honest, and it went against the grain for me to leave all the preparations behind. But it couldn't be denied that if we didn't get back Evil's stories, the Dead King would snap us over his knee. Much as I'd like to pretend otherwise, I didn't really have a choice.

"Well then, pack up and join me in Salia," I said. "Look like we're headed to Serolen."

I had a week until he was there, so I had better spend it well: after that, there would be no going back.

elanevensong

Yay! Thanks for the chapter

ruduen

Go boost!

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

Many of the big issues are taken care of, and while the dwarves are still an affair that are incomplete, it looks like the list of objectives for the final missions has been laid out.

And so we enter the endgame.

It's amazing to think about how long the story has been going. Thanks for all of the times so far, and I'm excited to see just how things will resolve. After all, we have the goals laid out... But this has never been a story where you'll meet those goals without question, or without a fight.

Sir Nil

Ah yes, let's start dividing up Keter before we've won, counting your eggs before the basket has never backfired.

Sinead

I mean, the Dwarves were doing just that with the living realms as well.

Establishing the parameters of what the Grand Alliance can actually afford (without internal politics breaking it all down) is a solid plan.

And this isn't dividing up land that other people are living on either.

Salt

Yep. Not to mention that trying to win the battle without having any idea of what comes after is one of the first mistakes that Catherine learned not to make.

All the way as far back as the Lone Swordsman and the bands that came after he before the crusade, one of the big glaring problems she realized most Stupid Good Heroes had, was assuming that cutting the head off the big bad somehow solves every problem. Absolutely nothing in their heads regarding how to fill in the power vacuum, how to establish proper

boundaries of rule and infrastructure, and how to make sure said power vacuum doesn't suck in former allies into another conflict.

Half the point is to figure out what to do after ahead of time, because by the time the "after" rolls around, it's already too late to start figuring it out.

jamesc9

And isn't that a parable for the limits of hard military power in our time?

SpeckofStardust

If keter doesn't fall everyone dies.
Straight up when total war is the table planning for after winning is the only thing you can do, cause if you lose no plan is able to be done anyway.

jamesc9

> If keter doesn't fall everyone dies.

What if that's not true? What if being Warden gives her power over the DK's stories, and she also has the hard power to slide the knife home?

SpeckofStardust

That would be Keter falling yes.
Like if the Dead King falls so does Keter, and if Keter falls so does the Dead King.

MoreDakka

It's more like the dwarf is demanding three city's for the armies that have already been paid for and they are giving him one that the armies would have gotten him for free if he hadn't been a dick

SeventhSolar

There's no point to not dividing up Keter. At this point, it's paying for an entire war front and a good amount of their arms and armor.

caoimhinh

When in Procer, do as the Procerans do

jamesc9

I've liked this, because I think that it contains a large measure of truth, but I reserve the right to decide later whether to dislike the outcome.

DC

In fairness, if they lose then there won't be a problem anyway; much easier to provide living space to the undead.

Levi Kalden

I mean there are only two outcomes, dead king is, well, dead or they are all dead instead and it doesn't matter that they can't enforce those promises. So it doesn't matter at the end

Linnus42

Hakram and Cat make up. We see how this Triumvirate works for now and that it will be eventually a Quintet with a Quartet of Named split 50-50 between Good and Evil. Though one can argue Warden being Neutral means that system can get unbalanced fast unless Hanno's new name is also going to be Neutral but lean good. 3 v 1 Heroes to Villains seems like a super majority.

joewill5234

Cordelia is not a Hero, and apparently is not even close to a Name.

Reader in The Night

On the one hand, I think I do like this resolution better for Cordelia personally, of holding no Name because it's not what she wants. On the other hand, I do think the system would have worked better if her position had a Name, both as part of a Rule of Three and as a ready-made Band of Five to defend the Accords when you added the Representatives. Maybe her successor will get a Name?

Insanenoodlyguy

No, it will be the opposite I suspect. There will always be two who orbit around the warden, one an embodiment of named, one a normal mortal (albiet an exceptional one). A balance entirely different then that of good and evil, fitting for a truly neutral name.

RoflCat

Cordelia is not Named, and this setup is temporary until Keter falls.

Once that's done Hanno will likely start to train his replacement for his eventual 'retirement' into the new Name.

Eventually the 3 of them will forms a balanced voices around the Accords.

Catherine presents the Villains views and the Stories

Hanno the Heroes

Cordelia the view of non-Named mortals.

Catherine will draft/revise the Accords as needed, Hanno will act as the enforcer of its rules and Cordelia help ensure the countries accept it.

jamesc9

> Catherine will draft/revise the Accords as needed

I'm not sure that I see this. The first draft was a mixture of Vivienne's aristocratic education and Hakram's Find. I liked Cordelia as Lawgiver, in someone else's story of the Cardinal / Accords executive. This would mean that the Accords are hard to change unless it's for the benefit of non-Named.

RoflCat

That's the first draft that's been written down, but the core of it has always been inside Catherine, Viv/Hakram helped refined it which is what I expect to be part of Cordelia's job going forward.

Like, if Catherine say she want Named to not be a ruler, Cordelia might counter with Princess being there, or Hanno point out there's Names specifically for ruler position (again, Princess as example)

So Cat then can adjust it to any non-ruler Named can't be a ruler, with an exception clause where the person declared an intent to transition to a ruler Name.

Or to use something else as example.

Cat and Sve Noc made the first interaction.

The final version put into Tenets Under Night is...'touched up' a little more.

Although even that attempt couldn't overcome 'try a foot'

Quwertzuiopp

Warden isn't a neutral Name. I don't fucking get the obsession everyone has with neutral Names, it's worse than with Grey Jedi. The story has repeatedly and relentlessly told us through text and subtext that no such thing actually exists. Every single allegedly "neutral" Name sooner or later just turned out to be a Villain in hiding or a Named that is aloof towards the conflict of philosophy, but still fulfilling the purpose of one side or another. I can't actually think of a single one that didn't turn out to be a villain good at hiding themselves.

In this very chapter, Cat tells us that she is still very much a Villain, that the mantle of Warden could change between Above and Below when switching the wearer, but that who ever wields is doesn't somehow stop being the Hero or Villain they were before.

As far as we know, the only way to be Named is for the Gods to personally hand it to you. That means that there can logically only be a neutral Name if the two sides shake hands and give out a double bestowal to make someone BOTH. You can't be a neutral Name by being neither, it is metaphysically impossible. Who the fuck is supposed to give you a neutral Name? There are only two factions and they play for keeps and play to win.

And mind you, the only known exception was literally created by writing in exceptions into the very laws of nature somewhere around the beginning of the universe by mutual agreement of both sides. One might be forgiven for thinking that the Gods might create a new exception to start the new age just like they started the age of wonders by creating the WB by also bestowing heroic powers onto a villain to also make Cat both at the same time, but the text tells us at very first literary convenience that they didn't and that Warden is just a normal Name with an exceptional Role, with Cat still being fully a Villain by her own admission.

So really, I honestly don't understand how you would even get to 3 v 1 Heroes to Villains. Even if you supposed that Cat was Neutral, Hanno + Hero Rep vs Villain Rep would still come out to 2 v 1. Cordelia is not Named and thus per definition neither metaphysically a Hero or a Villain, and she clearly has the potential to be both or she wouldn't have been offered a Name by both sides back to back. The reality is that Cat isn't neutral, so it evens out to 2 v 2, with Cordelia as the only actually neutral one in the mix, by virtue of not being Named.

Tenthyr

The story quite literally just said the name is neutral. It can belong to a hero or Villian, but the function and nature of the name stands apart from Above or Below.

Zach

You're confusing Name and Role. Warden, as held by Catherine, is a Below Name. In the future it could be an Above one.

A good comparison is Squire. Squire can be either a Heroic or Villainous Name, but any given Squire is one or the other, not both.

ninegardens

Warden is a neutral name. Catherine is a Below aligned NAMED.

The Name itself isn't on any given side in a general sense, but the particular Named who has it will lean one way or the other.

jamesc9

@ Quwertzuiopp, I think that the hope for (over-reading slightly) Neutral wielders of Names is a bit like the hope for independent regulators in democratic politics. It's a hope to opt out of conflict, in order to opt out of having to decide who to trust, where deciding who to trust is a known, hard problem.

SpeckofStardust

Named are granted power by the gods because they fit a role that they the gods want empowered. Which gods they are empowered by decides if thier the below's or above's. Non-Named aren't locked into this system. Named are, technically many Name fit roles that either side might want to "support", Aka Archer a basic role of being kickass with a bow could be a hero or a villain, however the person who is Named will effectively be either supporting the below's ultimate argument or the above's ultimate argument. Not being supporting either means a lack of fulfilling a role and thus losing the name, because without role the Name wont stick.

If one side of the gods want to opt out empowering someone tends to mean they switched sides and thus the other side will pick up the slack.

The Warden might go either way, but the holder of the name dam well can't. (or anyone who is named)

The bard got empowered by both sides to keep the argument going until (I assume) the mortals get to an answer. (I also assuming thier regretting that set up for bard)

Tenthyr

Oh my. All that power and it might not even be an aspect.

I do wonder what Aspects Catherine will form to enforce the Accords on those who defy them...

RoflCat

She can't have an Aspect for punishing defiers.

The bargain is that Hanno is its enforcer, so the most likely result is that she'd have the ability to detect someone breaking the rule and teleport Hanno over there.

Kinda like how Tariq was guided by the Choir to where he's needed.

Tenthyr

She will need someone to do the minor work of enforcement, but I doubt Catherine is going to be an idle Warden. Warden implies doing the work of defending and safeguarding the accords, and Catherine has worn the rut so that you must have the POWER to hold your mantle, not just the will.

Salt

So you're saying she'll be able to Guide him exactly where he needs to be at exactly the right time?

[Yamageddon](#)

That sounds very practical, yes!

shikkarasu

Rein, Collect, and I can't remember the third one that was floating around a book ago that I liked. She's dramatically used Collect twice now, so the third better make an Aspect, and the idea of a pun like Rein being part of her soul makes me happy in unnatural ways.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, so where IS Masego right now? In the Observatory? In the Arsenal? Am confuse.

Hum, not what I called for Cat's Name, but we haven't seen all of it yet either.

Also not what I called for Cordelia. A shame, but fair enough I guess ._.

Hanno's getting a new Name! ^^ And yeah Recall is sticking around which is Nice

Hakram!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! ^^

Nice way to resolve the thing with Ishaq, also totally what I called.

Not what I called for the heroes, but reasonable!

FINALLY WE'RE COOPERATING ON THE DWARVES THING JESUS CHRIST ON A CRACKER

[Liliet](#)

P.S. SEER CAT
SEER CAT
SEER CAT

ODIN CAT

and Masego outright calls Bard the goddess of stories, which probably has one hell of an implication when Cat's outright usurping her Role.

Unrecovered

Has one eye, sacrificed other, has two crows... Damn how come i've missed it?

shikkarasu

Staff not unlike Gungnir, supernatural mount, habit of sacrificing herself for personal power...

CMDraz

She is after all Woe and Warden, AKA Wodin

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"Horse" with more limbs than one would expect (both current Zombie and Dread Emperoress Big-Ass Spider).

Linnus42

I wonder if there is a Name for that type of Aspect.

Hanno has Recall.

Cat seems to have it as well with Take.

Some sort of inherent Aspect that is linked more to the soul than the Name.

Bard would know I suppose

[*Liliet*](#)

I wonder if Cat would have gotten Seek as it if she'd not lost it back then.

shikkarasu

I would also like to call out Masego's **Glimpse** to **Witness** and **Deconstruct** to **Ruin**. We never **Glimpsed** his 3rd Aspect as Apprentice, although **Learn** is most likely.

I expect that since Aspects are based on the character and how they think/view themselves that there would be a lot of parallels after transitions. Cat's were only different

because she stopped thinking of her path as one where she would **Seek** and **Struggle** to find her way to power. She had, at that point, enough personal power to **Take** what she needed and **Break** what she disdained. ("Use what she cannot break and break what she cannot use.")

Hanno believes in the Wisdom of others, even if he isn't taking direct orders from Angels anymore, so it makes sense that he will either keep **Recall** for as long as he has any Name, or he will develop a similar one.

Sinead

My understanding is that Maseago is back in Laure/Observatory. It's actually a better place to be since Callow isn't under assault right now. Since the Arsenal has been shut down, I think that they would need the support at the Observatory that just wouldn't be available elsewhere.

[Liliet](#)

OKay but where was he when he was therapy-ing Cat on her way to

shikkarasu

I think at this point he just has a traveling lab in the supply train. Possibly in Arcadia to stay safe from DK. Or, more amusingly, he just wanders in to any sizable house/cave/mansion and Merlins it into his bedroom/office. See Disney's Sword in the Stone for an accurate depiction of my headcanon.

[Liliet](#)

hockety pockety wockety

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I didn't get the reference so your comment was completely incomprehensible for a moment before I drew the obvious conclusion.

BargleNawdleZouss

I learned something today! LOL

erebus42

Yay! I've been sorely missing the Drow in this story.

Sinead

Now does Cat actually deal with the issue with Kuisrov herself, or does she oversee the transfer of power and uses someone else (likely Ivah) as the spearhead of this initiative?

[Liliet](#)

popcorn.jpg

shikkarasu

She *did* have a bunch of her soul hollowed out to fit a majority of the Night into if needed. She could probably just kill him, **Take** his stuff, and not need to borrow from the Sisters anymore.

ninegardens

"kill him, Take his stuff"

I see what you did there.
Robber would be proud.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

God I miss him. Her limp must be so much worse without her (lesser lesser) footrest.

[Adrian_V](#)

I suspect we will see a resolution to some Drow su plots, like that general that is rebelling and basically trying to usurp Sve Noc.

Also glad to see these 3 working together

Frivolous

I suspect Catherine and Masego will have to fight and kill Kurosiv.

Might have something to do with the quantity of Night that Kurosiv is hoarding and denying Sve Noc. For that Night to be released and used against the Intercessor, Kurosiv must die.

Salt

They'd better bring some countermeasure against acid then. It'll be a sad day when the Warden goes up against a dude named "corrosive" and isn't prepared for corrosion

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I'm surprised at myself for not catching that.

RoflCat

What other countermeasure is needed besides Catherine just being Based Catherine?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Is this a chemistry joke or am I overthinking it?

RoflCat

chemistry base + 'confidently be who you are' based
so yes

Isi Arnott-Campbell



[Adrian_V](#)

They could use him as a sort of medium or living artefact to channel the night, basically they sag him with all the side effects doing that would have on them, that way they kill 3 birds with 1 stone (him, the intersector and not cripple themselves)

arcanavitael5

I did not expect the chapter to go like this but I love it. The wakeing up from getting name and seeing Hakram. The reconciliation of Cat and Hakram with hi still being part of the woe. The meeting with Hanno and Cordelia and how we handled that with them and the new dynamic between the 3 of them. Hanno and Cat are on good terms as well which is awesome and Cordelia is putting aside her dislike for him which is good. The powers of the Warden being used to understand the Herald of the Deep which so far is not an aspect. I like how a Cat just cool as a cumcuber replace herself as the Villian representative with the Barrow Sword (MVP LARPER)

That bit with Less to about the bard is very intersting. This is such a great situation of the last chapter.

[Liliet](#)

Cat has already gotten over the representative thing in the previous chapter ♥ ♥ ♥ and it was never as personal to her as ruling Callow was

I love how Cat in book 6 was like ":blushing: we're close collaborators? :blushing:" and now she looks back like "our easy friendship"

ohJohN

"cumcuber" oh god

Frivolous

This chapter makes me feel good. Hakram reconciling with Catherine, Catherine and Hanno and Cordelia learning to work together.

Hahaha, the Herald of the Deeps is doing all this just so he can be with his boyfriend. It's so sweet and romantic.

I wonder if Hanno's new aspect will be the same as the old Recall. I have a hard time believing it will be exactly the same. He's not the same man anymore.

Wonder what Hakram's first aspect is. Wonder if Vivienne has a first aspect by now.

I'm a little surprised that, at least according to Hakram, Kairos saw no Wish at all in Hakram. I figured his Wish would be merely weak, not nonexistent.

Glad that Ishaq became the captain for the villains. Needing a girl to fight for you against another girl is probably a bit embarrassing, though.

I'd like some glimpse of the Red Knight sooner or later. It's annoying that she's never gone on stage yet. I want to see for myself just how obnoxious she is.

Linnus42

Yeah we have heard a lot about Red Knight but we haven't seen her.

I mean I can imagine there was a bit of that meme going on between Ishaq and Hanno...Look at my man, look at your man. Since Hanno with no Name spanked Ishaq and Hunted. And Ishaq cannot even defend his own claim lol.

SeventhSolar

Ishaq's more a rogue-type anyway. So far, his strengths include: leading bands of 5, resurrecting, executing dangerous targets, and whatever he did to steal his artifacts in the first place. A very villain-style leader, never takes a fair fight when he has his crew playing frontline.

Linnus42

Sure he has the roguish charm I suppose and has other skills. Point is he is starting to look like Frederic outclassed against Real Martials.

SeventhSolar

Unlike Frederic, he still has Named leadership experience, ambition, and rogue combat tactics. I didn't mean rogue as in roguish, I meant rogue as in assassins, thieves, other classic rogue archetypes. He can't beat Hanno, Red Knight, or the Ranger claimant in a 1v1 duel, sure. But if he really wanted to kill one of them, bets are off. He can start with an ambush, take a mortal blow, and land a single cut to win the fight. Probably still can't take Indrani, though.

Frederic is a supporter in every sense (Aspects and outlook). He's *supposed* to lose fights.

Linnus42

His sword is not an instant kill and your tactic only works if no one knows his sword can rez him.

[Liliet](#)

> Glad that Ishaq became the captain for the villains. Needing a girl to fight for you against another girl is probably a bit embarrassing, though.

I think among Named these attitudes are long gone.

> I wonder if Hanno's new aspect will be the same as the old Recall. I have a hard time believing it will be exactly the same. He's not the same man anymore.

The Aspect is basically a brand on his soul from slightly overdoing it with the Gigantes, it's not really a result of a Name or of the kind of person he is. I don't think it'll change, though Hanno's capacity to handle it will likely improve.

> Wonder what Hakram's first aspect is. Wonder if Vivienne has a first aspect by now.

I know right!!! NAME NERDERY PLEASE GIVE US NEW ASPECTS FOR ALL OF THE WOE (except for Masego who is perfect as is)

Juff

Typo Thread:

an herbal (should be "a herbal" for UK)
is question > is a question
else why I > else while I
would just > would take just
be vice > be a vice
steal anymore. > steal anymore."
less of a > less than a
"Form the > "From the

seeks it not > seeks is not
willing let > willing to let
on redeeming > one redeeming
I was too > It was too

shikkarasu

"An 'erbal" would make sense given the... degree of refinement generally displayed by our fair Queen, Long May She Reign Until She's Bored, Happy Retirement Thereafter, May She Never Return.

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

Ah, yes, Dread Black Empress Queen Catherine Triumphant Foundling, Goddess-Empress-Queen of All Evil and Callow, lover of half-fey gingers and Vale summer wine and victories snatched from the jaws of defeat.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Isn't Killian quarter-fae, not half?

shikkarasu

Correct. Book 2:15 – Council

""Kilian of Mashamba. Her grandmother rode with the Wild Hunt until encountering her grandfather. Specifics are sparse on how she died, but the fae rarely last when too far from Arcadia"

And for bonus facts: Book 3:Extra Chapter – Regard
" "Anyway," [Ranger] said, "I'm thinking about a hunting trip in Arcadia. The Wild Hunt was very uppity when I met them."

some time later, same extra chapter

The tavern was nearly empty at this time of the night – people in the Green Stretch were farmers, went to bed early and rose with dawn. "

Crack Theory:

Ranger chased Killian's grandmother out of Arcadia and into the Green Stretch, where she hooked up with a Farmer. Black inadvertently saved Killian's life by distracting Ranger long enough for Killian's parent to be born. After Good King Edward was killed this is the loose end that she immediately left the Calamities to go deal with, however Ranger didn't care about some half-fae or their daughter and so let them live.

[Sugar Roll](#)

After the war, a new city is going to be built at the heart of the continent. I imagine a suitable offer can be made to the Herald of the Deeps regarding that.

Konstantin von Karstein

And give him the seat of the Liesse Accords? Great idea!

shikkarasu

Genuinely unsure how serious you are being, but this unironically.

Konstantin von Karstein

I'm sarcastic. Giving to an expansionist foreign power the only major link between the 2 nations (so where all the trade will happen is an awful idea. Cardinal will be the new centre of Calernia, with its school. And you would give power over it to the Kingdom Under?

shikkarasu

As a politician you make a good point. For the Narrative? I like the idea of the radical expansionists being immediately bound to a new, different set of rules once they get up here. The Herald has no stake in the surface or its politics and may very well be bringing the whole "only Dwarves can own property" mindset with him. Making him part of the new paradigm might help in shaping how the Dwarves operate on the surface.

Genuinely surprised at how much I'm siding with Hanno all of a sudden, but now that he's started describing his position with something other than platitudes I'm starting to get it.

Konstantin von Karstein

Yeah, that's another reason why having him anywhere near the Accords would be catastrophically bad.

Gabe Meadow

I love the reconciliation between Cat and Hakram, and the trio of Cat, Cordelia, and Hanno starting to work together again. This is what the WB worked to knife for years, because this collaboration could just save Calernia.

The twist reveal of the Herald's motivations make a lot of sense here, EE as ever, hinting at it in Interlude: Triptych long before we ever thought it would become a major thing. Delein and Balasi, whose love is illegal, and of course: "A mere seeker of deeds could not be seated at the same time as the Herald of the

Deeps, he thought, bitterness so old and worn it was hardly even that anymore."

It would make another great change to Calernia's benefit if the dwarves (or a presumptive faction), truly begin to recognize surface folk as people and work with them.

[Hargabga](#)

Things are looking up.

Suspicious...

letouriste

I mean, everything was a little too bleak recently.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Was a bit disappointed the villains choosing their leader was skipped over. Would've been an interesting interlude, but I suppose the pacing may be better off without it. I'm also surprised Barrow Sword accepted having a champion fight in his stead. Thought his honor would make him insist on taking on the Red Knight, but I guess pragmatism won out.

SeventhSolar

He doesn't have honor, that's why he's a Levantine villain, not a Levantine hero.

beleester

No, he's got honor. Remember that his big personal issue for the past book has been "I want Levant to officially recognize my glorious deeds in this war."

But I think that working to make that happen taught him the value of using the rules to your advantage.

SeventhSolar

That's not honor, that's status. Honor in Levant is fighting without seeking advantages or disadvantages. Ishaq wants fame and fortune. Essentially, he wants to be nobility in the way that the Blood are. Nothing about him screams "I will sacrifice my goals in order to give my opponents fair fights."

shikkarasu

He had Lawful/Stupid beat out of him when he challenged Cat to a duel for her position. Now he has Lawful/Wait, So I Can Claim

Tacit Superiority To Archer, THE Fucking Archer? Hells Yes She Can Fight My Battles For Me.

Clear ideological upgrade, in my eyes.

Earl of Purple

I hope Hanno becomes a Knight again. Then we can have a band of five consisting only of Knights. The Black Knight, Red Knight, Mirror Knight and Knight Errant to fill it out.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The fact that the first two knightly Names you rattled off were color-coded gave me an idea: Power Rangers/Practical Guide mashup.

shikkarasu

The Dead King is too powerful, better form Knight-tron

Black/Errant: Form Feet and Legs!

Red/Mirror Knight: Form Arms and Body!

Hanno: And I'll form the Head!

The Blazing sword is, obviously, the Severance.

Earl of Purple

Might be three colour-coded. Hanno used to be the White Knight, after all; he could be so again.

[Peter](#)

5 knights in Keter – sounds expensive

jamesc9

That was punny.

[kal durak](#)

I'm looking to see Hanno change from The White Knight to The White Prince!

Dome Zasrekh

Keter has a hellgate that leads to a hell with a lot of humans in it. They will lose their leader if the dead king dies, so the dwarven city will have lots of humans to work with!
Too many things seem to work out lately, makes me worried!

Salt

Well if the point for the herald to expose some of the dwarves to other cultures so the kingdom under doesn't become this isolated regressive culture, I'm not sure having them live with the only peoples that are even more isolated and regressive than the kingdom under would necessarily work out well.

Whatever comes out of a mish mash of the serenity (quite literally human cattle raised in a hell-pen to blindly cult worship the dead king) and the kingdom under (a race almost completely physically isolated from every other race, and xenophobic to the point where even the Drow seem openminded and accepting in comparison) is probably going to be the most fucked up thing since Praes.

Kojo

I think that whoever is advising the Herald of the Deep is making a mistake because they are going to turn the Dwarfs from a competitor/enemy of the surface nations into THE ENEMY of the surface due to the timing of this expansion. Because if you consider the various surface nations, you can already see some of the seeds for the future civil wars that will wrack each nation in the next 100 years.

Procer – North Vs South

Free Cities – Everyone Vs Protector

Callow – Disagreements over the settlement of Goblin and Orc veterans in Callow.

Orc Horde – Not sure?

Goblins – Pro matriarchs vs Anti matriarchs

Praes – A war started by an election.

Each of these potential wars might be made worse due to meddling by other nations through The Cardinal, As Black said that The Cardinal might become the new continental court.

So why would the Dwarfs not wait for all these conflicts to start and weaken the Grand Alliance/Liesse Accords before slowly taking over the surface instead of giving the surface nations something to rally around? Like trying to cheat us when the Dead King was out to kill us all.

Because now, due to the Herald of the Deep, the foremost powers of the Surface have concrete proof that the Dwarves are coming for them, and even if the current scheme fails, Cat and Cordelia will start making long term plans during their time in The Cardinal to counter future Dwarven invasions. Is it just me or those the current scheme by the Herald of the Deep make absolutely no sense?

jamesc9

I remember THE ENEMY as a thing from the Age of Wonders. I'm not sure what it will be like in the Age of Order. It depends, at least in part, on whether the stories will pull the Dwarves into the Liesse Accords against their will.

Salt

"The Enemy" as a theme will still be around for sure imo, and still be just as relevant. It just won't be based on an enforced binary Good and Evil. Just because Above and Below aren't setting the terms, doesn't mean prejudice and bigotry suddenly disappear. That's not something Above or Below need to force on mortals for mortals to exude it from every pore on their own.

If anything it'll be even worse in a lot of ways – people kind of suck like that – with "The Enemy" just changing themes to be based on nationalities, races, mortal belief systems, or even much more petty things that are horrible enough to lend some credence to the idea that Above and Below actually do know better.

The only thing that the Age of Order actually changes, is mortals dealing more with mortal failings instead of problems caused by higher entities and their associated grand works. Mortal failings can be every bit as awful and serious as problems caused by said higher entities though, meaning there's a real chance the Age of Order could have the same types of problems or even be worse than the Age of Wonders, the same way there's also chance it could be better.

Mike E.

"When that time comes," he quietly said, "I would like to fight with the Woe."

My heart clenched. To that, at least, I had an answer.

"If the Woe are fighting," I simply replied, "where else would you be?"

—

That exchange gave me some feels. Woe back together again for the end?

Frivolous

Agree, that exchange made me feel good weepy.

Also this mirrors what happened in the Arsenal. Catherine sat Hakram's bedside waiting for him to wake up. Here he returns the favor.

BargleNawdleZouss

Hypothetical: Hanno puts up the decision of who wields The Severance to a vote. The results are split between himself, Mirror Knight, Valiant Champion, Blade of Mercy, and Bloody Sword

(as mentioned in Chapter 33: Claimant (Repeat)), with none close to a majority. As a result, Arthur as Knight Errant gets picked as a compromise candidate.

Likelihood = low, but a reader can hope! 🙏

Frivolous

Hakram was a bit wrong when he said all the Woe went through 2 Names except for Catherine, who has had 3.

I'm assuming that Indrani is either Ranger by now or is progressing in her claim to Ranger.

The reason is Vivienne: Thief, Princess, and presumably Queen, if she lives long enough and Callow doesn't get destroyed. That's 3, not 2.

In related news: I wonder if Vivienne attended the hero meeting wherein Hanno was reelected as captain of heroes. Did she get a vote?

Also: If there still were any heroes (like Tariq) that loathed or feared Catherine for making Callow Evil by ruling it, I wonder what they would say now that Vivienne and Arthur have become heroes. Especially Vivienne. Years in Catherine's company and she becomes a hero again.

Would they say that it means Catherine can't be all that bad, or would they say that it only speaks to Vivienne's virtue, that she resisted contamination by Catherine, Hakram, Masego, and Indrani?

Of course this is Vivienne the Yoinker we're talking about, so no one could say she's that pure. So maybe Callow isn't that Evil either.

jamesc9

Hmmm... So if we evaluate someone's alignment by their enemies, are the Summer fae of Above or Below?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Summer is of Above, Winter is of Below. To me this is made most clear not through the direct iconography/symbolism of either side, nor their battle tactics or directly-onscreen cultures (but those too; the Winter Court are all treacherous schemers, and the armies of Winter fight in a less organized, more bunch-of-skirmishes-in-one-spot fashion compared to Summer's tactical cohesion), but most of all through the summary we once got of the typical cycle of Summer and Winter.

To wit: Summer builds itself up as this land of milk and honey, idyllic and plentiful to the extreme, while Winter sits and festers in bitter deprivation and hunger; and when it becomes unbearable Winter attempts to claim Summer's bounty by force and one of them destroys the other for that cycle. Evil looks greedily upon what Good has, and acts first to seize or ruin it; Good responds to this aggression. It's the same pattern Praes and Callow had prior to the Conquest, hence said Conquest eventually altering the nature of Arcadia-as-viewed-from-Calernia.

BargleNawdleZouss

I'm curious if Hakram attended the villains' conclave as The Warlord?

Someperson

Well with luck this will be the final confrontation with that darned Wandering Bard that is brewing. And ironically the very lack of villainous stories will probably make it substantially easier for Cat to do that.

Hakram would have made an ideal representative for Below, although it also makes a great deal of sense that he did not attempt it.

Bart_KF

OH SHIT that's why Kairos was so insistent that Hakram was broken somehow! Because of his Wish aspect! He looked where someone's heart's desire was supposed to be and found nothing- that makes so much more sense now!

Chapter 41: Passing

"Forty-four: never refuse a companion come to join your journey at the last moment. Whether true or traitor, they represent a necessary opportunity."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

The heroes had come together in one of their little councils and a verdict emerged: when all marched on Keter, the Mirror Knight would wield the Severance.

I'd hoped it would be Hanno instead, but I would make my peace with the decision. It wasn't like he'd be keeping the sword after the war anyway – it had been made in the Arsenal, so by treaty it would be going into a vault under Cardinal as soon as one was built. It would see the light of day again if a Warden saw a threat emerge that it should be wielded against, but I had my doubts there would be another of those in my lifetime. Vivienne had the Jacks keep an eye on Christophe de Pavanie afterwards and they noted he did not seem to feel particularly happy about the choice.

Rumour had it he'd argued against his own candidature, though even my friends among the heroes remained tight-lipped. Knowing their kind, trying to refuse the charge had probably swayed a few more in favour of him taking up the sword. Still, important as the decision had been as the days passed it felt like little more than an afterthought. A much greater test was looming just ahead, after all: word had been sent to the Herald, and we were now prepared for the final talks with the envoy of the Kingdom Under. Even the most eminent of swords was a small thing, compared to the conversation that would make or break our attack on Keter.

We took Cordelia's suggested line, at least superficially. The Barrow Sword would sit in as the representative for Below and the First Prince had reached out to the Kingdom Under through the dwarven gate to find an interlocutor should the talks with the Herald fail. We'd kept it deniable and strictly Proceran so far, talking about the trade the gate being dug up might represent while Cordelia's envoys sought to get in touch with an isolationist dignitary. It wasn't that subtle, of course, and wasn't meant to be – our best shot at getting in touch with such a person was them finding us, not the other way around, so rumours were to our advantage.

And if this blew back on us, then the Grand Alliance could say it'd all been the Principate and that Cordelia Hasenbach would abdicate because of this debacle, because she totally hadn't been planning on doing that anyway.

We got tentative feelers back from a dwarf whose title was something like 'home-lord' in dwarven, but she got frustrated when our envoys got noncommittal and that boded well. Knowing our time was running out, we rushed the meeting a day early. The Herald of the Deeps and Seeker Balasi were once again the whole sum of the Kingdom Under's delegation, which in retrospect looked a little suspicious. Arrogant as dwarves were, they had to know that sending fewer people than the number of fucking cities you were asking for was a bit much – this was the Herald's choice, I figured, cutting other people out of the room so word couldn't get out to his opponents back home.

It boded well for our bargaining position that he couldn't even be sure of everyone in his delegation.

"You have been given sufficient time to grasp the terms," Balasi bluntly said. "Have you deliberated your answer?"

They didn't waste time on courtesies and this time Cordelia didn't pull out the perfect hostess routine, which I felt was rather more honest a way to do this. Hanno might be inclined to see the best in the Herald, but I had yet to find any reason to.

"A sort of answer, certainly: it has come to our attention that you have not been negotiating in good faith," Cordelia Hasenbach coldly replied.

I reached for my wakeleaf and began stuffing my pipe, letting the hero and the diplomat have at it. I was here to look imposing and wave my Night stick, not pull strings they were my better at pulling.

"This is an insult," the Herald calmly said. "Withdraw it and apologize or these negotiations are at an end."

Mistake, I thought. The green-eyed dwarf wasn't a diplomat and it showed. Never give that kind of an ultimatum unless you were sure you wouldn't be called on it or you were willing to go through with the threat. The First Prince matched his gaze, unblinking.

"The door is behind you."

Balasi rose to his feet.

"Salia will be sunk into the ground for this," the deed-seeker hissed. "You insult envoys of the King Under-"

"Silence," I Spoke.

His mouth closed shut and he stared at me as if I'd gone mad.

He might think so, but it had been a tactical choice. It meant the Herald would have to speak for himself at all times and I was looking for something else besides. Still, I cocked my head to the side. That'd resonated more strongly than it should have. It was like I'd thought in Praes, the aspect was so close to emerging it would only need a single halfway solid pivot to solidify. As I considered that I kept my dead eye on the Herald, who under the calm façade was furious. Personally so. *But is it him you're in love with, or is this just a close friendship?* I could not tell, I wasn't good enough at this yet.

There were a lot of revenge stories around the Herald that began by Balasi dying, but that didn't precisely confirm it either. The death of family or a childhood friend was just as common a catalyst as a lover's to begin a journey of revenge.

"Now," Cordelia said, leaning forward, "do you intend to leave?"

I knew her well enough to tell that the glint in her eye was a vicious little twist of satisfaction. Couldn't blame her, given how these two had tried to use the threat of extinction at the hand of a common foe to extort us out of three cities.

"It appears there has been a misunderstanding," the Herald evenly said. "We will depart once it has been resolved and you have understood the depth of your mistake."

"Your intentions were understood," Hanno said. "You are attempting to create realms on the surface where you can change the ways of your people."

It was calculated that he would be the one to speak. If it turned out we'd been wrong in our conclusions, then he could take a step back after Cordelia 'chided' him and remain silent like Ishaq – who was looking faintly amused as he beheld all this and was not inclined in the slightest to get involved. He was a man who knew his limitations, the Barrow Sword. He was still a few years away from having earned a seat at this sort of table in his own right.

"You assume much, angel-child," the Herald replied.

"It is a laudable undertaking," Hanno continued, "but your means are wrong. You cannot build the foundations of a better world by setting the stones on the back of those who live in it."

The Named dwarf's face tightened, the first sign of anger obvious enough I was able to catch it.

"You know nothing, White Knight," the Herald of Deeps said. "Of what is needful or needed. The weight of your ignorance is crushing."

The air in the room thickened, but I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"None of that, now," I lazily said. "Else *I'm* going to start doing it too, and you won't like where that leads."

"Threats and insults," the Herald scorned. "All of you will pay for this insolence."

He stopped massing power, but only because he rose to his feet as well. He strode out of the room, Balasi following after throwing me a glare I rolled my eye at. They two of them left silence in their wake until the Barrow Sword broke it.

"I take it negotiations with these fine fellows are at an end," Ishaq said, stroking his beard.

I cast a look at Cordelia, who looked thoughtful, and then Hanno.

"No," the Sword of Judgment said.

"No," the First Prince agreed. "They will be back."

Two bells later, they were proved right.

—

Dusk was approaching when the two of them returned. They were ushered back into the same room after being made to wait while we gathered up again. This time there were no theatrics: they knew that while they still had a blade at our throat now we had one at theirs. Not the Kingdom Under's, that was a lost cause, but *them* specifically. Cordelia's fondness for cards as a chosen metaphor for diplomacy was proving accurate: we'd played the opponents instead of the cards, and now we were getting results. Interestingly, I noticed that while my command had faded in Basali there was a lingering echo. If I gave the same order, it would come down much more harshly the second time — and my instinct was that three might lead to permanence.

That might prove more than a little useful, if the aspect was meant for what I thought it was.

Hanno took the lead this time, as Cordelia had already pulled the rug out from under them. It was about the soft glove now, not the steel underneath.

"You accused me ignorance," he said. "Help rid me of it."

It shouldn't have worked, I thought. But I knew it would. Because underneath the calm I could see that the Named was just itching to talk. To lay it all out to someone who'd understand, who'd agree. It was the same reason villains gloated, only instead of getting them friends it got them killed.

"The Kingdom Under," the Herald of the Deeps began, "has grown calcified."

He spun us a tale, after that. Reading through the lines and navigating an unfortunate number of words in dwarven that I had no idea how to pronounce, it looked like the heartlands of the Kingdom Under had grown into pretty much a caste system. People lived and died in their little bubbles according to tortured rules, only the rungs on the caste ladder were quite literal here: the commons lived crammed in the deepest pits, the respectable in the nicer cities that had been emptied as the expansions continued.

The Herald was from one of the wealthiest families in the great city that was broadly below Orne, a place called Maradar, but he had seen the evils in the way the commons were used because... there he gave a look to Balasi that put to rest any notion it was

just friendship between them. Deed-seekers, as I recalled, were dwarves who sought to commit great deeds to their status would be raised in dwarven society. The pieces fit rather neatly together.

"After I became the Herald," he said, "I attempted reforms. It... did not go well."

"There was war," Balasi frankly said. "He was accused of stepping beyond his Burden."

"So you compromised by heading the Fourteenth Expansion," Hanno said.

Only that too had failed. While the largely bloodless victory I'd delivered to them over the Firstborn had seen the Herald lauded, it had also made the pioneering *safe*. His opponents from back home, seeing massive gains to be made at little risk, had immediately begun getting their hands all over the colonies. To get him out of the way they'd tossed him leadership of the Fifteenth Expansion, an unprecedented honour, but those first waves would be mostly soldiers and those had other loyalties. If he wanted to make a haven for the trod upon, then he would need somewhere else to bring them.

So, as we'd surmised, he'd cut a deal with the same people who had been chasing him off after every victory.

"Securing cities for support would have been so resounding a victory we would have been untouchable for at least a century," the Herald said. "Time to grow, to make alliances."

"A fair turn given to an ugly act," Cordelia said, unimpressed.

"You would already have gone beyond us if you did not want to cut a deal," Balasi replied. "So offer your terms, First Prince."

"Keter," she replied.

"A wasteland infested with the dead," the Herald frowned.

"A great city among once-rich lands," Hanno replied. "An outpost with roads to the Kingdom Under, a natural capital to the Fifteenth Expansion."

"Even if all the dead are broken," Balasi slowly said, "there would be no trade, or humans to work under us."

"Are you seeking change," the Sword of Judgment quietly replied, "or just to add a rung below you on the ladder?"

Both dwarves flinched. There was talk back and forth after that, about boundaries of land and trade concessions and the massive sum of gold that they both wanted – I now suspected to make a garden out of Keter, if they were stuck there – but I could tell

that it was Hanno's retort that had done it. Every time it looked like they were getting angry, they felt the bite of the bladelike sentence slide below a rib.

"It is not the bargain I was expected to make," the Herald told us when the negotiations wound down. "I may not have the support to make it law."

"I am willing for Procer to take the debt immediately if supplies for the siege of Keter are promised," Cordelia told him.

"I cannot promise them," the green-eyed dwarf admitted. "I do not have the authority to move such quantities by my word alone. The land-kings will have their say."

"But you can help," Hanno pressed.

"I have struck a bargain with Sve Noc through an envoy before," the Herald said, glancing at me. "This power none can deny me, so these talks do not worry me. All I can offer for the land-kings is an oath on my staff that I will fight for these terms with all my might."

So not a sure thing, I thought with a grimace. It wasn't the agreement we'd wanted, and the Sisters had yet to agree to the terms – which involved them ceding a great deal of territory theoretically theirs – but it was something. And if we tried to go pas them, reach out to their opponents in the Kingdom Under, we ran risks too. The talks might be killed entirely, or the terms grow worse. And even if it worked out just fine, it would take time. What would better terms matter, if they were accepted when we were all dead? No all the decisions we could make carried risks. The real question was which of them was the best risk to take.

My gut said this was the one.

Hanno had gotten to Herald, I'd seen it, and that would work for us. It was a better bet than a complete unknown. I met Cordelia's eyes and nodded my assent.

"Then speak to the land-kings, Herald," the First Prince said. "This is the bargain we seek."

Drinks were brought in, we emptied them and the Herald of the Deeps swore his oath. I saw Creation eddy from the strength of it. *It will not be broken without consequence*, I thought. That night, as I lay in bed I found that sleep eluded me. The assault on Keter had always been going to be a gamble, a roll of the dice that would lead to either victory or extinction, but it was even more so now. We had enough supplies for the march and a few weeks once we set camp around the Crown of the Dead – a little under

two months, barring a disaster, but even two months wouldn't be enough to crack open Keter.

If the Herald failed, we failed with him.

I was not surprised that I slept little, and fitfully.

—

It was actually quite hard to take anyone by surprise through the Twilight Ways, at least when you got to the scale of armies. A cavalry contingent of a handful of Named could be slipped in to devastating effect, that was true, but an entire army? Getting it through the gates could take more than a day sometimes, not unlike marching a host through a narrow mountain pass, and it was even worse when you were leading a coalition force – half a dozen languages, people yelling about who was in charge and too many different baggage trains. Having led such a force on the Hainaut front for almost two years, I figured I had my finger on the pulse of the kind of troubles it entailed.

As always, though, the League of Free Cities found a way to surprise me. After a day and a half they had most of the Helikean army through and that was pretty much it. Everyone else had landed small forces, squabbling over who should go through, and apparently Bellerophon's citizen militia was debating just staying in the Twilight Ways the whole time.

There would, I was informed, be a vote.

Still, by the afternoon of the second day there was no longer any delaying the official 'arrival' of the League: people had seen the troops crossing into Creation, word was reaching Salia and there might be a panic if the situation was left unattended. The people of Procer's capital had gotten much twitchier about armies since the shine off the myth of the Principate's invincibility had worn off. For that and diplomatic reasons, theatre was made of the whole affair. It suited all parties, since the League cities wanted to salvage their reputation after sitting out most of the war while Procer was in desperate need of good news to trumpet about.

All of the cities picked two hundred of their shiniest soldiers – Bellerophon drew the names by lot instead – and a parade was welcomed into the city to raucous cheers. Cordelia cracked open the foodstuff reserves to throw street banquets and newly minted Empress Basilia sent out crates of salted fish, dried mutton and dates as an elegant gesture of goodwill. If she made sure that the generosity was traced back to her by having her own officers distribute what was technically League stores, well, that was just how those games were played. She'd not gotten her hat by missing opportunities.

The city's spirits were lifted, the doom just beyond the horizon forgotten for a night, and why *wouldn't* the people cheer? Not even the First Crusade had boasted an array of soldiers from so many parts of Calernia: this time all the nations of the continent stood on the right side of horror.

I did not take long for Basilia Katopodis to seek me out after the formalities were done. She came alone, keeping the pretence of a visit between old friends instead of state affairs, but we both knew better. I received her in the same bar I'd received Nestor Ikaroi in when he came on her behalf, standing behind the counter. The Protector of the League had good taste in drinks: she asked for a Wasteland mule, which was a finger of aragh in pale beer. It was an old Legion favourite I remembered from the War College, beloved of students for being a cheaper drunk than either beer or aragh and of innkeepers for being really easy to cut with water without affecting the taste.

"I wondered if Ikaroi was boasting," Basilia amusedly said as I handed her the mug, "but it seems not."

"It's a little nostalgic," I admitted.

"I wonder if there are any boys in Laure who now boasts of having had their ale poured by a queen," she mused.

I snorted.

"There's a few who could boast of getting more than that, if they put the details together," I told her, wagging my eyebrows suggestively.

She choked on her drink, spraying mist on Cordelia's nice carpets as she coughed. Ah, the costs of diplomacy. The Empress of Aenia, a realm that covered almost half the territory of the League, was a tall brown-haired woman with a rather plain face and the build of someone who'd spent most of their life on horseback wearing heavy armour. No one would call her pretty, but she was fit and fierce – interesting to the eye the same way a tiger would be. She'd once been believed a man, I'd heard, but I would not have guessed at a glance.

"There *are* tales about Callowan serving girls," the Empress admitted, grinning.

"All lies, except for the ones that are true," I drawled.

She'd not come for idle talk, of course, but I saw worth in keeping the loosely friendly relationship we'd had so far. I had been Basilia's informal patron during her rise in power, providing support from afar while she fought Malicia's allies in the League. I'd even tugged at Cordelia's sleeve once or twice to get her to toss the then-general a bone. We both knew she'd risen

far beyond what I had ever intended and that a relation that'd once had a clear superior had grown rather more muddled, but that was not enough to warrant hostility. She was still the closest thing I had to a reliable friend in the League.

I just had to tread more carefully when asking things of her and expect to be asked the odd favour in return.

"That's always the trouble with tales," Basilia said. "It can be hard to pick out the true ones, especially when it comes to Named."

It was my turn to send her an amused glance. There was no need to go fishing when I was ready to just toss her the fish.

"That one's true," I said. "I stand as the Warden now. The office will be written into the Accords, with all accordant powers and responsibilities. There is no longer a need for the League to worry about infighting within the Grand Alliance – all our efforts are turned against Keter."

She let out a low whistle.

"You do keep landing on your feet, don't you?" Basilia said.

"Coming from you, *Empress*," I smiled, "that's a little rich."

We traded toothy, savage smiles.

"The message I sent through Ikaroi still stands," she told me. "The League can't sign onto the Accords unless we get back the Hierarch."

"He did not strike me as a man who would sign them if you did get him back," I frankly replied.

She shrugged.

"Regardless, there's way around it," she said. "The cities have already adopted laws that follow along the same lines, so the holdout is you."

Meaning the office of Warden, which could not be expected to have authority over the Named of the Free Cities when the League had not signed onto the Accords.

"And you have an offer?" I asked.

"What falls under the authority of a Protector of the League is vague," she told me. "Largely on purpose. So Named could be swept under that aegis, if the bone is gnawed at some."

I almost smiled at the audacity.

"You want a deal between the office of Warden and the hereditary title of Protector," I mused. "Your authority over the League's Named recognized in exchange for enforcing the Accords on them."

She wanted for her and her descendants to be the natural and legal lieutenants of the Wardens in the Free Cities. More power gathered to her title in exchange for me getting my way past the labyrinth complexities of negotiating any treaty with the League.

"I could stomach that arrangement," I said, "so long as it's contingent to the League not having signed onto the Accords yet. Once it does, it will be no different from any other signatory."

I might not be in a position to take a hard line at the moment – we needed the Free Cities if we were going to take Keter – I had no intention of sundering the Warden's authority by allowing private Named fiefdoms under the office. Basilia narrowed her eyes at me, recognizing my answer for what it was: a concession that I could accept this temporarily, but that I'd be putting my full weight behind getting the League into the Accords properly the moment we were done with Keter. It wasn't what she'd wanted to hear, but like me she knew that pushing too far would bite her in the ass.

So, as I had expected, she went after another concession.

"They made for interesting reading, your Accords," the Empress said. "Particularly the parts about Cardinal and this school you intend to build there."

I'd originally meant it for Named, but in practice it would likely see only a few of these attending – young and transitional types, before they headed out into the world. The guild I intended to raise there for villains, and perhaps even heroes if Hanno was so inclined, would draw more interest than the halls of learning. But the school itself would draw mages and nobles from all over Calernia, especially if a few Named mages could be talked into teaching. There would be a lot of influence to be traded there, so I cocked the eyebrow over my dead eye at the empress.

"What about it?" I idly asked.

"The League would be late to join that effort, and our divisions may lead others to edge us out," Basilia evenly said. "A pledge might allay those fears."

I got what she practically wanted out of her before long: guaranteed seats. For students, but also for teachers. And there was the clever part: those were not to be promised to the League itself, since indeed that would be illegal and infringing on the authority of a Hierarch. They were to belong to the Protectors of the League, so that the Empress and her successors could use them

for bribes and influence. Well, she didn't lack for audacity. I bargained her down to one teacher and ten students, which I suspected was actually what she'd been after from the start, and with that little concession I got the Empress of Aenia in line.

She'd still fight me tooth and nail to keep the League out of the Accords so she could maintain her authority over Named, but this way she wouldn't actually go to war over the matter. *Good luck with that*, I thought, smiling prettily at her. *The eastern half of the League's terrified of you gobbling them up and it's Cordelia fucking Hasenbach I'll be sending to talk them into signing*. She smiled back just as prettily, no doubt already planning half a dozen ways to brutally smash any fingers that dared creep anywhere near her backyard.

"To alliances," I toasted, raising my cup.

"Long may they last," Basilia Katopodis replied.

And to the sound of metal against metal, the League of Free Cities entered the war.

—

The day before Masego was set to arrive in Salia, the people of the capital filled the streets. Rumours had been swirling around the city for days, no small amount of them seeded by Cordelia's spies, so it was with expectation more than glee that the people gathered. I was not to stand in the crowd but instead in a great raised gallery by the side of the platform where a First Prince would abdicate and another be elected. I'd had forewarning, of course. From the Procerans themselves, but also through the Jacks: the two princesses had gone through every legality they could given the circumstances, and that meant a vote in the Highest Assembly.

There was no way to hide that from Vivienne's people, who might not be the Eyes or the Circle but were nothing to be underestimated.

It was without an invitation that I went to see Rozala Malanza, but these days my name was invitation enough. The guards, swarming the place like vigilant hornets, let me through and an attendant guided me to a small room up two sets of stairs. There the Princess of Aquitan was having a cup of sweet cider as she looked through a great window at the crowd still gathering below. Louis Rohanon, her husband and secretary who'd abdicated rule of Creusens at the Graveyard, was fussing over her as she allowed his attentions with a fond gaze. I was almost reluctant to clear my throat.

Louis stepped back immediately, looking mildly embarrassed.

"Your Excellency," he said. "A pleasant surprise."

"Louis Rohanon," I said. "Or should that be prince consort?"

He smiled ruefully.

"Simply consort," the dark-haired man replied. "After consultation with the Rogue Sorcerer, it was decided it would be best for me to be removed from anything princely."

I hummed in approval. The 'crown' he'd surrendered in Iserre had been more than a chunk of metal, it had been the story of his right to rule. It was perhaps not necessary for him to have refused a largely ceremonial title, but the prudence spoke well of him. Rozala was not without taste.

"And to what do we owe the visit, Warden?" the Princess of Aequitan asked.

I flicked a glance at her husband, who took the hint with good grace and made his excuses. As he left the room I took in the sight of Rozala Malanza as she had chosen to dress for her coronation: a warrior-princess. Over a red dress with a yellow stripe down the centre – her heraldry's colours inverted – she wore a polished breastplate, vambraces on her arms and greaves over soft leather boots. The thick belt at her waist, touched with gold, bore a sheathed sword. The princess' dark curls had been pulled back, freeing bangs as a loose braid went down her back, and she had been made into the very ideal of an Arlesite princess of war.

It suited her, I thought. It was not without reason I considered Rozala the toughest Proceran general I'd faced: if we'd fought the Camps to the finish instead of making a truce, it would have been an army-shattering hour for both sides.

"Now that my husband was chased off and you've looked your fill," Rozala drily said, "will you deign to speak freely?"

I took the time to pick my words carefully.

"Yours is an election come out of the war," I said, "but Gods willing, it will last long past it."

"Ah," the dark-eyed princess smiled. "I had wondered if I would warrant such a visit."

There wasn't a lot of joy in that quirk of the lips.

"You have spent much coin and effort keeping Procer from failing," she said. "So you look for assurances that our gratitude will not be short-lived."

"You took an oath after the Graveyard," I said, "when you put that sword in the ground. I don't believe you the kind of woman to go back on it."

"But," Rozala replied.

"We will have business, you and I, when I sit in Cardinal and you in Salia," I said.

And I did not have the kind of rapport with Rozala Malanza that I did with Cordelia Hasenbach – who, for all that we had faced off for years, had become someone I trusted in our own way. Considering that Procer would be pivotal to the survival of the Accords one way or another, it meant I needed to have a second look at the dark-haired beauty before me: not as Cordelia's general and rival, but instead as a First Princess in her own right. Rozala narrowed her eyes at me.

"Let me speak plainly, then," the princess said. "We will never be friends, Catherine Foundling."

Her jaw clenched.

"I believe you cruel and cavalier with lives as well as deeply conceited," Rozala Malanza harshly said. "That the Gods have seen fit to reward you for this is the misfortune of our age."

I did not blink, waiting for her to finish.

"But you keep your word," the Princess of Aquitan reluctantly added. "And treaties made with you can be trusted. Procer will stand behind the Accords, even if arms must be twisted."

"I have heard promises before," I warned, "and they died stillborn on the floor of the Assembly."

Rozala's face hardened.

"Procer," she said, "will not be what it was. It cannot be."

She rested a hand on her belly.

"I will not bring my daughter into the world I knew as a girl," Rozala Malanza swore. "The chaos, the petty wars and the knives. Hasenbach had the right of that: there is *rot* in the Principate and it must be burned out."

My eye narrowed.

"And what will you do about it?" I asked.

"Open your ears," Rozala said, "after the crown is set on my brow."

I left, as she'd tacitly told me to, and an hour later found myself leaning against the gallery railing while the people of Salia shouted themselves hoarse. After the criers and resonance spells had made known Cordelia's abdication there had been cries of dismay, for though her reign had not been without troubles and riots she was a comfortingly steady hand. They had turned to cheers soon enough, though, when Rozala's election was announced. She was a popular woman, her victories in the north well known while the black marks on her record were long forgotten.

Cordelia Hasenbach herself set the crown of white gold on her successor's head, the two of them matching gazes as she did.

When the First Princess of Procer stepped forward afterwards, to the edge of the platform, I felt spells bloom all around us. Scrying mirrors, I realized after catching sight of one of them from the glint of the sun reflected, though where they led I could not be sure. Rozala had a good speaking voice and the promises she gave out were the kind a beleaguered people could cheer at: driving out the dead, restoring order and peace to Procer. After that, though, things took a turn and I found myself leaning forward in interest.

"- and so as we begin our march on Keter I ask: where are the princes and princesses of the south?"

Murmurs, unease.

"Again and again," Rozala Malanza called out, "we have sown the seeds of our own defeat. Schemes and grasping hands, betrayals and cowardice Shame at every turn.. Even as the Hidden Horror closes his grip on Procer, these *parasites* hide in their palaces and leave the rest of us to burn."

A shiver went through the crowd. Like she'd touched a finger to the pulse of the fury just under the surface.

"No longer," the First Princess said. "I give you this oath now: those who call themselves princes and do not march to save Procer are princes no longer. All their families I attaint, all their holdings I declare forfeit. When the moon turns, all who will not hold a sword to save the Principate will be cast out of it until Last Dusk."

The city went wild, the clamour of shouts and stamping feet shaking the walls. And now I knew where those scrying mirrors went: the First Princess had, on the day of her coronation, thrown a gauntlet to every crown in Procer.

Pick it up, Rozala Malanza had said, or I will drag you off your thrones by the hair.

"Yeah," I murmured, smiling down at her from the gallery. "You'll do."

—

Hierophant arrived in Salia early, late on the night of the coronation instead of early in the morning. I offered to delay our departure so he could have a night's sleep in a proper bed, but he would have none of it.

"It makes no difference to me," Masego told me. "And time is of the essence, you have been telling me."

"You just want to get your grubby fingers on the godhead of the Crows as quickly as possible," I accused.

"That too," he shamelessly agreed.

He did want to spend a few hours with Indrani before leaving, though, as she wouldn't be coming with us despite her protests to the contrary. I wanted her keeping an eye on the Barrow Sword, whose seat as representative was still too fresh to be anywhere near secure. I encouraged him to, as much because I loved them both as because I needed some time to get the last of my affairs in order. I sent word that I would be leaving tonight instead of tomorrow to all those who needed to know, then talked Vivienne into a late supper with me. Hakram was out of the city, settling a dispute between two clans out east, so a message would have to do.

After my pack and goodbyes were done, I went to find the third companion that would come north with me. Akua was not far, having been amusing herself over the last few days by turning the flying tower where I'd become the Warden into what she called 'a proper throne' in between going into the slums of Salia to offer healing against the diseases that kept sprouting up in the crowded hovels. Some of them could not be wiped out entirely by Light.

"Did you know, darling, that most villains only ever encounter a single godhead in their lives?" she told me. "You are something of an overachiever in that regard."

"It's the Crows again, so it doesn't count as a new one," I argued.

Though it was novel for her to actually need supplies now — as well as clothes, since she could no longer a shade who could change her wardrobe with a thought — she'd had most of them set aside already. If anything, she had seemed eager to head out to Serolen. When I asked, she turned thoughtful.

"I've always felt the business to be unfinished," Akua said. "It is good to settle all of one's affairs properly."

Yeah, I felt it too. It was time to bring to a close the journey that'd begun in the outskirts of the Everdark. We were nearly ready to leave, horses saddled – well, Zombie for me – and our route out of the capital picked out when there was a commotion just out the palace. I looked through the Night, one of my hundred dead eyes, and cocked an eyebrow. Moments later, Cordelia Hasenbach rode in atop one of those sturdy horses the Lycaonese favoured. She had saddlebags and she was dressed to travel.

"Going somewhere?" I idly asked.

"I believe she means to come with us, Catherine," Masego told me.

He sounded a little surprised I hadn't caught on to that. Mercifully, Cordelia was not one of the Woe so she did not take the golden opportunity to mock me as one of them would have.

"I thought it best to make my offer for Keter directly to Sve Noc," the Lycaonese princess said.

She was still Prince of Rhenia and Princess of Hannover, at least for now. The papers to pass on the crowns to Otto Redcrown and turn him into the sole ruler of the Lycaonese were already ready and signed, I'd been told. They were only waiting so it wouldn't look like Rozala was stripping her predecessor of the titles.

"That could be done by scrying mirror," I replied, unimpressed. "The First Princess wants you out of the capital, I take it."

"We are in agreement that my looking over her shoulder as she begins her reign would benefit neither of us," Cordelia replied.

"And how does that lead to your riding with us?" I pressed.

"I thought you might be in favour of my presence," the princess mildly said, "since it will allow you to keep an eye on this."

Reaching inside her cloak, she presented a baton of sculpted ivory. It was beautifully made, but aside from that there was – no, not quite right. There was *something* at the heart of it, I thought, dead eye seeing a glimpse of something like Light. I shot her an inquisitive look.

"It is," Cordelia Hasenbach told me, "the device that triggers the ealamal."

I smothered a grimace. Yeah, she had me there. I wasn't letting that out of my sight if I could help it. I'd already figured there must be an artefact serving the purpose but the Jacks had not unearthed anything when they looked into it.

"I don't suppose I could talk you into breaking that," I said.

"No," she pleasantly replied.

"Welcome to our little band, then," I sighed.

"It is," Cordelia victoriously smiled, "my great pleasure."

elanevensong

Yay! Thanks for the chapter

nimelennar

Oof.

If the entire continent, including Callow, the League, Praes, and a reunified Procer, march against the Dead King, that's a very, very powerful story.

This, of course, means that something is about to go terribly wrong.

letouriste

you forgot the giants (and probably the Titan), the dwarfs and the drows 😊

Ciara

And you forgot the elves!

nimelennar

I don't think the dwarfs are in yet.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

They go to settle the Drow. Sereolen(sp?) is the Drow capital, where the D are fighting the Dead King.

Levi Kalden

Lucky us, its not our problem if the protagonist isn't there to see to it

[Liliet](#)

BEST BEST BEST BEST BEST BEST BEST

I AM GIFTED A GIFT TODAY AND I LOVE IT VERY MUCH

Cpt. Obvious

Even reading this many months after you posted it raises my spirit to witness your joy!

ruduen

Boost!

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

You know, I expected a band heading out with Catherine. But my money would've been on a standard Band of Five, with more Named in the group. Does the compatriot formerly known as the First Prince fit into such a band? Would it just be a group made with the expectation that one or two more will fill in as they go? Or are they just skipping on the five entirely if this is entirely a villain story at this point?

nick012000

I think it might be five? Akua was going to be Cat's third companion, with Masego the first or second, so with Cordelia it makes five once you add in Cat herself. I dunno who the non-Masego member of the first two is

caoimhinh

Yeah, Cordelia joining the trip is just weird. Not only are her arguments for going quite flimsy, but it is actually detrimental for her to leave. She, as one of the most skilled administrators in the Principate and the person who is most informed about everything going on throughout the realm, is needed right now. But she is suddenly going to be absent instead of smoothing the transition or supporting Rozala in the many things that are needed so Procer doesn't collapse.

Plus, shouldn't the artifact be now in the hands of the new First Prince? She is keeping it as her own personal weapon instead of something that belongs to the nation. So much for the advocate of systems and institutions over personal power.

Cordelia's hypocrisy never ends, I see.

Linnus42

I mean Cordelia is an eternal Hypocrite nothing new there. Clearly angling to secure herself more unearned power despite being too good for a Name.

kinigget

Having her sticking around would be purely detrimental, given that it would look like she was trying to maintain her power despite having abdicated. As for the staff, would *you* trust

something like that to be kept in a nation's armory? Better that it stays in hands that have been proven trustworthy, leaving aside the story pitfalls leaving it lying around entails. You act like she's keeping it for her own personal benefit, this is not only deeply uncharitable, but against what we know about her.

SeventhSolar

Cordelia is trained and practiced in the use of the Ealamal, I believe. Ever since she first used it when the Dead King broke into the the Assembly Chamber, the Ealamal has been an artifact tied directly to Cordelia Hasenbach, rather than to the Principate.

Salt

Have to disagree complete here. I'm not a Cordelia fan, I think everyone here knows this as an obvious fact, but her going with Cat isn't just sensible but absolutely necessary. Mostly because Sve Noc is about to be asked to give up fucking Keter to the Kingdom Under. I'm not sure if it can be understated how serious that is in their point of view, the Sisters are going to be utterly apoplectic about it for completely valid reasons.

They're being asked to cede the crown jewel of the dead king's lands; something they and the Drow earned after giving up the Underdark, taking their entire peoples to the surface, having a significant portion of them – many of their greatest – massacred fighting the Dead King, having their Godhead sundered by the Dead King, and now also needing to risk the source of their original Godhead to break the Bard's grip on Evil stories.

The Sisters have basically risked and suffered catastrophic losses in Every. Single. Thing. that matters to them and their peoples, entirely on a leap of faith, in the face of genocidal Armageddon from both the Dead King and the Kingdom Under. Now, the same nation that plotted to betray them during the literal end of the world just made an agreement on their behalf, with the Gods-damned Kingdom Under, to yet again take away the crown jewel of what their entire peoples bled and died for.

In a personal sense, the Sisters and the Drow absolutely do have the right and do deserve to hear it from Cordelia directly, rather than a secondhand message or ritual. They've gone so far above and beyond what they can be reasonably expected to give that every inch of fury they'd muster at this latest development is 10,000% justified and beyond. The Crows are the goddesses of theft in murder, not the goddesses

of bleeding themselves dry out of selfless sacrifice for the sake of nations that tried to destroy their entire peoples.

In a Story sense, there's so much weight already built up behind this that it's near impossible for this to pass without some serious narrative consequences coming out of someone's hide. That someone is very likely to be the office that Cordelia holds and/or other signatory nations like Procer.

Honestly at this point if Cordelia herself doesn't guarantee their dues to be paid with as much story weight behind it as possible, Below would probably be narratively justified in ripping it out of Creation itself to make sure they get their due. Which they absolutely would do with glee, the very instant this large of a debt is called into account from a nation whose entire identity is an altar to Below.

Linnus42

You see I buy that more if bringing Cordelia was Cat's Plan. Also whole Dwarf Action plan and giving them Keter was more Hanno's plan no so wouldn't they want it to hear it from him. Well you can say Hanno is needed for the War but Heroes can travel pretty fast via Arcadia or Twilight anyway. And one could also say Rozala needs a political crash course from Cordelia.

Does Cordelia really care that much about the Drow being screwed in this plan though? Cordelia just showed up for this mission and used as leverage a super weapon (that her own supposed philosophy says she has no more claim to). It seems more to me that Cordelia is not happy having basically no power and is trying to leverage a super weapon that she argued should be under the sole control of the Proceran Government and the First Prince to advance her own agenda. Not cause she cares about Sve Noc being mad. Not to mention I really don't expect Sve Noc to give a frak about an apology from Cordelia, they expect to get screwed by Procer. But also Cordelia has no real political power in Procer anymore or leverage over the Dwarves to right any wrongs. She has nothing to offer Sve Noc.

But really the main issue is Cordelia's hypocrisy. She cares about laws, regulations and institutions only so far as she can use them against her rivals. When they seek to bind her she breaks them, ignores them, etc. Her political philosophy use to "When the First Prince does it, its not illegal" now its "When I do it, its not Illegal" Cordelia has always leaned Villain in my book though.

Also speaking of the Angel weapon whatever happened to the speculation about how that angel weapon would work with a

sealed choir? That was a major question and the answer is it works just fine? Its like EE discarded that plot point to warp the plot to make Cordelia look good.

chris S

"Also speaking of the Angel weapon whatever happened to the speculation about how that angel weapon would work with a sealed choir? That was a major question and the answer is it works just fine? Its like EE discarded that plot point to warp the plot to make Cordelia look good."

In this very chapter The League discusses the Hierarch returning being a factor for the League's admittance into the Accords. Methinks this plot point maybe isn't quite as done and dusted as we've all just assumed.

Salt

It doesn't matter how much remorse she does or doesn't have or what her overall character is here. It mattered when considering her for Warden because it would be an indicator of what her overall Wardenship would be like and shape the Role itself might take

Neither is the case for this one. This is a clear cut instance where it simply makes practical and personal sense for the particular negotiation. It's a matter of all involved parties showing proper regard and respect for the Sisters and the Drow by at the very least going personally when asking for something this severe, as well as filling a narrative necessity.

She's not particularly virtuous, no. That's the realm of Heroes. That's also not important right now, because what's going to matter to the firstborn right now is the most relevant people holding themselves accountable for making sure this leap of faith isn't going to end up with a knife in their back, not whether or not the representatives have the most golden principles. Different needs for different situations.

Her not being particularly virtuous compared to the likes of Roland or Hanno, doesn't mean every single thing she does is wrong. The same way Black being vicious and callous to an extreme didn't mean every single thing he did was evil.

mavant

Given their noted propensity for looting corpses, perhaps Cordelia means to offer the ealamal to Sve Noc in the bargain for Keter.

Liliet

Smoothing the transition for Rozala is the explicitly stated reason FOR her absence. I assume she has prettied up everything administrative ahead of time, and now's the time for her to make herself genuinely & also conspicuously scarce and not in position to influence Rozana's new reign in any way.

nimelennar

I don't think Cordelia can count towards a Band of Five; Cat notes that she seems to have relinquished her claim on any sort of Name.

Kletanio

A standard Band of Five (in outside media) can always include one Badass Normal, right?

nimelennar

Hmmm. That's an interesting question. If someone steps into a Role of "Badass Normal," would they get a Name for it, or would the Role itself preclude the Name?

Liliet

Catherine wasn't Named when she joined the Twilight Liesse band. Name is not important, Role is. If anything one can get a Name FROM joining a band of five.

Cpt. Obvious

Late thoughts...

At the time they set out the stories for villains are still silenced, so a band of five doesn't add any story based boost.

Which makes me wonder if there are any reason for mixed bands like we've seen earlier. Would the Heroes of such a band receive any benefit beyond the added abilities of the villains?

Feels like these mixed bands weren't considered to be an option by the Gods who drew up the templates for the stories. Well on the other hand they were probably not expecting to have their Bard go corrupt, the Heroic stories stole by a Villain or the villainous stories silenced so...

Tenthyr

My my, Catherine is maturing an aspect that will turn any command Spoken three times into an unviolatable law.

Hard to beat that as a way to curtail a Named abusing their power.

megaprr

I would say Decree... but given that that used to be one of the Saint of Swords' aspects I think perhaps not.

Looking at synonyms.... There's Order (meh), Proclaim (bit too ostentatious), Declare (I like), Command (I like, but less), Dictate (bit too dictatorial), Impose (I like less), Compel (bit too mind-controllly), Constrain (meh),

caoimhinh

Sentence

megaprr

wow how did I not think of that... seems pretty spot on!

Rynjin

I like the sound of "Discipline", as that's the way she's been using it, to punish and teach a lesson to those who cross her.

tmchin75723

If it were discipline, it wouldn't really fit with how it was used this chapter. She's not making the dwarf shut up to improve his behavior, she's doing it to give herself an advantage.

Rynjin

I disagree. She's using it to put him in his place. If he doesn't learn his lesson (not to speak out of turn in front of his betters), the punishments get harsher and harsher.

shikkarasu

Rein

letouriste

how about just Speak

mavant

If it's Proclaim, I hope she orders someone to walk five hundred miles.

Mike E.

And then make them walk 500 more...

ninegardens

Just to be that man who walked 500 miles...

Black Spiral Dancer

I would bet the aspect will be named "Lock" or "Bind". I favour the first but I understand the second might be used.

erebus42

Well now, it seems Cordelia is in for a little adventure. Only now the things that go bump in the Night aren't only gonna be coming to stab her in her beliefs...

edrey

Great chapter
all the world against Keter,
Now a new Drow arc, but this band of five lack one person; who
would be?

Kletanio

[illegible]

Reaper

Agreed
Rumena is a sass master on pqr with Archer, and can keep up
with Hakram on dryness.
He fills the two positions.

Insanenoodlyguy

This is a finishing of old buisness. There was another there for most of that journey, and now that we again journey to the heart of things Drow, I'd be shocked if Ivah isn't back soon.

Juff

Typo Thread:

There were a lot (extra space)
They two of > The two of
Basali > Balasi
me ignorance > me of ignorance
go pas them, > go past them,
No all > No, all
contingent of a > contingent or a
shine off > shine of
I did not take > It did not take

cheaper drunk > cheaper drink
labyrinth complexities > labyrinthine complexities
Keter – I had no > Keter – but I had no
turn.. > turn.
could no longer > was no longer

ninegardens

I'm... confused.

Why are they taking Salia's current nuclear defence... our of Salia?

Shouldn't it be given to the new queen?

Why does Cordy still have it?

Also, Rozalia and her boy continue to be great.

caoimhinh

A) Because Cordelia is a hypocrite who for all her talk about systems and institutions, actually has no faith nor trust in those, and only believes in her own judgement and capacity.

B) Because Cordelia joining Catherine's journey to Serolen makes no sense whatsoever. She has no real reason for going to meet Sve Noc, and she is a liability with zero combat strength. Worse, she is actually needed in Procer, but she is leaving just because she feels like it?

Cordelia is direly needed in Procer right now, and her leaving all of a sudden is practically throwing a lot of stuff over Rozala (things that Rozala has no idea about, since she was away in other tasks) and saying "good luck", as if the marathon of administrative and diplomatic tasks that plagued Cordelia's every waking hour was suddenly no more, or it didn't need to be properly explained to the successor to smooth the process. She should have stayed and served as Rozala's advisor and properly pass down the responsibilities and convey the details of all the things going on in the Principate, all the plans and measures taken for the sustenance of the realm.

But noooo, let's leave it all in Rozala's hand, and just as icing on the cake, let's leave with the key to the use of the nation's ultimate weapon.

Amostyx

C) I'm not sure they can use the ealamal at the moment. Salia is filled/surrounded with all the allied forces of the Grand Alliance, the vast majority of which haven't been judged by the angel previously. Triggering the nuclear option now would probably do more harm than good.

I think the villains are camped an appropriate distance away from Salia, but I'm not sure about that.

aurikdomi

Pretty sure Rozala isn't staying in the capital either, but leading the armies marching against the crown of the dead. Also we don't know the limitations or workings of the artifact yet. Does it activate the angel corpse? is it the angel corpse? can it channel power in a more targeted but smaller fashion? who knows

ninegardens

Cordy is getting a lot of hate in these comments lately.

Honestly, I don't think she's any MORE of a hypocrit than our protagonist. Both Cordy and Cat lead large countries, and are forced to make frequent compromises. Both have their blindspots, their *personal* faults.

Both try to do Goodish things, and wish to be something more. And both have failed... time and time again... often through their own stupid.

shrug

devildragon777

It can't be used at the moment without potentially annihilating a good (Evil?) third to half of the GA in/around Salia to begin with. Cordelia is effectively being told to get out of the way during the transition, so it's either bring it along where Cat can keep her eye on the nuke button, or leave it with Rozala, who at this point knows and was involved with barely anything to do with the Ealamal. Guess which one C & C prefer!

There isn't really a range limit to the remote that we know of, so it might be possible for Cordelia to activate it even if she isn't specifically there. Or the priests around the angel corpse might be able to finagle something if necessary.

Agent J

There was a comment somewhere that Cordy might be intent on trading it to Sve Noc for Keter. Which could be an interesting development.

Linnus42

I mean what was the point of spending so much time on who gets Severance if the resolution was obvious and offscreen. Could have at least had a tournament or heard Christophe's speech.

Dwarf Resolution goes the way Hanno expected. Which quite frankly suggest that Hanno very much didn't need to cut the deal he did at all. Without Cat's biased intervention (would she have pulled that if she thought Cordelia was going to win?) He Could have taken the whole pie and left Cordelia with nothing...though we see why that be a bad idea cause she do something crazy.

Cordelia shows herself to be a massive hypocrite. Jumps on the Sve Noc mission to chase personal power and shows her distrust of institutions (not under her personal control) by keeping the nuclear launch codes for herself instead of turning them over to the right ruler of Procer, Rozala. That sounds like High Treason perhaps she should be hung? But Cordelia has gone from when the First Prince does it, its not illegal to when Cordelia does it its not illegal. Clearly, Cordelia is angling for a Non Named power up from somewhere and her main chip is something she should no longer have access to period. Is it really a sacrifice if she immediately tries to circumvent it? Also really Cordelia could act at a consultant and give Rozala a political crash course since we know Rozala aint great at it.

Agent J

"He Could have taken the whole pie and left Cordelia with nothing"

How did you miss... literally the whole point of the last mini-arc? Hanno is not Cat's equal and did not have the full support of Good behind him. Catherine could have "taken the whole pie" as well by eating the book without bargain, but in either scenario, they'd be marching off to face the DK on a hobbled leg.

As for leaving Salia, fucking Malanza herself doesn't want her around looming over her shoulder. In order to have a smooth transition of power, power needs to actually transition. Cordy sticking around doing effectively the same job is not that. Just like Ishaq, Rozala wants to solidify her new position and so Cordy leaving is explicitly to her benefit (and preference, let's be honest, she hates Cordy even more than you).

As for the ealamal, I'm hoping she plans to sell it to Sve Noc in exchange for Keter. Because otherwise, I have no idea what they can offer that would be worth losing ANOTHER FUCKING HOME to the same genocidal fucking "Hero" and his genocidal fucking Kingdom Under. I hope she's not just going their to bat her eyelashes and ask sweetly. She needs an actual offer and, oh, hey, she's brought an angel corpse with her. I wonder what those fetch for? (Well, she brought the launch codes, but whatevs.)

ninegardens

...

...

Holy shit.

Can Sve Nok Eat an angel?

I mean.... They are running low on power, thanks to being mauled recently...

And they are the goddess of "Theft in victory".

And... it would bring a certain amount of balance to their light/dark side.

In other bussiness, why haven't we handed the drow the Twilight ways yet?

A place without noon?

Giving them juristiction over it would be the "fair" if you taking Keter.

kinigget

You are missing the point entirely about Hanno. Sure, maybe his plan would have worked, but letting him do that and become Warden of the East would still have fundamentally weakened Good and driven a giant wedge between the Heroes and the people they're supposed to protect.

And where in the name of hellfire are you getting the idea that Cordelia is chasing personal power? Hell, the reason she had to leave Salia was to **prevent** those exact optics. She has nothing better to do, can accomplish some goals on the way, and keeps the angel nuke away from anyone who would misuse it.

Steel and Elaborate Insult

Cordelia Hasenbach: Gives up the sovereignty of the largest nation on the surface, her ancestral titles whose history drive her very being, the Name that would most assuredly make her personally powerful

Commenters on this Web serial: She cares about nothing but personal power!!!oneone!eleven

Steel and Elaborate Insult

I mean, say what you like about a woman who was born to privilege, bred to assume authority, and lived an entire life in the lap of luxury, but she's not Louis Rohanon or Abreha Mirembe.

[Liliet](#)

Louis Rohanon?

Linnus42

She was gave up being First Prince trying to score a more powerful position. She failed.

She kept the super weapon control so she could leverage it for more power not to protect it lol. Cordelia is the one after all who made a big deal about getting mad about Tariq killing the villagers despite not having the right. She claims you have to have the ascent of the governed (even though that loosely applies to Nobles) and yet keeps the super weapon. The weapon belongs to the state of Procer and the first prince should have control is Cordelia's argument when she is first prince. But when she is not first prince, she thinks she deserves to keep the weapon? That is the problem with Cordelia, she believes in rules, laws and institutions when they apply to others not herself.

shikkarasu

She gave up being First Prince to accomplish a goal. She never wanted to be Warden of the West, she was tricked into thinking it was necessary. This was covered in Occidental IV. Just about everyone in this story fights for personal power, but that's how the world is changed. Once Hanno pointed out that she didn't need to be WotW she stopped caring about the Name.

I don't think she's a control freak, no more than Catherine at the very least, but after her conversation with Auger she realised that in order to change the country to something better she'd have to start stepping on toes and burning bridges. Cardinal is simply the best opportunity to keep working at her reforms, so of course she gave up everything she had left for it.

As for the Angel Stick, I wouldn't leave that in the hands of someone like Rozala. Love the First Princess, Long May She Reign, but she is a General first and a ruler second. Rozala may be entitled to the weapon, but she can't be using it with the army in Salia, anyway.

Salt

Not to mention that said angel stick is a metaphysical semi-magical Nuke that's a giant narrative risk by way of being a dubiously controllable power, of foreign origins, that they understand little of, and which would be devastating if something were to coincidentally happen to it. Exactly the kind of gigantic narrative weak spot that entities like the Bard like to exploit. It only makes sense to make sure the most obvious point of failure – the trigger – isn't left too far away from the supervision someone that can combat the Bard.

Leaving the trigger for it in Rozala's hands is like leaving your five year old child alone to guard your house, while knowing full well that Genghis Khan is roaming around just waiting for a chance to burn your house down. Rozala wouldn't be able to see the Bard coming if the Bard was actively strangling her neck.

Even if the Bard takes a different approach, this way they at least have a metaphysical link to the weapon to do something about it remotely.

Reader in the Night

I mean, by this argument, Cat really should just take the Nuke's launch codes for herself by force. Cordelia's squishy as hell, Catherine is much better suited for actually defending it from misuse.

By the argument of actual lawful right... Catherine might have a claim as well, not sure. Or Rozala might, but Cordelia certainly doesn't.

Skaddix

Yeah my complaint has two parts.
Is this a good idea for Cordelia to use the Angel Exterminatus as Leverage with Sve Noc for something. We can table that part though.

Is this action consistent with Cordelia's supposed ideology that we got told this very arc. So I am not buying well her thoughts evolved over night. Cordelia's whole ideology is not might makes right. Its that the state using its rules, regulations and laws should control and constrain "Special People" mostly Named with a focus on Heroes from Cordelia. So by her own argument who holds the nuclear football should be determined by the state of Procer and its First Prince or by the High Officers of the Grand Alliance. Cordelia alone by her own argument doesn't get sole discretion over it anymore since she is no longer First Prince and not even a Prince. Ergo she is hypocrite because she doesn't care about the laws, rules and regulations when she is out of power and said laws, rules and regulations restrict her. She is acting like the Heroes she whines about despite supposedly being opposed to special rules for special people. Which suggest she only held her previous ideology cause she was in power given how quickly she discarded it when she lost power. Whether Rozala can be trusted as Cordelia's defenders argue is irrelevant though I see no special reason not to trust Rozala.

Cautiously Skeptical

Um...I'm pretty sure Cordelia is the only one who has the narrative weight and practice to potentially use the thing safely? Which coupled with the number of 'Evil' people in the army Rozala is leading means Cordelia is probably the best person for the job.

Because this isn't a choice between "Cordelia, the former First Prince", and "Rozala, the current First Prince" potentially using the thing.

It's between "Cordelia, the person who has reliably held Proccer together and been trained for this" and "Unnamed mage guy no.3 who has almost no narrative weight or authority but does understand the stick" holding and potentially using the thing.

Rozala's trustworthiness isn't in question, it's her literal capability and whether leaving it with her rather than under the eye of the person who built it and one of the most powerful Named on the planet is a good idea. Especially since Cat is one of the few who could reasonably assess whether using it at any given moment is sure to backfire horribly.

Additionally, something basically everyone is ignoring when talking about this, there is no indication that Rozala didn't know and agree to Cordelia taking the stick, which handily sidesteps the issue of legal ownership. This is a constitutional monarchy, Rozala is now the primary ruler, it's likely entirely up to her how military assets are deployed. It's a national weapon, likely under heavy guard for obvious reasons, and while the control method is secret the existence of one is pretty deducible so it wouldn't make sense for her not to have at least some idea of it.

There was probably a conversation along the lines of: "I need you to leave the main force/Salia for awhile so no one questions my authority"

"Of course. I will accompany the Warden to explain to the literal gods why we've given away part of their territory, since I'm actually a trained diplomat and I don't believe anyone else going is suitable for that role. I've gotten most everything ready for you here, although there is the matter of the angel-stick. I was one of the few who knew how to use it, but I've been told that using or holding a weapon of great power without appropriate training is basically asking providence to beat you over the head with it. Who do you want to take care of that?"

"I can't use it near the main force anyway and it's going to be a while before we need it. Take it with you, no one will expect me to trust you with this and it will be safer than in my hands."

"You don't trust me."

"I trust you to do what you believe is best for Proccer and the world."

And so Cordelia gets given the paper with the nuclear launch codes because she is one of the very few capable of using them and also leaving that lying around is asking to be compromised.

No legal issues, very few ethical ones, just a woman who has ceded power acknowledging the power of the new First Prince over her by leaving peacefully to ensure a smooth transition of power and taking the potentially dangerous weapon along because it was agreed to.

(Yes, she might have suggested that she take the stick, rather than Rozala doing so as above, but I still very much doubt she did it without talking to the First Prince at all)

AbraKadabra

WHO says that Cordy does not act on Rozalaz orders?

kinigget

This is at least the third time I've seen you make these statements that run directly counter to the actual text. At this point I can only assume you are deliberately ignoring anything that doesn't line up with your weird grudge against Cordelia. By all means, you are allowed to not like a character or what they stand for, but you do both the work and the author a disservice by reading selectively like this.

SpeckofStardust

The angel nuke button is going with the party that's ultimately facing bard.

As a non-named she Cordelia could legit be useful in that regard. Also with the Drow and dwarves the only power to not help in this war is the elves.

So plots that might come up before the end-

Final bard fight.

Elf intervention.

Drow politics.

Hierarch's return to creation.

Fun talks between Alaya and Cordelia, Dead King and Cat.

ninegardens

Chilling out, and just fricking nuke Korosiv.

Cordelia: "What? You wanted to get rid of him? Right?"

DC

The gnomes are still a thing too, although they are fine as a background explanation for the tech level

ohJohN

They're not a Calernian power though, they're based elsewhere in the world and only show up rarely to enforce their technology ban. I wouldn't count the Yan Tei, Baalites, Asadal, etc. for the same reason, and it seems like they've had more/more recent contact with Calernia. (The elves also came from abroad, but they've been living here for millennia now so they count.)

ohJohN

Ashur hasn't contributed anything to the war on *Keter specifically*, since they got rekt right before it started, but at least some Ashuran Named are part of the forces.

And is nobody gonna mention the rats?? 🤪

Zahariel

There is something I have just noticed. Here are the forces now involved in the Crusade against the Dead King :

Callow

Procer

Praes

The Orc Clans

The Everdark Empire

Levant

The League of Free Cities

The Dwarves

Notice something ? There are eight of them. That is, "seven and one". An alliance of seven and one nations/polities against the Dead King ... that's powerful story stuff, I think.

Of course, I may be completely wrong, have forgotten something, or just be looking too deeply into this.

ANCT

I think the pattern is a good call, but a few things are wrong. One, the Orcs are still a part of Praes. Two, you forgot the Titans appear to be taking part. They would fit the one quite well

[Liliet](#)

Gigantes.

Daniel E

I hope Sve Noc gets a happy ending here, they have definitely earned it. They've been sorely under-appreciated; so much of the shenanigans Cat has pulled would not be possible without the magical battery that is Night.

Alex

Not sure if I missed it, but why is Rozala "First Princess" instead of "First Prince" like Cordelia? I recall that Cordelia was correcting someone for calling her a princess at some point, and explaining why "First Prince" was the proper title.

megaprr

That was because of a quirk in Lycanoese laws if I recall correctly. They never amended it to recognize the Princess title, so Cordelia went with Prince instead.

[Liliet](#)

First Prince is what Cordelia called herself out of Lycaonese pride. Normally First Prince/Princess is gendered.

Reader in the Night

The one thing I question about Cordy going on the mission with them is in terms of danger. They're heading into a brewing Firstborn civil war, and Cordelia is useless in a fight even by civilian standards. And it's not like the Firstborn are above assassination or taking her hostage, either.

Cordelia is awesome at politics and she might even be useful to solve the Firstborn civil war, but the Firstborn are **the** most individual-power-by-square-capita race in Western Calernia, and they're very violence-inclined. If it turns into a fight, the rest of the party will have to fight while bodyguarding Cordelia.

[Liliet](#)

> Cordelia is useless in a fight even by civilian standards

I actually genuinely don't think so.

She's Lycaonese, trained with weapons (and I'd bet that out of these four she's the one with the monst experience knowledge & skill in wilderness camping lolz). She's demonstrated that she can keep a cool head in a combat situation, see alternate routes and execute them (the coup arc). She has potential to be as good as a non-Named non-professional-warrior can even BE on a trip like this.

Sure, she doesn't have the >9000 power level that it takes to fight Mighty. And they will have to bodyguard her some. But there's wayyyyy worse candidates to be stuck bodyguarding.

Rey d`Tutto

When they throw themselves out of the way before you have to...?
Priceless.

Frivolous

I like that Catherine can deduce things about the Herald's character, his nature and relationships, simply by looking at what stories flow from him.

It's a very considering power, too. She looked for stories that flow from Balasi's death. That's a thinker power equivalent to Kairos's Wish.

It's just too bad that that capacity is not proven to work on regular people. If it only works on Named, it has limited utility.

Vyole

Is that a casual reference to Basilia being trans? I absolutely adore the way LGBT people are casually scattered throughout the story without being anything to remark on

Frivolous

Yeah Basilia being trans has been hinted way back. This may be the first time it's been outright stated, though.

Liliet

I mean, it was about as outright stated back then as it is now. EE doesn't bring terminology into this but the hints are transparent.

softle

I very much appreciate that we got this second hinting on a chapter named "passing"

DC

The thought just came to me that Cat was able to get a sense of the Herald's stories without him being present.

I wonder what would happen if she tried that trick on the Hierarchy?

SuitorShooter

"and apparently Bellerophon's citizen militia was debating just staying in the Twilight Ways the whole time.

There would, I was informed, be a vote."

Gods, I've missed Bellerophon.

David Stone

First and Mightiest of the Free Cities, May She Reign Forever.

heffalumps

rreh? hope EE is all right... this is an awfully long time between chapters. 😊 unless there was an announcement somewhere I missed?

Rynjin

EE's sick, skipped a couple of updates to recover, be back on track soon.

heffalumps

good to know, thank you! ♥

Chapter 42: Journey

"A journey is one of those magical events that are turned into either an eternity or a heartbeat by the quality of one's companions."

– Aldred Alban of Callow, the Prince Errant

It was pretty clear that Cordelia had not been on a day-long ride in years, but to her honour even as she became pained she did not let out so much as a single complaint. Masego filled in the gap in whining, having always despised horse riding with a vengeance and not grown to like it in the slightest over the years, but of all people Akua came to the rescue.

"My own body is not yet fully accustomed to riding," she told him. "As I've only had it for a few months."

"It is very nice," Masego told her, looking her up and down shamelessly.

There'd been about as much sexual tension in that look as in a visit to a healer's tent to get your boils treated, not that it stopped Cordelia's eyes from slightly widening. I sighed.

"He's talking about the homunculus nature of the body," I whispered at her.

It was made with magic, which made probably would make this the first pair of tits he'd actually be interested in looking at. In all fairness, if you *had* to pick one pair in all of Creation you could do much worse than Akua Sahelian.

"How sweet of you," Akua replied, not batting an eye. "But it still needs breaking in, which is why I have been using a spell to ease my time in the saddle."

Huh. Hadn't known that. Hadn't felt it either, but that was not entirely a surprise: a mage of Akua's calibre was capable of hiding smaller workings from my senses if they did it on purpose. She offered to teach him the spell and he eagerly agreed, then took pity on Cordelia and offered to cast it for her as well.

"So that you might gauge the difference," Akua smiling offered.

I saw the Prince of Rhenia seriously consider refusing her out of principle, but saddle-sore was saddle-sore. The spell was applied and we quickened our pace again, riding north through the Twilight Ways. It was hard to tell how good a time we were making: from a distance, the starlit compass was vaguer. I could only tell we were progressing, not at what rate. Not yet anyway.

Though the company we'd assembled was unusual – 'the Black Queen, the First Prince, the Hierophant and the Doom of Liesse walk into a bar', there was a premise – the travelling itself was smooth. I sometimes took Zombie on flights ahead, as much to bag some game as to cure her restlessness, and the addition of quail and rabbit to the cookpot was welcome. It was our custom to rotate the chore, which led to occasional bouts of the surreal. Sending the former First Prince of Procer out to gather firewood while the Doom of Liesse made biryani chicken for four felt like some sort of deranged waking dream.

Masego seemed entirely nonplussed, not that I'd expected anything else. I doubted Zeze would bat an eye even if the entire Choir of Judgment made him morning eggs, so long as they weren't over-salted.

Three days in, as Akua went to gather firewood and Masego went about skinning the pair of rabbits I'd caught with a disturbing amount of skill – *much easier than people*, he'd told me with a horrifyingly well-meaning smile when I'd commented on it – I found my eyes following Cordelia's hand. Or, more specifically, the ivory baton they were holding. The command rod for the ealamal. I knew it was real. I'd asked Masego, and there was no fake anyone in her service would have been able to make that'd fool his eye.

"You stare at it whenever it is near my hand," Cordelia said.

"And that surprises you?" I replied. "It's a lot of power bound to a pretty small object."

She settled herself more comfortably against the fallen log, adjusting so it wouldn't dig into her back.

"Not so much more than you could bring to bear, given time to prepare," she said.

I snorted.

"Yeah, no," I told her. "That's not comparable, Hasenbach. Maybe with the Crows personally guiding my hand I could bring down something vaguely in the same league, but it'd kill me for sure."

"You veiled the sun itself in Iserre," Cordelia skeptically replied.

"I mimicked the effect of an eclipse, temporarily, for a small *part* of Iserre," I corrected. "And that wasn't me waving around a staff, it took months of preparations and an artefact that a once-in-a-century mage made."

I paused.

"And I didn't even do the deed," I noted. "I'm the one who put in the power over the months, sure, but it was Akua and Sve Noc who called down the fake eclipse."

"If you believe that to be reassuring," Cordelia mildly replied, "you are sadly mistaken."

I rolled my eye at her, then put up my palms in a gesture of appeasement.

"Look, at the end of the day we can quibble about precedents and equivalents all we want but you're holding in your hands the control rod to one of the few artefacts in existence that can just kill me," I said. "No ifs or maybes – I'm in the range of the ealamal when you use that thing, and I'm *dead*."

I snapped my fingers.

"Just like that," I said.

I wasn't sure what the boundary conditions for not being killed by the wave of Light even though there'd been tests – it looked like maybe the standards on Judgment deciding to kill you were as low as they could get, but that was just informed guesswork by Roland – yet the odds that I wouldn't be one of those picked off were so low as to be nonexistent: Warden or not, I was still a villain. In some ways I felt like I was a girl again, walking

around with the knowledge that my life was only my own so long as no one decided to snatch it.

It'd not missed the feeling, but the years of war against Keter had done wonders for my tolerance to looming doom.

"So you'll have to forgive me the staring," I bluntly said. "It's not going anywhere."

Blue eyes studied me, maybe assessing how much of the agitation in my tone had been genuine. She decided it had been.

"I meant no offence either," Cordelia said.

I shrugged, having taken none. I'd certainly encouraged the perception of my being an unstoppable force over the years, it very much had its uses. But it had led to people overestimating what I could actually do – or survive – sometimes.

"I'll confess to some curiosity as to how you even have it," I said, trailing off.

I wasn't going to push if I hit a wall, but I *was* more than a little interested. I didn't know Rozala Malanza all that well, but she didn't seem like the kind of woman who just handed out doomsday weapons to recent political opponents.

"It was part of the negotiated terms for my abdication," Cordelia admitted.

Huh. It was true that Cordelia had been in a decent bargaining position when she'd negotiated her abdication. Support for Hanno had been growing, but it'd not been support for him to rule all of Procer and it certainly hadn't been support for Rozala Malanza to do the same instead. After the war would have been a toss-up, there was no telling whether Cordelia would have ended up an untouchable saviour or the woman blamed for the horrors, but at the time of the deal her throne had been solid. She'd lost most of Procer, sure but the parts that had stayed were still largely behind her.

"Didn't quite trust her with the doomsday weapon, huh," I said.

Couldn't entirely blame her. If I'd built something that stupidly dangerous I would want to keep it under my thumb too.

"Trust," Cordelia replied, "can be a very complicated word."

"I'm not casting stones," I shrugged. "If anything I can sympathize."

Cool blue eyes studied me.

"Can you?" she said.

"I've had issues with giving up power even when it was my decision to," I frankly said. "I like to think of those times as growing pains, but it's not quite that clear-cut."

I'd been an ass to Vivienne for some time, when it'd sunk in what my abdication would actually mean. An abdication she'd in no way forced on me, any more than my choice of her as my successor. It wasn't the same with Hasenbach and Rozala Malanza, but there was enough in common I could feel pangs of sympathy.

"Have you considered," Cordelia said, "that perhaps the decision was as much about you as Princess Rozala?"

I blinked at her, taken aback.

"How's that?" I asked.

Her lips quirked mirthlessly.

"You have a history of only listening when the interlocutor also has a knife at your throat, Catherine," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "I took the precaution when I believed I was to be Warden of the West, but I stand by it."

I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to decide whether I should be insulted by that or not. Wasn't sure yet.

"A complicated word, is it?" I mildly said.

"I took oaths," Cordelia simply said. "To you, I do not deny it, but I yet heed older ones. If we lose, if the Dead King triumphs and the land teeters on the brink of extinction, I will make the hard choice."

My jaw tightened.

"If we lost in Keter," I slowly said, "you want to blast the ealamal. As strong as you can."

"More than nine in ten should survive the Light," Cordelia quietly said. "Should nothing go wrong."

"You don't know that it won't," I flatly said. "You've never fired that thing at the kind of strength you're talking about. The furthest you've gone is the borders of Salia."

"I cannot," Cordelia grimly agreed. "Yet what can I do but make that choice anyhow, if the other choice is death for all? Even should nine in ten die instead, it would be better than annihilation."

"And if it goes worse than that," I pressed. "If everyone dies?"

Her lips thinned.

"Then when a ship next crosses the Tyrian Sea, its captain will not find all of Calernia a realm of the dead," the blue-eyed princess said. "A cold comfort, but then I am Lycaonese: we are winter's get."

I leaned back. I recognized the cast to her face, it was the one she always had whenever I'd brought up the angel corpse over the years. She wasn't going to be moved on this. And I could even see the grim sort of sense in it: like she'd said, even the most horrific of results was a better end than extinction and become soldiers in Keter's service. On the other hand, she had to know that absolutely no one who had a decent chance of dying should that weapon be used – a number including every villain alive – would find this acceptable or be willing to tolerate her keeping the baton should they find out.

I held no illusions about the people who'd been my charges until recently: if the worst came to pass in Keter, they would be legging it through the Twilight Ways towards the closest port where Baalite ships docked. Learning that instead they were going to get an angel knife in the back might genuinely make a few of them desert and I wasn't sure I blamed them. It would not be too hard a thing, I thought, to sweep this under my authority as Warden. Odds were Hanno would back me, and Ishaq doubtlessly would. Hells, I could just *take* the damn thing from her and it wasn't like she had the strength to stop me.

It'd be a lie to say I was not tempted.

Silence hung between us. *It might yet come to force*, I thought, meeting those blue eyes. *You have to know that*. But for all that her holding that ivory length was putting a knife to my throat Cordelia had also extended trust, hadn't she? She'd told me what she intended without being forced, pretty much admitting that she saw her duty to Calernia as something that came before even the oaths she'd sworn to me as Warden. One step forward and one step back, only it didn't feel like we'd stayed still.

A noose was just a knot, until you'd killed someone with it.

"A complicated word," I slowly repeated.

And left it at that.

For now.

—

The journey was restful in some ways, but in others it was not to be. That much became clear as the days passed.

I'd never particularly enjoyed cooking: it was a lot of tedious little chores followed by equally tedious looking over fires and

ending up in a plate that never seemed to be quite as good as when made by others. Still, it would be shabby of me not to pull my weight so I'd learned to be solid with at least few recipes. Of those I liked hunter's stew the best, since it was about as simple as cooking got, and I'd become a fair hand at it. There would be the usual bickering from the gallery about spices when time came to fill the bowls, I had no doubt, but that was part of the draw by now. Indrani sneering down on Callowan tastes and Vivienne going for her throat in retaliation was always good for a laugh.

Hells, back in the day even Akua got into it once or twice. Like most Praesi, she seemed convinced that any plate without a fistful of goddamned cumin sprinkled over it was unforgivingly bland.

I checked on the pot, finding the stew simmering, and stirred it a few times with the ladle before closing it again. I looked through the smoke as Masego sat across from me, long legs folding as he tried and failed to make himself comfortable perched atop a stone much too small for that. I thought of a praying mantis for a moment, looking at the long limbs, and almost laughed. To think he'd been pudgy when we first met. I could hardly even remember what that was like: he'd melted in the months leading up to the Tenth Crusade and never gained back the weight. Long robes and the black eye cloth, a golden glimmer beneath it, were what I saw in my mind's eye when I thought of Masego nowadays.

"Won't be ready for at least another hour," I told him. "So if you were hoping for an early bowl-"

"I was not," Zeze calmly replied. "I came to speak with you."

I narrowed my eye at him. That sounded serious. I wiped the steel ladle on a cloth and set it down.

"I'm listening," I told him.

He didn't speak, at first, as if surprised I'd agreed so easily or unsure what he'd wanted to say.

"We have come a long way since the day we first met in Summerholm," Masego said.

I half-smiled. By some counts, Apprentice could be said to be the first Named to join what was yet to become the Woe. He'd already been a master of his mantle when Hakram had only just begun to come into his.

"You've taken to chasing larger creatures than winged pigs," I drawled.

He quietly laughed.

"Too many still breathe fire," Zeze replied.

He paused, looking for words, and I gave him the space to think. There was rarely any gain to be had in rushing his mind.

"We have all changed," Hierophant finally said, gold shining beneath cloth. "You do not seek the same ends you did back then, and you seek them differently."

"Yeah," I murmured. "I've been seeing that too. We've..."

Moved on, I refused to say, because if they were gone from my life what did I have left?

"It is inevitable," Masego said. "The man who raised me is not the same who stood at Uncle Amadeus' side during the Conquest. In overcoming circumstance we grow – or are buried, overcome by it."

"I'd argue they were the same man," I said. "Just standing in two different places, at two different times."

Hardship and pleasure bent people in many ways but ultimately they were just colour on the canvas. They did not, could not define what the work was painted on. To my surprise, he smiled.

"I knew you would disagree," he said. "You still believe in the line in the sand, the difference between right and wrong. I have grown to like that about you, Catherine."

I cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Have you?" I drily asked.

He nodded.

"You try to make people stay on one side of the line," Masego said. "And, more often than not, we are better off for it. It doesn't always work, but I like that you try."

I cleared my throat, looked away. He'd always been at his most dangerous when he was painfully earnest.

"But you don't believe in that," I said.

"I believed that we should try," Masego honestly said. "You have shown me the value of that. But we've had this conversation once before, years ago. In the end-"

"- Creation ends," I quietly finished. "So it's not wrong to care about it, but it's missing the point. We should be looking beyond the bars, not rearranging the inside of the cell."

He looked pleased.

"So you do remember," Masego said.

"This," I said, "is about apotheosis, isn't it?"

"You have all found purposes," Hierophant said. "Hakram heals the people he once saw as a lost cause, Vivienne has traded the rooftop for the throne, Indrani has decided that instead of being Ranger she wants to be better than her. And you..."

He mulled over his words.

"You have decided to pull down the curtain on the Age of Wonders and usher what comes after with your own two hands," Masego finally said.

"Everyone's changed," I slowly said, "except you. Is that what you're saying?"

"I will break the shackles I was born bearing around my wrists," Hierophant simply said. "I will open my mind to the secret of existence and burn with the truth of the godhead."

I almost shivered. It was a nice evening out, warm with bright starlight and the merry gurgle of a stream right around the bend of the hill. And still I almost shivered, for though there had been no threat in my friend's words neither had there been so much as a speck of doubt. Masego had become the Hierophant by peeking at the truths behind the curtain, laws mortals were not meant to understand, and he had been unwavering in his sole ambition ever since: he would become as a god, and then step beyond even that. I studied him, fingers clenching and unclenching.

"I feel," I finally said, "as though I am being warned."

"The Dead King awaits in Keter," Hierophant evenly said. "And when I face him once more, Catherine, I will even the scales between us."

"You want revenge for your magic," I said.

"Revenge is not the right word," he mused. "It is the bargain of an eye for an eye, and that is not a rule I abide by."

Through the smoke, I saw Masego's eye burn bright gold through the cloth.

"I will ruin him," Hierophant said, his calm like that of a deep, dark lake. "I will make of Autumn's crown a noose around his neck and make him watch as I tear out of him everything of worth."

The fire crackled. Motes of gold danced on the smoke, as if traced by some luminous finger.

"I will use the sum of his works as a step for my own," Hierophant told me, "and let him rot like a bloated carcass as I reach horizons he never so much as glimpsed."

The dark-skinned man leaned forward, long braids sliding off his shoulder.

"That is what I promise Trismegistus King, and only then will I count us even for what passed between us," Masego said.

I swallowed. These were not idle words, I knew. He wasn't the kind of man to speak those. Masego genuinely meant to rip out the power of Neshamah and use it as part of his own apotheosis.

"Why tell me this?" I asked. "Why *now*?"

The glass eye's light ebbed low, now little more than glimmers again.

"You made room for everyone else in the world you're building, Catherine," Masego said, then smiled.

He drew back and just like that there was no trace of the Hierophant left in him, none of the intensity that'd filled the air around likes a physical thing. As if it'd only ever been a trick of the light and the illusion had been broken the moment he moved.

"Remember to make room for me as well," he asked.

I loved the man like a brother, and he loved me the same, but I knew a warning when I heard one. When the moment came for him to even the scales, if I stood in the way it would not be a small thing. That was what he'd been telling me.

If it came down to choosing between my dream and his own, his choice was already made.

—

I'd gotten used to my laundering being done for me.

Both the Army of Callow and the Legions had it as an assigned duty, but I'd never served at a rank where I might end up needing to kneel by the river shore and rub the dirt out of my clothes — or other people's. I wasn't unfamiliar with the chore, it was one of those we traded around when the Woe travelled together. Usually it was Vivienne who traded for it, she didn't mind getting her hands bone cold, but she wasn't along this time. So instead I found myself kneeling in the sand by Akua Sahelian, washing clothes in the stream. It was hard work, and rough on the hands, but there was only so much to wash and when it came to drying afterwards we cheated with magic.

The aftermath found us sitting on flat rocks by the river as we waited on the spell to finish getting the water out of the blankets. Akua had insisted on using a slower one, since apparently it didn't damage the fabric.

"How do you even know that?" I asked. "If you tell me you've ever had to do your own laundry, I'm going to call you're a liar."

She rolled her eyes at me, the simple red and yellow robes she wore somehow managing to look tailored instead of plain.

"It is originally a spell meant to rid oneself out of contact poisons," Akua said. "There's nothing worse than a botched assassination attempt ruining your favourite dress."

"Of course," I drily replied. "How dare I ever think otherwise."

"It is the common birth, I assume," Akua kindly informed me. "I have reliably been informed that lowborn children are born with inferior minds."

I glanced at her.

"Please tell me that's not actually something one of your ancestors believed," I pleaded.

Akua smiled beautifully.

"Not at all, dearest," she said.

A pause.

"It was his Mirembé wife," she told me. "There was a most fascinating treatise on the subject in the family library. Did you know that Callowans are also born naturally subservient? While I'll admit I've yet to encounter such a specimen, very convincing experiments were executed to prove this."

"I'm going to strangle you," I cheerfully told her.

"Irrational anger in the face of one's divinely ordained superior," Akua noted. "I was warned it might happen."

I tossed a stone in her direction, though she got a shield and a smug look up in time. My lips were quirking, though, and so were hers.

"So what's your take on our guest?" I asked her.

She slid me a glance.

"Catherine Foundling," Akua said, "are you soliciting me for *gossip*?"

"Indrani's not there," I complained. "And Masego doesn't get the point. He always tries to be nice."

She was grinning, now.

"She snores like a bear, did you notice?" the golden-eyed sorceress said.

"It was horrifying," I admitted. "I couldn't believe it was her at first, she's always so dainty about everything. I'm impressed at how good she is with a bow, though."

Cordelia had bagged us a pair of rabbits a few days back, which had been a pleasant addition to the cooking pot as well as a surprise.

"Lycaonese nobles are expected to hunt, I believe," Akua said. "Not unlike Praesi, though presumably with fewer assassinations attached."

"In my experience, that's always a safe assumption when Praes is involved," I said.

She snorted at me. It was light talk, nothing of politics or Keter or the many dooms ahead, and it made knots in my shoulders loosen. It was so rare, these days, that I could afford to just sit with someone by a river and talk. We must have spoken for an hour, far longer than the spell needed to finish, but I sensed she was as reluctant as I to acknowledge that and put an end to it. Eventually, though, it became harder to ignore that we would be awaited in camp. I sighed. Her expression immediately went blank, the highborn mask falling down over the lovely face. What had I done? I hesitated, but dimly I could sense that prodding at her now I was likely to lose a finger.

I kept to the silence instead, until humanity bled back into her face and she broke it herself.

"It would be easy," Akua said, "to simply fall into your orbit again. I forget that, every time we are parted."

She smiled at me, fondly but without amusement.

"Somehow I always forget that that it is not some subtle manipulation that you entrapped me with," Akua said. "That you truly enjoy my company, and that is what makes it so very easy for you to win."

"That's not what I'm trying to do," I said.

"It's always what you're trying to do, Catherine," she replied with a strange gentleness. "It's in your bone, the disease you inherited from the father you chose."

My fingers clenched into a fist. That wound was still fresh. I wasn't convinced it could ever be any other way.

"I'm not sure what it is you're saying," I said.

"I have had enough of cages," Akua told me. "And choices being made for me."

"You're talking in circles," I replied.

"If I choose to serve as the jailor of the King of Death," she said, "it will not be at anyone else's behest."

"I've asked nothing," I replied.

It had taken years for me to make it so I wouldn't have to. It had gone wrong in Ater, all the small steps I'd taken. The moment they should have led up to never came to pass. There'd been too much going, and the Bard had put her fingers to the scale. Had the pivot passed, had I failed? Looking at her, seeing her looking at me, I had to consider the possibility that I had.

"Nor should you," Akua said, gracefully rising to her feet. "Of all the debts I owe, the one I owe you is far from the heaviest."

She began to gather the clothes, a clear sign the conversation was finished. And it left me wondering a question I would rather not have to entertain at all.

If I had failed, what then?

—

On our thirteenth night on the road we found the guide Sve Noc had sent us for the latter half of our journey to Serolen, waiting seated by a shallow river. The colours of my sigil painted on its face, Ivah of the Losara offered me a smile as it rose to its feet.

"First Under the Night," Ivah said, bowing low, "it has been too long."

[*ErraticErrata*](#)

I'm back and recovered from my illness. Chapter's out a little early as a thanks for your patience while I got better.

SHARKS

Glad you're feeling better. Take care of yourself!


aurikdomi

thanks for surviving ee!

Frivolous

Glad you're better and feeling well again.

[Taltos Dreamer](#)

I'm very glad you are feeling better. The wonderful chapter is just icing on that cake 

tmchin75723

Who, ultimately is responsible for keeping the dead king trapped? The Warden, of course. I'm thinking Cat's not getting that happy retirement at Cardinal after all.

miles

It seems a bit unfinished. Is there supposed to be dialogue after that greeting?

lenethren

Wonderful chapter. Glad you are better.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

KageLupus

Sa vrede?

Someperson

CERA AINE

TheGreatAsp

So the 5th member of their party will be ivah, can't say I was expecting that

dadycool

And so the fifth member arrives. This was a very nice chapter. Very light, with friendship conversations with each of them. I believe this has been said before, but Masego is fucking terrifying.

Grey

I love Masego, but despite knowing his goals for a long time I find this rather unsettling. I hope that he remains intact, mind and soul, and not just a figment of himself shallowly pressed onto godhood.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Catherine recovered from Winter as completely as it gets, and Masego would presumably be seeking less destructive means of apotheosis in the first place,

Someperson

Masego has very substantial insights into the ascensions of the Sovereign of Winter, Neshemah, and the Crows as examples to study.

Apotheosis is no easy task, but I would certainly hope he could learn from some of their mistakes, and do better.

Frivolous

I want apotheosis for Masego. I hope that if he is ever required to choose between apotheosis and balancing the scales with Neshie, he'll choose apotheosis.

I mean, that's the likely result anyway, but I hope that he doesn't pick torturing Neshie for eternity over subliming.

[Liliet](#)

Zeze has already picked Cat not being mad with him over torturing Nessie in Reverberation. It was quite adorable.

ohJohN

Just imagine it: post-apotheosis Masego would be the absolute best arcane patron.

Like, so far Cat has made pacts with an archfey (total dick, ageless king of hidden knives and frozen corpses) and goddesses of theft and murder (forged through millennia of magical cannibalism).

What's the worst Masego's gonna do, whisper pedantic corrections into your mind whenever your prayer contains factual inaccuracies?

(Sure, his words would probably come as an unsettling thousandfold chorus of voices, but I'm sure if you brought that up he'd be like, "0- H/ 2~"- ' -I- ' - D/I~D/' -N~ 0- T~'~A~ C/
0/ F/0-R/ -° T/ H/' E~ /F/ R~ A- I~L-I- I~' E/'S/' - 0/
0- M- 0~R/T/ A/ L~ -M-I/ ' N- D- 2~ IS THIS BETTER?" and then g
you a boon in embarrassment.)

jamesc9

I'm not used to the idea of gods giving gifts motivated by the god's embarrassment.

Jake

Yay, Ivah is back! Best Drow 10/10

Cpt. Obvious

Hey I like Ivah, but best Drow?

I'd like to throw the Tomb Maker into the hat. I just can't ignore what he said to the Saint of Swords about how he didn't need a weapon to spank an errant child...

Lord Haart

Rumena is genderless but if a gender had to be assigned, I've always leant that it'd be female.

arcanavitae15

Nice to see you recover. Interesting chapter with especially with how Cat had her conversations with Cordelia, Masego, and Akua, they were all very in theme with the characters. I also like the 5th member of the band being Ivah I really missed it.

[Liliet](#)

I love the epigraph implication that the company was pleasant enough, half the journey passed in a single chapter :p

Juff

Typo Thread:

worse than > worse than
nonplussed (nonplussed actually means confused. the "not bothered" sense is mostly an american mistake)
conditions for > conditions were for
Judgment > Judgement
It'd not missed > I'd not missed
Procer, sure > Procer, sure,
become soldiers > becoming soldiers
likes a physical > like a physical

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"American mistake"? That's not how languages work, dude. I know you're probably framing it that way facetiously, but I personally am not amused. It carries a hint of the same

overweening cultural arrogance that causes empires to form to begin with.

ninegardens

So, you're saying that you could care less about Juff's linguistic imperialism?

Mary Gentle

It is how languages work – they spawn dialects, or engulf them; some dialects go on to become other languages; some languages wither on the vine. Looking at the history of almost any word demonstrates that.

"Nonplussed" threw me right out of the chapter with Masego. I kept trying to see where a missing negative would fit in, and it didn't and doesn't. That break in the immersion did actually spoil that part of the chapter.

If you want to argue it, "nonplussed" is from classical Latin: "nōn plūs", meaning "not more, no further", that is: you've arrived at that spot beyond which you can't go. (For reasons of confusion, or whatever.) It's difficult to get "not bothered" out of that.

Having said that, meanings shift. If you want to define what you're writing and speaking as American, I don't believe anyone would have a problem with it. It's just that Microsoft appears to think there's something called "British English", and there really, really isn't. (Not unless you want to also carve up and name the various Commonwealth countries' use of English, and heritage countries like India, and the use of English as a business language...)

In other news: lovely, bittersweet chapter, full of love as well as forboding. And things never get this good without the wrath of the Gods (possibly quite literally) descending on our villains.

Which reminds me. Isn't Cat being a bit quiet about the problem that the Angel of Mass Destruction is going to void the world of all its villains? Very probably leaving the heroes untouched? I just feel she should be reacting a bit more.

I miss Hakram...

shikkarasu

RE: "British English"

There's normally an option for British vs American and, if they felt like pretending they were thorough, Canadian.

Personally, I'm in favour of having an Indian English, Australian English, etc. option in spell check/language options. They are all valid dialects of English and it's fascinating to see which bits of the old "King's English" survived in each one. Talking to native English speakers from India, for example, should be an absolute treat for anyone with a passion for language, since they still have turns of phrase from 1800s Britain that the *British* stopped using at some point in the past hundred years or so.

RE: Cat being a bit quiet

You can kill every Villain on the continent, much like how Maddie killed every Callowan Hero, and still expect new people to take up the torch. There is no point for Cat to bring up how many friends and allies she would lose. If Cordelia did kill all villains, Cat knows this would be a last resort due to the number of Proceran lives it would forfeit, so there isn't much point talking about it further. They each knows where the other stands.

[Estelulu](#)

There **is** an Australian English option in spellcheckers.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

When you said "it is how languages work," I think you meant the same thing I did when I said it isn't. Clearly I could've worded my comment better. The "that" in my "that's not how it works" was referring to the idea that one dialect is more proper than another. In any language, it's all just what it is (until it's something else), and emerging in a specific geographical area doesn't confer special properties. I will admit that the specific case of a word with two diametrically opposed meanings does lend itself to the idea that only one of those meanings can be correct.

ninegardens

Masego. I love you. And I love that for all the granduer of this story your goals are just... Beyond it.

Like... the central thesis of his philosophy is **so damn good**.

BUT.

BUT....

One of Nessie's most basic tricks is "Lol, I put a piece of my soul in this book. Now I am going to eat your mind"

Do you **really** think it is wise and/or safe to use **that fuckers** science as the basis of your apotheosis? Couldn't we just like... **not** do that?

""
Villians don't age Zeze. You have all the time you need. Why try to cheat by eating the author of the necronomicon.

Hell, you know what? Zeze taking Nessie's science and using it to reach godhead is probably a victory condition as far as Nessie is concerned. Even if he doesn't get to beat the gods, so long as someone does, that's still pretty good, right?

God damn it Zeze.

ninegardens

also, I can't help but think Cat is tragically missing the point when she says "You want revenge for your magic". Zeze doesn't give a damn about his magic. Zeze wants revenge for the Dead king laying so much as a finger on Indrani. Or hijacking his brain, or... plenty of other things. But the magic? That's like... WAY down the list of things he wants revenge for.

[Liliet](#)

Yup, Cat misses the point a lot when it comes to Masego, bless 'em

[Liliet](#)

Masego doesn't give a shit what Neshamah wants, though.

ohJohN

Yeah, and it's not like Neshama's high-level goal is inherently bad, or even too far off from Masego's own – the problem comes from, you know, trying to kill every living thing on the continent to achieve it.

If Masego happens to achieve one of the DK's victory conditions, for his own reasons and without all the genocide, I don't see how that's necessarily a problem? Just because a bad dude wants it doesn't mean it's always a bad thing in itself.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm. Poetic and shit, if anything.

shikkarasu

The real risk, here, is that DK will pull another trick to live on in Masego's mind. Remember that Masego needs a good story to beat DK. Archer dying in front of him gave him the True Love powerup needed to win an arcane wrestling competition with DK, and he failed to **Wrest** the Hellgate at the end of Book 6. It is a very real concern that he flatly

cannot beat DK in a fair* competition, and will be wholly or partly consumed.

* "fair" herein being defined as two mages each given similarly vast time/resources to prepare for their confrontation. Masego having the Arsenal and sente feels roughly on par with, or inferior to, DK having millennia to accumulate power and defend against literally anything he can imagine.

[Liliet](#)

Thought.

I wonder what would happen if Cat actually remembered Masego telling her earlier that he won't leave her side, and asked him how the two statements are compatible in his mind.

ninegardens

"My goal is omnipresence."

"What did you think I needed all that apotheosis for?"

kinigget

Gods its always the chapters like this that stick with me. The little conversations that seem so inconsequential at first, but betray grand depths of character.

Wonder

I really want Cat and Akua's thing to work. Cat just has to get over her long price thing and accept that she has changed Akua for the better and that should be enough.

[Liliet](#)

Cat would need to forgive herself for Liesse, first.

Lord Haart

Liesse is for neither Cat nor Akua to forgive. Most of the people who would need to forgive them are dead, and the rest still mourn.

As in the real world, crimes may go unpunished but they also don't get erased.

[Liliet](#)

Hm, bad phrasing actually. Cat needs to... let go of punishing herself for Liesse.

(Also, it wasn't Cat's fault so much as to need forgiveness, really)

Sugar Roll

I'm pretty sure Cordelia thinks Masego is a casanova. From her perspective, Masego is making a pass at Akua. Indrani made it known in the arsenal that Masego has seen Catherine naked and insinuated intimate relations between them. Vivienne reinforced that image when she signed Masego up for something like a sex club as a prank. It would be hilarious if Cordelia is now having second thoughts about joining them because there's a sexual predator on the loose.

shikkarasu

I love the idea that Masego has this reputation that every part of his being contradicts once you speak to him for 10 consecutive seconds. The sheer mental whiplash from your spies being so uncharacteristically wrong,

Cordelia then gets a nosebleed from trying to reconcile the two Masegos in her mind, followed by Akua quietly informing Masego of the anime nosebleed trope, just to add fuel to the fire.

Sykomantis

Oh Gods yes I need this to happen it would make this entire arc

Sugar Roll

After his apotheosis, he becomes the god of love and fertility.

shikkarasu

His 2nd project, once a god, is to figure out how the hells *that* became his Domain. Archer just laughs her butt off and appoints herself as his prophet.

stevenneiman

I feel like that line about Indrani should have said that she wants to be better than Hye and not to be Hye. It's already been strongly indicated that she very much does want to be the ranger.

shikkarasu

Wants to be *the* Ranger, but not the *current* Ranger. I think something is lost by differentiating between Hye and Ranger too clearly. It is more clear, but less poetic, especially since it was once the other way around. Indrani used to want to be just like the current Ranger, but didn't care for the name or role.

Now she wants to do the job, but doesn't really care about the woman.

Cpt. Obvious

I wouldn't say she doesn't care for Hye. I think she still respect her, but I think she's realized that she never loved her.

She respect Hye for her skills and for her drive to be self-sufficient in everything. But she's realized that Hye is a very bad role model. None of the students that walked out of Refuge were prepared for what they found.

They grew up chasing the approval of Hye, something that was basically impossible to get. The more they tried to please her the more they failed. Hye didn't train them to be anything but the most skilled. Pleasing others where a weakness as emotional bands would limit them and make them vulnerable. Better to never trust than to suffer having your trust broken. Better never to love than have your heart broken. Friends can betray you. Even hate can betray you. But an enemy can never betray you.

So Indrani having her sights on becoming the Ranger is not just ambition, something Hye most probably approves of, but also a way to show that she's achieved what Hye tried to teach her, how to be a better Ranger.

Dang that got long-winded. Be grateful that I cut out more than four times as much text that was just me rambling in circles, never getting to anything even remotely resembling a point...

Evgeny Permyakov

Akua is maturing. Yay.

[anonymous4968](#)

And so the guide, goes to a band of five.

Linnus42

I am still curious by what right Cordelia claims to have the right to nuke the whole continent with an Angel Exterminatus. Its not political power cause well she doesn't have any any more not that her previous level of Political Power would give her the any rights beyond Procer. And yet she supposedly believes special people ie Named should be controlled.

Masego staying Masego. Akua still talking about sealing the DK, smfh. I will really hate if she does that.

nimelennar

It was decided through a legitimate democratic process: one person, one vote. Cordelia is the person with the ealamal trigger; she gets the vote.

(With apologies to Terry Pratchett)

Linnus42

She bargained with Rozala for the rights to it. That may imply she has some rights in Procer I suppose but that agreement doesn't clear her to use it across the whole continent. And doesn't jive with her supposed philosophy of governments over special people. By what right does she claim to make such a judgment for the whole continent?

Not that I consider Procer's government of unelected princes voting on decisions to be democratic. Even if I thought Cordelia was in the right to have the weapon and use it as she saw fit. I be worried about the safety of such a device in her hands. She is a zero in combat ability.

shikkarasu

Cordelia had bagged us a pair of rabbits a few days back, which had been a pleasant addition to the cooking pot as well as a surprise.

"Lycaonese nobles are expected to hunt, I believe," Akua said. "Not unlike Praesi, though presumably with fewer assassinations attached."

Coupled with the fact that she just passively is Lycaonese I would be shocked if she never learned to fight or command armies. Not as well as Klaus, but well enough. Also, I'm interested in what the *minimum* range/radius is for the Ealamal. She may very well be able to call in tactical strikes only a few meters wide. The entirety of Salia is 'the furthest she's gone,' not the lower bounds of the weapon. The act of holding it may very well give anyone combat ability, provided they know how it works and can be trusted to hold it.

As for the right? Kind of the whole point of the Accords is that no-one should have that kind of unilateral power, much less use it, but the Dead King needs to be destroyed before the Nukes can be disarmed. Ethics are legitimately a thing for after the war right now, as horrible as that statement is.

Dome Zasrekh

I think it originates from the corpse not the trigger.

kinigget

It's insurance for if everything goes horribly wrong. A chance to give a final "fuck you" to the King of the Dead.

You ask what right she has to hold it as if that question matters right now.

Quibbling over beaurocracy at this point serves no one but Neshama

MoreBeer

By the right of Inertia. She had the power, she used it well and didn't abuse it. She is, to paraphrase, "the evil you know."

There is no way to know how someone else might use the power should they come into possession of it.

Lord Haart

Yep burden of proof is to show who has more right (or that it skittle be destroyed) rather than saying she doesn't. She had it already, what's the argument for giving it up?

And honestly I think it's clear that Cordelia is NOT ethical, and probably has never been. Her goals of saving Procer and the rest of Calernia, and then establishing the Accords, is why Catherine wants her as an ally, not because she has some internal code of conduct like Hanno.

nimelennar

Okay, hear me out.

So, Masego is trying to become a deity. And while he does like having oodles of power, he seems to prefer knowledge, so that would probably be his domain.

A god with a knowledge domain is almost certainly going to be omniscient.

This story has two modes: the parts from Cat's perspective, written in first person, and everything else, written in third person, and some of the stuff in those chapters it would have been impossible for Cat to find out after the fact (e.g. when the character dies). You'd need some sort of omniscient perspective to get this information.

The obvious conclusion is that when Cat decides to put this all on paper, Masego will be her co-author, taking care of all of the

third-person POV chapters, from his omniscient perspective as a god of knowledge.

BargleNawdleZouss

I like the callback to Book 6, Chapter 38 (Tantamount) referencing Cordelia's archery skills. Nice to see it wasn't just an idle boast!

[Grimfel](#)

Yeah this was a nice touch for sure

[BarthHumphries](#)

I worry that, once they get stories back for Evil people, they'll swiftly get "Well, some Good person has a 'kill only evil people nuke', so it's only fair that I should have a 'kill only evil people nuke'." Cordelia's continued claim of that weapon risks everything.

[BarthHumphries](#)

Whoops, the evil person would have a "kill only good people nuke".

Chapter 43: Serolen

*"Silent then stood the great city,
whose mighty had called in vanity
the great wrath that passed.
And found they who had laughed
that their power might be vast,
but Dobrogost laughed last."*

– Extract from the 'Dobrogost Veste', a Firstborn traditional epic

"Trouble has come to Serolen," Ivah of the Losara said.

"Has it ever not?" I replied.

We travelled quicker now than we had before. Ivah had bargained for the Secret of the Half Road, and though it might not be as instantaneous as the Shadow Stride the Longstride Cabal had once boasted of it still lengthened our steps. We had to ride in a narrow line, over a stripe of Night barely larger than the horses, but so long as we rode there we were possessed of a great celerity. It did not prevent the horses from getting tired, but they covered easily thrice as much ground before needing a rest. One the second of those interludes, as the rest of our company had their mounts drink in a shallow pond, I sat with Ivah to speak of what awaited us to the north.

"This is true," Ivah acknowledged. "But there have never been troubles such as this. It is... unsettling."

My brow rose. Not a word it would use lightly. Ivah had once been a rylleh in a sigil in good standing, about as high as it was possible to rise without holding the sigil yourself, and in the nights since fought under me through campaigns above and below. The drow was not a sort to unsettle easily.

"Have the lines collapsed?" I bluntly asked.

"We have lost the southern woods," the purple-painted drow said. "The Gloom was pierced through with great roads of steel that were kept alight with strange lanterns."

I grimaced.

"And they didn't pull back the Gloom forty miles to start over?"

Ivah hesitated. It had no reason to watch its words around me. As its sigil-holder, I was the only person it could be said to answer to and I'd never been one to mind blunt honesty. Only there was someone even above me, wasn't there? Sve Noc.

"Shit," I quietly said. "It's not that they didn't want to, they *couldn't*."

It must have been deeply distressing, I thought, for Ivah to admit that the goddesses it had worshipped all its life had limitations. That they were not all-powerful or beyond failing.

"It broke into shards when an attempt was made," Ivah said. "A third was recovered, but Sve Noc says cannot be forged anew into a lesser Gloom. They have been used as weapons to win battles since."

My eye narrowed.

"You're keeping something back," I stated.

"Mighty Kurosiv has stolen two of the shards," it admitted. "They have claimed it is proof of their divinity and taken the name of Loc Ynan."

Fate-giver, it meant. But it was the formal version of giver – maybe closer to 'gifter' – and the implication there was that the gift was given to an inferior. Kurosiv was effectively claiming to be the entity that would 'give' all of the Firstborn their fates. A naked challenge to Sve Noc's authority.

Even this far away from Serolen, I could catch the scent of civil war in the air.

"Last I heard Kurosiv was playing god-king in the northeast, with an eye to returning to the mountains above the Everdark," I said. "What changed?"

"They tell a tale of having wagered the fate of the Firstborn in a verse-game with the Dead King," Ivah scorned. "That they triumphed over it and won from Death a reprieve for nine years. They now come to gift us a new fate, leading us east and across the water to a land of endless riches."

Oh did I not like the sound of that.

"I'm assuming by water they don't mean the Chalice," I said.

The painted drow shook its head.

"The salt-water," Ivah said. "We are to sail on great ships that will bring us to a glorious kingdom without light."

My fingers clenched.

"They made a deal with the Dead King," I bluntly said. "Pull out of the war and the Firstborn get nine years to get the Hells off Calernia while Neshamah thoroughly wipes out the rest of us."

"That is also the belief of Sve Noc," Ivah agreed.

Would the Dead King keep to that deal? I wasn't sure, but in all honesty it shouldn't matter. He'd finish killing us off long before nine years had passed and I had my doubts about the success of a Firstborn exodus across the Tyrian Sea anyway. They'd lived underground as long as they'd been a civilization, they were neither shipwrights nor sailors. *Although with Kurosiv holding the reins, they might just hit one of our port cities and devour enough they can raise a decent fleet.* More worrying was a question I did not have the answer to: was this Kurosiv's plan or was Neshamah now using diplomacy to finish collapsing us?

Because if it was the latter, we were in deep shit. There weren't really any human nations that'd cut a deal with him, at least not unless we suffered a catastrophic defeat in Keter first, but the

same was not true of others. The Golden Bloom was unlikely to actively help him, but the elves might take a deal so they could cut and run unhindered. The Gigantes had sit out the war since their sacrifice in keeping the Hellgates closed, so they might be tempted for the right prize, and worse of all was the Kingdom Under. We still hadn't signed a new treaty with the dwarves, so if the Dead King came in with a better offer? Fuck, that could get *bad*.

There was no way we would take Keter without the Kingdom Under supplying the besieging armies. If they pulled out of the war, we were done.

"How bad has it gotten?" I asked, tone gone grim.

It did not play coy, which I appreciated.

"Most of the remaining Ten Generals still follow Sve Noc," Ivah said, "but two have gone over and brought their sigils with them. We still have the greater part of the strength, but that strength is bound holding the lines to the south: Kurosiv and their traitors now hold much of Serolen."

It grimaced.

"The strife has grown along lines it never had before," Ivah said. "The tenets that you taught us in Iserre have divided the Firstborn."

Fuck, I thought. I'd never seriously considered that might be a possibility, back when I had spoken out. I was the mouthpiece of living goddesses who held in their grip the source of power of all Firstborn, it wasn't exactly a kind of position that got you *questioned*. But the Sisters weren't the only source of power now, were they? They'd admitted to me months ago that they couldn't even try to kill Kurosiv anymore without pretty much destroying an already-ruined Night and it sounded like the usurper had only grown in strength since.

"How?" I got out.

"Many sigils despise them," Ivah frankly said. "That Mighty can no longer take and kill freely is loathed and the authority of the Losara over the new oaths even more so. Sigil-holders remember times when they were not bound by promises and their authority could not be challenged by vote."

I studied its face.

"It's the protection oath that fucks them, isn't it," I stated.

It was the foundation of the reform I'd laid at the heart of the Firstborn: violence could not be used to keep a drow in a sigil

or punish them for leaving it. It was what gave the votes power, why the new ways had teeth. Sigil-holders who continued to treat their followers like cattle would find that their sigils shrunk while those who treated their followers well would find their ranks swelling. A straightforward incentive for sigil-holders to begin treating the powerless decently.

"Nisi and dzulu have been leaving harsh sigils in droves," Ivah agreed. "That this could not be curtailed by spear or Night has left Mighty furious. It goes, they say, against the true Tenets of Night."

"And let me guess," I coldly smiled. "Kurosiv welcomes the malcontents with open arms. They offer the old ways again, maybe even worse."

"It is said that the nisi are sorely used in the territory of the traitors," Ivah hesitantly said. "The tenets of Iserre are not observed among the sigils following the usurper."

And how genuinely awful did treatment have to get, before even the *Firstborn* thought it was too much? And bad as that was, it wasn't even what worried me the most from the situation.

"You told me we have the most sigils," I said, "but Kurosiv poached a large chunk of the Mighty, didn't they?"

Reluctantly, Ivah nodded. I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Of course they had. The tenets I'd introduced gave power to the powerless over the few individuals that'd ruled over more than nine tenths of the Firstborn as uncontested tyrants for more than a millennium. Some of the Mighty would take it in stride, but some of them would simply look at the fact that now *nisi* – a word that literally meant cattle! – had some power over them and be offended to their very core. Lesser Mighty wouldn't mind so much, I decided, because they didn't actually lose a lot in practice and they might even gain in the exchange. But those few whose strength had allowed every right, rylleh and sigil-holders? They would be furious at the reforms.

And now another god had come, one that promised them a return to the old ways. All the most poisonous of the Mighty, those who knew they couldn't cut under the reforms, would hear it a siren song. If we were dealing with humans I'd call it good riddance, but these were drow: being a murderous cancer likely meant they'd been among the strongest of their sigils.

"Fuck," I feelingly said.

That civil war was still looming just beyond the horizon, but worse than that was the realization that my side might actually lose it.

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It took us another week and a half to get to Serolen, a short span that felt like forever. Every day we spent here could not be spent with the armies that must already be marching on Keter. How much more of the Principate had been destroyed, while we rode down a shadowed road? How many more thousands had died to blades and devils? There's been a restful tinge to the travels at first, since so little was demanded of me save that I ride north, but that had faded. Urgency whipped at my back, reproaching every breath not spent making haste to Duskwood.

The others felt it too. Cordelia grew more somber as the days passed, still cordial but ever more distant, and Masego even began setting aside his book to ride in earnest. Akua, as though the talk by the shore had never taken place, stuck to me as a second shadow. She spoke more to Ivah than myself, asking it about old acquaintances and the state of affairs in the Empire Ever Dark. But her presence was not unpleasant. I tended to withdraw less into myself when there was a conversation going, and it was less demanding to listen than to have to keep it going myself.

It sometimes frightened me how well she had come to know me, perhaps better than anyone alive save Hakram.

We could tell the moment was passed the remnants of the Gloom, even in the Ways. The shadows got deeper, the stars more distant, and Ivahs' road grew noticeably more effective. From there, our last few days were consumed with haste. There was a calamity in the making, I knew it deep in my bone.

"Is it your Name?" Akua asked me quietly, one night by the fire.

"Maybe," I murmured. "More senses than aspect, yeah? It's like I can feel a current with my fingers."

"Fate," the golden-eyed sorceress said. "A convergence of events."

I nodded.

"Something big is coming," I said. "A great pivot."

For my patron goddesses, or for all the Firstborn? It was too early to tell. All I knew was that coming too late would bring down a disaster on all our heads. So we picked up the pace, running each other ragged as we rode through a dry and sandy riverbed until I could sense the end of our path ahead. Our mounts milled about the sand as I reined in Zombie and the horses followed, Ivah coming to stand at my side without so much as a whisper of warning. Not without reason had I once named it my Lord of Silent Steps.

"We're here," I called out. "Get ready for the crossing."

I got a tired, cranky grunt out of Masego and more vocal acknowledgement from the other two. I barely paid attention, though, catching Ivah's stare from the corner of my eye.

"You told me parts of Serolen are in Kurosiv's hands," I said. "What are the odds that there are enemies waiting on the other side?"

"We will emerge within the Shrine of Tears, Losara Queen," it said. "It is a stronghold of those loyal to Sve Noc."

"So not very," I summed up.

"It is so," Ivah agreed.

I sighed, then glanced back.

"Arm up," I ordered. "We're going into trouble."

Ivah sent me a wounded look, but it ought to know better by now. Even if there hadn't been a bevy of gods at work in Serolen, convergences of fate made the unlikely common. I would have bet on a fight even if there *wasn't* a good change of enemy action. I took the lead, Ivah at my left and Masego behind me. Akua stayed in the back with Cordelia, as much to shield the calm-faced princess as because she tended to benefit from having longer to cast. She wasn't the war mage that Masego had been before he lost his magic, or truthfully even now. I unsheathed my sword, Zombie keening eagerly at the sound, and breathed out.

My staff came down, opening a gate out of the Twilight Ways, and I rode through.

The air was warm and humid, that was my first thought. I blinked it away, but my eye went wide as I took in the sight around me. The Shrine of Tears was massive, larger than any Proceran palace I had ever seen and taller than even the Alban Cathedral in Laure. It was disorienting to stand inside, because the shrine pretended it was otherwise: though there was a tall ceiling of curved stone high above, it was hidden by thick fog all the way to the corners of the roof – which came down in walls that were long curtains of rain.

Through the uneven curtains I glimpsed at the lake the shrine had been raised on, but it was not what drew the eye as I rode further onto a causeway of wet stones. Under the roof the great Shrine a hundred smaller shrines had been built, made of painted tiles in vivid colours: red and yellow and blue. Few were larger than a house and everywhere tall painted poles stood, bound to each other and the sharp roofs of the shrines by thick woven

ropes from which hung strands of coloured cloth and shining trinkets.

Across it all rain fell in gentle drops, sliding down the vivid tiles and down deep furrows in the ground that led to shallow canals. It was as if under the great roof a hundred beautiful islands had been laid to rest among rivers of stone, each laden with prayers and offerings. It was, I thought even as I pulled up my hood, a place of startling beauty. Behind me I heard Cordelia gasp and smiled. She'd never known the Firstborn as anything but violent killers and skulking spies, but this should begin to teach her differently. They were the ruin of a people, but even now there was more to them than Night.

We emerged on the island at the heart of it all, on the causeway leading to the ornate shrine behind us while knotted ropes crisscrossed above our heads. And as the gate out of Twilight died with a gentle breath, I saw movement ahead. Silhouettes moving through the faint mist of islands.

"There should be a sigil awaiting us," Ivah said.

Its eyes had followed my own, picking out the number. Seven, eight, nine – no, eight, they were using raider's walk to make their warband look larger than it was.

"Looks like there's one," I coldly smiled.

I shrugged.

"At least it's not one of the Ten Generals," I said.

I would have felt one of them coming. This was, by their strength in the Night – oddly muted to my senses, enough that I couldn't just pick out their numbers through it as I once would have – a sigil-holder and a cadre of rylleh come to kill us.

"What insolence, to dare come to this holy place as servants of a false god," Ivah said.

Its shoulder had tightened, its muscles coiled. All in anticipation of the violence to come.

"Zeze," I called out, "sow confusion."

He cleared his throat.

"Can I have the bodies afterwards?" he politely asked.

I turned to fix him with a steady look.

"I have been very interested in how a race not born to the use of Night could grow so innately adept at wielding it," he defended.

"Fine," I sighed. "Just don't get, you know..."

I gestured vaguely.

"I do not," he admitted.

"Don't get all Warlock about it," I elaborated.

I ignored Akua's choked laugh and Cordelia's murmur of 'should I even ask?'.

"I will not be the Warlock," Masego assured me.

"Not what I asked," I sighed, "but I guess it'll have to do."

I patted Zombie's neck, stroking her feathers and nodded at Ivah. It did not need instructions, not after the months we'd spent fighting together in the Everdark. It knew exactly what I wanted of it. I rolled my shoulder to limber it, then cracked my neck to the side.

"Well," I cheerfully said. "Let's solve us a religious dispute. Chno Sve Noc!"

I spurred Zombie to a gallop, and moments later we were aflight.

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They shot first.

It was the first time I'd fought Firstborn since the Night was ruined, and the difference was plain to see: the three streaks of darkness that howled towards me took a moment to form and they... weak. The Secret could no longer be used the way it once had been. I didn't even bother to weave a defensive working, my knees guiding Zombie into a short dive that saw all three projectiles go wide. Three of the rylleh ran at me down the causeway on the other side of the river, power blooming around them as they aimed to leap at me when the dive went lowest, but I grinned and pulled deep.

Gods, the Night came easy here. It was so much stronger than in the south.

The air exploded, paving stones flying everywhere as the rylleh scattered into thin lines of Night along the ground, and my staff touched one of those strands of shadow before Zombie banked upwards. That was all it took. I disrupted the Night before it could form into flesh and the rylleh lost control, reappearing like a burst balloon filled with black blood. It never even got off a scream and I pressed low against Zombie's neck as another volley of Night streaks howled just past my air. Amateurs. If they'd gone for centre of mass instead of my head, they would have at least forced me to defend.

Still, they were not unskilled. While three ran across the causeway and another three continued to fire from the back, the last rylleh had been pulling on a larger working. The kind that took time and shouldn't be interrupted. Coming out of its body in strands of Night, a hulking shape with a massive maw – it was little more than teeth set in a round and eyeless head – formed and shot out towards me. It didn't make it far. Two heartbeats and the world rippled, the rylleh's face turning to utter surprise as the Night beast turned around and bit its head off before blowing up in streaks of black flame.

Hierophant could do all manners of nasty things, using Wrest.

The flames scattered the rylleh shooting projectiles, as they'd been standing too close for comfort, and that was my opening. I slapped aside the spear one of the runners from earlier tried to toss at my back, then sent out my will and picked up the black flames that were guttering out. I fed them life and they roared out in a blaze, spreading in thick tendrils that swallowed up two of the rylleh in the blink of an eye. One of them walked out of his own flesh with a wet squelch as it began to burn, but Hierophant broke the working halfway through and instead of being skin deep half the meat stayed on the bones. Gods but that was an ugly way to die.

Four out of eight dead, all rylleh. Where was the sigil holder, it hadn't made a move yet? Ah, out back. Atop one of the shrines, gathering Night to itself to form some sort of carapace armour. I'd seen Mighty Jindrich do something similar once, but the shape stayed humanoid here. I suspected I'd not enjoy it should the armour be finished. A whisper against the back of my mind and I turned without batting an eye, following the instinct. My staff slapped down a spear, then twirled to parry the spear of Night that had been hidden in its shadow. I'd not moved in moments, and in a fight that was too long.

"Go," I whispered at Zombie, and guided her with my knees.

We fell into a curved glide, circling around the island-shrine where I had caught up to the warband. Two of the surviving rylleh fell back to their sigil holder, but one slipped behind me and leapt across the canal – to be caught in the throat by a bolt of sickly green light. The drow went straight through the spell, looking triumphant, but that passed. The moment its feet touched the stone on the other side, they began to turn to dust. *Someone* was getting fancy. Akua always did like her curses. I had more pressing matters, though.

I flicked an orb of black flame at the sigil holder gathering his carapace, but the two rylleh besides it formed a spinning wheel of Night and scattered it. Yeah, they were going to keep covering their captain until it got that done. Unfortunately for them, I had a way around that.

"The carapace, Zeze," I shouted.

The world rippled again, and in the heartbeat that followed it all went wrong. I could feel Masego's will wresting away the Night, began to rip out the carapace, but then another will fought him. Not the drow's, it had tried and failed already. Something *bigger*. Hierophant let out a hoarse shout of pain and I clenched my jaw in anger, lashing out with howling flame. Again the rylleh summoned their wheel, but the Night was all askew around them and as my working impacted theirs the fabric of Creation rippled out angrily. I pushed my will, fed my working, and there was loud crack before the shrine burst into a rain of melted, broken tiles.

A plume of smoke hid the results from my sight, but I could still feel Night in there. At least one was still alive. I risked a glanced back, finding Masego was leaning on Akua and bleeding from his empty eye socket. Golden eyes met mine from a distance and she shook her head. In no danger of death, then. Good, I could put my full attention on this. Kurosiv had taken offence to someone wresting Night from their faithful, but it was not the last injury it would suffer today.

When the smoke scattered I found the sigil holder still standing, garbed in black carapace from head to toe. It was segmented, like armour, and it had taken up a long spear of obsidian covered in glyphs. I saw the mark of its sigil written on the side of its carapace helm, a pale wriggling snake pierced by an arrow. *Eterin*, it meant, and so it was Mighty Eterin I now faced. The armour drow leapt up, landing with unearthly grace atop one of the wooden poles. Eterin flourished its spear at me almost mockingly, and my eye narrowed. I guided Zombie's glide to the side, watching the timing and throwing myself off.

I landed atop a pole of my own, leg throbbing with pain, and return the flourish with my sword.

"In the name of Loc Ynan, I order your submission," Mighty Eterin called out.

Its voice was reedy, but its eyes were sharp.

"As First Under the Night, I offer you a chance to return to convert back before your summary execution," I mildly said. "Which I feel is rather generous, consisdering."

It laughed.

"Va Ynan Yn," Mighty Eterin replied, and broke out in a run.

The gift is given, it meant. Eh, ours sounded better. With unnatural grace it ran atop the rope tying our poles together, but I did not move to meet it. I called Night to me instead,

weaving it into spinning blades above its head. My eye narrowed as the air current failed to suck Eterin upwards, snapping the working into an explosion instead. That got it to react, but not as I wished: it swayed on the rope for a moment, but the armour was not so much as dented.

"Tricky, tricky," I muttered. "You don't get the mobility, but this is stronger than Jindrich's Secret."

And Jindrich had been the second strongest sigil holder in Great Strycht. It wasn't the expendables I was getting sent at me. I began gathering Night again as Mighty Eterin crossed the last of the distance separating us, laughing as it raised its spear, and grinned back toothily. Tendrils of shadows rose from the bottom of the pole, twining around my limbs, and I focused my Name: with the strength of both behind me I met Eterin's blow, my staff catching the side of the spear.

It should have been blow straight off or lost the spear but instead spun, impossibly still on the rope, and when I tried to slide my sword into its belly the steel slid harmless against the carapace. I hastily put my guard as Eterin finished its spin, turning it into a blow from the back of the spear towards my ribs, and though the angle was wrong for both it was worse for me. My blade went down, the obsidian shaft struck my rib hard and I swallowed a groan. But I was close, and with a free hand. I laid my fingers against its chest and my will *pulled*.

It was easy as ripping a page out of a book. For the first heartbeat, at least, and then I felt it too. The thing that called itself Loc Ynan, Mighty Kurosiv. The great leech that had survived even the wrath of the Crows. It was like the whole sea coming down at me through a narrow channel and I rocked back, shaken, but I saw something beyond my vicious blooming headache. This was a power, but it was not beyond me. Kurosiv was not a god, for all that they put on airs. And I had ended stronger storms than this, crushed them in the palm of my hand.

"I am the Warden, you upstart thing," I hissed, "and if you dare raise your voice against me, I will **Silence** it."

The Night in Mighty Eterin *died*. It was snuffed out like a candle between fingers, Kurosiv's will cut just before I felt from it a towering rage. The sigil-holder moaned out in pain, his carapace crumbling into nothing, and my hand rose to catch its throat.

"You should have picked a better god," I told it, and *squeezed*.

My Name flared, the Beast laughing in my ear, and Mighty Eterin died as I pulped flesh and shattered bone. Urgh, now it was all over my hand. I leapt down, using the tendrils to ease my descent, and dismissed them as my boots touched stone. I tossed the corpse away and wiped my hand on my breastplate, limping away

to pick up my sword and sheath it. And as the last of the bodies began to cool, a hush fell upon the Shrine of Tears. A dimness blanketed the world, the sound of my own breath distant to my ears and the soft patter of the rain gone silent. I did not need to look to know they had come, sensing their looming shapes in the Night like leviathans swimming through the water.

They perched behind me atop the tallest shrines, the silhouettes of great crows large as houses casting long shadows past me. Sve Noc had come to the victorious field.

"Now you show up," I drawled, glancing back at my patronesses. "A little late to the evening, are we?"

They were hard to look at with the naked eye, even for me. Their very feathers seemed woven out of inky blackness, and here in this place of power I could dimly sense the endless void that lay beyond the surface. Like the emptiness behind stars, the absence of anything at all. Someone might go mad, looking too deep and too long at that. Ivah was already kneeling, but neither Akua nor Masego – recovered but his face still touched with blood – seemed impressed. They looked at the goddesses with the unruffled assurance of people who had been raised to see gods as meat on the block, not anything worthy of awe.

But that was only to be expected, while Cordelia staying astride her horse had me nodding in approval. It was her first time standing before the likes of Sve Noc, as far as I knew, and though her hands were bone-white around the reins she sat straight-backed in the saddle. There was steel in that spine. The Sisters did not answer me – indeed they rarely spoke outside mind or shared dreams – but there was no need for them to. They had brought a herald with them, an old acquaintance.

The Tomb-maker was still the oldest drow I had ever seen. Its back bent, its skin creased and its thick black veins visible through it. Its tunic of obsidian rings was belted tight at the waist and it wore no arms, never having done so as long as we'd known each other. Silver-blue eyes were set in a face bearing in paint a blooming ochre sunflower in ochre and its long white hair went down its crooked back. Mighty Rumena had not aged a day since I last stood in its presence.

"Losara Queen," the old drow greeted me. "You have already shed blood on the grounds of Serolen."

"A good omen," I agreed.

"There are few better," Rumena chuckled.

It cast a look around, lingering on distant gates that stood across the shrines.

"My sigil will hold the Shrine of Tears until the Kasedan arrive," the Tomb-maker told me. "Let us leave for the temple-fortress. We stand too close to the skirmish lines for council to go unheard."

"Doing a lot of walking, are you?" I smiled. "I suppose I've already handled the fighting for you."

It smiled at me, glancing at the dead bodies.

"Indeed," Rumena said. "You may now boast strength equal to a rat trap, First Under the Night."

Fuck, no comeback came to mind. Not *again*, goddamnit. Komena cawed in amusement. She always played favourites, the bitch. The Secret of Scathing Retorts remained enthroned.

"Ugh, just take us to the whatever temple," I sneered.

It took to victory with a mocking grin. Masego cleared his throat.

"And send the corpses after us," I added. "The Hierophant has laid claim to them."

If there was one upside to dealing with the Firstborn, it was that no one so much as batted an eye when Zeze asked for a pile of corpses.

Silver linings, eh?

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Serolen was a city that had been built out of a hundred cities, and there was no other like it on Calernia. The finest monuments and architectural wonders of a nation millennia old had been stolen and regurgitated wherever it pleased Sve Noc, a haphazard nightmare of great beauty. Towers carved out of stalagmites jutted out of the forest floor along with elaborate painted pyramids and what looked like an entire city district on a mile-wide plate of stone. Small houses of stone and wood had risen up between the great works, streets being burned into the ground with Night along the sprawling canals that Andronike had insisted on.

The temple-fortress was not one of the ornate and beautiful places, but instead exactly what it had been named as: a square of heavy obsidian walls surrounding a squat fortress of stone and bone topped by an airy temple without doors where Sve Noc liked to nest. Our rooms were at the heart of the fortress, deep in the belly behind half a dozen heavily armed sigils. I sent Zombie up to the temple, knowing she'd enjoy the place and the Sisters wouldn't mind, and dropped my affairs in the luxurious rooms

that'd been designated as mine before immediately heading for the war council, where Rumena and Mighty Ysengral would be waiting. Ivah had left to attend to the Losara and prepare them for my return, while Akua and Cordelia both indicated interest in attending the council. Masego, not so much.

"I want to dissect the bodies while they're still fresh," Zeze informed me. "My interest lies in the intersection between Night and the physical body, which requires that there still be wisps of it yet to fade."

Well, it wasn't like he was actually going to pay attention if I forced him to come.

"Don't get too deep in a new study," I warned. "We might need to go on war footing soon."

He scowled at me but did not argue. Good enough. I picked up Cordelia and Akua, both of which were drawing stares wherever we went. All three of us were human, but unlike them I could be felt to have power in the Night – with my hood down and no skin showing, I might be taken for a short Firstborn if not for the depths of my strength revealing me as Sve Noc's chosen herald. In a nostalgic turn, the war council room that I found was much like the one I had seen in Great Lotow long ago: thrones set against the walls and an empty stone floor at the heart. Neither Rumena nor Mighty Ysengral were seated when I entered, an implicit mark of respect.

I'd seen Ysengral in dreams before. It was the best defensive commander of the Firstborn in my opinion, only the eighth of the Ten Generals but having proved utterly lethal to Keter's forces by relying heavily on traps and artillery. It had earned the sobriquet 'Cradle of Steel' the hard way. It was no more impressive in person than it had been through the visions, a skinny drow with short white hair and a slight overbite revealing half-broken teeth. It wore black half-plate made of an alloy forged through Night over steel ringmail, and a single-edged sword was sheathed at its hip.

Both it and Rumena offered me a respectful nod as I swept in, Akua and Cordelia behind me.

"Mighty Ysengral," I smiled. "Our meeting is a long-awaited pleasure."

"Shared, Losara Queen," the drow replied. "I ate memories of the campaigns in Hainaut with great pleasure."

A toss-up whether the poor bastard whose memories had been eaten still lived. Just because Ysengral was competent didn't mean it was any less vicious than the rest of the Firstborn when it wanted something.

"I bring with me Prince Cordelia Hasenbach, of the Lycaonese," I told it, "and the one who was once a shade in the Night, Akua Sahelian."

Ysengral flicked a silvery glance at Akua.

"I have heard of your works, Mighty Shade," it nodded.

Cordelia did not rank the same courtesy. If she was offended, she did not show it. It wouldn't be the last insult she swallowed today anyway, as I'd told her. For one neither she nor Akua would get to sit here, as it would imply they were equals to the two Mighty – something neither of them was likely to tolerate even if I interceded. It was easy enough to find which was my throne: one of them was twice as large as the others, about the right height for me and positively dripping with sculpted crows. I sat down with relief and they followed suit. Cordelia came to stand by my right, Akua following suit to my left with an amused quirk of the lips.

"Mighty Ivah told me of the state of Serolen, but the talk seems to have been out of date," I said. "Where do we stand?"

It was Ysengral that fielded the question, flicking a wrist as it called on Night. An illusion that resembled Serolen as seen from above spread across the stone floor. Nails of pale light began to coalesce over much of the eastern half of the city and a chunk of the centre where the canals converged

"The traitor sigils have seized nearly half the city," Ysengral said. "The traitor Ishabog's attempt to seize the heart of the canals was ended by Mighty Rumena, but the traitor Moren has broken the back of two of our own offensives."

Ishabog the Adversary, the Fourth General. One whose sigil was small and made of only the strongest Mighty, numbering not a single nisi and dzulu. Its defection to Kurosiv was not unexpected. Moren Bleakwomb was an even harsher loss, having been the Third General. It knew Secrets that granted it power over ice and snow, an arsenal that had only grown more deadly after Sve Noc devoured Winter. In a straight fight it was probably weaker than Rumena, but it didn't give straight fights and anybody trying to kill it was going to die in a permanent blizzard long before catching sight of it.

One of its favourite tactics was to use its dzulu and lesser Mighty to bait an enemy sigil onto grounds it could encase in ice, killing both in a stroke, so I could see why Kurosiv's ways would be of greater appeal to it than the reforms.

"And what have they been doing since Ishabog got whipped?" I asked.

"Skirmishes across all boundaries," Rumena said. "They push strongest for the temples in the city heart, but there have been attacks everywhere."

"Moren placed sigils at the border and gave them lead to raid as they wish," Ysengral told me. "Ishabog and its riders join the raids as they pleased, abducting duzu and slaughtering all others."

I frowned.

"So they've stopped with major pushes?" I asked.

"I believe Ishabog is joining raids to find a weakness in our defences," Ysengral said. "It looks for a killing stroke."

I looked at Rumena.

"They are provoking us to attack," Rumena disagreed. "Only I could match Ishabog on the field and it follows no strategy, so they hoped to bait us into another offensive so that we might try to force its presence."

The old drow grimaced.

"It is a trap," the Tomb-maker said, "we have seen that Kurosiv's traitors are raising towers of obsidian in many places across the city."

I did not like the sound of *that* at all.

"Do we know why?" I asked.

"They might be meant to empower Moren's winter," Ysengral suggested. "We have dammed it on their side of the canals with Secrets, but if forced through our defences it could overturn the preparations of my sigil."

"I do not believe it Moren's work," Rumena disagreed. "It has always preferred raw strength to ritual, and Ishabog even more so. There is only one other mind that can have conceived of such a thing."

Kurosiv themselves. Yeah, the more I heard about that the less I liked it.

"Then we need to have a look at one of those towers," I said. "We need to know what they're for. What kind of defences are we looking at?"

"Significant," Mighty Ysengral replied. "Sigils defend them and sometimes more than one. No less than an offensive will let us reach even the closest."

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them.

"Then that's what-"

I felt Andronike brush against my mind, the refusal deep. They did not want us to go on the attack. *Why?* I had fallen silent, turning to look at the temple above us through the ceiling, but no one asked why. The answer my patronesses conveyed was complicated enough it took me some time to decipher. They were afraid the deaths would feed the towers, I got, only the fear was not just in abstract. *You don't believe those towers are about the fighting on the ground, do you? You think they're a weapon forged to kill you.* I mulled over that, biting my lip. I could see where the suspicions came from.

Rumena was convinced they were baiting an attack from us and Ysengral had noted that Ishabog was abducting dzulu when it raided. Were those meant as workers to raise the tower, or sacrifices to feed them? Maybe both. Either way, it hinted that the towers needed people to be on the other side of the canal for them to be of us. An offensive was playing right into that. But doing nothing was not an answer either, we all knew that. The longer we waited the longer the enemy had to advance their plans.

"That's a problem," I admitted. "How would either of you rank the chances of a small cabal making it to one of the towers hidden?"

Neither of the Might looked convinced.

"Moren knows all that tread its winter," Ysengral said.

"There are ways around every power," I said.

"They'll have seer Secrets everywhere around the towers," Rumena replied more bluntly. "Without the cover of an offensive and the chaos of war, there will be no success."

"The deaths of an offensive across the canals might be turned against us," I said. "We will not make such an attempt."

The once-First Prince of Procer stirred at my right. I turned to look at her.

"Cordelia?" I asked. "Speak."

"Am I to understand, Losara Queen, that it is the deaths of our soldiers that are the reason such an attempt cannot be made?"

Eh, maybe not in an absolute sense but in practice yes. Kurosiv might be able to sacrifice its own sigils to try to kill Sve Noc, but it would be a bloody gamble – and if it lost, it would have nothing left. Much better to spread out the deaths between two sides, even them out by making it a war.

"More or less," I agreed.

"Then I may have a way," Cordelia Hasenbach said.

The drow seemed skeptical, but I knew better.

"What do you need?"

"One day," she replied, "and every Firstborn chronicler you can spare."

Well now, I thought, that ought to get interesting.

TRUELIKEtheRIVER

"I am the Warden, you upstart thing," I hissed, "and if you dare raise your voice against me, I will ****Silence**** it."

AA

dadycool

Yeah, that was amazing.

Darkening

Was that an aspect? Given how often she's used that command to great effect it would be fitting. Could have just been Speaking, I suppose, though it seems a bit of an odd use case. She probably would have made a comment if it'd been her awaking an aspect I guess.

dadycool

She did make a comment about how if she used it thrice, it'd likely be permanent. It was when they met with the Herald and his boyfriend a second time.

[boballab](#)

It was written in Bold which EE uses to denote aspect use. What is more significant to me is whether Kurosiv cut his tie to Eterin before Silence hit or did it get him, like it did Malicia through her puppet when Cat was in Praes, and Silence cut the tie. If it worked on him like it did Malicia that could be very crippling to it.

Earl of Purple

Speaking is also bold, that doesn't actually mean anything. Not yet, at least.

[Maeveam](#)

The fact that it killed its power suggests this was an aspect. Would Speaking the word 'Silence' have done that?

Earl of Purple

I had misread/misremembered by the time I made my comment.

ISiejek

Possibly, part of her name is Command as has been show before, it could go either way, personally I think making one of her aspects Speaking would work best

shikkarasu

I'm 90% certain that this was an Aspect. That would explain why commanding someone to be Silent was more powerful than Speaking should have been; she was passively tapping into the Aspect without actively using it. We have gotten confirmation that Aspects can be used to empower actions without being burned in that once-a-day sort of way. I think that's what happened in the meeting with the Dwarves, and here she was using actively invoking **Silence** for the first time.

Put more simply, I don't think there is any way in Hells that her authority over Kurosiv is strong enough for her to Speak to him through a follower like that. He's a traitor, so not under her authority as FUtN, and not Named. This would be more impressive than what she did to the Dwarves, at a far greater range. *Surely* it's one of her long-awaited Aspects.

shikkarasu

Also, she said "I will [Silence]," which is not a command, like Speaking, but rather the way Aspects are introduced. Aspects nearly always describe the speaker doing something. To themselves, to others, or to the world.

"And if you won't give me my due," I said. "I'll **Take** it." something had broken and he needed to **Mend** it.
"Come on, you bastard. Here I **Stand**,"

Earl of Purple

I'd misread or misremembered by the time I reached the comments, I was in fact wrong.

Taltos Dreamer

I think it was her will through Speaking combined with her power in Night. It looks like the Warden has power over the Name-adjacent like the Mighty...or the Mighty count as Named in Drow culture.

Rey d`Tutto

Nope. Aspect.

Haven't read ahead, this is a prediction.

ohJohN

Already pretty settled by previous replies, but just some additional textual observations.

Speaking:

- always takes the form of complete commands (even if only a single word), not statements or questions
- generally is standalone dialogue, or kept distinct from other non-Speaking dialogue by a sentence or clause break
- is entirely bolded
- is only capitalized according to standard English rules (i.e. words that begin a sentence or proper nouns)

By contrast, the invocation of an aspect:

- bolds & capitalizes the name of the aspect (and nothing else)
- can be thought or spoken or narrated, as a single word or as part of a complete sentence

So this is definitely an aspect invocation, as it's part of a statement and capitalized where it otherwise wouldn't be.

Agent J

It's also the right kind of verb for an Aspect as well. If she commanded him to be Silent, that wouldn't have fit as an aspect grammatically speaking and would definitely be Speaking. Silence on the other hand is the right sort of specific verb (don't remember the technical term) for an Aspect.

Frivolous

Hah. I was right after all. Kurosiv really did end up making a deal with Keter AND running away.

Still in the middle of reading.

Frivolous

Also thanks EE for remembering and correcting that the Dreamer was still active, since the Tribulation mentioned the Dreamer had been killed.

I'm guessing you fixed that since I can't find it anymore in this chapter.

megaprr

Great chapter as always!

One aspect down... two to go!

megaprr

Anyone care to make predictions?

Daniel E

Badgers, because it's always badgers. Always a disaster, never just a minor problem. Never 'Oh no, we're out of the really good wine, but that's ok we'll just drink this still-decent wine instead'.

shikkarasu

I'm confident in **Collect**, used twice in dramatic moments, just *begging* for a third, and I'm hoping for **Rein**, but I think **Silence** covers that pretty well, so odds are it will be something else..

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Not Collect... Take

ninegardens

Ummmm...

Wut.

Like some sort of wild Counter ritual from Akua or Zeze I might expect, but Cordelia coming in hot with "Yo, someone give me the history books. I got this" was ****not**** what I was expecting.

This sounds awesome, and I am all for it... but also what the heck?

dadycool

I'm tempted to assume she's coming into something, considering she spent a long time in the Salia library and came out of it with a small arsenal. Now she looks at certain doom and baffled allies and says that.

spencer

I think we've pretty clearly established that Cordelia will never become Named.

shikkarasu

I agree, and yet am similarly tempted. What all did she learn while working with the Forgetful Librarian? What were FL's Aspects? *What else did Cordelia take with her*

dadycool

Ho about a Role? If she'll be an Administrator, she'd be able to weaponize rules, policies, traditions, and such.

jamesc9

So she wants to know which rules, policies and traditions are available to weaponize in this situation.

ninegardens

Some sort of Queen/administrator perhaps?

RoflCat

Well, considering she took the 'right hand' position + Cat noted that she hasn't earn the respect of the Drows, it make sense that she need to establish herself.

Considering the nature of the Drows on the other side, my first guess is she'll dig up their old grudges/oaths and use that to cause chaos + analyze what Secrets the enemies may have.

erebus42

Well this is certainly a cluster fuck. I do sincerely hope that if Cat can end this situation the Drow will be able to consolidate and recompose themselves. They definitely are my favorite faction and they unfortunately felt like the collective whipping boy of last book.

Insanenoodlyguy

That's the easy part. Drow are very accepting of the idea "this side won, they are in charge now, the fact they were stronger is proof that they are right, or at least more right." Ynan says he is the new god and meant to bring them to old ways. If the old god beats him, that will settle that for most.

edrey

well, this is a disaster, no better place for Cat.
Now the Queen of winter, ice and darkness, loss and found is in

her terrain.
Great chapter as always

dadycoool

She was born in a pit. Uphill battles are where she learned to walk. Struggle was the first Word she ever learned. Her teeth grew in chewing on the fallen corpse of a foe above and beyond her. Her second life began by looking Power in the eye and forcing it to submit to her will.

ohJohN

I love this, but the pedantic ghouls that haunt my brain insist that "Struggle was the *second* Word she ever [L]earned" (because Learn was her first aspect)

I'm sorry, I also hate these ghouls, but here we are 🙄

jamesc9

The ghouls are trying to help you. I acknowledge that accepting their help, in the form in which they want to give it, may be problematic.

[Kletanio](#)

Don't forget that Hasselhoff has experience holding together a country that has no business remaining held together.

shikkarasu

Rule #3: Don't Hassel the Bach

caoimhinh

It still surprises me how Sve Noc let the situation come to this

dadycoool

Well, that's the thing about giving your underlings the power of choice with out inherent, immediate repercussions. Some of them don't make the choices you like and some of those choices turn into big problems.

beleester

"See, this is exactly the reason why I wanted to mind control the world. The rebellion is only proving my point."
-Dread Emperor Imperious

Ed

Not like they had a choice, it's been one arse kicking after another for them.

Xinci

Eh, blame both Sve and Cat. They are in this state in the first place due to not preparing institutional contingencies or at least logistical frameworks beyond a single point of failure(which...big oof on Cat as a Villain for that) when they intended to fight the Dead King. Naturally, it has come to this since Sves means of regulation have either been inferior or just incomplete.

ninegardens

Also, Sve is goddess of "Theft in victory". This is all well and good, but also means that "Theft and victory" are BY DEFINITION valid means of taking power from her. The nature of the power itself is "Finders keepers", and has been for thousands of years.

You might as well criticise a prime minister for being voted out.

Theft and trechery is what Sve's power is *made out of*.

Zach

This situation is an example of why you need to deal with counter-revolutionary elements and can't just let them hang around.

masterofbones

Its also a great example for why its hard to do something about the counter-revolutionaries.

All the weak, mostly useless in combat people *love* the new rules. Tons of the strongest, most valuable people hate them. What is the result? The rebels are almost entirely made up of skilled and intelligent individuals, while your loyalists are almost entirely made up of fodder.

Its remarkably similar to what happens if you crack down on major corporations. They will just leave, meaning that location's productivity plummets.

ohJohN

You'd think Cat would be better prepared, given her father's shining example in post-Conquest Callow 😊

[sengachi](#)

Honestly, in all my studies of history I've seen a revolution this big which didn't involve a reactionary movement on at least this scale. It's just a really freaking hard problem to wrest power from the powerful without them using that power to fight it.

Juff

Typo Thread:

says cannot > says it cannot
sit out > sat out
cut under (should this be "cut it")
There's been > There'd been
somber > sombre (somber is us spelling)
moment was passed > moment we passed
Ivahs' > Ivah's
roof the great > roof of the great
they... weak > they were... weak
A whisper against > There was a whisper against (or a whisper sounded, or something like that)
began to rip > beginning to rip
drow's, it > drow's; it
was loud > was a loud
armour drow > armoured drow
I landed atop (extra space)
and return the > and returned the
to return to convert back (one or the other)
with he strength > with the strength
blow straight > blown straight
put my guard > put up my guard
and with a free > and had a free
as least > at least
that they put > that it put
easy my > ease my
seen. Its back > seen, its back
ochre sunflower in ochre (is the repetition intentional?)
gave them lead > gave them leave
duzu > dzulu
said, "the Dreamer > said. "The Dreamer
Kurosiv themselves > Kurosiv itself (or is kurosiv a them, not it)
be of us. > be of use.
Might looked > Mighty looked
such an attempt. > such an attempt."

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia "not Named" Hasenbach continues to be amazing.

SILENCE!!! CALLED IT!!!

And Hell Yeah new drow arc!!!! Pretty Serolen!!!

And hell yeah Akua still sticking by Cat. What an amazing combination of having no idea what she wants and knowing EXACTLY what she wants. God.

Wonder

Holy shit !!! New Aspects are the best!!!!

I was planning to go piss at reading all of the chapter but damn that New shiny aspect Silenced my resistance in sheer awe . I had to go take the mother of piss while crowing out in praise .

Dos the land without light reference mean the new Story is still in this universe?

gladiuslucix

I assumed the "kingdom without light" was just the Drow equivalent of "promised land" or "land of milk and honey." A place that may not actually exist, but they'll promise you it does if you join them.

ohJohN

this, it makes sense that "a kingdom without light" would be a promised utopia for a people that spent millennia underground and are physically & magically weakened by sunlight

[Adrian_V](#)

Huh so Silence, and it can be used to kill things or at least make them as if they were dead or destroyed if that is what it takes to make the silent (basically like snuffing something), usefull if she can control the level of measure although we have seen all aspect can be streeched (would be funny if she later on uses it to get silence after a night drinking xD)

I won't be surprised if 1 of its more practical application is to shut off other aspects.

Now lets see how Cordelia gaings some fame among Drow

dadycool

Well, there is a certain Name that's based around singing, or at least telling stories, which makes her voice the foundation of her Name.

ninegardens

Oh shit. Cat is going to silence the bard, and then she'll have to steer stories completely through mime!

Hell... just from a narrative point of view, Silence would *break* the bard's name and... unlike anything else we've seen might actually be enough to unmake her.
Cool.

Wonder

Apparently Being Silenced Three times makes the effect permanent. Cat speculates during the Post Warden chapter ,the dwarf negotiation.

spencer

I don't think that her Silence directly killed Mighty Eterin. It just removed Kurosiv's influence, and without it Cat one-punched Eterin to dust.

KageLupus

Exactly. Cat actually Silenced Kurosiv, and that removed the connection between it and Mighty Eterin. Without a source of Night Mighty Eterin became just Eterin, and without that power it was never going to stand a chance against Cat.

What I find really interesting is just how Night reacts to Name stuff in general. Cat is something of an exception I think, given her Name and role in Drow society, so I can see how she is able to use an Aspect on Kurosiv. But I have to imagine that anyone else would be hard pressed to do something even remotely similar.

I have also been thinking about whether the Drow lack Names because of something inherent to the Night that they use, or simply because of cultural reasons. I really thought the big twist of this arc would be some Drow getting a new Name and starting off a new era of their society. Probably Ivah since that would be a good mirror to Hakram getting the first Orc Name in centuries or however long it was. But that supposes that Drow can actually become Named and I am still not convinced that is true. There was definitely too much emphasis on the individual before the exodus for them to be able to form Names. The question is whether Cat has shifted their culture enough that they can start wearing the grooves in Creation that Names fill in.

Earl of Purple

I think there's WoE that drow don't have Names because Night-as-it-was already filled that space; drow won't get a Name from Below with Night because that's double-dipping into Below's pool, and drow culturally aren't ready for Above Names- and also won't get one if they hold Night, since that requires sacrifice on an altar of Below's. Now

Night has been Ruined, it may well be possible for drow Named to crop up- and I'm leaning toward either Ivah or Rumena for that.

Adrian_V

It basically destroyed something since it was the only way to make it "silent", not sure if it was the working or the night used in it

jamesc9

"if 1 of its more practical application is to shut off other aspects"

We've seen Cat's Silence weaken Malacia's Rule.

BargleNawdleZouss

Hmm, I thought Cordelia was going to volunteer to use the ealamal on the traitor-held portion of the city, and then the group having a debate on how precisely the angel-smiting can be targeted. I'm looking forward to her diplomatic solution instead!

shikkarasu

She may not be Named, but Cordelia is showing that she is still certainly a PC.

DM: you need to enter a fortress, which is heavily monitored, and if you start a fight the bodies will trigger a Doomsday Ritual.

Cordelia's player: Are there enough books here to get advantage on a Knowledge:History check?

DM: ...whyyyy?

Cordelia's player: I have an Idea.

DM: No, this is a clear stealth mission. Guys, back me up.

Catherine's player: I want to see where this goes.

Akua's player: I take the Help action. Can she use my Int bonus?

DM: YOU ALWAYS DO THIS.

Linnus42

Cordelia randomly comes up with an idea despite knowing jack about the Drow? One could argue the archives gave her some insight but she wasn't the one doing the reading. And given the Drow's limited interactions with the surface one would question the veracity of such chronicles. Well I suppose EE brought Cordelia for a reason and EE does love having Cordelia shine. Highly biased towards the character in my book. Insight here would make more sense coming from Akua in my book.

Some thought Cordelia would be for the angel weapon but nothing suggest that has precision targeting quite the opposite. It really seems to have a massive AOE that spreads from a central

point. I suppose it could be used if all the rival drow were on the side of the area closest to the angel exterminatus.

Cat reminds me of Dany here. Show up to a culture make a bunch of sweeping reforms and surprised Pikachu face when they backfire. Because you didn't understand the culture you were trying to change. Also sweeping reforms during a war also tend to be some optimal if they are not about winning said war.

Probably should have brought Mirror Knight lol. Really someone who could use Light would be useful here.

As for the Drow cutting a deal with DK seems kinda obvious. DK got consulted by the Twilight Sages back in the day and has plenty of time to study Night. I see no particular reason why DK bother going back on the deal. If he has mopped up the rest of the continent chasing the remaining Drow seems a waste of time. I suppose it depends on if he thinks his future moves will require cutting deals.

Cat's Aspect is Silence.

kinigget

Leaving aside your weird grudge against Cordelia, Cat's reforms didn't actually fail, this was always going to be a possibility just by the nature of what Night is. Also Mirror Knight is the actual single worst idea possible to bring here. Motherfucker once tried to sell the Drow out and they know it, Light is the nuclear option here, and as much as he's gotten better about it, he still hasn't quite shaken off his Proceran Supremacist views. The man is a war waiting to happen.

Linnus42

My point with Cordelia is I find it weird she who doesn't know jack about Drow and has limited interaction with the Drow. Magically discovers a solution in like 5 seconds of being told the situation. That is ignoring the fact that she should not even be able to follow the discussions cause she doesn't speak the language. Seems to me more author bias for Cordelia to shine here than any well setup payoff or logic from EE. It also clashes with the message of Cat causing this issue because despite knowing about more about Drow she didn't consider the ramifications as an outsider imposing reforms.

I would not count a Civil War during a War against extinction a grand success of policy. Will Cat's policy work in the long term sure that is likely...was it good move to implement in the short term headed into a war against extinction the answer there seems no.

The solution to this False god issue is probably to going to involve killing said False god. Which means that bringing some Light User for this mission would be quite smart. Mirror Knight is most optimized to beat Drow specifically though which I was a name dropped him.

Xinci

Hmm, I am still really curious if Sve Noc will be "dead" or at least broken to the point of basic inability to interact by the end of this. Momentum is currently on the side of Kurosiv, their power bloc is more fluid in action and is actively collecting power from other Drow to form a new god. Whereas Sve Noc is calcified, her side has a set of rules but those don't actually apply to the framework of usage and dissemination of secrets and their powers. Eventually, one would likely self emerge under the paradigm Cat set, which is more efficient methodologically, that would eventually precipitate systematically to the rest of the Drow sigils, but she is mimicking societies that grow such things gradually. And as an important caveat, such things need to be protected because they are somewhat fragile as they grow. It's possible that the formation of the Losara will be a saving grace though since they do form a societal apparatus for information accrual. It seems likely Kurosiv got the schema after observing or just directly from the DK too(with those towers also likely being sabotaged so he gets the info for more research as a general assumption) since they seem similar to the pillars he used to absorb Night before.

Abrakadabra

My guess is that Nessi wears Kurosiv lile an old smelly sock.

benjamin h

if i were the drow i'd take the deal with keter tbh.

jjr

Wait a sec, Mighty Kurosiv claims at least some of its legitimacy from its claim that it won a verse game with the Dead King, winning a reprieve from death for nine years. And now Cordelia wants, "every Firstborn chronicler you can spare." Is this war going to be decided by an epic rap battle?

ninegardens

Oh, holy shit, you are right.

MC Hasenbach is in the HOUSE.

[308924810a](#)

Is there any actual reason for the loyalist Drow to stay here? If they all uproot and go through Twilight to the south they should still be able to get enough food to survive, and will have neatly derailed whatever plan these rebel drow are pursuing, leaving them with a large number of undead forces already positioned on their borders and very little to offer the Dead King as a deal. Perhaps he'd let them sit out the war as the rebels are claiming he promised, perhaps he'd alter the deal and require they fight on his behalf so he can get a force that can operate in Twilight.

shikkarasu

DK would likely let them leave, but give them no means to do so. The rebels would then attack the coasts of Calernia to steal or make ships, leaching military resources that no-one can spare to stop them. The Loyalists would be stabbing the rest of the continent in the back to flee South, basically ensuring their own deaths unless they *also* leave the continent. So they will need to raid coasts as well. It's not the killing blow that attacking Twilight would be, but it would knock the Drow front out of the war and set enemies fighting each other all without costing the Dead King anything at all.

This is all assuming that they only needed to worry about outside forces. Some Mighty, such as Rumena, won their position with the promise of defeating the Dead King. They lose their position as Sigil holders if they run, now.

Chapter 44: Antecedents

"If you cannot be good, be just. If you cannot be just, be mindful. If you cannot even be that, then be slain by a better man."

– Clément Merovins, fourth First Prince of Procer

I was too restless to sleep, after the council, and so I sought company instead.

Masego barely slept any more than I did, so it was at the... well, he'd probably call it a laboratory but it was really more a charnel yard that the Firstborn provided him. He was cutting open a rylleh's skull with a silver knife when I entered, from the top of the head to the strange almost beak-like nose bone that drow had where humans had cartilage. While there were more bones there

were less muscles on their species' face compared to humans and they were placed differently. It was one of the reasons the drow were considered less expressive.

I dropped into a rough stone seat, watching him work. As a girl I'd found the sight gruesome, but these days I'd made enough corpses that their sight evoked little in me.

"Learned anything useful?"

Hierophant did not immediately answer, waiting until he'd finished cutting through the bone properly and revealed the black sausage-like brain under.

"Useful?" he mused. "I do not know. Yet certainly interesting."

We tended to have somewhat different ideas about what that word meant, but what the Hells. It wasn't like I had anything better to do.

"Like what?" I asked.

He looked surprised, eyeing me suspiciously.

"You do not usually express much interest in my dissections," Masego said.

He sounded, I thought, a tad reproachful.

"It's drow corpses and I am First Under the Night," I shrugged. "You might say it's in my wheelhouse."

He mulled over that, then nodded in agreement.

"What do you know about the nature of the Gift?" he asked me.

I hummed.

"I read the *Natura Virtutis* by Warlock Shatha," I said. "The ability to do magic has two components: one his physical, the body must be born with the talent, while the second is metaphysical and necessitates a soul."

"Shatha's work is incomplete, never explaining how the likes of devils and fae can use a form of sorcery," Masego noted. "I would recommend you read Magister Cressida's *Theologos*, which skillfully revises and completes the theory. Still, it serves as a base."

He paused.

"The metaphysical aspect is the most essential of the two," Masego said. "It is why Akua was able to practice magic after seizing a new body while it would be pointless of me to attempt

the same: the Saint of Sword severed the part of my soul that interconnects with the physical, allowing the use of magic. Changing the body would mean nothing."

"I'm following so far," I said. "How does that lead to the Firstborn?"

He tapped the side of his knife on the open drow brains.

"There have been Firstborn mages in the past," Masego said. "We know this as a fact. So why none since the creation of Night?"

I hummed. That was a pretty good question, actually.

"Did the Sisters kill the capacity?" I asked.

"It would be more apt to say that they replaced it," Hierophant said. "As far as I can tell, the same part of the soul that was cut in me – that allows the use of magic – is used for the manipulation of Night."

"Every drow uses Night, to some extent," I pointed out. "They can't *all* be capable of magic."

He beamed at me.

"My wonder exact," Masego said. "I can think of only two existing manner of creatures that can all use a manner of sorcery, fae and devils. Species whose sentience is a complex matter."

Considering fae were living stories and devils grew more intelligent the older they got, on top of both having a sort of immortality, I could see his point. The Firstborn weren't really like either.

"Every Firstborn is born with *some* Night, supposedly," I mused. "It's only those Mighty that have been alive since its creation that lived without it."

And there were precious few of those. Not even all of the Ten Generals had been born before the fall of the Empire Ever Dark.

"That is because your patronesses have changed the souls of the drow," Masego said, sounding impressed by the Crows for what might be the first time.

I felt their weight of their attention suddenly in the back of my mind, the two of them listening through my ears. Masego's golden eye lingered on me, and I wondered if he could see them. I wouldn't be surprised. Either way it didn't stop him.

"It is very crude work," Hierophant opined. "Metaphysically speaking, it is the equivalent of hammering a nail through the forehead to serve as a connection. In those born capable of magic

– as one of the rylleh you provided me was – it appears to destroy that capacity.”

Komena felt irritated, I could tell because the emotion was strong, but underneath that cover I could sense that Andronike was *worried*. Gods. How many people in all their years had ever found this out? It couldn't be many.

“In those born *without* it, however,” he continued, “it appears to serve as a prosthetic of sorts. An appendage that functions as the connection between soul and body they do not have.”

My eye narrowed.

“Let me guess,” I said. “That nail, it's the piece of Night that every Firstborn is born with.”

“More likely there is additional Night as well, gifted by Sve Noc through the nail so that its functionality is confirmed,” Masego said. “I imagine that when Night ‘fades’ after a death, it is returned to your patronesses through that very appendage – destroying itself in the process.”

He leaned forward over the corpse-covered table.

“Did I miss anything?” Hierophant coldly smiled, asking the goddesses lurking in my soul.

They went away, silent, and he chuckled.

“I didn't think so,” Masego said.

I rolled my eye at him.

“Always glad to see you making friends,” I chided.

“I admire the inventiveness of their original work, do not misunderstand me,” he said. “It is their ramshackle attempt at apotheosis that offends. Unlike you, who stumbled to the result accidentally, they have no excuse for their sloppiness.”

Nice of him to excuse me, but I couldn't actually argue with the way he'd put it so I did not risk sarcasm.

“It was a desperate decision made to save their people, Zeze,” I reminded him. “Not a master plan.”

“I will not laud a hollow doll as a god, Catherine,” Masego shrugged. “If they claimed themselves to be less I would keep silent, but so long as they claim divinity I will offer the very scorn that claim deserves.”

Yeah, I did not foresee a great friendship between Zeze and the Crows. A civil tongue was probably the best I could hope for, to

be honest, so best to change the subject before they started listening in again.

"So, do you think Kurosiv made their own nails?" I asked.

That got his interest.

"I do not think they can," Hierophant admitted.

"Huh," I said. "How's that?"

"The 'miracle' of Night that creates these nails, Catherine, is not something any of the Mighty could do," he told me. "We came here, you might remember, for the original Night. The power that was bestowed onto Sve Noc by the Gods Below and makes up the heart of their godhead."

"You think the nails are made of that," I guessed.

He nodded.

"Kurosiv is bestowed and not bestower," Masego said. "They cannot create nails because only the original Night can shape souls."

"So they're just usurping where the nails go," I mused. "Taking over part of the spider web, so to speak."

"You forget," Hierophant said, "that the nails are part of Sve Noc. It is more accurate to say that Kurosiv is attempting to devour their godhead one piece at a time, that they might become a god in the place of the Sisters."

I clenched my fingers. Like a tug of war that only ended when one side held all the rope and strangled the enemy with it.

"It's to the death, then," I said.

Masego looked at me, eye glimmering gold.

"Oh yes," he smiled. "Very much to the death."

Well, wouldn't that make for sweet dreams.

—

I was up before dawn, breaking my fast when Cordelia was brought to me by an ispe of the Losara. My sigil had smoothly slid into the role of my attendants and escorts since my arrival, treating me as if I had never left, and it would be a lie to say that I did not enjoy it. The former First Prince sat across the low table, eyeing the spread of food laid out for us.

"Don't eat the mushrooms," I told her. "They make humans laugh uncontrollably whenever we drink water."

The blonde princess looked appalled.

"You have a plate full of them," Cordelia said.

"I can burn out the effect," I said, "and they are tasty as *Hells*."

I popped another one in my mouth, chewing on the savoury flesh. I could eat all sorts of terrible stuff again now that I could use my Name to burn out 'poison' again, it was pretty great. She stuck to the bread and what she probably assumed to be honey and not the blood of gem-eating snake crystallized and then melted into a brew. Tasted pretty similar, though, so might be best not to break it to her. We polished off our food and then got to business, Ivah arriving at the precise moment I needed of it. It bowed and sat at Cordelia's side under her curious gaze.

"Ivah is my second among the Losara," I said. "And it speaks fluent Chantant and Lower Miezán, as you know, so it'll be your guide and translator. The highest Mighty usually speak a few human languages, but those historians you asked for won't."

It would also be her escort, since Cordelia was full of knowledge and eminently killable. Having the effective head of the Losara at her side would it clear she wasn't to get her throat cut so some jawor could learn to speak Reitz.

"You have gathered them, then," Cordelia said.

"I have," I replied. "Though there's no such thing as a Firstborn historian in the sense you mean. There are Mighty, though, who through Secrets or because of personal interests have gathered histories of their people both ancient and recent."

"That is what I need," she nodded. "May I call on your war council for information as to the enemy's situation across the river?"

I nodded, seeing no issue.

"Ivah will handle it," I said. "Practically speaking, you can ask for pretty much anything you need."

I offered her a sharp smile.

"One might say your work is divinely blessed."

She looked rather torn at that. Sve Noc were horrors, hard to get around that, but it was useful to have gods in one's corner.

"I look forward to working with you, then, Ivah of the Losara," Cordelia said, offering it a nod.

"And I you," Ivah replied, perhaps more politely than honestly.

Eh, it'd work out. Ivah would prefer to go wade in the blood of our enemies at my side, sure, but its skills were better employed elsewhere at the moment. Besides, if I was reading the Sisters right it would be good for it to have a history of working with Proceran royalty. My tenure as First Under the Night would end before long and my replacement would need to deal with humans whether they liked it or not. I took my leave from them, having something like an appointment to head to. It had been long since I last communed with my patronesses, and I'd yet to have a proper look at the temple where they roosted. N my way to the aerie, though, I came across an unexpected sight.

Akua was leaning against a windowsill in one of the high corridors overlooking the ramparts, hair loose and eyes distant. My limping gait was easy enough to recognize but she did not turn when I approach, eyes staying on the distant shapes of the great monuments the Sisters had stolen from their ruin of an empire to adorn their capital with. Not unlike, I thought, magpies making a nest. I came to stand by her, leaning on my staff instead of the stone.

"Copper for your thoughts?" I offered.

She did not answer immediately, tucking back an errant strand behind her ear. Her red riding dress was form-fitting, but I followed her gaze instead of letting mine linger. She did not seem in that kind of a mood in the slightest.

"I was thinking," Akua said, "of Praes."

I hummed.

"What of it?"

Her jaw tightened.

"I killed it, you know," Akua said. "The Dread Empire. It might be your father that handed me the match, Catherine, but he couldn't have done it in my place. It was my decision. I saw..."

She shook her head.

"Too much, I suppose," Akua said. "Too much I could no longer ignore."

I did not interject.

"And so I burned an empire I could have ruled," the golden-eyed sorceress said.

I leaned against my staff of dead yew, letting it bear my weight and carefully not looking at her.

"Do you regret it?" I asked.

A long moment of silence.

"Yes," she finally said.

My heart clenched. A golden gaze turned to me, darkly amused.

"There is no need for anguish, dearest," Akua said. "You did not fail. It is not the throne I regret but what it might have meant."

"And what's that?" I warily asked.

"Making a difference," she said. "I could have made things better, Catherine. Mended wounds."

She shrugged.

"Here, at your side again, I am not that woman," she said. "I trail in your wake. Not unpleasantly so, but when I remember those who looked at me with hope in their eyes it does not seem enough."

I studied her, silently, from the corner of my eye. She looked at the horizon still.

"So what is it you want?" I asked, too casually.

She rose from the windowsill, all fluid grace, and offered me a lovely smile.

"I do not know," Akua said. "But is it closer to the woman that struck the match than the one who stood silent in the war council last night."

She left, brushing her hand against my arm as she passed, and I said nothing. I thought, standing there as she left, of that moment when you flip a coin. After it reaches the apex and begins to come down, just before it hits your palm.

Just before you know what face will come up.

—

I called Zombie to me instead of taking the stairs all the way to the summit of the temple-fortress.

It didn't end up mattering, because before I could reach my patronesses they reached me. The touch of the Sisters against my mind was light, but the images they offered up burned bright: I was needed elsewhere. The enemy had come, and I pulled at Zombie's reins as our destination changed. Yesterday, we'd won a victory at the Shrine of Tears and I'd personally slapped Kurosiv in the place. It looked like the Fate-Giver was a sore loser, because the Shrine was where it was picking a fight today. And

while I'd been expecting Ishabog the Adversary, the opposition's designated raider, to make an appearance what I got was altogether worse: Moren Bleakwomb had come out to play, and the Third General was in no mood for half-measures.

What had been sheets of rain yesterday was now frozen solid, holes smashed through where the raiders attacked. Mighty Kasedan and its sigil had been assigned to hold the Shrine after we retook it, but I could feel not a single survivor of the Kasedan within. All the Firstborn that remained were of that Other Night, the one I could not read as deeply. Besides, I only had need of eyes to be able to tell there would be no survivors: a blizzard was howling behind the ice walls, the mark of Moren Bleakwomb letting loose. It was not the Losara that I led into battle, as it was no longer their role: they were oathkeepers and priests now, no longer warrior-Mighty.

Instead it was the Rumena at my back and the Tomb-maker itself at my side. Standing before one of the holes, I watched the blizzard and cocked my head.

"That's stronger than I was led to expect," I noted. "In sheer power, Bleakwomb's a notch above even you."

General Rumena did not disagree, which spoke volumes.

"Moren has grown in strength," the Tomb-maker evenly said. "More than it should have. This was not taken from another Mighty. It was *given*."

The scorn in the word was thick. The worthy rose, the worthy took: they were not handed gifts. So Kurosiv had begun to strengthen their lieutenant, huh. I supposed there was nothing keeping them bound to play by Sve Noc's rules anymore.

"How does it compare to Radigast?" I asked.

"Close," Rumena somberly said.

I let out a low whistle. Radigast the Guest, the First General, was powerful enough that even when it possessed the bodies of other Firstborn – the Secret that saw it earn its sobriquet – it could usually bat other Generals around. It and the Gloom-shards was pretty much the reason southern Serolen had yet to turn into a rout, since its sigil was spread out all over and so it could move from one battle to another in the bat of an eye. I rolled my shoulder.

"Well, Rumena," I said, "let's knock before we enter. It's only polite."

I pulled down my hood as the Tomb-maker took a wary step away from me, breathing in and sinking deep in the Night. Blackflame

was nothing to sneer at, when you concentrated it, and I'd long learned that trick. I smashed the sheet of ice before us, the sea of black fire I slammed into it sublimating the frozen water and the gust of air making the blizzard within disperse for a moment. Near the gate, anyway. I flicked a glance at Rumena.

"Don't dawdle," I chided. "We've a traitor to discipline."

I stepped into the howling winds, immediately feeling the cold eating at my flesh. Night flared in my veins, burning it away, but I was still reluctantly impressed. That'd been quick. A hundred eyes bloomed to replace my dead one, all buried in wind and snow, but I was feeling out the currents. There was an eye to the storm, a place without wind or frost. Moren and its sigil were there, not in this lethal storm. Behind me I felt Rumena's presence burn in the Night, the ground moving as it raised out of solid stone a path for its sigil to take. Good, that took care of that. I could go straight for Bleakwomb.

It must have thought much the same, because even as I began weaving a bubble of Night against me – a sphere of stillness that would kill the winds – I felt the great presence in the Other Night move towards me. The winds picked up in strength, ice began to spread over the snow and reach for my boots.

"None of that," I sharply said, smashing down the butt of my staff.

Tongues of fire shot out against the ground, revealing bare stone again, and I finished that bubble of stillness just in time for Moren to strike its first blow: high above us, I began to hear *cracks*.

"You fucking loon," I said, half-admiring. "You're bringing down the ceiling on us, aren't you?"

Only it was worse than that. Wasting no time, I pulled at Night and filled my bubble of stillness with spinning winds – not as strong as Moren's, but strong enough to turn aside anything falling on me. Only it'd not just been me that Bleakwomb was aiming at. When it'd brought down the ceiling, it'd filled a massive storm with *hundreds of large pieces of stone*. Rumena's hall was ripped apart in moments and I cursed, ordering it to withdraw in the Night. This wasn't a fight, it was a fucking rat trap – and this time we were the rats. The Tomb-maker balked. Its sigil should retreat, it agreed, but itself... We both paused when a dreamlike vision shivered through our minds.

Andronike's hand, but the memory had been taken by Komena: a lookout from the Ysengraļ had just seen Mighty Ishabog and its sigil moving to cut our retreat.

"Go," I snarled at Rumena through the Night. "Clear them out."

There was no argument this time. I turned my attention back to Moren Bleakwomb, whose gaze I could feel on me through the storms. I could see through its own works, I thought. So that was why even though it was far from a brawler it'd made it up to Third General: it always had the advantage of home territory, because it brought the territory with it. Unless I dispersed that blizzard I was fighting uphill and dispersing that thing would blow through most of my strength in the Night. Attrition and aggression with the same single Secret. We'd underestimated our opponent, I thought. Not expected that Kurosiv would empower its lieutenant.

I was not prepared to win this fight.

"Still," I told the blizzard, "there's appearances to maintain. You can't just stroll in, wipe out a sigil and then stay put in a temple that used to be ours. That'd be bad for morale."

I moved around my footing, placed a second hand on my staff and squared my shoulders. I smiled, Night flooding through my veins. Fighting Moren's Secret would just exhaust me, so I did the very opposite. I attuned my Night to its own and fed the working, filled its belly to bursting until the winds howled so loudly that the scream shook the very walls and the pillars holding up the roof began to crack. Ropes snapped, painted shrines shattered and even the frozen waters were ripped out of the canals. I could feel Moren struggle to keep control of the over-mighty working.

"Yeah, you're recent to that kind of power aren't you?" I smiled. "You're not real good at handling it yet, not after so many centuries of stagnating around the same strength."

Then I'd added my own strength and that had made it *significantly* worse. I'd thought it would. I was no stranger to biting off more than I could chew, so I had a grip on the difficulties involved in your strength increasing so suddenly. The two of us stood in the storm, untouched, as the world broke around us. To my displeasure Moren had control enough to spare its own sigil, maintain the eye of calm, but that was all it could save. The Shrine of Tears *broke*, everything shattered and ripped apart until no two stones stood atop one another and the beautiful place I had seen yesterday was but a dream.

The winds died, leaving only a flat empty expanse of snow and a ring of rubble around us. I met the eyes of the silhouette across the field, Maren Bleakwomb's staring back unblinking. A tall and skeletally thin drow, haggard in their stringy blue and green clothes – looking half-drowned – and covered in masses of round beads as if attempting to make up for the severity of its figure. I offered the traitor-general a mocking bow, gesturing at the nothingness around us.

"It's all yours," I said.

The Mighty did not answer. I limped away, feeling its gaze biting at my back.

We both knew this was not going to be our last fight.

—

It was nightfall by the time the borders were secure again and I'd spent most the day fighting.

But a day had been spent, and so I went to reap the harvest that had been sown. I found Cordelia Hasenbach in what had been someone's bedchamber but was not covered in papers and tables, the blonde princess animatedly speaking with Ivah and the two dozen other Firstborn on the room as a dzulu of the Losara took notes on what looked like a great map. I squinted at it as I entered, finding mostly sigil names and red lines linking them to other names. The drow bowed as I entered, which I dismissed, and I turned towards Cordelia.

"What am I looking at?" I asked.

"I am pleased to see you as well, Your Majesty," she mildly replied.

"I'm about six hours and nine hundred corpses past courtesies right now," I tiredly replied. "What am I looking at, Hasenbach?"

"War," Ivah replied in her stead, sounding enthused.

I took a longer look at the map, then scanned the papers. Most of it was poetry, records of duels between Mighty and the found of sig- oh, oh.

"Kurosiv's entire philosophy is being hands off," I slowly said. "It's said multiple times that Sve Noc's edict ending fighting between sigils under Keter breaks is a betrayal of the Tenets. So even if its sigils start attacking each other instead of us..."

"It will not intervene," Cordelia said. "At least not immediately."

"So you figured out which of those sigils hated each other in the Everdark," I said. "The feuds and wars."

"Of which there were many," the princess drily said. "And to think I once believes Alamans quarrelsome."

"The worthy take," Ivah agreed.

"If they're fighting each other instead of looking at us, we have a decent shot at getting to one of the towers," I smiled. "That is a solution."

Then I threw her a look.

"If you can get those sigils fighting," I added. "How do you intend to do that?"

"Last night," Cordelia said, "I inferred from context that though some of the greatest Mighty have abilities to detect intruders this is not perfect. That these 'seers' are concentrated around the towers."

I narrowed my eye.

"False attacks," I said. "You want us to paint raiders in other sigil's colours and spill blood so the feuds start up again."

"They are not so different as princes, these sigil-holders," Cordelia quietly said. "And Malicia once taught me the truth of them: they *want* to fight. All they need is the means and an excuse."

The latter of which we would provide. My gaze turned to Ivah.

"Lord of Silent Steps," I said, "your opinion. Does this have the shape of victory to you?"

It mulled over its words before answering.

"There will be war," Ivah said. "I know not how much, but that there will be war I believe."

I slowly nodded.

"Then let's do it," I ordered.

—

By nightfall the following day, forty-seven sigils under Kurosiv were openly at war with one another and I'd had to refuse eight requests to add Cordelia Hasenbach to the Night.

She'd bought us our shot with her cleverness, now all that was left was to take it.

—

I was out of practice sneaking around without using Night.

Probably should start practicing that again. I'd never been so much as a shade of what Vivienne could do in her prime as a Thief, but for a Squire I'd been pretty decent at getting the drop on people. With the years and the bad leg, though, it'd become more practical to just veil myself and limp right past watchers. That wasn't a possibility tonight: if someone as powerful in the Night as I was started using it on Kurosiv's side

of the canals, they were sure to notice. The Sisters had been pretty firm about that. An argument could be made that it might be best if I didn't come along, but my answer had been blunt.

Akua and Masego could probably handle any Firstborn that were not one of the Ten Generals, but that was in a duel. If they got caught and swarmed by a dozen sigil-holders, they were good as dead: Zeze could only Wrest the power one person at a time and Akua's magic was no Night-proof. Someone was going to have a trick that'd get through her shields, and she just couldn't compete with the mobility that any Mighty worth their salt brought to the table. No, if this went bad – and in my experience, little jaunts like this tended to – they would need me to slap the opposition in the face hard enough it bought time for us to leg it.

Some people thought there was more to it, of course.

"I see you cannot suffer the thought of our going on an adventure without you, dearest," Akua amusedly. "How charmingly transparent."

Masego looked at her in surprise.

"I thought it was impolite to point out when she did that," he said.

"Less so when it is done flirtatiously," Akua informed him.

I saw unfoldingly nakedly on Masego's face the struggle between the thought of being able to be ruder to be people and having to be flirtatious. He sighed, turning to look at me.

"Not worth it," he said.

"Hey," I weakly replied, unsure whether I ought to be offended or not.

It was not an entirely inauspicious beginning, considering that a great many of the Woe's successes had been preceded by my so-called friends ragging on me. I supposed that, mathematically speaking, they would have to be.

The half of Serolen our side held was wound up tighter than a coiled spring, but so far the violence had been mostly contained to Kurosiv's sigils with only a few raids attempted over the canals. They'd run into Mighty Ysengral's prepared defences and been brutally slaughtered to the last, which had rather discouraged repeat attempts. Well, that and the baskets full of severed heads the Ysengral had catapulted back over the canal as a taunt. The Cradle of Steel's sigil had knack for the unnecessarily vicious that never failed to amuse.

After speaking with Rumena, we'd picked the tower that had been raised inside the Relic Grove as the one to hit. It was in the northeast of Serolen, past two sigils that had a reputation as nasty customers – the bigger of the two, the Yeshala, had been the effective rulers of one of the Everdark's cities before the exodus – and deep in a part of the city widely considered a death trap. The Relic Grove had taken a little *too* well to the surface, the way I heard it.

"The Rozhan tended to the Grove as their sacred duty once and now lend assistance to the cabal protecting the tower," Rumena said, "but they have been drawn into the war between the Yeshala and the Orobog. Patrols will be thinned."

Which would mean nothing if either Moren or Ishabog went prowling around looking for us, but we had a plan for that: Mighty Rumena was going raiding. In principle, the target was a camp near the Singing Rings where dzulu taken from us in raids were being kept penned up.

"How likely are you to draw both?" I asked.

Rumena hacked out a laugh.

"I ripped out Ishabog's ear a sennight ago," the Tomb-maker replied. "It will come for my head if the opportunity arises, I am sure of it, and Moren will act the moment I get too close to the tower in Rings."

I grunted, not entirely convinced but knowing it was our best shot. The Relic Grove wasn't the easiest target by a long shot, we'd been careful not to be too easy to predict in case someone on the other side figured us out, but I disliked plans that relied too much on enemy error. *But we're not exactly swimming in other courses, are we?* The civil war that Cordelia had effectively started in Kurosiv's camp would not last forever: the leech might preach that it let its sigils do as they wished, but they would definitely step in if the fighting lasted too long. They couldn't afford to erode their military strength by too much, not with the balance of power in Serolen so narrow.

"Try to get the other ear," I told Rumena. "I want a matching set for my hat when we'll have talks with their lot."

It blinked, then let out a startled bark of laughter.

"Your will be done, First Under the Night," the Tomb-maker replied.

Funny how it only ever called me that when I was telling it to do violence, wasn't it? Firstborn, what could you do. The timing was carefully arranged so that the three of us got to the canal before Rumena's raid began, looking over the placid waters at the

low hills where the Yeshala had lain their line of defence. Most drew disdained fortifications – which I could understand, given what most Mighty could do to a set of field fortifications in the span of a breath – but the Yeshala Sigil had made an effort, perhaps spurred on by the example of the Ysengral on our side of the canal.

There was a rough spiked wooden palisade set atop a low earthen wall at the bottom of the hills, maybe ten feet away from their end of the canal, and a dozen raised stones reaching higher than the spikes dotting the length of the fortification. Mighty were perched atop the stones, keeping watch on the sigil guarding our shore, and they would be the first obstacle in our way. Akua, standing by my side, had her eyes on the enemy sentinels.

“Strength?” she asked.

“Pravnat,” I said. “Maybe one jawor? Hard to tell without them pulling on Night.”

Pravnat were just promising ispe, the lowest of the Mighty, and jawor squarely a middle rank among that same distinguished number. I would have expected at least one rylleh around to keep an eye on things, but there was none I could see or sense. Either the Yeshala had committed to the hilt to their war with the Orobog, or the sigil’s defence strategy considered these watchers an expendable alarm. Given the usual callousness of Firstborn strategists, it really could go either way.

“Favourable terms,” Akua murmured.

I nodded, silently appreciating she’d refrained from calling it luck. Two villains and the Doom of Liesse talking about getting lucky was just asking for fate to rap our knuckles.

“Hierophant,” I said, “get us started.”

Masego nodded, wresting away the magic in the trinkets he’d taken to carrying everywhere since losing his magic. We’d found that his doing that was harder to sense for Mighty than a mage casting the traditional way, since it was a manipulation of already extant power instead of something forming, so it would be him that wove the enchantment around us. He murmured for some time in the mage tongue, Summer-lit eye sweeping over our forms from under the cloth, and after he snapped his wrist I felt a sensation like warm mist sweep up from my toes to the crown of my head.

“Ibrahim’s Mirror,” Akua murmured. “Your appreciation for the classics never fails to charm, Hierophant.”

“It’s a fine spell,” Masego told her. “Even Father couldn’t find a way to improve the formula.”

The conversation was a little surreal to hear, considering that I could now no longer see either of the people speaking. It wasn't true invisibility, which was rare and exceedingly difficult to maintain, but instead a sort of reactive illusion forming a cone around each of us. Ibrahim's Mirror effectively made everything in the cone 'transparent', the enchantment reproducing the sight almost perfectly. There were two weaknesses: one was a slight shimmer, like light on a mirror, whenever the cone first enveloped an outside object. The other was that anyone standing inside the cone was unaffected by the illusion. I cleared my throat.

"Let's get a move on," I said. "We only have so long before General Rumena strikes."

Crossing the canal itself was not particularly difficult. At this time of the day the water was shallow, barely more than waist-high, as a series of lock chambers upstream directed the overflow to channels feeding cisterns in Serolen's central districts. Water did not register as an object to Ibrahim's Mirror, so it was unseen that we got to the opposite shore. Akua climbed first, staying close so we would remain visible to each other, then helped up Masego and myself. We were careful to move quickly towards the earthen wall, dripping water on earth instead of stone as much as possible, where it would not remain noticeable.

We were between two 'watchtowers', neither of the Mighty perched atop the raised stones seeming to have noticed our crossing. Now, though, came the tricky part. There was no way for us to climb the palisade atop the earthen wall quietly enough; drow senses wouldn't hear us, which meant we'd have to get inventive. So we huddled close, cones overlapping, while Akua knelt by the bottom of the wall. She laid an elegant hand on the packed earth and began to murmur, trailing off into silence after repeating the same incantation ever more quietly the third time. Even standing behind her, I could barely feel the spell magic she used.

It was barely more than a spark, the same petty curse used again and again. The spell was a Wolofite creation, meant to soften an inch of someone's scalp so it was easier to rip out their hair. Fortunately, it could also be used to soften *earth*. Akua withdrew her hand after a moment, then began to dig. It was like digging into a garden's black earth, not an effort in the slightest, and she stopped after hitting hard earth again while Masego and I scattered the earth about. It took six instances before we had a path, then another three until it was widened enough we could crawl and wiggle our way through.

We hurried up the hills as I kept an eye on the Yashala sentinels, who seemed blessedly unaware of what had gone on under their nose. It wouldn't last forever, sadly. One of them would find the hole or notice the irregularities in the earth and then

an alarm would be sounded. Hopefully, though, we'd be past the territory of the Yahsala Sigil by then. Let them arm up and go on war footing all they wanted, we weren't going back by their territory anyway. Under the cover of a copse of trees we stopped, patting ourselves free of the clinging earth, and huddled close to negate the cones.

"Everyone fine?" I murmured.

Nods. We'd agreed to speak as little as possible.

"Then we take the Soaring Stairs," I spoke with a grimace. "Let's go."

Alas, they were the fastest way through. They weren't difficult to find, though as in many parts of Serolen I found the sudden transition from thick woods to monument a little jarring. Slowly sloping stone stairs two wagons wide began at the end of a beaten dirt path leading to the canal, rising for what had to be the better part of a mile. Beginning at the bottom, steps had been painted in vivid colours over which Crepuscular glyphs were inscribed in pure white. Each was the name of a Mighty that had attempted to reproduce the famous deed for which the monument was named: begin at the top of the stairs as an ispe and slay enough foes by the time you'd reached to bottom to have become a rylleh. The Cabal of the Soaring Stairs had gathered ispe by the thousands every ten years to attempt it in some sort of grisly ritual festival, but as far as I knew none had ever succeeded after the first.

They were an exquisite sight, cutting through a few more hills and then the beginning of an inhabited district with houses and temples and makeshift streets, but they were also fucking stairs. Near deserted at this time of the day, at least, but since I couldn't use Night to dull the pain I had to rely on the herbs I'd taken earlier. They were working for now, but I already feared what the trip back would feel like when their effect went away. The three of us moved in silence, hurrying as much as we could. Masego was less than athletic and I limped, so admittedly we were not the fastest infiltrators Calernia had ever seen.

On both sides of us the territory of the Yashala was splayed out, the serpentine streets slithering around knots of houses and towers. Firstborn liked to cluster houses together, build them to have common roofs. It felt more like the roof of a cavern that way, and less like the sky of the Burning Lands where they had come. It made for strange streets, knots of houses and shops and temples popping up like mushroom patches as trees grew through everything and paths winded around in every direction. I let my gaze wander a bit, but not too much. We were not here to sightsee.

"Catherine," Masego murmured, just loud enough for me to hear, "we have a problem."

I paused halfway through a step.

"I'm listening," I said. "What-"

Behind us Night flared, streaks of light touching the sky. It was coming from near the canal. An alarm, sent up by the Mighty.

"That," Masego said, coming close enough I could see him point ahead.

I looked up at the top of the Soaring Stairs, where a warband was massing. A few dzulu, taking the front, even began sweeping down the stairs. *Fuck*. They'd found us out too early.

"Change of plans," I said.

"Indeed?" Akua murmured.

"Follow me," I said.

And I leapt down into the streets to the side, the two of them following after a beat. I swallowed as scream as my bad leg throbbed, then adjusted my cloak on my shoulders.

It looked like we'd be doing this the hard way.

[Droughtbringer](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Speck of Stardust

Ah politics, people who work with each other for a single reason can easily fight if 2 reasons are brought to bear.

Mirror Night

I suppose the Sisters while one of them may have been good at magic were not a once in a century genius prodigy. Plus they were kinda on the clock though Masego might be right surely they could have improved the work over time. But the Sisters really didn't seem to do much or have an exit strategy before Cat stumbled into them.

Ah finally getting back to Akua deciding to jack in the Praes Arc Conclusion. Yeah I was personally quite annoyed she saw the

issues and had a chance to assert herself and fix things and decided not to. So she and Cat can play will they won't they again. Whatever happened to the guy who was falling her around anyway...

Cat is really making it hard on herself with the All Caster Party though I guess if they are High level and this is D&D 3.5E or Pathfinder I it not that hard of challenge. Still think she should have brought a powerful light user given she knew there be a fight being likely.

Agent J

A Light user? Like a Hero? You want her to bring a Hero to the heart of her Dark Goddesses' power? In the midst of a civil war? While the Hierophant studies their souls?

9/10 odds that comes back to horrifically bite the Drow/Crows in under a decade.

Linnus42

I mean if I know I am going to have to kill a false god Drow that uses Night. Yes I want a Light user to use as hammer against them.

Salt

To be fair this isn't really a Good vs Evil fight or stopping Evil from harming the innocent sort of deal. This is a strictly in-house Evil vs Evil catfight (pun intended). Heroes don't really have any place in this kind of civil war, story wise, unless they're trying to exterminate the Night or something

Mirror Night

I don't see how that is relevant. Light is quite useful when the goal is to kill Night Users. And I don't think it takes a genius to figure death would be a likely solution to this false god coup situation that Sve Noc has.

kinigget

Ya gotta consider the fallout.
Sure, if the only goal was to kill Night users, sending a Hero would be great, but this is about what the Drow become, and whether or not Cat's reforms continue. Bringing in outside help of any kind is a bad idea.

Miles

The goal isn't to kill Night users. It's to kill only the ones we don't like.

[Liliet](#)

Well Cordelia IS there...

Also Cat didnt know about the drow civil war when she was setting out.

shikkarasu

I've seen a lot of influences from 5e as well that weren't in Pathfinder. (Mages cannot concentrate on two spells, no casting 2 spells in the same round) That said I don't think this is just D&D. The power level is all over the place, by that standard. For instance, interplanar travel seems to be an easy trick for low level mundane mages while even low level teleportation like Dimension Hop is basically impossible.

ruduen

It's already everything-goes-wrong-o'clock? Huh, that was quick, especially with villain stories still off. I guess opportunistic stealth missions to obtain essential important information regarding the enemy's plans are still too heroic to be fully suppressed.

SpeckofStardust

I mean no villain stories means the first step of a plan can just fail.
Like what happened here.

[Liliet](#)

THINGS

HAPPENING!

[Adrian_V](#)

I have to stop my reading to ask a super important question:
["Don't eat the mushrooms," I told her. "They make humans laugh uncontrollably whenever we drink water."]

Is this real? I thought it was going to end up as a joke? xD

dadycool

Considering it's Cat, it's probably a joke.
Considering it's the Drow, it's probably real.
That's what makes it fun.

nick012000

I'll admit, I laughed when it was mentioned that Cat had to deny a bunch of requests to give Cordelia Hasenbach, an Heroic Claimant, Night. I'm not sure if that'd skew her nascent Name towards being Villainous, if she'd wind up some sort of anti-Hero that wields dark powers to good ends, or if it'd just short-circuit her Name entirely and leave her un-Named.

The discussion on how the Mage Gift works and why all Drow are born with access to the Night was interesting, though. I wonder if having a genetic aptitude for the Gift would give certain Drow improved affinity for the Night, even if the Gift itself was lost during the implantation process? It's also confirmation that Cat will never be able to use Mage spells, I guess. I wonder if the gifts of Light given to Heroes and priests of the House of Light work the same way.

I also wonder if a Drow Named (the Mystic Theurge?) would be able to use both Mage spells and Night using their Aspects, though, by using the Gifts of other people the way that the Hierophant and Rogue Sorcerer do?

hakureireimu

I read it as killing her and harvesting her knowledge to add to the Night.

[sengachi](#)

Knowing the Drow, I expect Cat got both types of request.

spencer

Do we know of anyone besides Cat (and ancient drow) who has been given night? I would expect all the requests to be to suck Hasenbach's skull dry of knowledge.

Darkening

Masego got an offer when he lost his magic and turned it down pretty firmly. We haven't seen a lot of others have close contact with drow on screen. Kinda surprised we never saw any goblins get it after they started worshipping sve noc in Cat's army.

Cpt. Obvious

The Gobbler has its claws firmly into goblin kind. And I doubt it would take kindly to some upstart gods sinking their talons into its subjects.

Kiara

Wow I read that night comment differently than you.

I thought it was give her to the night. Ie have her killed and her skills given to a mighty. Each requests being an individual who wanted to kill her.

CalmBreaths

I don't think they were requesting Cordelia be given night, rather that she be killed so her knowledge and cunning could be added to it. Which is significantly more gruesome and on brand.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia is not currently a claimant, she fed her nascent Name to Cat's.

As of Salia / as far as we know anyway...

Isi Arnott-Campbell

There is that one heroine, the girl with parallels to the Scorched Apostate, who was formerly a mage and traded the Gift for Light.

ISiejek

She gave up her name though didn't she? For the second time even

'Ladi Williams

Thanks for the comment.

I do t want Cat to spend too much time on this. I wish she scold just curb stomp the opposition but alas the sisters messed things up too much already and Cat now has to pull their behind out of the fire.

I just want this arc over and the sisters back to almost full power.

Zggt

Everything is about to be on fire, also known as Cat's fine art of "diplomacy".

Juff

Typo Thread:

Firstborn provided > Firstborn had provided
one his physical > one is physical
their weight > the weight
of he rylleh > of the rylleh
smoothly slid into > smoothly slid back into
again now > now

again, it > again; it
eating snake > eating snakes
would it clear > would make it clear
N my way > On my way
I approach, > I approached,
But is it closer > But it is closer
Kurosiv in the place (should this be face)
strength, ice > strength; ice
I could see through > It could see through
Maren Bleakwomb's staring > Moren Bleakwomb staring
feeling it gaze > feeling its gaze
not covered > now covered
on the room > in the room
Keter breaks > Keter
believes Alamans > believed Alamans
power one > power of one
was no Night > was not Night
had knack > had a knack
in Rings > in the Rings
Yashala > Yeshala (occurs twice)
Yahsala > Yeshala
as scream > a scream

Reader in the Night

Huh. I just realized a flaw on the Accords that I never thought of before: all Villains are biologically immortal, while Heroes age normally. The leading cause of Villain mortality, death by Hero, stops being a consideration so long as the Villains uphold the Truce.

Which means that in a couple of centuries, Cardinal will be effectively ruled by Villains by dint of simple seniority. As positions are vacated by Heroes due to old age, any neutral role will eventually end up on the hands of a Villain, and from there, all that Villain has to do is not be killed and keep accumulating power and influence until it becomes virtually impossible to remove them.

For context, I got here by wondering if the Firstborn would edit history after Cat's death so the position was retroactively always occupied by a Drow.

Salt

The Accords don't actually stop Heroes and Villains from fighting or killing each other. It just outlaws a lot of the worst methods, in terms of collateral damage. Angel summoning, Demon summoning, Cordelia's angel stick, Second Llesse/Still waters, etc... kind of deal.

Villains are also a lot more prone to death by hubris, ironic comeuppance of their own making, infighting with other

Villains, fatal overreach, death by worthy successor, death by worthy rival, death by stronger Villain who just needed you out of the way, etc... If you leave a Hero in peace they tend to live to a ripe old age and mentor other Heroes and do kind acts and whatnot. Leaving Villains in peace tends to have them hatch plots that embroil them into conflicts with just about everything else under the sun.

I don't think there'll be much in the way of overly long-lived Villains being too common even after the Accords

[sengachi](#)

I expect we'll see a general uptick in Villain lifespan, to be sure, but it's important to remember that even Black and Malicia didn't last all that long. Two of the most successful Villains ever and they only lived long enough to enjoy extended youthfulness, not even an unnaturally long life. And both of them died for political and personal reasons which would still exist post-Accords.

Villains might no longer be vulnerable to angle-nukings in a post-Accords world, but they'll still be vulnerable to their own bullshit and Heroes taking exception to crimes against humanity.

ohJohN

Malicia has a firm expiration date a bit under 8 years from now, but I'm pretty sure she's still alive?

shikkarasu

I just took Sengachi's wording as 'dead woman walking'. Not to mention that she might not live much longer even if she isn't executed. She must be over 80 by this point and over the course of 8 years that is going to catch up hard.

[Liliet](#)

Truce and Terms are strictly temporary wartime measures, Accords don't include any sort of truce.

Reader in the Night

Isn't there a School for villainous and heroic Named in Cardinal? How would that work with no truce?

I expect at least some sort of enforced peace within Cardinal would exist as long as the Villains aren't actually doing anything wrong, otherwise the concept of Cardinal isn't really workable.

[Liliet](#)

Within Cardinal, yes.

Miles

That's not a flaw, it's a feature. Those villains who don't do too much damage get to live long lives. Those who do, die.

Black Spiral Dancer

Hmm... exciting. Masego's "Not worth it" made my day. Or night.

[Adrian V](#)

I see what Cat did there, she can't keep the temple then just destroy it so no one can have it, and leave in a manner than implies she could have fought more but just wasn't worth it.

Now i wanna now more about that first general, it has to be a badass. And speaking of generals can someone give me a list of their names and monikers? (And main power if we know it), i can only remember the one whose moniker was Spearbitter, and that one died if i remember (include dead ones too).

Lastly Cordelia didn't dissapoint, it says a lot that they want her in the night so much, i just know more than 1 Mighty saw what she did and nodded all "ok that is impressive, and nasty" xD, and just imagine what Malicia could do, or better yet both
muahahahahahaha

Drow fan

I'm not sure whether a consistent list is possible at this point, but based on the reddit (https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/i32d8i/current_state_of_calernia_as_of_book_6_interlude/) and some searches I would wager that the following list was accurate during the drow exodus:

First General – Radigast the guest (can fight in the body of other drow)

Second General – Mighty Kurosiv the All-Knowing (trying to be a god)

Third General – Mighty Rumena

Fourth General – Mighty Ishabog the Adversary (has only mighty in his sigil)

Fifth General – Mighty Moren Bleakwomb (blizzards)

Sixth General – Mighty Radhoste the Dreamer (his title is saying it)

Seventh General – Mighty Vesena Spear-biter (could bite through a giant revenant)

Eighth General – Mighty Ysengral the Cradle of Steel (defensive, uses traps)

Ninth General – Mighty Radosa the Hushing Dread (ambushes the dead and has fewer losses than any other General)

Tenth General – Mighty Jutren

By now Kurosiv is no longer a mere General; Radhoste, Vesena and Jutren were killed by the dead and apparently Moren became more powerful than Ishabog, so it would be the following list:

Radigast, Rumena, Moren Bleakwomb, Ishabog, Ysengral, Radosa, possibly four new Generals?

Has anyone something to add/correct?

ohJohn

This page has at least their names, numbers, and known epithets: https://abridged-guide-to-evil.fandom.com/wiki/Empire_Ever_Dark

Miles

Cat didn't destroy the temple. She fought Moren and forced him to unleash so much power it flattened everything.

At least that's what it looks like to Rylleh sigil and anyone else who might have been watching.

spencer

The exposition on how night works was interesting. What does this imply for Cat? She must have a bigass spike of night through her brain too. Could the Sisters grant that to any human if they chose?

Cordelia as Priestess of Night would be pretty cool. Then she could get power without becoming Bestowed.

Xinci

It was good to get further confirmation on the interconnectivity of the Gift. I suspect the same overriding property of their souls also prevents Name formation. It would go with what the Dwarves indicated when they called her a abomination. The original pure Night being what can manipulate souls makes sense, I am curious about if the DK has figured this out yet and informed Kurosiv

It seems Kurosiv did indeed go the route they neglected in sanctioning the giving of power. Which is troublesome perhaps for the Losara in the future but maybe can be assimilated if Sve wins. They are in this to the knife now, Sve was found wanting before and her competitor is fluid and hungry.

shikkarasu

I always assumed that Light worked like this, honestly, since we've not seen an example of a Mage who can also use Light. Light seems to be awarded based on the Gods' whims, possibly influenced by the faith of the person in question. Surely by sheer dint of odds some priest with the Gift would eventually gain access to Miracles *eventually*, unless some aspect of the process specifically purges the Gift from them, as with the Stalwart Apostle.

I don't think Night prevents Names, or else Catherine wouldn't be the Warden right now. She's more deeply entwined in the Night than anyone, except perhaps Kurosiv, and must have the brain spike since she has no Gift.

Crack Theory: Sve Noc is an example of twin Named and the Night is a massive F-off Aspect, not unlike **Delegate, empowered by the ongoing ritual that is the Tenets of Night. The spike allows the use of Night in the same way that Masego's Wrest** does, but en mass.

shikkarasu

oops, must have messed up my angle brackets.

[308924810a](#)

-Each was the name of a Mighty that had attempted to reproduce the famous deed for which the monument was named: begin at the top of the stairs as an ispe and slay enough foes by the time you'd reached to bottom to have become a rylleh. The Cabal of the Soaring Stairs had gathered ispe by the thousands every ten years to attempt it in some sort of grisly ritual festival, but as far as I knew none had ever succeeded after the first.-

Why is this the case?

Surely they know how many they have to gather in one place to have a rylleh's worth of Night in one place? So long as someone prevents them from leaving/they actually want to fight, it should. all concentrate into one person at the end.

Unless the original still exists and has some sort of vested interest in not letting anyone else do what they did.

shikkarasu

I think the idea is that all of the other ispe/dzulu on the stairs are on the same side. If they win, whoever struck the

killing blow gets the jackpot, but that probably only gets them up to Pravnat, *maybe* Jawor if they made it far enough down the stairs before they got cheapshot.

If you choose to be the one (ones? Multiple runs per festival?) who starts at the top of the stairs then you are guaranteed only the biggest prize, but without the chance to get it by landing a cheapshot; you need to kill *every Drow harvested* by your own hand. Standing in the crowd is low risk/low reward/low *chance* of reward, starting at the top is suicidal risk/set for life reward.

It's like how the previous Black Knight, the one that Amadeus was Squire to, died to a non Named foot soldier with a spear. Sheer numbers eventually win out, doubly so with the difficulty of using power you've only just gained.

KiltedBastich

Hang on a second, what's this bit about the Saint of Swords severing Masego's magic? Wasn't that the Dead King who did that, as he was being evicted from the Hierophant? Did I miss something?

Salt

The Dead King got a hold of his soul, Bard stopped the Pilgrim from being the first to react, and second in line was the Saint who did Saint things and metaphysically cut off the Dead King's grasp on him.

It was left kind of vague at the time, but from this it looks like she did it by just cutting out the part that the Dead King was corrupting, which I guess is whatever part of the soul lets him feel and use magic

jamesc9

Hmmm... My understanding is that, when he has wrested magic from somewhere, he can still feel it normally.

[origamiflame](#)

So Cat has won once against Kurosiv, and tied this time...

Though is that pattern paused for her, as a villain?

Also, if that is the case, why would she say

"I nodded, silently appreciating she'd refrained from calling it luck. Two villains and the Doom of Liesse talking about getting lucky was just asking for fate to rap our knuckles."

[Liliet](#)

Reflex.

Miles

Patterns of 3 are subverted all over the story. They only matter if the author says they do.

Or from a no-metagaming perspective, there is no pattern of 3 because those only form for people who are similar in strength and/or rivals. Kurosiv has a trick to resist, but is ultimately unable to rival Cat.

ninegardens

I'm... not sure how I feel about Coredalia's plan being "Let's use false flag operations to stir up a civil war."

Partly because... that isn't actually Cordy's modus operandi (She even says "I borrow this from Malicia"), and partly because False Flag operations and stirring up civil war very much **ARE** the kind of thing I would expect Drow to already know about. They've have 1000 years of brutal tribal warfare. This is something they should already know. They shouldn't need Cordy to suggest it, and certainly should be **that** impressed by it. At least... that's how it feels to me.

Or maybe I'm just sad because it wasn't "MC Cordelia Rap battles a god", which got suggested last chapter, and sounds god damn fucking amazing.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hopefully she'll get a chance to rap battle a god in the future. Maybe the Dead King? It's also not too late for her to rap against Kurosiv even if the odds are now against it happening.

[Liliet](#)

> and partly because False Flag operations and stirring up civil war very much **ARE** the kind of thing I would expect Drow to already know about. They've have 1000 years of brutal tribal warfare. This is something they should already know. They shouldn't need Cordy to suggest it, and certainly should be **that** impressed by it.

This! Yeah, this is what feels off about it.

shikkarasu

This is an excellent point. As Devil's Advocate I will suggest that Drow hold mundane learning in such low regard (most don't even know about the time before the Night) that keeping track of who hates who and by how much isn't prioritised. Note that

Cordelia asked for chroniclers and historians, but essentially got a handful of gossips.

"Though there's no such thing as a Firstborn historian in the sense you mean. There are Mighty, though, who through Secrets or because of personal interests have gathered histories of their people both ancient and recent."

I think the Drow know about False Flag attacks, but they never thought to use anything other than common knowledge. What would be the point? If you want everyone to know that Sigil A attacked Sigil B, surely you would only choose well known about, current rivalries, yes? What Cordelia brought to the table was the very idea that this information, old grudges forgotten about by all but those who hold them, is as valuable as the Secret of spewing acid vapour from your mouth.

It's not about False Flag being a new concept, but about the way she organised dozens of them in the span of a day, all convincingly enough that not a single one of the enemies questioned it. Because of *course* the bastards from that other Sigil would turn their back on us this quickly. Don't you remember 250 years ago when they stole all our riding lizards? This is just Noc-Damn typical. Let's kill them.

ninegardens

I see- you're arguing that they aren't impressed with the *idea* of false flag attacks, but by the *execution*. This feels... plausible, but not compelling? It's a decent argument- and I certainly can't think of a better one... but I also don't feel convinced.

shikkarasu

It's also not just the overall effectiveness, but also the way she used resources that no-one else thought of and, to top it off, she is effectively a nisi. It's the kind of bragging rights that Drow live and breath, for those who wanted her to be granted a sliver of Night. Ivah was sent out to the burning lands as one of several nisi lead by a dzulu to prove itself worthy after having its Night stripped away. Killing enough foes while that weak is how you become respectable in Drow culture. Nothing indicates that she was asked to be made Mighty, just not cattle anymore.

On the flip side, a way of turning useless Secrets into viable weapons is worthy enough for those who wanted to harvest her and gain her knowledge. I add this since we aren't 100% sure what 'requests to add her to the Night' means, and as some commenters have pointed out it's probably a mix of both kinds of request.

Think of it like when Black took down the Pirate Queen:

"Your prize ship has been sunk. Most your lieutenants are dead. You are kneeling on the floor of your very seat of power," he murmured. "Bringing you to this took me four people and a rowboat, Pirate."

It's partly the execution, partly the lack of resources used, partly the magnitude of the result. All together she is worth more than nothing, and 8 separate Drow, of however many she interviewed or knew of her work, wanted to act on that. The more I think about it the more I am convinced.

Orby

They were in a constant state of tribal civil war, hard to "start" one in a meaningful way. As to "false flag ops", actual constant attacks precludes the need to come up with the idea, you're already at war.

Both these things being new concepts to the sve noc era drow rings true, to me.

Abrakadabra

I agree, this. Unless drow has some cultural bias against wearing the colours of other sigils?

Forum Solipsist

All of the exposition about how all Drow are able to use Night, and mostly my take away was: Heirophant is disdainful of how crude the mystic prosthetic that can grant non-magic users the ability to use magic is.

Let me say that again. Heirophant has just seen an example of a mystical prosthetic that allows use of magic. He is disdainful of how crude it is.

By the time they reach the walls of Keter, he is going to have a far better version for himself.

Miles

He was impressed by the prosthetic, just disdainful of its inventor.

It's like a peer whom you can't stand, but they suddenly do something really cool and you're like, "ok props for that. Still think he's a total tool though"

But yes Masego is totally gonna steal everything Sve Noc has ever done and improve on it, and call it his original work like he came up with it from scratch.

Orby

They were in a constant state of tribal civil war, hard to “start” one in a meaningful way. As to “false flag ops”, actual constant attacks precludes the need to come up with the idea, you’re already at war. Both these things being new concepts to the sve noc era drow rings true, to me.

Chapter 45: Kernel (Redux)

“Understand this: divinity is an act of murder. A god can have no beginning or end; both must be slain without hesitation.”

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

I thought I’d gotten a sense of the Yeshala territory, but I’d been wrong.

The streets weren’t empty the way it’d seemed from up on the Soaring Stairs. Sure, it wasn’t exactly a market fair out here but neither was it a ghost city with a few terrified souls shivering behind closed doors. The three of us had barely turned our first corner before we nearly stumbled over a handful of nisi sitting in an alcove and chatting about a recent game of *inic cin* as they wove reed baskets. None of them noticed the edge of our illusions glimmering against the wall, but we quickened our pace anyway. They were the first drow we encountered, but hardly the last.

We found a sort of half-hidden trading where dzulu were bartering meat and greens for small wooden beads and sharpened obsidian – well shaped, fit to serve as knife blades – and mere streets later drow were sneaking to the side a run-down temple painted entirely in shades of yellow to hang small white ribbons from hooks on a wall. The ribbons were simple cloth, but I could see that there were glyphs on the hooks. Prayers for luck and good health, for the misfortune of your enemies. Life still breathed in Yeshala lands, it just kept out of sight. Like rats hiding from the light.

Never once did we see a Mighty anywhere, though perhaps that should not have been a surprise. There were so very few of them compared to the numbers of the Firstborn, not even one in ten, and none of what we’d seen would be of interest to them. Nisi were expected to do all this, the labour of keeping cities

standing, because it was the work fit for them. Real drow, real people, pursued only the accumulation of Night. Nothing else was worthy of one's time. Still, it was evident the Yeshala had seen better days.

That so much of the territory was run down or broken meant the Mighty were using dzulu and nisi for war labour, not abandoning them to their affairs, and the consequences of that were obvious. They wouldn't have been, in the Everdark, but deep down that was why I believed that Kurosiv's philosophies – which would survive them, I had no doubt of that – were doomed to lose. See, when the Firstborn had been living in grand old ruins sigils had been able to fight over who got the nicest part and it'd reinforced the order of things: fight well, gain Night, live better.

Now, though, it wasn't so simple. Serolen was a trove of stolen treasures, but large parts of it had been built over the last few years. And those quarters had been unquestionably superior for nisi and dzulu, who'd never got to taste comfort anyway since the niceties were reserved for Mighty. Nine out of ten Firstborn had been force-fed the realization that they didn't actually need Mighty to make their lives better. And whenever sigils turned to the old favourites, raiding all the neighbours and slaughtering on a whim, now Firstborn were actually losing something. Their comfortable lives were being infringed on.

One of the first things my father ever taught me was that the tool tyrants needed to maintain their grip on power was not fear but *apathy*. And just like Mazus squeezing the blood out of Laure until there was the scent of revolt in the air, the Mighty here were chipping away at that apathy one inconvenience at a time.

Even if you'd only risen an inch from the bottom of the barrel, no one liked losing that inch. Mighty who kept too close to the old ways, Kurosiv's gospel, made things worse for the bulk of the Firstborn. In Procer or Callow that'd end with the nobles knifed and changes made, but of course it wasn't that simple here. It took more than sleep and a knife in the back to kill a sigil-holder. But the wind was turning against the old ways, because the old ways were fucking awful for everyone except the strongest Mighty and now there was a visible, known alternative.

So the Mighty would find their cattle growing less and less obedient, apt to lashing out through the means the tenets of Iserre had given them, and the clever ones would learn to go with the wind. They'd use it to increase their power at the expense of their rivals, throwing a few concessions at nisi and dzulu as the price of prosperity, until it became common sense that it was the better practice. And then, one day, the cattle would grow mutinous again. Maybe they'd look at other kingdoms and see their lives could be better, or because the Mighty got too hungry again and their subject suffered for it.

The reason didn't matter so much as what would happen: all of this, once more. The same cycle, over and over again. All the Kurosivs of the world lost eventually, because they weren't the natural order of a single goddamn thing – they were parasites.

And no matter how tight the saddle, you could only ride a tiger for so long before it remembered it wasn't a horse.

We ghosted through the streets, avoiding people as much as we could and heading straight north. We'd have to take one of the winding paths around the hills to get to the Relic Grove, but the wasted time taking the streets had cost us was worth it. The Soaring Stairs and the other large avenues would be crawling with Mighty by now and there were bound to be a few with a Secret that'd see through Ibrahim's Mirror. Our gamble was that by the time they'd realized this was an infiltration instead of the prelude to an attack and begin sweeping through the territory, we'd be long gone.

I was not fool enough to call it a success yet, but these were odds I'd roll dice on.

We took a long, diagonal street leading to the northwest because it was completely empty but the longer that lasted the more uneasy I felt. Akua clearly felt the same, as she gestured for us to stick closer together. We found out why the street – and all those around it – were empty after we got to the end of it, finding a marketplace stripped bare. At the heart of it, hammered into the paving stones, a large iron pillar covered in number glyphs stood. To it were bound what had to be at least three hundred dzulu, thick chains to which drow were shackled on both sides radiating out of the pillar like spokes of a wheel.

The paint on many of their faces was faded or cracked, but there was no mistaking that these people came from at least a dozen different sigils. At least half, though, were Yeshala. Bile began to rise in my throat as I took steps closer, shaking off Akua's warning touch on my arm. It was the pillar I looked at, the count being kept. Numbers, but also a few words. Not just these dzulu but also a dozen 'batches' before them. Mighty had carved into the iron pillar how many were to be kept and for how long, the number glyphs ominously slashed through when the time had passed.

"They man the pillars with their own people when they don't take enough of ours," I murmured, genuinely appalled. "Mighty Yeshala was the one who sent its dzulu here."

It was one thing to know that even dzulu were considered barely better than animals in the eyes of Mighty, another to see them chained here like cattle awaiting the abattoir. Akua stood at my side, golden eyes hooded as she studied the pillar.

"They are meant for the tower in the Relic Grove," she murmured. "It is why the pillar is so close to Rozhan territory without needing defence: these lives are claimed by a higher power."

My fingers clenched. I'd known they were taking dzulu from our side of the canals, Rumena had told me as much in the war council, but it hadn't been sure whether it was as work slaves or sacrifice. *I should have known, I thought. If they wanted pairs of hands, they would have taken nisi as well. They want dzulu because there's a few Secrets' worth of Night in them.* Masego was the only one of us who could not fluently speak and read Crepuscular, so he shot us a curious look.

"When are they meant to be moved?" he asked. "Knowing the frequency of the sacrifices will be of some use."

"Two days," I grimly replied.

If this didn't end in two days, the drow I was looking at were all dead. Or worse. *And I don't think I can end this in two days.* Akua met my gaze from the corner of hers, visibly sharing in the thought. She looked away after a beat.

"Other Firstborn seem to be avoiding the area," Masego noted. "We should continue down this street, it will quicken our pace and lessen the risks."

Throat tight, I nodded. Grim as the logic was, it wasn't untrue. But before we could move, there was an interruption.

"We need," Akua Sahelian quietly said, "to free them."

I felt the weight of those golden eyes on me without needing to turn. My heart clenched. The calculus was plain to see, as it so often was at times like this. If we freed them, the enemy would know we'd been here. Maybe not immediately, but sooner than otherwise. And if we got caught, were forced to retreat or fight our way out before getting to the tower, it might be a lot more than three hundred drow that died for it. And on the other side of the balance was a hard truth: if we did not save these people, they were dead. And we would condemn them to that fate simply because of a risk, a potential danger. Not a certain consequence.

I knew the choice I would have made if I'd come alone. Knew it deeply, instantly. And some part of me recoiled at the thought of how very comfortable with sacrifices I had become.

"Masego?" I asked.

"So long as the spell is not too powerful, I can maintain the Mirrors through it," Hierophant said.

He did not seem particularly concerned with the moral question to wrestle with, I thought. Indifference, or was he simply trusting me to wrestle with it for him? Sometimes it was hard to tell.

"I have had enough of shackles, Catherine," Akua murmured. "Especially those made of iron."

I studied her face. She had already made her decision, I realized. She would free the dzulu whatever I said. And so I shivered, knowing in that moment that I had both succeeded beyond my wildest hopes and entirely lost control of the situation. So I said the only thing I could say.

"We must be quick," I replied, "and then cut through the Rozhan territory in a straight line."

It wasn't even that difficult, when it came down to it. The shackles had been made to resist Night, not sorcery, and so Akua sent a spell shivering down the nine chains one after another that simply popped the shackles open. The dzulu milled about uncertainly, some even fearfully. Thinking it might be a trap. But when one of them hesitantly tried to leave and nothing struck it down, there were excited shouts and within moments they were scattering in every direction. We waited until our path was clear, then ran for the Rozhan grounds to the east.

I could not see Akua's face, but somehow I knew she was smiling.

—

The Rozhan were a smaller sigil than the Yashala, having taken up a territory that was a thick half-circle around the east of the Relic Grove. Theirs were poor lands, most of them still woods, and their inhabited holdings were essentially knots of houses and temples closely clustered together in clearings. The rest was tall trees split only by a few paths, used for hunting and patrolled by Mighty but otherwise abandoned. Cutting through wasn't all that difficult. The Rozhan were on war footing as well, though, so we did have to duck two patrols that we might not have known were coming if not for my ties to the Night.

Just because I couldn't tell how many there were or how strong didn't mean I couldn't feel them coming at all. Kurosiv was yet a usurper.

Before long we reached the end of a shallow dirt path and found ourselves standing at the edge of our destination: the Relic Grove. Only a threshold made of four arm bones lined up between two twisting oaks announced the end of Rozhan territory, but all three of us could sense it. There was power in the air, and the fog we could see up ahead was not of natural make.

"I have been looking forward to this," Masego cheerful admitted. "The Firstborn usually shy away from anything that could be considered necromancy, it is an interesting change of pace."

"The Twilight Sages left scars," I said, "but this isn't necromancy, not exactly. Technically Mighty Kavian is still alive."

"But not truly sentient," Akua noted. "Ego death is still a manner of death."

Masego nodded in approval.

"We're not getting into that debate here," I said, sensing tricky grounds. "We have work to do. Do you remember the rules?"

"We must always be in contact," Masego said, sounding displeased.

"Do not touch the grave-trees," Akua dutifully added.

"Good," I grunted. "I'll go in front, Zeze behind me. Let's try not to wake up Kavian, yeah?"

Settling into a single file line, Akua taking my cloak and Masego hers, we passed the threshold of bones. To the power-blind the Relic Grove would have seen like nothing more than misty old woods, the trees tall and twisted and its grounds covered with dead leaves no matter the season, but the illusion lasted only as long as it took us to encounter the first grave-tree. In the side of large, thick ash tree whose branches were spreading out like the fingers of a hand, there lay a small stone stele to which a drow skeleton had been nailed.

The part that had Masego's hand twitching at my back, though was that the Night in it had yet to fade.

"No relic," Akua murmured, sounding a little disappointed.

"There's probably a Secret or two in there that Mighty would value a great deal more than a fancy spear," I said.

"One cannot make an earring of a Secret, darling," she replied.

I rolled my eye, pulling us forward. One of the dangers of this place was that the Secret behind the mist would actively try to get us lost and make us stumble on graves, but there was no chance of that so long as I could feel the beacon of power that was the obsidian tower in the distance. Mostly getting through was slow, tedious limping forward on a forest path that was barely distinguishable from the rest of the ground.

"How long have Mighty been trying to harvest Kavian?" Zeze asked.

"Seven hundred years and change," I said. "The days where entire sigils disappeared in there are long past, but they still get a few fools every year."

Akua let out an interested noise.

"Did you ask Sve Noc what Secret it is that allowed it to remain for so long?" she asked.

I snorted.

"Are you asking me, Sahelian," I drily said, "to reveal the secrets of my communion with dark goddesses simply so that your petty curiosity might be satisfied?"

There was a beat of silence.

"I am," Masego brightly replied.

I heard a half-choked laugh coming from the back. Fine, be that way.

"It's the Secret of Recurrent Echoes," I said, "only it's not actually supposed to last this long. Just a handful times, opportunities for the holder to murder some other drow and take their body."

And Mighty Kavian had spent the last few centuries methodically doing the latter, but never the former. Andronike figured something had gone wrong with the part of the Secret that maintained sapience, probably because Kavian had tried to make it repeat much more at the expense of mental stability. The end result was that a Night-presence of the old monster popped out whenever someone disturbed the Relic Grove, murdering everyone involved and shackling their Night before disappearing again. The whole thing was like fucking honey for Mighty: a fight against a legend and a massive payoff in Night if they won? It'd taken literal centuries before cocky sigil-holders stopped feeding their sigils into the place.

The Rozhan Sigil had come into existence out of scavenger crews that'd figured out how to get their hands on some of the lesser morsels from the outskirts without bringing down Kavian's wrath on their heads. They took care of the graves in exchange, apparently, and had some Secrets entirely about the matter. Back in the Everdark the Relic Grove had been a maze of stone and lichen buried at the bottom of a city that'd been shattered by a dwarven incursion, but it had taken very well to being moved to Serolen. Kavian's blank consciousness had grown to permeate all the fucking trees around here, like some sort of sickness, and now there was...

"Stop," I whispered, and immediately they did.

The grave-tree before us was larger than the last, a massive willow that had grown around three steles, but that wasn't what had given me pause. There was a shape crouched on the branches, a slender drow whose eyes were scanning the mists. It passed over us twice without seeing us, my shoulders tensing as it did. See, the old Relic Grove had been stone and lichen. But this new one, moved into the woods? It'd had old, strong life to work with. Trees that'd been around for centuries, if not longer. And with Kavian's consciousness spread out, it had caused... echoes. The Mighty whose Night and belongings were the relic of the name drew from the life of the trees, forming these... things.

Little more than shadows, but wielding Night and completely unkillable. Even if they got repeatedly smashed into nothingness, all it would do was cause the shade to dwell into the tree until enough life accumulated again for it to manifest. It was possible to end the phenomenon by destroying the tree, of course, but anyone who did that instead got to deal with Mighty Kavian itself. None of us moved, even our breaths growing more quiet, but the shadow was still looking at the mist.

"It knows something is here," I murmured.

I got a shake from Masego at my back, agreement. Fuck, we weren't going to pass with it looking for us. And it was smart enough to notice the light from Ibrahim's Mirror when we got too close to something, those things were known to attack Mighty who used Secrets of stealth.

"Akua," I said. "Distract it."

A heartbeat of silence, then a quiet incantation. From the corner of my eye I saw a ghostly light bloom to our right, behind the thick leaves of an alder tree, and the shadow saw it too. Without hesitating it leaped in that direction, chasing the spell, and I tugged urgently for them to follow me. I put aside the pain in my leg, making haste, and I could see that the shadow was hacking away at the tree now – and the light further running away. A splendid choice of spell. Now we just needed to-

To come across another grave-tree, a twisted elm with two skeleton-adorned steles, before which stood a shadow wielding a long spear of crystal. And it'd definitely just see the light from Ibrahim's Mirror on the branches. Fuck. So that was why the mist had been trying to push us here. It was just smart and malicious enough for something like this.

"Keep touching," I said, "and *run*."

It didn't know where we were under the illusions, but that didn't matter: it came at us in a burst of Night, shattering all three spells in a single thrust. I wrestled down my instinct to turn around and fight, knowing that I was the only one who could guide

us through the mist. Instead I ran as fast as I could, every stumble having me curse how fucking unnecessarily *long* their legs were compared to mine. No longer maintaining the Mirrors, Masego was freed to fight as well and I felt bursts of magic erupt behind me as I guided us through a thick knot of branches that whipped at my face.

Akua cursed and a pine shattered to our left as the faint pop of a shielding spell broke. I took us off the path and through bushes, ignoring the thorns as they tore at my cloak. Masego grunted and I felt the ripple of his aspect unleashed, something catching flame far behind. *Eye ahead*, Catherine, I reminded myself. I couldn't be sure how long we ran like that, weaving between trees and stones and winding forest paths, but my heart was pounding in my throat when we finally stopped. My back was drenched in sweat, but we'd finally shaken off the shadow.

"We are too far for it to follow," Hierophant panted.

He was even worse off than I was, I saw with a twinge of satisfaction. Akua, on the other hand, didn't even look like she was sweating. Urgh. Couldn't she be bad at more things? It was starting to get irritating. We caught our breath together, then Masego wove a new set of Mirrors.

"We're close," I told them. "It's up ahead."

We took our time with the last stretch, knowing it to be the most dangerous. The dead leaves covering the forest floor thinned, revealing smooth stone beneath. The trees here rooted through it, shattering stone and spreading rubble, and it seemed like every ten feet we came across one of the tree-graves. It took us almost as long for that last stretch as it'd taken us for the rest: I was in no mood for another run, so I had us circling whenever I caught sight of a shadow instead of risking being caught. But we got there, at long last, and from the mists rose the silhouette of a great obsidian tower.

Although it wasn't actually that great, I noticed when we got a little closer – stopping at the edge of the trees, wary of being seen by the Mighty that'd be guarding this place. The tower was maybe sixty feet wide and thrice as tall, nothing to sneer about but not exactly gargantuan. Made sense, if Kurosiv has set their minions to build several. It was pure obsidian, though, fitted not in blocks but like the polished pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The precision of that was impressive. Concerningly, though, I could see a fucking door.

A quick look told me there were windows at the very summit, large ones facing every cardinal direction, but were the people assigned here really forced to climb every time they wanted to enter?

"Can either of you see a way in?" I whispered.

Akua shook her head, but Masego was staring at the wall with his Summer-forged eye.

"There are hidden mechanisms in the pieces, bound to Night," Hierophant told us. "Releasing the workings would seem to free a slab to be pushed in."

"A secret door," Akua enthusiastically said. "Well done, Hierophant."

She was, I thought, enjoying this little jaunt a little too much.

"Can you Wrest it open?" I asked.

"Yes," he said after a moment. "But there are people within."

"The place is too thick with Night," I admitted, "I can't actually feel out drow. It's like smaller flames hidden in a bonfire."

"I can see four at the bottom of the tower," Hierophant said. "And some shapes at the summit, near the windows, but they are veiled."

It wasn't just anything that his eye would be unable to see through, so that smacked of Kurosiv weaving a little something. Best to avoid there entirely.

"Are the two parts of the tower connected?"

"They are. There is a middle chamber as well," Masego added. "The sacrificial altar."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"How do you know?"

"There are gutters for the blood," he said.

I swallowed a grimace. Shouldn't have asked. This was going to get tricky, I thought. There was bound to be at least one strong Mighty among the defenders, which meant I'd likely have to pull out Night and that would give away the game. *We'll have to crush them fast, get a look at the ritual and run*, I thought. There was no helping it. I turned towards them and-

"We need to move," Masego said. "They are coming out."

I blinked in surprise but did not argue. There had been nine drow in the tower, and every single one of the seven that left had been rylleh. There were, I gauged when they left and I could tell them apart from the ambient Night, not one but two sigil-holders

among them. All of them went due west, leaving only two at the bottom. Once they had passed I voiced the question that had been on my mind the whole time.

"What are they going after?" I muttered. "There shouldn't be-"

I took a look at the eastern horizon for the first time, having a good angle at last, and paused. There was a large plume of smoke going up.

"Masego," I evenly said. "Did you set the Relic Grove in fire?"

"The shadow set the Relic Grove on fire," he corrected. "I only redirected the flame."

"Ah," Akua smiled, "so that is why they are leaving. They need to put out the flames before Mighty Kavian goes berserk."

"I'm going to get blamed for that one too, aren't I?" I sadly said.

"Well," Masego said, "you did bring me here. So in a sense, it *is* your fault."

That little shit. If I'd actually had the time to take him to task for that I would have, but we needed to get in and get gone before the enemy returned.

"Get us in," I ordered. "Akua, you and I hit them fast and hard."

We took our position smoothly, Akua already beginning to incant. I couldn't, since the moment I pulled on Night I'd be outed. Masego had neglected to mention that the slab of obsidian freed was ten feet tall, but he used the Night from the mechanisms to do so anyways. Which revealed two very surprised rylleh, both in Yeshara colours, baring their spears at us. I pulled on Night, quick and deep, and began to form a wedge of blackflame when... it unravelled? Akua's shrivelling curse took one of them in the chest, dropping it, but the other one shot through the door towards me as Night slipped through my fingers.

What the *fuck*?

I might actually have gotten a spear through the chest if Masego didn't Wrest again, killing the Secret it used to speed forward. It stumbled, and abandoning the thought of Night I instead focused my Name and struck: my sword cleared the scabbard in a heartbeat, cutting through the wrist that came up to defend the rylleh's neck. Akua hit it with a small curse that made it spasm, though, and I smoothly drew back my blade and feinted – it moved to dodge to the left, and the edge of my blade went right into its skull. It spasmed again, Night gathering, but Masego killed whatever Secret that was before it could get away.

"Catherine," Akua said, "what happened?"

My teeth clenched.

"I'm not sure," I admitted.

But whatever it was, it'd nearly gotten me killed. We hurried inside, all of us aware our time was already beginning to run out, and took in the sight of the circular obsidian chamber. Every surface save for the carved stairs leading up to the central chamber was covered in glyphs, each carved into the precious stone and then filled with molten silver. It was striking sight, though that was not why my two mages paused. Masego took a few steps forward and then went still, eye moving without pause, while Akua took a slow turn around the chamber before kneeling in front of the wall facing the door.

I left them to that, instead limping to the nearest wall and rapping my knuckles against it once. Solid. I focused my Name and struck at it with my staff, the dead yew bouncing off. Yeah, that was fortified with Night. The impact wasn't the same as if it was simple obsidian. Probably the whole damned tower had been built using it and it was running through like veins, which was why I'd had so hard a time picking out the drow inside. Destroying this place with Night would take me a long time, it'd be much easier with pure physical strength – and I didn't have nearly enough of that on hand.

There'd be no breaking the tower tonight, and having Masego try to Wrest the threads running through was just asking for Kurosiv to get involved. This would stay a scouting trip, so we'd best make the most of it.

"So what are we looking at?" I asked.

Masego was in his trance, lost in thought, so it was my other mage I was speaking to. Akua frowned, still kneeling before the wall of silver glyphs.

"These towers are altars," she said. "That much is certain."

"Charnel pits to feed Kurosiv," I said, not hiding my disgust.

The Sisters had made their entire race into an ever-red altar hidden behind the Gloom, once, but it had not been for their own benefit. This was simple, ugly greed.

"Indeed," the dark-skinned sorceress said, "but while this has been their function so far it does not appear to be their primary use."

"Ominous," I muttered. "So what *is*?"

Akua looked like she'd bit into a lemon as she rose back to her feet.

"I cannot tell," she admitted. "These are not structured like any glyphs I've seen before. Night-workings have a... syntax to them, Catherine, but it is entirely absent here."

"Because this is not a Firstborn ritual," Hierophant's calm voice cut through.

My fingers clenched.

"Tell me Kurosiv was not fucking fool enough to borrow a ritual from the Hidden Horror," I begged.

Masego took a step closer to Akua, ignoring me, and after demanding her attention without a word he raised his hand to point at a line of silver glyphs.

"There," he said. "And now two lines below, the closing half. You should recognize this."

Golden eyes followed his instructions, then narrowed.

"I cannot believe I missed that," Akua murmured.

"You have flesh eyes," Masego dismissed. "You cannot look at the entire pattern at once the way I can. It was only a matter of time before you recognize it."

I loudly cleared my throat, which finally got their attention.

"Someone," I said slowly, enunciating every syllable, "please tell me that Kurosiv was not fucking fool enough to *borrow a ritual from the Hidden Horror*."

The looks on their faces were not promising.

"It is not just a ritual," Akua told me.

"You've seen the original with your own eyes," Masego continued.

I froze.

"Wait, you're telling me..."

"This appears," Hierophant said, "to be an adjusted rendition of the ritual that destroyed the Kingdom of Sephirah and made Trismegistus into a god."

Fuck, I decided, was not quite strong enough a word for how bad things had just gotten.

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Getting out of enemy territory was more long than difficult.

We just legged it north as far as we could, then circled until we reached one of the canals that fed Serolen's and took a boat back down. It was refreshingly uneventful, leaving me with a long while to digest what we'd found out. I was silent most of the trip, lost in my thoughts. Had the Dead King genuinely given out his oldest trick to a would-be rival, or was there a trap laid at the heart of the ritual? We couldn't know, not having seen only one of the towers, and I was beginning to think it wouldn't matter.

Either way, the Firstborn would end. Whether it was that Kurosiv devoured their kind and then Sve Noc or that Neshamah finished ripping out the Night as he'd attempted at the Battle of Hainaut, it would be a disaster that might lose us the war. The Dead King gaining Night would be significantly worse, but even if Kurosiv got their way without a hidden price then the young god would walk away and free all the armies assaulting Serolen to reinforce Keter just as it was getting besieged.

When we returned to the fortress I left my companions behind, heading directly to the airy temple at the summit where the Sisters roosted. It was a simple enough place from the outside, a rough square of stone whose roof was tiered and walls were entirely arches, but the inside was raw, untamed Night. Not even when I had tried to eat the Book of Some Things had the feel of it been so strong. I could no longer see or feel anything save an endless black expanse in ever direction, and it was in that void that the Sisters came to me.

Gods, even lesser gods, were beyond tiredness. Yet somehow I thought, looking at the two of them, that they seemed exhausted.

"We wane," Komena said, her eyes hard. "The tide has turned against us."

And I knew she was speaking the truth, for the mantle of divinity was feeble on their shoulders. Her voice had not echoed with things dimly understood, her very presence did not send a shiver down my back. Night had been made to suffer Ruin, and then been wounded further by Kurosiv's betrayal. They were goddesses still, but of a great deal less than before.

"Kurosiv is not stronger than you," I said. "I could still drive them out of their followers."

"Not yet," Andronike quietly agreed.

"It's why we need to fight them now," Komena said. "You know it's true, heart of my heart. If we wait until their strength surpasses ours, only defeat can ensue."

"They won't come out to fight you this easily," I said. "Their entire strategy is based on holding their ground, daring you to take a swing."

That was the conclusion I'd come to, on the way back. I'd thought that Kurosiv's strategy was oddly defensive, at first, considering the Dead King was pushing north towards Serolen and there were no iron cast guaranteed when dealing with Neshamah. How long could they truly afford to wait to become sole god of the Firstborn? Except I'd misread what they were actually after. It didn't give a shit what happened the drow, it was only after apotheosis. They'd gladly devour their own kind and walk away. So now it fell into place.

If we attacked their side of the river, the blood flowed to the towers and Kurosiv was strengthened while our numbers waned. If we waited this out, Kurosiv would finish its ritual and devour all its followed before taking a swing at Sve Noc.

"We would not be the victor in that strife," Andronike told me, having followed my thoughts. "We hold great power, but much of it is dispersed in others. It would be our lesser still, but..."

"Concentrated," I finished with a grimace.

Selfishness had its strengths. Still, it also had weaknesses.

"The defensive stance only works if their sigils stick with them," I said. "And I expect that, hardliners or not, few of those Mighty are going to be eager at the thought of being eaten. We need to arrange talks and out the truth."

If enough of them believed us, enough defected back, it might not even come to a fight between deities. We could just take back the towers by force and smash them before the bloodshed fed Kurosiv.

"Is it your right to attempt this," Andronike acknowledged.

I eyed them both with a frown. They weren't going to stop me, but neither was buying this as a solution. Why?

"You are First Under the Night," Komena curtly said. "You were appointed to attempt what we would not."

I decided to let it go. Their reasons were their own more often than not, why would this be any different? Besides, I had a more urgent worry.

"I tried to use the Night, when we were out at the tower, but it failed," I told them.

"That is known to us," Andronike said.

I rolled my eye.

"Then do you also know an answer to the question I shouldn't have to voice?" I asked. "What the Hells happened?"

Komena grimaced.

"The Night is coming apart," she said. "Your Hierophant took it to the brink of destruction and it has been pulled in too many directions since."

I winced.

"How bad?"

"The power itself is still functional, the trouble is that it is invested," Andronike said. "In Mighty, in workings, in Kurosiv's hoard. If it could be all returned to our hands and redistributed it could be mended, but as it is..."

"We will have to begin eating old workings soon," Komena said. "Else what you experienced will repeat."

"It is difficult to predict where the lack will happen," Andronike admitted. "There are too many wills involved."

So Night was finite, and it too many people took chunks of it up to wield there might not be enough left for whoever was trying to – even if they should be able to. That sounded, I thought, uncomfortably like the fate the Sisters had bargained to avoid: the Twilight Sages borrowing more than they could repay.

"We are not unaware," Andronike coldly said, "of the resemblance."

I raised a hand in appeasement.

"If we slice open Kurosiv our books are out of red, right?" I asked.

"Broadly so," Komena said.

"Then we start with that," I grimly said. "And fix the mess once we have their head on a pike."

The Crows hadn't picked me as their herald without reason: all I could feel from them at that plan was unyielding agreement.

—

Even Firstborn, whose concept of peace was closer to truce, had ways to hold talks.

Usually drow diplomacy was along the lines of threatening annihilation if immediate surrender was not given, sometimes a dash of exile or surrendering Mighty for harvesting, but that was

between sigils. There wasn't really a precedent for the scale of the talks we'd asked for since the fall of the Empire Ever Dark, because until the exodus the drow had been united under Sve Noc. Well, divided under Sve Noc really but the supreme authority had been uncontested. So now that there were sigils under Kurosiv and sigils under us, the situation grew a little more complicated.

We settled on ten Mighty for either side, since keeping any more than twenty of that quarrelsome brood in close proximity was bound to result in fighting. The three of the Ten Generals in the city – Ysengral for us, Ishabog and Moren for them – were a given, as was Rumena. It might not have a rank in the Ten, having instead served as the commander of the Southern Expedition under me, but it was comparable or outright superior to many on the list. After that the ranks were filled with powerful sigil-holders, in case a fight did break out, and also me.

We met in the city centre, contested grounds, in a beautiful old temple called the Empty Shore. It was entirely made of wood, a rarity before the exodus, and though the outside was all vivid colours the inside had painted with impossible skill into the illusion of being the shore of a lake under the dark of night. And not a night from the Everdark, for there were even distant stars above. It was exceptionally beautiful, and though no ground was truly sacred to Firstborn most Mighty would hesitate before beginning strife that might destroy this place.

It was us that'd called the talks, so after the usual rounds of posturing – I refrained, knowing that my mastery of Crepuscular was too shallow to risk dipping my toe into the fast-paced trading of taunts – we were expected to state why everyone had been gathered here. I spoke up then.

"Tomb-maker," I ordered.

Night flared, Mighty tensing at the sensation, and behind me an obsidian wall covered in silvery glyphs. The very same we'd found at the heart of the tower. There was some shuffling on the side of our opponents, but neither of the Generals were surprised. They'd already figured out what last night had been about.

"I will speak plainly," I said. "This is not the work of the entity that titles itself Loc Ynan. It is a ritual of the Dead King's make, whose purpose is to make a god from the death of an entire people."

A pause on the other side.

"Not only us," I bluntly said, "but you as well. You will be the first to die when the Fate-Giver reveals what fate they truly have in mind for the Firstborn."

I'd expected a range of reactions to that revelation. Denial, dismay, maybe even violence. It wasn't even out of question that Kurosiv would decide the game was up and try to devour its followers immediately. But what I got, instead, was *laughter*.

"See," Moren Bleakwomb mockingly smiled, "it is as was foretold. Now that they fail against our might, they resort to the cheapest of tricks."

My fingers clenched.

"This is not a trick," I flatly said. "I am willing to—"

"It does not matter even if your false gods have tricked you, *human*," Moren said, using the word as one would filth. "We know the truth. Sve Noc tried to devour us once, and you think sweet whispers will let us do away with our protection?"

It all went downhill from there.

We got out without a fight, in the end, but we'd lost face and was quietly furious as we returned. The Sisters had hidden something from me, something that'd made all of this a fool's errand, and I confronted them with the petty mistake. They were neither of them cowed by my anger, but they did deign to provide explanation.

"When sigils began to defect, we took measures," Komena said.

My lips thinned.

"You tried to drain the Night out of the traitors," I said. "Like they claimed."

"It failed," Andronike plainly said. "There were some who were made nisi, but the leech was ready for us. It usurped mastery of what you call the 'nails', severing us from the traitors."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Of course, the existence of the nails was a secret that only a few knew. So when Kurosiv had told their faithful that it took towers to keep Sve Noc at bay, they'd had no reason to disbelieve it. *And if I were an ambitious god, I'd even fake a few drains to remind my subject of why keeping the altars wet is so important.* And I realized, suddenly, why it was that the Sisters had let me walk into those talks without telling me. Weakness. It was the same reason they'd used Ivah to tell me about the collapse of the Gloom instead of using dreams. They were ashamed of looking weak in front of me.

Neither of them addressed the thought, and not for lack of seeing it. I took it for the tacit admission that it was. No quite enough for me to forgive the way they'd let me make a fool of myself, but enough that I was willing to change the subject.

"We've been outplayed," I said. "There's no reason for the defector sigils to believe us and every reason for them not to."

Kurosiv had been planning this for even longer than I'd thought, and planning it *smart*.

"We must prepare for war," Komena said. "It will come down to the fangs, Catherine Foundling."

A war of gods, she meant. Kurosiv and the Crows, savaging each other for rule of the Night and likely destroying most of their race in the process. My goddesses didn't want to slaughter their own, but they'd still choose that above getting swallowed up by the usurper. I clenched my fingers then unclenched them.

"No," I finally said. "We still have one card left to play."

This was a game of deicide, now, and I just happened to have brought to Serolen the finest expert of that art in all of Calernia.

—

It wasn't exactly hard to find Masego. He was in his laboratory again, dissecting another corpse. How he was being kept supplied in fresh bodies was a question I'd decided not to ask. I plopped down in the chair I was pretty sure he was leaving there mostly for my visits, then groaned as I stretched out my tired limbs. He didn't turn, but I felt his eye glance at me through the back of his head before returning to the corpse.

"We can't stop the ritual from happening," I informed him.

Masego paused in his study, leaving the ribcage of the drow whose internal organs he'd been looking at kept open by steel contraption.

"I thought that might be the case," Hierophant replied. "It is a clever conundrum they present us with. Making war to destroy the towers might strengthen Kurosiv enough it can slay Sve Noc, while leaving our foe to their devices ensures they will devour much of the remaining Night and then your patronesses afterwards."

I was entirely unsurprised he'd caught on to that. Masego might be utterly uninterested in war as a rule, but deicide was an exception. To him this would be a genuinely interesting puzzle to figure out, or maybe something more along the lines of fencing.

"Diplomacy has failed," I said. "We tried to warn Kurosiv's sigils, but they got their story out long before we even knew it needed contradicting."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"And their excuse?"

"Sve Noc tried to drain the rebels out of Night when the first raised their flags," I said. "They've been claiming the towers are tools to ensure that can never happen."

The rebel Mighty probably figured that Kurosiv was skimming off the top, but that we'd come out trying to get them to pull down the towers had instead probably cemented in their minds that they needed to stay up at all costs. The talks had come across like an attempt to land a killing stroke now that we were losing, not us trying to save their damned hides. Masego let out an amused noise.

"And so the few Mighty capable of deciphering parts of the glyph array recognize the parts related to draining and believe them," he said. "Perhaps we should consider backing this Kurosiv instead, Catherine. They certainly seem to be the more skillful of these would-be gods."

"That's not in the cards," I firmly said.

Even if it were possible to convince Kurosiv to turn on the Dead King and refrain from devouring their race, they were chronically untrustworthy and their ideals were repellent to me. On top of that, in the long term I'd just be saddling Procer with another kind of enemy looming to its north. No, there was no bargain to be made there. Besides the Sisters might be a pair of murderous, thieving crows but they were *my* murderous and thieving crows. We'd entered the nightmare together and we would leave it just the same.

"Unfortunate," Masego shrugged. "So what is it to be our plan?"

"If we can't stop the ritual," I said, "then that leaves us only one choice."

He leaned forward, face brightening.

"Usurping it," Hierophant said, sounding pleased. "A most interesting idea."

"We came here to gather the original Night anyway," I pointed out. "We can kill two birds with one stone. When Kurosiv tries to eat the Firstborn, instead we return all the Night to Sve Noc and wipe the slate clean. We shake off the Bard, get our affairs in order and move to join the fight in Keter."

"That should be possible," Masego mused.

"Good," I grinned. "We can return with an army of refreshed drow at our back, which sh-"

"Ah, you misunderstand me," Zeze absent-mindedly interrupted. "It is possible if, like Kurosiv, you are willing to kill every living drow in the process."

The grin went away.

"Start from the premise that I'm not willing to do that," I said.

"Then you expect too much of me," he honestly replied. "I am not familiar enough with Night or soul work to do this to the level of precision you require."

He paused.

"I could perhaps lower the casualties to somewhere between two thirds and four fifths," Masego finally added. "Anything more than that would require Akua's help."

It was a life raft, and I boarded it eagerly.

"But with her help you could do better," I said.

"Presumably," he said. "She has experience harnessing the power of lesser gods into fixed systems that I lack, and her arrays in Liesse were precise to a degree I had believed unfeasible. As for soul work, we've explored different branches of the discipline – it is conceivable that she would know a method to remove the nails safely that I would not."

"Then we're putting the two of you on this," I said. "Everything else is kicked down the ladder, Zeze. Anything you two need you get it, and even if the Dead King comes knocking at the gates I want you to keep working on our usurpation ritual."

He didn't look all that happy about being interrupted in his study of Firstborn physiology, but the kind of work I'd asked would not be unpleasant to him. If he'd not already been getting into his own project, I suspected that he'd be outright eager.

"I'll inform her myself," I continued. "In the immediate, do you need anything to get started?"

The glimmering eye swivelled towards me, visible under the cloth.

"Live test subjects," Hierophant said. "Expect deaths. Our first attempt to remove the nails are unlikely to be anything less than traumatic."

My stomach clenched, but I slowly nodded. I'd ask for volunteers, people knowing the risks. But if I couldn't get enough?

Well, I guessed we'd see how far I was willing to go when extinction was on the line.

[Liliet](#)

HEEEE

SpeckofStardust

So whats better.
Slave freer Akua.
Deicide mission Masego
Or in denial that she has zero issues doing horrible things
Cat?

[Liliet](#)

"I won beyond my wildest expectations and also entirely lost control of the situation" Cat

Miles

She just made Moren Bleakwomb go through that exact feeling at the shrine. How quickly the sunꞰ ɛlqəꞰ.

[Liliet](#)

lmao

erebus42

I mean I'd say she definitely still prefers to avoid doing horrible things if feasible alternatives exist.

[Liliet](#)

This, yeah.

M0och123

Alas, Cat is a practical Villain, it is one of, if not her most defining trait.

[Liliet](#)

(Although it should be noted that Akua's insistence on freeing them showed this WAS an existent feasible alternative, and Cat didn't see that)

Hhii

Just because it possible doesn't mean it's practical

Liliet

mm

Miles

Doesn't seem like there were any bad consequences. In fact, it should sow some doubt. She was able to sneak around and count coup before trying peace talks.

erebus42

True, though in this case you might be able to attribute that to them being on a dangerous mission and in a hurry.

Liliet

Yeah, it's not An Inexcusable Wrong. Action \neq inaction, morally speaking.

Hargabga

But she came to think any risk of not getting her reward as a reason to discard a notion entirely. She picks the safest option, even if it is objectively monstrous. I love her development, ngl.

Zach

Well, the thing she admits herself is that she wouldn't have decided to save the drow, despite saving them being feasible (and then proceeding to successfully do so). She wouldn't have been willing to take even a small risk to save those several hundred drow (at least until Akua brought it up).

Basically she doesn't have enough of an objection to sacrifices that she's willing to put much effort into avoiding them. If someone gives her a way to avoid them she'll accept it, but won't put much effort into finding such a way herself.

ohJohN

I think the real cornerstone is less 'effort' than 'expected utility': Cat is pretty consequentialist at this point, and if leaving those 300 drow to die increases the odds of saving all 100k+ drow from extinction by 1% (expected lives saved = 1000+ drow, or 700+ net), then the choice is already made.

However, if you throw Akua into the mix (who will save those 300 drow regardless, for deontological reasons), it quickly becomes a choice between stopping her (messy and

very likely to lead to mission failure) or taking the 1% hit and continuing on.

Miles

Slave freer aqua is a terrible omen.

The doom of freaking liesse has taken over Vivian's role and is acting as Cat's moral compass.

gingerlygrump

Isn't that what Cat wanted, though? She surrounds herself with people that do have morals, in some capacity or another. Even Robber had morals, he happily died with a smile on his face so that his friends could live and oh my god just thinking about it makes me cry again.

Cpt. Obvious

BASTARD!

You had to remind me that he's actually dead. And I can't even hate you for it...

gingerlygrump

I know, I know, it's still such a hard punch to the chest that I cry every time I think about it. God he was amazing and I hope that somehow Cat DOES come for him and take him back from the gods below.

Christian Oaks

Calling it now, the towers are meant to take the night to the deadking giving him back the ability he lost in death-learning through the use of night theft from others

devildragon777

...The crows have a tendency to underestimate their opponents. First Neshamah, and now Kurosiv...they need to change or this *will* keep happening.

Cat's finally lost any hope of reins on Akua, and I think that'll be healthier for them both in the end. Also, Cat occasionally needs someone to yell at her for being a self-sacrificing dummy at times, and an Akua who's an equal would definitely be able to do that (She already has!)

I guess Masego and Akua are doing something similar to patient trials of a novel surgery? The other metaphors I can think of are...not pleasant.

Something I'm wondering about is how does Night get added to the pool? From what it seems like, there's a max limit, but how does that limit get expanded? Or is it just recycling the same powers?

Insanenoodlyguy

you can pull power from non-drow to increase night, gain more secrets. It's a much lower process, but it's what Ivah was trying to do out of desperation when we first met him.

beleester

This was the original plan for sending the Drow up north – they'd get a steady flow of Night from harvesting the rat invasions every year.

Geno

It's been stated many times before gods can't really grow or change. That's basically why the Crows empowered Cat to give them ideas they wouldn't consider otherwise

[Sethur](#)

Drow can draw Night from non-Drow as others have stated. And I think it was implied several times that Drow can add to the Night themselves by learning stuff in their lifetime. When Cat first met Ivah, it implied this was possible but that now Drow would ever attempt it, because for Mighty it was just faster to kill someone to get stronger and for weaker Drow it was like painting a target on one's back over several, arduous years. When Cat gave out the Tenets of Iserre she tasked the Drow with adding more Night, not just by killing, but by being/becoming better. Hence her question "Are you worthy?" which gets answered with "Ask tomorrow". 😊

[sengachi](#)

Each newborn drow's soul and each consumed outsider adds a little Night to the pot. Secrets can also be added by drow learning them the hard way. Unfortunately there are also ways Night and Secrets can be destroyed or lost (I don't think the transfer process is 100% efficient) and it seems like the Firstborn's Night supply had been stagnating for centuries. Or at least not growing fast enough for Sve Noc to do the apotheosis they were looking for. And the Mighty rarely invent anything new, so new Secrets of any serious magnitude are rare.

Miles

There are no drow newborns. Drow lost the ability to reproduce when they lost the ability to die of old age.

ohJohN

Pretty sure this is not true:

- only a threshold amount of Night keeps drow from 'natural' death, otherwise they die at exactly 60 (cf The Three Faces), and that limit on their baseline lifespan was part of the Crows' bargain with Below
- in this chapter we learn that 90+% of drow are non-Mighty
- thus there almost definitely weren't enough drow in existence at the time Night was created to survive a millennium of constant & bloody (VERY CONSTANT, VERY BLOODY) warfare without replenishment
- it's been mentioned that Mighty generally identify as genderless and are uncomfortable with gendered classification ("cattle-terms") because nisi ("cattle") are the only ones who consistently reproduce, and they're dogshit in the hierarchy

Miles

>I guess Masego and Akua are doing something similar to patient trials of a novel surgery?

Speaking of this, I doubt their call for volunteers will go well. Drow culture being what it is they'll get plenty of volunteers to go raiding for some voluntolds though.

mamm0nn

Just last chapter it was mentioned that Cat didn't want Cordelia harvested by some dzulu for the ability to speak Reitz, meaning that even aside from all the other stuff said before it was recently re-affirmed that the drow can gain power from any sentient being. Not sure if they can take power from animals, but probably not.

Which is kind of a broken ability if they weren't confined to infighting only as they are in this setting. As long as they win their battles and their numbers don't grow too low, drow can just go on campaigns and grow stronger by default of regaining all their own Secrets and their foes skills and powers too. As long as they keep breeding more numbers they just need to make sure they don't lose the battle regardless of the losses incurred.

MoreBeer

Kind of like the Dead King huh? Or the chain of hunger. Any of these forces only get stronger by killing others, as long as they're careful not to lose battles.

The problem is the deck is stacked against all these continental threats so they're not OP in the actual narrative. They're just threats. Unfortunately for the

protagonists the Dead King managed to break out of his evil-in-a-can mode and is now truly OP.

mamm0nn

Not really. The Dead King is still bound to numbers, if one soldier kills two zombies then there's an overall loss. One that battle can partly regain, but especially in defensive forts he lost rather than broke even. He just has the overwhelming advantage of numbers to ignore this, only having the advantage of growth when defeating hapless or weak foes. And the chain of hunger is not so much ever-growing rather than a plague that just spreads out. They're a bit like (regular fantasy) goblins, just reproducing so fast that they appear a numberless plague.

Meanwhile the drow have a direct and notable growth with every victory. Not a drop of their own power is lost but the power of their foes is gained. Immediately. Directly. Assuredly. As long as they win, and do not rout leaving massive amounts of Night behind.

Linnus42

Yeah I still think Cat should have brought some Light Users. Its not like combat wasn't an obvious likely outcome to the Drow usurping power in a civil war. I know some don't like Mirror Knight for instance but he is optimized to kill Drow especially with Severance. And if not you got other options.

It occurs to me that this false god Drow plan is only liable to be working because Cat turned off the Villainous Stories. I was wondering what DK was doing and it seems he was capitalizing massively on that screw up. This probably also ties into why he didn't just slaughter all the Drow with Night Crippled and the Stories off. Though i am still not quite sure what was stopping him from rolling the Human Fronts with all the top people meeting in Salia. But who knows maybe he is working another angle.

Part of me wonders if Masego and Akua would actually give the power to Sve Noc. I find that some what doubtful. Maybe will get an Isildur and the Ring scenario with Cat as Elrond. And Honestly Sve Noc should give more info to Cat lol and not just let her go in blind but maybe they don't want to bias her choices.

[Liliet](#)

Cat did not know she was walking into a civil war until Ivah found her!

Linnus42

Cat knew a Drow was usurping power though. Killing that Drow is the obvious solution to any false god plot. Cat is suppose to be a lore master so no I don't buy that argument.

shikkarasu

Sure, but bringing a Light user in is still asking for trouble. Bull in a china shop, trouble. All of Serolin is made with Night, even if little of it is made of Night. Cat would need to keep that Hero/priest on a short leash the entire time, and there are only so many resources she can pull from the main army.

It was a valid choice to not bring Light users, even if it would have made some of the fighting easier.

[Liliet](#)

Cat didn't know that was a problem that would need immediate addressing or that there would BE a false god plot.

ninegardens

We the audience knew. The the audience knew several years ago that Kurosiv was trying to claim night, and was going to be a threat. It was kind of obvious. Besides, even if you *don't* know what kind of madness you are heading into, having a good toolbox on hand is useful. And ummm... Cat left with only a small fraction of her toolbox.

I can see the argument for leaving MK and severance behind (though severance WOULD be handy)... but bringing some kind of hero party member would be *very* useful... Overall it just seems like a very small party for a very important mission.

Two dozen snakes

The Dead King HAS rolled the human fronts and the only reason he hasn't taken Salia is the repeated use of the Eleamal. Right now he's probably working on a counter to that. Otherwise, he knows the game is up for the Rebel Alliance – they're out of time. They have to come to him in Keter and soon, so he can just wait for them while building his response

No way Masego or Akua usurp the ritual for themselves. Masego wants apotheosis on his own terms, while Akua has grown away from that entirely. She doesn't want to have that kind of power anymore

Cat couldn't bring a Light User because they're heroes, and the only Hero we've met who is both powerful enough to make a difference AND not lose his mind and take a crack at Sve Noc

upon witnessing drow culture is Hanno, and he's needed in Salia. Pity Tariq is no longer around...

Death Knight

The Pilgrim would definitely have fucked up Kurosiv's shit hard with Mercy on his shoulders...

Geno

She had no idea the civil war was happening until she got there. Will never understand why some readers expect characters to be clairvoyant. It makes no sense at all

mamm0nn

The Villainous stories being gone thing doesn't seem as absolute in practice as it seemed when this problem was introduced. Cat's probably here because of Providence urging her to be here not too late nor too soon, the heroic assault on her tower was still with plenty of hero always wins fuckery, and Villains also don't get the power boosts that the first act would grant their story.

I think that while the Bard controls a lot of the current and mundane Stories, she's hardly the one that created and shaped all of Providence. Tales that apply to Named of both sides as well as a more ancient Might vs Right likely still apply. Villains can still be defeated or drawing heroes by Providence, they're just no longer so bound to this fate that Asmodeus would rage against the heavens over it. F.e. if a new Hero and Villain were to appear now and fight each other, the Villain would be able to fail on their first appearance if they bluster too much but they wouldn't be destined to die by the hero at the third act. But the Hero might still be attracted to the Villain's plot and appear at the right time to play their Role. Just, the outcome would go from 90/10 to 60/40 on who would win the battle in the third act battle. Or more favourable for the Villain if they prepared well while the Hero just rushed in.

David Stone

The villainous stories being gone doesn't help Neshamah here. The one story that consistently "works" is: villain deals with powers beyond its understanding, expecting UNLIMITED POWAH! but instead gets its soul eaten. Evil Overlord List item 199: "I will not make alliances with those more powerful than myself. Such a person would only double-cross me in my moment of glory. I will make alliances with those less powerful than myself. I will then double-cross them in their moment of glory."

Insanenoodlyguy

I studied her face. She had already made her decision, I realized. She would free the dzulu whatever I said. And so I shivered, knowing in that moment that I had both succeeded beyond my wildest hopes and entirely lost control of the situation. So I said the only thing I could say.

"We must vote quick"

topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil

[Tenmei](#)

"We can kill two birds with one stone."

Cat using this expression here feels rather ominous xD

Miles

Seems like it would be a sore topic for the birds on her shoulders but I guess they didn't catch it.

Gabe Meadow

It's interesting that this was titled Kernel (Redux). The original chapter was in Book 4, depicting Neshemah's progress towards apotheosis. And we see how Kurosiv's work here mirrors the Dead King's: a lot of smart thinking, patient groundwork, and the brutal destruction of everything that isn't necessary for attaining godhood (meaning all the draw in this case).

The one crucial distinction here, is that Kurosiv/Loc Ynan, clever as it is, hasn't taken the full caution to leave no openings, starting with borrowing *the* ritual from the Hidden Horror, and hopefully not guarding the apotheosis ritual against usurpation. Well, I hope so, or else Calernia is screwed.

Also, the reveal about the Night introduces a pattern to lesser godhood. It's finite, fixed. The Dead King is DEAD, any soul shard lost is gone for good, permanently weakening him. He cannot grow, in that sense.

The Night might (we don't know for sure) be capable of replenishment and growth, but it's definitely something that can be overstretched, with its vulnerability to usurpation being a significant part of the problem.

I imagine Masego is taking notes for his superior PROJECT APOTHEOSIS.

Dome Zasrekh

DK can't grow 'cos he is undead. Gods can grow just fine. Night is known to feed on others to grow, that's the whole point of it, to pay the debt of the old drow.

ninegardens

>"Live test subjects," Hierophant said. "Expect deaths. Our first attempt to remove the nails are unlikely to be anything less than traumatic."

Right.

And here we have your annual reminder that Hierophant is in fact a villian. Not just Apathetic about morality, but actively ummm... happy to put it on the back burner.

And he needs Akua in order to make this work.

And Akua is becoming more and more heroic, and less and less willing to live with Person sacrifices.

Ohhhhh... this is going to be fun.

[Liliet](#)

I mean prisoners from the other side are one obvious way to make this work.

shikkarasu

Nah, Akua won't tolerate it. It will be a mirror to an old argument over Ivah's band from the start of the Everd Arc showing Akua's growth as a person and Warden!Cat's decline, even lower than Winter!Cat.

"We've enough at hand to salvage keys for ourselves," Diabolist said. "Though I would suggest we keep one guide to learn how to use it."

"I'm not going to just execute prisoners, Akua," I peevishly said.

"It's not a question of usefulness," I said. "We don't execute prisoners."

That whole conversation circles around a few times, Akua finding new ways to justify killing them and Catherine insisting that these things are simply not done. I can't wait for Akua to tell Catherine that it's not a question of usefulness; that she will not kill prisoners.

Salt

Catherine does execute prisoners though, en masse at times. Just not for frivolous, unnecessary, or cruel reasons.

She specifically picked out the highborn from the prisoners she took at the end of second Liesse and had an entire road lined with their crucified corpses. That's pretty far from being absolutely against killing prisoners.

At the end of the day if she has enough of a vendetta and/or sees enough necessity in it, she'll cross that line and even more.

[Liliet](#)

they arent going to kill them they are going to experiment on them

also she should have this argument with Masego not Cat

shikkarasu

Given that the experiments are going to be lethal and torturous I don't see that as a mark in Cat's favour. As for who Akua should argue with, Masego is not the one being a hypocrite, here. Nor is he the one simply assuming that Akua will have a hand in it.

*"Then we're putting the two of you on this," I said. ...
"I'll inform her myself,"*

She went on a tirade about killing your prisoners, specifically Drow, and how it is morally wrong. She even convinced Akua that this is true and admitted that this was her intended goal over the past 3 years. Not a day ago she witnessed that Akua has taken this so very much to heart that she risked her life to save 300 Drow, friend and foe alike, even knowing that it may change nothing. All of this and then *still* tacitly ordering her to help gruesomely kill prisoners?

Cat made a Hero (Named or not) and now she's asking her to act like a Villain. You don't get it both ways. Rehabilitating Akua means not relying on her to do capital 'E' Evil for you anymore. This is, at best, a callous disregard for Akua as a person. I would even go so far as to call it betrayal. It was one thing to give Akua the rope and let her do as she will with it. To simply allow her to return to Praes. It's another to tell her to tie a noose and stand on this chair. This specific chair. The one that Cat is preparing to kick.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think that was about Akua taking Catherine's speech that one time to heart. I mean she was immediately *arguing* with Catherine about this.

Also, I think you're missing the point. This is the solution with the FEWEST lives lost, that's why Cat is going for it. Do you seriously think Akua's new moral compass will tell her "let them all die rather than do experimentation on unwilling subjects"?

shikkarasu

You are correct, Akua changed over 2.5 years of being shown a better way; it's not just the one argument. Still, I can't help but note it was the first time Cat tried to tell Akua 'we don't do this' instead of simply 'get back in the box.' It was this first of her many lessons on being good and that is the sort of thing that has weight. The sort of seed EE plants 3 years before it is going to be a pivotal part of a character's arc.

What really sells me on this are the following 3 things:

- Cat realising that Akua would rather jeopardise the mission and go against Cat's orders, even when 300 Drow would 99% certainly die, even if these ones were freed.
- Akua saying that she was sick to death of shackles.
- This conversation from last chapter: "I trail in your wake. Not unpleasantly so, but when I remember those who looked at me with hope in their eyes it does not seem enough."

While I fundamentally agree with you and Catherine that this is the least of two or more evils, and I'd probably side with Masego on anything because he is my favourite cinnamon roll, I really do think that Akua's new moral compass will tell her to find a third way, even if one doesn't exist. I fully expect her to take the Heroic stance that it is better to make a stand and fail than to torture and kill 'innocents'.

Zach

No; as Masego said, the earlier experiments will almost certainly die. So it's actually worse than just execution; it's torturous executed via experimentation.

[Liliet](#)

the point is the reason

Burdi

Why would masego and akua give all night to the sve nov after they get it all in their hand. Neither of them fond of the crow. It would more make sense to give night to cat, make her goddess one more. Part of it that made night immortal is Winter anyway so give it back to cat would be possible

[Liliet](#)

Because uh... Cat doesn't want it? Cat wants it with the crows? If you squint, you could argue crows are her subordinates she's delegated handling the drow and the Night to, so why would her best friends sabotage that? Masego has suggested switching contractors but Cat said no, I'm sure he might suggest it again but Cat'll just say no again.

erebus42

Yeah she didn't much like being a goddess and I doubt she has any real desire to be one again.

[Liliet](#)

I'm sure Masego agrees with DK's view that getting that back would be a step down for her.

shikkarasu

I'd feared alienation as the consequence of drawing on my mantle, all the while too far gone to realize I'd already estranged myself from everything that'd made me Catherine Foundling. Better to die than go back to it, I thought. To be nothing at all rather than be that. I closed my not-eyes.

"Mortal," I whispered. "To the end, whatever that may be."

Yeah, maybe not in her top three options.

Miles

Because it's the sloppy seconds of a failed/poorly executed apotheosis. They won't want it because they don't want it.

Juff

Typo Thread:

the side a > the side of a
if interest > of interest
and begin > and began
Yashala > Yeshala
have seen like > have seemed like
of large, > of a large,
to dwell into (seems like it should be more like retreat)
something, those > something; those
just see the > just seen the
singe > single
Yeshara > Yeshala
baring (not the right word. maybe pointing, wielding,
brandishing)
was striking > was a striking
recognize it > recognized it
against us. > against us."

guaranteed > guarantees
happened the > happened to the
its followed > its followers
"Is it your > "It is your
was buying > were they buying
it too many > if too many
had painted > had been painted
wall covered > wall was covered
and was quietly > and I was quietly
is it to be > is to be
first attempt > first attempts

Nick Chivas

Is it meant to be this?

Concerningly, though, I could see a fucking door. >
Concerningly, though, I couldn't see a fucking door.

[nineran](#)

No, because a door is clearly a trap.

Amostyx

Possible typo

Concerningly, though, I could see a > Concerningly, though, I
couldn't see a

KageLupus

"Good," I grunted. "I'll go in front, Zeze behind me. Let's try
not to wake up Kavian, yeah?"

Settling into a single file line, Akua taking my cloak and
Masego hers, we passed the threshold of bones.

Unless I am not getting the plan, the party order should be
Zeze -> Akua -> Cat, but the description makes it sound like it
is Akua -> Zeze -> Cat

Zahariel

This chapter once again reminds me how dangerous the Dead King
is. I mean, he was able to convince a Drow proto-Eldritch
Abomination to trust him, despite the Drows having spent
centuries/millennias being terrified of him and actively avoiding
his territory. That's some good persuasion skills right there.
Or maybe the other side felt cornered and didn't have a choice ?

beleester

The Dead King published a how-to book on ascension to godhood – Kurosiv could be copying that rather than talking directly with the Dead King.

shikkarasu

A booby trapped how-to. Hells, he may have just made a new copy and let Kurosiv “steal” it.

[laguz24](#)

Masego ate that book and look where it got him. Actively trying to use that book’s instructions is an even worse idea.

[sengachi](#)

I’ll bet the Dead King seeded pieces of the ritual in his undead necromancers and let Kurosiv piece it together from “stolen” information, taken as Night and Secrets.

Raved Thrad

Forgive my ignorance, if that be it, but what happened to Jindrich? I have a soft spot for that insane nutter, and I’d been looking forward to seeing it in action again. Did it buy the farm somewhere and I forgot?

[sengachi](#)

I think it’s just on the frontlines happily murdering undead.

shikkarasu

I hope it harvests Night from a Crab-Forge. It deserves to treat itself.

mamm0nn

I disagree with Cat’s visions of how Kurosiv was eroding the apathy and that the new ways would inevitably win over the old ones. It’s what she wants to see and wants to believe, but these are inevitably different creatures with a different culture and different situations. She even remarked it several times herself that where some selfish Proceran prince was still just a regular man in the end, the most selfish and arrogant Mighty were also the most powerful who could have that attitude because of their power and experience.

This isn’t even about the mightiest also being the strongest by a wide margin, and that a ruler wouldn’t need a large army of loyal soldiers or the tithes of the people to continue ruling. The drow are a massively different species, to a point where all of Asmodeus’s teachings are downright worthless here to just apply to them. He would likely scold Cat himself if he’d see her apply

his human-oriented ideas onto a decisively different species that doesn't even care about gender. And she clearly doesn't know a lot about their culture still, let alone about the stuff she'd have to know to make a drow-version of Asmodeus's dissection of a human kingdom's ideals and soul.

If her ways were truly so good that they would soon make Kurosiv's outdated because hers would win out in the end, then that would've happened in the Underdark centuries ago. Even trapped in a cave led by goddesses that wanted the killing to continue, there would've been Mighty that would've improved the lives of the nisi simply because they could or wanted to. A millennium is a very long time, and any Mighty holding a position for a while would've had decades of sitting around having nothing better to do.

If the nisi being happy would've been a meaningful advantage, then some Mighty would've grown and spread the example. No such thing happened, or at least it never reached prominence while the Mighty fighting for themselves only was clearly working well. Whether it's the power difference of Mighty making the nisi's power insignificant (quite likely) or the drow mentality and morals being decisively different from the humans' (likely a factor), Cat's belief that her new ways will soon make a return to the old ways an inferior and foolish idea is foolish itself. And that is making me rather scared for whether her big 'I'm improving the world!' project will even last a decade.

Salt

In my opinion, Cat's reasoning is pretty sound to be honest. What the Drow currently are and have been are a moot point in the current scheme of things – the underdark arc and this arc is about them changing and growing as a people from the old ruins of their civilization. It doesn't make sense to me to say they're not going to culturally change as a people, in the middle of a story arc about them culturally changing as a people.

That's why the entire civil war is happening in the first place, in this short of a span, Drow culture has already become so far removed from what it was that there's an active rebellion against the Crows, and Drow like Kurosiv have begun to bestow power rather than letting it be earned the hard way. This would be unthinkable to the past hundreds of generations of Firstborn, yet here we are before even a decade of living on the surface.

There isn't much basis to say Drow culture over the past millennia has served them well either. The Drow right now aren't a Great Civilization, they're the ruin of one. They're the bloated, fetid corpse of a once-great people that sat in the underdark rotting for a Millenia. They didn't grow, they

didn't progress, they accomplished nothing but bleeding their own peoples and degenerating into pitiful things that the original Empire Ever Dark would be horrified with. There's no reason to worship the old ways now that they're no longer isolated, and every Drow can see for themselves that the old ways have caused them to fall so far as to be barely eye level with species the old empire once considered *cattle*.

As far as how they're going to change, there's lots of good reason to believe Catherine's predictions make sense. The fact that so many Heroes and vengeful Villains specifically become Named because average people were being pushed too far and too cruelly proves it. For that to become such a major and universal Story Trope in the Guideverse, it has to happen with such consistency and frequency across every culture and generation that it carves the pattern into the face of Creation itself. Even among Non-Humans like the Dwarves, you see it in Named like the Herald.

At the end of the day, the simple fact of the matter is that people like Kurosiv fall apart the first time that they don't win. Meaning they're sure to go down in flames eventually, as always winning is the territory of Above, not Below. The Drow need to be led by individuals who make sure they they always get their due, instead of wasting lives and effort in a futile effort to always win.

mamm0nn

I'm not saying there's going to be no cultural change, I'm saying that Cat's specific vision of change is incredibly naive and that she has no proper knowledge and experience with drow to even try predicting their kingdom and culture a decade down the line.

This is a big difference in opinion between you and me, I can already tell. I see you even expect Above to factor into this, something that is definitely not going to happen for the literal Night-worshipping drow. They, similar to the orcs and goblins, will remain wholly Below-worshipping and getting no Heroes to rise up to cause this Evil Loses habit that you're talking about. Similar to the orcs, they can remain repressed for centuries by big evil guys.

As the drow Mighty are both very big and strong as well as something that any nisi could one day become (rather than being chosen for like a Name), they hold a natural leadership position here. In this culture, Below can and will win by having the strongest lad around, it's their very religion. Kurosiv and his Mighty don't even care for this cultural change you're speaking of, they're just seeing their own power and influence wane and decided to do whatever suits them best instead. Nothing to do with the drow culture in

specific, just their own immediate desires. And as they are the most powerful around, unless there's someone even stronger like Cat around to actively enforce this then they'll just make their Might is Right.

Christian Oaks

Calling it now, the towers are meant to take the night to the deadking giving him back the ability he lost in death-learning through the use of night theft from others

ohJohN

(I'm dying at 'Asmodeus' 😊)

I think Cat explains her reasoning well in this chapter, and she addresses a lot of your points. I also think you're vastly underestimating how *different* the situation in the Everdark was compared to now.

Her way wouldn't have been successful in the Everdark because that was a closed system, with constant, zero-sum fighting over the nicest ruins which "reinforced the order of things: fight well, gain Night, live better." That became a stable equilibrium, in part because the Crows – the source of Night, the best available tool for improving your life – actively encouraged it, to ensure enough sacrifices to keep their species alive. Sigil-holders weren't just "sitting around having nothing better to do": you have to raid for supplies, defend your territory from constant attacks, and keep increasing your Night to avoid rival sigil-holders (or your own lieutenants) eating you. Focusing on non-Mighty too much would see your sigil outcompeted and wiped out; building anything beyond the bare minimum for survival (e.g. mushroom farms) just puts a target on your back. Nisi didn't have much of a choice, or better options, and after some centuries very few drow would even remember a different way of life.

Now, on the surface, things are VERY different. The Crows are no longer trying to keep their people divided and constantly at war with each other, even backing the Iserre tenets to enforce some degree of cooperation. Resources aren't as scarce – there's woods full of food and lumber and room to spread out, there's other races and nations to trade with – so it's no longer necessary to fight amongst each other to survive (even counterproductive, with a shared external threat). Without that intense competitive pressure, nisi now have more choices than "get treated like garbage by Mighty" and "get wiped out", and Cat has shown them a workable alternative with tangible results. These alternatives are *possible* now, and as long as they remain so, I think her prediction is pretty plausible.

Underneath it all, I don't think drow are so very different from other races. Definitely shaped and scarred by their circumstances, their culture and beliefs twisted by centuries of conflict and isolation and scarcity. But we've near-exclusively seen the perspectives of Mighty: a small minority, the ones best adapted to that environment, most likely to buy into its vicious mindset. I don't think the average nisi is irreconcilably different from the average goblin or orc – and Cat's general lessons about *people* have, for the most part, applied to those races as much as humans.

Abrakadabra

So Kurosiv is playing the Saruman game. Join the dark lord and rule together/in competition with him. Either that or he is already a flesh puppet of DK.

Sir_Immith

"One cannot make an earring of a Secret, darling," she replied.
For sure she knows this for a fact because it's been tried

Chapter 46: Penultimate

"So spoke Maleficent: 'To sit this throne is to be debtor and indebted: I owe and am owed, tethered by the oath that raised me. Let this empire forget not it took myriad hands to raise the Tower.'"

– Extract from the Scroll of Chains, first of the Secret Histories of Praes

I sometimes felt like the shepherd from the stories, stumbling on the half-buried lamp and rubbing it so I might ask the djinn for wishes.

Though there were two wonder-makers in Serolen and neither were bound to anything as dingy as a lamp, it was still betting it all on their ability to make my wish come true: usurp Kurosiv's apotheosis ritual without killing thousands, if not millions, of Firstborn. Sve Noc had allowed me time to find a solution, a way other than them rolling up their sleeves and getting into a death match with their would-be devourer, but what was the point if the medicine was as brutal to the drow as the disease?

If the deaths were inevitable the Sisters would choose their talons over faith in Hierophant's works, whom they neither liked nor trusted. They'd been clear about that much. I had been given much authority as First Under the Night, but ultimately I was not a queen here for all that they called me one. I was a councillor and it was not my place to decide how they were to defend their godhead, or what fate they would countenance for their people. It was frustrating to have my hands tied, but I knew that to be unfair.

I had kept myself in check in Praes because there was still so much about that land I did not understand, too much to have the right to make the decisions I wanted to, and every bit of that was a hundred times as true in Serolen. It still left me restless. Ysengral and Rumena did not need me to fight their defence against the traitors for them, a kind of warfare I had little experience in besides, and unless either of the Traitor Generals came out to fight I wasn't needed for muscle either.

It left me in the uncomfortable position of being the highest-placed person in Serolen after Sve Noc in principle, but having very little to do in practice. Instead of going around chewing at my nails I turned to the Losara, the sigil I had founded in the Everdark and charged with the duty of priesthood and oathkeeping. The numbers of it had increased tenfold under Ivah's careful stewardship, but unlike any other sigil inexistence its numbers were spread out all over Firstborn territory – there weren't that many of them in Serolen, but then they weren't supposed to be fighting anyway.

It was not unlike holding court back in Laure, handling petitions to the crown. My Lord of Silent Steps had affairs in hand, not unexpectedly, so it was the matters related to my title of First Under the Night that were asked of. Which left me sitting with a bearded old drow who looked about to keel over. Its wheezing was not to enough to deceive me into thinking it weak, though: its presence in the Night burned, powerful among the rylleh of the Losara.

"This one would not dare question the designs of one so high," Mighty Trokel said, "yet it is not time, Losara Queen, for your words to be set down?"

"You want a book out of me," I said, almost amused.

Their fate of their entire race was in the balance and yet they wanted a holy book out of me. Mighty Trokel inclined its head in agreement, another Mighty – a younger one called Solvobod, my purple paint not covering only its face but instead its entire bare torso – picking up the thread.

"It is known that the First Under the Night has no time to spare for setting down its sayings," Mighty Solvobod said, "and this is only sensible."

"Of course," I drily agreed. "And?"

Much hemming and hawing as they tried to figure out how not to offend me with their request, until I got it out of them: they wanted to assign me a scribe, someone to set down my words and ask me questions whenever I had the moment. A tortured compliment about my being a skilled speaker of riddles was unravelled down to the blunter bone of them being aware that I usually only taught through conversation, so they figured the only way they'd get a book out of me was someone actually following me around and doing that.

I wasn't exactly eager at the prospect and made it clear that certain conversations would be barred, which they fell over each other to agree, but they weren't *wrong* to ask this of me. I'd been named First not because the Crows thought I had a knack for religion but because I was well placed to serve as a herald and advisor, someone who could help them fit the Firstborn in the complicated tapestry of the Burning Lands, but I was their high priestess. I could not leave only silence behind me.

"And I suppose you've already a scribe in mind for that?" I asked.

"This one offers itself to the purpose," Mighty Trokel replied, stopping to wheeze halfway through.

I mulled over that. It was rylleh, so it could be counted on to get out of the way without dying pointlessly when fights came. I glanced at Ivah.

"Mighty Trokel has some renown as a chronicler," my Lord of Silent Steps noted.

An endorsement, in other words, but I was not satisfied.

"How old are you, Trokel?" I asked.

The old drow looked surprised. While it was nowhere as aged in looks as Rumena it lacked the bland agelessness of most its kind, so I'd bet a couple of centuries at least.

"This will be my six hundred and thirty-third year, Losara Queen," Mighty Trokel said. "I once thought to die an ispe, but had a stroke of fortune in war."

Meaning it'd gotten to harvest a motherlode of Night and found its lifespan significantly expanded, but gotten stuck looking older and never bothered to change the look. Six hundred and

thirty-three years, I thought, the vast majority of which it would have spent as rylleh or close. The highest of the Mighty, save for those who ruled over even Mighty.

"Ivah," I said, "who is the youngest among the Losara?"

"I am uncertain," the silver-eyed drow admitted. "But I can know the answer in an hour's span, Losara."

It paused.

"Nisi, almost certainly," Ivah added.

Yeah, I'd figured it would be one of them. It was why I'd asked.

"Find out," I ordered. "I want called to me the youngest Losara who knows their glyphs."

Surprise, and not just from my steward among the Losara. They'd caught on quick.

"You mean to make them your scribe," Ivah said.

Trokel, I noted, had not dared to do the same. Perhaps fearing I would take it as insubordination and rip the life out of it.

"I will have two," I said. "Trokel, old and rylleh. And the other, young and nisi."

I met the old drow's eyes, saw how it looked like it was itching for a pen, and for a moment I was improbably reminded of Nestor Ikaroi.

"You stand high, Trokel," I said. "Sometimes that's the worst place to look at history from."

My Name thrummed in approval, pleased, and it warmed my veins. They bowed. I told them Trokel would begin following me as soon as the other scribe was found and that was the end of the petition, though I cut short entertaining another: word came through a runner that one of my wonder-makers had left the room where they'd been holed up in half a day.

It was time for me to have a talk with Akua Sahelian.

—

Akua had taken to wearing black since we'd come to Serolen, I'd noticed.

It wasn't enough to make her blend in with the Firstborn — that would have been difficult, when she had curves enough for a dozen of them — but it did make her stand out less than, say, Cordelia Hasenbach and her colourful riding dresses. Tonight it was a

loose, long dress with faint accents of gold swirling up the ribs she'd chosen to wear, paired with a cloak of the same cloth and a gauzy black veil that cascaded halfway down to her back. The veil was kept in place by a slender carved band of gold, one of the few pieces of jewelry she still wore nowadays.

It was far from the most alluring dress she'd ever put on, but there was something attractive about how obviously comfortable she was in the clothes. This was, I dimly realized, as dressed down as she'd probably been allowed to be back in Wolof. It would never do for a Sahelian to be *too* casual in their clothes, yeah?

"Now you stare," Akua said, sounding genuinely exasperated. "Should I just have put on a mutton's pelt a few years ago and called it a day, Catherine?"

Her wearing only a pelt actually sounded like something I wouldn't mind seeing in the slightest, but I decided that lying shamelessly was the best part of valour.

"Of course not," I lied. "I was just wondering where you've been keeping all these dresses."

"Pocket realms," she archly replied. "I forged one while in Praes and a second on the way to Salia."

I really should start using Night to do that, I noted, I had the capacity.

"Good to know," I said, then invited her to sit.

She did, still eyeing me with some irritation. Unlike me, who had to fold like a praying mantis, she somehow made sitting at the low tables the drow preferred a graceful thing. How she managed that with legs longer than mine I'd never be sure, but it was probably dark magic of some sort. I worked out a kink in my shoulder, then caught her eye.

"So," I said, "what's the verdict?"

"It is theoretically possible," Akua said, and I did not hide my relief.

"Casualties?"

"From taking back the Night?" she replied. "None."

"Masego was worried taking out the nails would kill them," I said.

"Masego has not powered rituals with sacrificed fae before," she retorted without batting an eye. "Winter's mark is still deep in the Night, Catherine, which resulted in some useful secondary

properties. Ripping out the nail would certainly result in death, but *dissolving* it is possible without killing the host."

I slowly nodded.

"And in the moments they're all left without Night," I began, then trailed off in invitation.

"If dawn comes to pass without it being restored, I imagine nearly all Firstborn save for dzulu and nisi would die," Akua mused. "Night *is* what extends their lifespan."

"So we'll be flipping the hourglass the moment we begin this," I muttered.

Which was a risk, but not an unacceptable one. I felt Sve Noc brush against my thoughts and cocked my head to the side, silently asking the question. A soft brush back, pregnant with intent. No, it wasn't a dealbreaker. *Good*.

"We've got divine blessing so far," I said, leaning forward. "So what do you need to get it done?"

There she grimaced.

"Living drow willing to let their nail be dissolved so we can find a method that will not have grave consequences," Akua said.

I nodded.

"We've sent out for volunteers and you already have a hundred," I said.

"We'll need Mighty, Catherine," she gently said. "They have a deeper connection to the power, it will react differently."

I clenched my fingers.

"They might have to be prisoners," I admitted. "We have some lined up for when it's been tried, but none want to be the first."

Sve Noc had so far declined to make it an order to one of their Mighty to lay down on the slab. I was both relieved and indignant that'd been their decision. On one hand, did they know what the stakes were? On the other, Gods, let there be at least one side in this nightmare that halfway deserved to win.

"The point of the procedure will not be to kill," Akua finally said, "but is a fine line, Catherine."

I grimaced.

"But no so fine," I said, "you won't walk it."

I was right and we both knew it. She looked away.

"What choice is there?" she asked.

"Always less than we'd like," I murmured, "and yet we go on."

The silence that hung between us was not restful. She was not happy, and I could not quite shake the metaphorical pebble in my boot.

"How many rituals is it that you've asked me now?" Akua idly asked, golden eyes returning to me.

There was an expression in them I found hard to read.

"Depends on how you count them," I hedged.

"You always dole out power and trust so freely," the dark-skinned sorceress. "I once believed that your great flaw, you know."

"Not anymore?"

Her lips faintly quirked.

"This ritual you ask, it will put in our hands a gift of the Gods Below themselves," Akua said. "How can you be certain neither of us will be tempted to claim it?"

"I can't," I admitted.

She leaned forward.

"How can you be certain it will truly do what we tell you it will?" she asked.

"I can't," I repeated. "Anymore than I can be sure Vivienne didn't spend the last few years undermining me as Queen of Callow, or that Hakram didn't use me to become the Warlord. It's impossible to know for sure, Akua. Some things you take on faith."

Her lips pursed. Not an answer that satisfied. I was, I suspected, being tested somehow. For what I could not know, but it behooved me to tread carefully.

"And should I decide that simply being handed trust and power to wield at your order is not enough?" Akua quietly asked. "That I, too, want to decide?"

My fingers clenched and slowly unclenched. A test, I thought, but a lie here would be a mistake. I met that golden gaze with my mismatched own, the eye I'd been born to and the one I'd lost, and breathed out. A year ago, I was not sure what I'd have answered. But today? I still remembered that moment in the

streets, looking at the dzulu in chains, and who it was that'd not been willing to walk away. Some things, I'd told her, you took on faith. But there was more to it than that, and that was the question that lay hidden behind those golden eyes. *Am I a prisoner on a longer leash, Akua was asking, or am I what you say I am?* One of us.

"Then I trust your judgement," I quietly replied.

Her face went blank. She nodded, curtly, and rose to her feet. Back to work, not that she even made the excuse, and as I watched her leave my stomach clenched. *Pivot*, I thought. Faint enough I'd not sense it. A personal one.

And it was too early to tell whether or not I'd regret the answer I'd just given.

—

I'd expected Cordelia to keep busy, given that she was not a woman prone to idleness, but I was surprised when the Losara watchers I'd put on her told me exactly how busy she'd been. Apparently her every waking hour was spent either meeting with sigil-holders or historians, her translators stuck as close to her as shadows. I caught her after a meeting with one of the rylleh of the Ysengral – no matter her old rank or recent exploits, she did not warrant the time of one of the Ten Generals – and got her to sit down long enough for a drink and a meal. Neither were of the kind of quality she must have been used to, but I did notice she dug into the pheasant with relish.

"I enjoy the taste of game," Cordelia admitted, "but I had to refrain in Salia. A noticeable preference for hunted birds would have drawn comment."

"Ah," I hummed. "The Lycaonese savage enjoying hunting too much would have been a bad look."

I received a thin smile that pretty much confirmed my guess. During the years where Cordelia was an outright foe, I'd never considered how fragile her position truly was. She'd pretty much won the Great War, that much was true, but the years of peace afterwards had been extremely dangerous to her. She was a Lycaonese ruling southern peoples who tended to dislike and dismiss her kind, walking a tightrope even when her victory had still been fresh. It was no wonder she'd had to be so careful with the perception of her, when you looked at what her reliable supporters had been.

The core of her backers were damn far from Salia on top of being the poorest, least populated and least influential of the principalities. The Lycaonese had proved in the wars then and since that their armies were the finest in Procer and punched

well above their weight, but she couldn't actually bring that strength to bear: most of it had to remain pointed north, keeping back either the Chain of Hunger or the Dead King. She'd built a bloc of southern supporters, sure but her majority in the Highest Assembly had never been large or solid.

It'd been only cleverness and her initial reserve of goodwill from winning the Great War that'd allowed her to push through her early reforms. Well, that and skillfully getting the people on her side. For a foreign savage come to the capital as a conqueror, however gentle of one, Cordelia Hasenbach had been impressively well-loved by the people of Salia.

"I was always surprised," I said, "that you never got the House of Light on your side. Gods know I would have had a priest standing at my side at every session of the court, if I could have found one willing."

I hadn't, or rather there'd been plenty willing to attend but none as my open backer. It'd been enough of a headache to find someone in good standing willing to anoint me as Queen of Callow, and I was still half-convinced that I'd only found takers because it'd been an open secret at that point that Praes and Procer were looking at the borders with hands on their swords.

"They courted me early in my reign," Cordelia admitted, "but what they wanted of me I was unwilling to give."

I raised an eyebrow.

"The seat in the Assembly the lost after the Liturgical Wars?"

Seemed like the likeliest prize. It'd been part of the bait that Scribe had used to get Holies to back the coup against Cordelia, a promise of restoring it made in Rozala Malanza's name.

"They were not so bold," the fair-haired princess chuckled. "They wanted me to exert my influence to make an exception to the foundational possession laws for the House."

I squinted at her, trying to remember what those were. I'd actually heard about those, Pickler had praised them in a report because of how easy they made it to build defensive bastions.

"Right, Lycaonese princes have different rights," I said. "No one can own land in your principalities except for the royal line, everyone else is renting."

"It is a little more nuanced than that," Cordelia said. "Some lands have been held in the trust of certain families for centuries, with written treaties between our royal lines and theirs that prevent revocation without certain conditions."

"So the priests were pissy about having to pay rent for their temples," I said, amused. "And you told them to stow it and keep paying."

A less generous woman than I might have called the expression she made at that a moue.

"The Holies wanted the right to hold lands and raise sovereign monasteries, as they do in southern principalities," Cordelia said. "I explained to them that the refusal to parcel royal rights goes back to the rule of the Iron Kings and is considered sacrosanct, but the frustration at being unable to secure a northern foothold is an old one."

She elegantly shrugged.

"Our relationship significantly cooled after that, though it was never outright hostile until events boiled over during the coup," the princess finished.

I grinned.

"And for that little piece of work you got to rip their fangs out," I said.

Vivienne had watched with attention and more than a little relish as the wealth and land of the Proceran House was methodically dismantled in the wake of that mess, noting that the priests even had to pretend to be grateful since she wasn't coming down on the actual people – it was the riches, the properties and the trades, that Cordelia had confiscated for the good of the war effort. In the years to come, the House of Light across the Whitecaps would find that it had a lot less coin to throw around when it wanted to get its way.

Like Vivs, I was already looking forward to the furious shrieking.

"It was only a matter of time until another First Prince did the same," Cordelia demurred. "Besides, your own religious adventures are rather more interesting."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"The House Insurgent is all you too, Hasenbach," I drily said. "I wouldn't have gotten so many firebrands on my side without the Tenth Crusade knocking at the gate."

"I meant a different sort of religion, First Under the Night," the princess amiably said.

"Eh," I shrugged. "The Crows and I came to agreement, that's all."

"There has been a great deal of speculation as to how you became high priestess of Night," Cordelia delicately hinted.

I rolled my eye at her.

"You can just go fishing openly, you know," I told her. "You've already made your oaths."

Hesitation. How rare for her to wear it so openly.

"Even though," Cordelia carefully said, "I yet hold the key to the ealamal?"

"Don't get me wrong," I said. "I really wish you'd smash that thing over your knee. But yeah, holding that doesn't mean you don't get your seat. In case you hadn't noticed, people having held – or holding – knives at my throat doesn't really disqualify them from sitting in my council."

"The Doom of Liesse's continued existence does indicate a degree of flexibility on your part," she conceded.

Sure, I thought, flexibility. Let's go with that.

"So what is it that you're actually curious about?" I asked, changing the tack.

"Much," she drily said, "but most as to how you successfully convinced Sve Noc to appoint you their high priestess. Rumours run wild, from your having triumphed over them to your souls having been melded."

The last one was actually not entirely untrue, which was a little disconcerting to consider.

"I headed for the Everdark after the talks went south in Keter," I said. "By then it was clear that Malicia and the Dead King intended war, which weakened your position, but my armies were battered and I was without allies. The Firstborn were the only Evil polity left, which made them pretty much the only candidates for getting help."

"So you did not intend priesthood from the start," Cordelia said.

I snorted.

"I thought I'd make a bargain with the Priestess of Night, not even knowing she was actually a they and not Named in the slightest," I said. "Only that went out the window almost immediately. Firstborn don't really negotiate with humans, and the Sisters were a lot more interested in Winter than anything I had to say. Besides, the Everdark was falling apart even without the dwarven invasion I arrived just ahead of. It was a fucking mess, Cordelia."

"Not the worst position to bargain from," she mentioned.

I grimaced.

"Winter," I admitted, "kept me frozen in the aftermath of one of the worst days of my life. I wasn't thinking as clearly as I could have. So after I realized I could make my own sigil and bestow fae titles, I struck a bargain with the Herald of the Deeps for the destruction of Sve Noc in exchange for the right to bring any drow following me to the surface as an army."

Utter surprise, though smoothed away quickly.

"You *fought* them?" Cordelia asked, leaning forward.

"I did," I said, "and they gutted me like a fish. I lay down on the ground to die, down there in Great Strycht, and only survived because they needed me to finish eating Winter. If Akua hadn't saved me then, Sve Noc would have slurped me up like tepid gruel."

I did enjoy the faint look of disgust she made at that lovely image.

"We had a shot at turning it around on them, after, but I'd had Winter ripped out of me by then," I said. "And I felt... freer for it. It'd broadened my perspective. So instead of continuing to fight like bears in the pit, I asked for their help."

I grimaced.

"Begged, really, when it came down to it," I admitted. "Because it was the only way out that wouldn't irreparably fuck one of us: someone being willing to lose, willing to bet on trust before it'd been earned."

She studied in silence, for a long time, and I felt uncomfortably naked under her gaze.

"Trust," she softly repeated. "It always comes back to that, does it not?"

"They repaid it in full," I said. "I've done a lot of things I regret over the years, Hasenbach, but that night in the deeps will never be one of them."

Blue eyes considered me.

"You call me both Hasenbach and Cordelia," the princess said. "Do choose one, Catherine, the irregularity grows irksome."

"That an invitation?" I teasingly said, cocking an eyebrow.

She met my eyes.

"It is," Cordelia frankly said.

I cleared my throat, surprised and a little embarrassed.

"All right," I croaked. "Cordelia."

Shit, I'd called her that before so why was using the name now making me feel like blushing? A change of subject was in order.

"I'm told you're sitting down with a lot of sigils," I said, perhaps a tad gracelessly.

She looked faintly amused but let it pass without comment.

"I have been trying to discern," she said as she tucked back her braid, "what lies ahead for the Firstborn."

My gaze sharpened.

"You want to know what kind of a neighbour Procer will be getting," I said.

"I love the Principate and always will," she admitted, "but in this I must embrace a broader perspective. When the war ends, Calernia will not be the same land it was when it began. What is it that the Firstborn seek as people, what are their needs and hatreds? I would understand, before negotiating the treaty with Sve Noc, what the place of the drow is to be in the coming centuries."

She was, I thought, probably the only ruler in the west that was actually pursuing that line of thought. There was a reason she'd made for a dangerous foe.

"And what did you find out?" I idly asked.

"You do not rule these people," Cordelia replied, blunter than was usual for her. "You are considered a manner of prophet, a religious symbol, but power is in the hands of the Ten Generals and the most powerful sigils – under the vigilant gaze of Sve Noc."

"My place as First Under the Night is temporary," I acknowledged. "I was appointed to guide the Firstborn in their settlement on the surface and serve as a vessel for necessary reforms, but I'm not meant to stay in the seat. I'll be surrendering the title at the end of the war, like all the others."

All except the last, the one that lived under my skin.

"You have steered them to a strong diplomatic position," Cordelia acknowledged, "but I fear that situation cannot last."

"You think they'll make themselves into a problem after the war," I said.

"The most troubling issue is that drow do not trade," she replied. "There is some barter, admittedly, but no coinage and no merchant class. Their society is turned towards subsistence and war, with few other pursuits."

"So Procer's stuck with a neighbour that's more interested in the Night gained through raids than anything that could be had in peace," I summed up.

"Building Serolen has already begun changing them," Cordelia noted. "That much is clear. Though Mighty keep to strict sigil divisions, nisi and dzulu living side by side wane in that perspective. I expect the tendency will end in larger sigils founding their own cities and sigil loyalties turning into city-state loyalties. By then, the needs inherent to feeding a city will ensure the development of some sort of internal trade – and thus a form of coinage and industry."

I hummed, not disagreeing. I doubted it'd be anywhere as clear-cut as what she was describing, but I didn't disagree with the thrust of the prediction. She underestimated, though, how much Night mattered to drow. War would always be a central part of who they were so long as the prize was there for them to fight over, no matter the other pressures.

"That form of the Firstborn state should prove a welcome trade partner to Procer," Cordelia said, "and so change the balance of power on Calernia indirectly – with less pressure from the north and northern principalities growing wealthier from the change, the Principate's energies will likely turn towards the Free Cities."

"Basilia will have," I mildly said, "very little tolerance for that."

"There will be war," Cordelia frankly said. "Not in our generation or the one after that, but in time it will happen. My hope is that the framework of the Grand Alliance will keep that war local and contained."

Optimism, I thought, but then I thought it was much too early to make predictions about what after the war would look like.

"So," I said, "your issue isn't with the drow in the long term. It's how they'll be during the..."

"Growing pains," she delicately suggested.

I snorted, but if the shoe fit...

"You're afraid they'll burn bridges before settling down," I pressed.

"It is the nature of the beast," Cordelia grimly said. "Before there can be city-building and trade, there needs to be an accumulation of wealth and food. Since you've taken measures to restrict the strength of the Mighty-

I gave her a very innocent look that she did not buy in the slightest.

"- then it will not be achieved by a sigil accumulating an overlarge amount of nisi and working them as effective slaves," the blonde princess said. "Given that the one resource the drow will have in abundance is skilled warriors, that leaves acquisition by force as their path forward."

And the Firstborn weren't fools, we both knew. They'd not keep raiding each other when the real wealth was south and still recovering, poorly defended.

"You can get ahead of that," I said.

"I will recommend that First Princess Rozala do so," Cordelia frankly said. "Lending the expertise of our merchants and farmers after some guarantees of safety would only be common sense. But that is, ultimately, a bandage wrapped around a slit throat."

That was, I suspected with an undercurrent of amusement, a Lycaonese expression translated into Chantant.

"There's another way for those warriors to gain wealth," I idly said.

She stared at me with piercing blue eyes.

"So you did foresee it," Cordelia said. "I thought you might have, when you backed the Praesi request to have those orc mercenary companies recognized under the Accords."

"You need them," I pointed out. "Even when we've dealt with Neshamah the undead will remain – they'll just be leaderless, roving bands instead of an army. And you have the manpower to take back the south and most the heartlands, but beyond that? Your armies are the worst off in the Grand Alliance."

"So you would have us hire mercenaries," Cordelia said, tone thick with distaste.

"It's your way out," I said, "and they'll need to be foreign. Procer's blown through its fantassins these last few wars and you won't have the people to spare to fill those ranks again because there'll be a massive amount of land to reclaim."

"And so we hire drow and orcs to claw back our lands," she said, "further strengthening their image as allies and not monsters out of legend while filling the coffers of their fledgling nations."

I smiled at her, though I couldn't lay claim to much praise over this. I had, after all, stolen Hakram's plan wholesale and fitted it to the Firstborn.

"And the goblins?" Cordelia pressed. "Princess Vivienne has already announced that Callow will open its borders to them, which I believe to be your work."

"Don't undersell her," I mildly replied.

She'd not needed any convincing at all, even though we'd both known it would make the Matrons livid.

"There were attempts to poach my sappers, during the fight for Twilight's Pass," I noted. "I expect that now Callow has opened the gates, some of the attempts to bring in tribes will grow more serious."

"You want to make a world where they have roots everywhere," Cordelia quietly said, watching me. "Orcs, goblins, drow. You would drag them out of our bedside stories and give them places at our hearths."

I met her gaze.

"When I was nothing," I calmly said, "they backed me. Not the Matrons, not the Clans, but *them*. The greenskins, the rank and file. And when my back was against the wall, when I was lost and grasping for allies, I went into the dark and returned to Iserre at the head of an army of the Empire Ever Dark."

My jaw clenched.

"I owe them a lot, Cordelia," I said. "And I will pay every drop of that debt back, come Hells or high water."

If I needed to cut out parts of Calernia so the drow fit it better, I would. And I'd do the same for Robber's people, for Nauk's. Hakram and Pickler had found paths and if they needed them seared into the ground, well, it just so happened I was a deft hand with fire. In this, at least, I was yet my father's daughter.

"You have," Cordelia said, "one of the most vicious conceptions of loyalty I have ever known."

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"And?"

"I do not entirely dislike it," the princess admitted.

She finished the last of her dessert – a sort of pudding whose main ingredient was, I believed, a kind of fermented algae – and set aside the silver spoon.

"You have my thanks, Catherine," she said.

"What for?" I asked.

"I believe," Cordelia smiled, "that I now know the bargain Sve Noc will accept."

—

Two days later, in the depths of the temple-fortress, a Mighty lost their Night without dying.

Now it was all over except for the violence.

[Droughtbringer](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

gingerlygrump

EE, you are one of the best writers I've had the pleasure of reading.

megaprr

Aaaaaaaaand horny cat remains horny

Levir

It's an integral part of her being. To be horny at the most inappropriate times.

erebus42

Horniness cares little for context, it knows only desire.

Black Spiral Dancer

Hornyness is. The rest has to try to be.

Metalshop

I'll admit, I teared up for the part about the greenskins.

LInnus42

Not sure the analogy works between Akua and Viv and Hakram. For Hakram, there was never any clear path to him becoming to Warlord until it kinda fell into his hands. For, Viv eh Cat still had the Army and enough intelligence on her own to know what Viv was doing locally.

[Liliet](#)

Vivienne is the head of the intelligence network. Catherine literally receives intelligence FROM her. This has always been a HUGE leap of trust ever since Book 3.

Linnus42

She has the Drow if she really wanted to check whatever Viv is doing.

She could also just get someone to scry Viv.

But the main issue is Viv doesn't really gain anything backstabbing Cat during the middle of the wars if she going to get power anyway.

So not especially equivalent to me.

Onos

It's fascinating the way you persist in contradicting the author.

ninegardens

I mean... she *didn't* have the drow back when she essentially said "Vivian, go back to callow and act as queen for 6 months, I'm visiting the everdark. Hopefully I come back"

Agent J

You mean the drow she didn't use against humans until Book 5? This somehow delegitimizes the trust she's had in the Spymistress she hired in Book 3? The same Spymistress she doesn't appoint as her heir until, again, Book 5?

I'd say there was plenty of time to sabotage if Vivienne were so inclined, and as for reasoning, she could have easily pointed to a myriad of red lines Catherine's crossed since her joining. Starting from keeping the Doom of Liesse to knocking on the Dead King's door.

[Liliet](#)

What Agent J said.

"Does not gain anything" is in the eye of the beholder. You know, like how Kurosiv doesn't ACTUALLY stand to gain

anything by betraying Sve Noc to the Dead King, because the Dead King is 99% guaranteed to eat him while Sve is actually loyal to her people?

Tohron

...and even if the Dead King doesn't betray it, all the destinations they could supposed flee to from Calernia are already occupied by civilizations that make everyone except the dwarves look irrelevant.

dadycoool

When she was a tavern wench, the greenskins kept her safe from the humans. When she was drowning, it was the creatures of pure darkness that reached out and breathed life into the corpse she was inhabiting. The orcs love her because she loved them first, the goblins adore her because she adopted so many of their traits, and the Drow very nearly worship her because she gave everything to them.

onedollargum

More Cat insight, nice!

And we get scribes! Will they contribute to the practical guide?

spencer

We already have many quotes from the book, so yes.

I am looking forward to a scribe interlude though!

Miles

We have quotes from before they even joined, too.

Cpt. Obvious

I think I remember quotes from Vivian, Queen of Callow, and I have a feeling Hakram were quoted. There's a nagging feeling that there were a quote attributed to Indrani, but I'm very uncertain as I don't remember it being flippant enough to be something she'd say, and I can't imagine some poor scribe would dare to sanitize the language used by Archer or perhaps Ranger.

edrey

Cat in all her glory, vicious with a big heart.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Big to fit more viciousness. 😊

jamesc9

"You have," Cordelia said, "one of the most vicious conceptions of loyalty I have ever known."

That's impressive, given that she's a northerner.

Juff

Typo Thread:

inexistence > in existence
it is not time > is it not time
Their fate > The fate
hawing as > hawing ensued as
up in half > up in for half
mused. "Night (extra space)
"but is a > "but it is a
But no so > But not so
Anymore than > Any more than
not sense it > not sensed it
sure but > sure, but
get Holies > get the Holies
they priests > the priests
form the north > from the north

[Liliet](#)

God, so adorable. I kept wondering where Cordelia was the last couple of chapters!

Aaaaaaaa cu... te...

(both Akua and Cat)

man, and Cat has really embraced the idea of "trust is when even if the person betrays you, you'll just assume they had a good reason / find that an acceptable outcome too". Fucking... beautiful, yo.

[Sugar Roll](#)

I vaguely remember a couple of books ago that I made a prediction about Akua betraying Cat when she even the scales—possibly after saving millions of lives. Well, Akua may very well save millions of drow soon. I hope my prediction is proven wrong because I'm growing fond of her.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, that's not how it works. The scales cannot be evened. Saving these people doesn't bring those other ones back.

[Sugar Roll](#)

No, it doesn't but at one point she thought that way. Did she change her mind about it? Maybe but I'm not entirely convinced and I guess we'll find out later. She has already proven she has no qualms about switching sides during the Praes campaign so it won't come as a surprise if she does so again in the future.

Rey d'Tutto

Nope onna Rope.
If anything, Akua is Contrite.
I'm wondering if she's still a Villain.

Dome Zasrekh

The world did give her Hero support before...

mavant

An interesting philosophical question: Would literally bringing those people back even the scales?
Sure, nobody knows how to do that at the moment, but if there's anyone who could figure it out it's probably the Akua/Masego/Neshamah think tank.

Salt

Well, imo probably impossible, considering the question of whether or not it evens the scales is dependent on the moral perspective of the person or entity being asked the question. It's really a question of commensurability of value in terms of lives and the opinion of the moral system of belief regarding it.

The Choir of Contrition? "You will not be forgiven" is one of their catchphrases, they don't believe in commensurability of pretty much anything past a certain point. The scales will never be even.

Mercy? Would literally eat a baby to save the lives of two babies. They only consider suffering or the lack of as value. If you've lessened suffering in the world overall, the scales are even and then some.

Below? You can always even the scales, but the price is going to be taken out of your hide, and they decide how much weight your sacrifices put on the scale. As far as whether they have any sort of impartiality or whether it's based on whatever they feel like, we have no idea.

Cat and current Akua though, the answer is more or less no, the scales cannot be evened for that kind of a genocide. Both their senses of morality takes the concept

of the value of a life being incommensurable, and applies it very strictly when it comes to needless mass deaths.

Salt

Or I guess badly phrased, it'd be more accurate to say it's about how much weight is placed on the act of taking a life in the first place

Miles

If death weren't death then her actions wouldn't be that big a deal in the first place.

DC

Trust is seeing so deeply and believing so truly in another's goals that seeing them achieved at the expense of your own is still a victory

[Liliet](#)

yessssss

Salt

> "I owe them a lot, Cordelia," I said. "And I will pay every drop of that debt back, come Hells or high water."

Somewhere out there, Below is all puffed up with pride.

Paying back the dues that were earned, come hell or high water, specifically in a way that's a step forward for them all and puts weight on the scales favouring them in their argument with Above.

SpeckofStardust

Considering the High priest of the below known as Kairos Theodosian has this to say on the matter of where Cat heart did lay.

The Queen of Callow still bore one of the strongest wishes he had ever seen, pulsing with her heartbeat: peace, peace, peace. It was like watching a flower bloom anew with every beat. Even now it was all he could do not to laugh until his throat bled, for what an exquisite jest it was that one of Below's finest servants in the long history of Calernia was at heart one of Above's!

-Interlude: Wicked

Zach

I like the dynamic between Catherine and Cordelia.

Wonder

Does this mean Cat has accepted she has lot control of her plan with Akua and is okay with that?

Liliet

Yup.

Catherine is great like that.

The point of the plan was always to do the right thing, and the right thing has clearly been accomplished.

Rey d`Tutto

Akua is a conundrum.

She knows the depth of her "sins". Her Atrocities will not be forgiven or forgotten.

She is a Contrite Diabolist Villian.

Contrition won't try to claim her, as She'd pwn der @\$\$.

That's a hard stop for Them. Like she wouldn't be prepared?

She's not gonna be a hero. She's a good Villain.

Michael Langridge

Above and Below don't seem to be aligned directly to Good and Evil to me. They seem to be more like Law and Chaos. So there's no reason you cannot have Good villains and Evil heroes. (Although they would tend to be the exception.)

MoreBeer

By strict D&D terms, yes. Heroes are defined by following the dictates of Above, whatever they may be and whether or not they are objectively Good. The prime tenet of Below is that you do as you will, if you are strong enough.

Those seem to fairly clearly define Law vs Chaos, with Good and Evil being only coincidental in alignment.

These sides are defined to us according to the Book of All Things and by Amadeus respectively IIRC, so they may not actually be the truth presented by the Gods Above and Below. Unreliable narration is a definite thing to beware of.

Myvekk

Good point, and the D&D similarity came to me afterwards as well. Above & Below put me more in mind of the philosophical difference in Babylon 5 though, where the Vorlons are 'do as we say', and the Shadows were 'do what you want'.

'Do what you want', does not have to be selfish, but usually is. And 'do as we say' can become, 'the ends justify the means'.

Insanenoodlyguy

She accepted that a while ago. It's admittedly still possible for the plan to work, but the shape of it is much different now. The situation where Akua would for sure walk that path was dashed the moment she set that throne on fire.

[Sugar Roll](#)

I wonder what kind of deal Cordelia has for Sve Noc. She will be essentially asking the drow to be neighbors with dwarves again. The drow was evicted out of their lands the last time that happened. It would be interesting to see how that plays out.

Agent J

And forceful eviction was the gentle option. The Dwarves came to genocide them. If the Drow are half as spiteful as Callowans, that's not a slight they're soon to forget.

Salt

I think the offer is going to be a guarantee to allow harvest of Proceran dead to add to the Night. Death row prisoners with learning, corpses of scholars and craftsmen after they come to their natural end, some degree of freedom to harvest Night from the fallen when working as mercenaries, etc...

The reason that the Drow withered in the underdark was because they hardly created or added anything to the Night other than more knives. All they did was steal from each other, sometimes losing precious secrets in the process, and every passing year diminished them a bit more. They ended up with an abundance of secrets to kill each other with and a lack of secrets to build or create with, as well as being so isolated that they had no way to grow by harvesting or learning from other cultures. If Cordelia offers them a steady supply of harvested skills and knowledge, even from the corpses of mundane Proceran scholars, warriors, craftsmen, and leaders, that kills several birds with one stone for everyone.

On the Drow side, the direct and obvious advantage it lets them start growing again. The less obvious advantage is that it broadens their view by having a flood of new knowledge and skills added to the Night. They'll start to see the power and value of secrets that have uses other than killing each other for more secrets to kill each other with. They'll understand that they can become *worthy* in ways that don't have to do with killing or fighting. It opens the door to Drow starting to

craft and research on their own again, and eventually having Mighty equivalents of Named like the Bitter Blacksmith or the Concocter, instead of every single one being the a dark elf version of the Red Knight. It naturally sets them back onto the path of once again becoming the 'Empire Ever Dark', instead of forever continuing to be the 'Squabbling Savage Tribes Ever Dark'.

For Procer, this pretty much strangles the Drow threat before it can really become a threat. The knowledge from harvested Procerans doesn't just empower Drow, it brings inevitable understanding of Proceran culture and perspectives. It lays the groundwork for a co-dependent ally that cannot afford to war on Procer, as they gain far more from a friendly relationship, as well as more concrete gains in payment via mercenary work. The Drow will never manage to be united in wanting to destroy Procer – due to so many of them being familiar with, gaining benefits from, and even possibly being fond of Procer. Not unless the Sisters themselves push for a war on Procer.

Furthermore, the cost to Procer as a nation is basically nothing. They don't practice necromancy in the first place, what the hells are corpses worth to them other than being a drain on their economy to bury and manage? Suddenly this useless burden becomes an incredibly useful bargaining chip that turns a potential foe at the door into a neutral-at-worst ally-at-best neighbor.

I think it would be a fitting Cordelia-esque deal imo, especially with the whole trust thing that was the topic in this chapter. This perfect solution only works on the premises that Cordelia trusts the Crows to keep to terms after she's dead and gone, if one day Procer grows vulnerable again and the firstborn grow great. After all, the whole countermeasure to neutralize the Drow threat completely fails if the Sisters decide otherwise, simple as that. Trust extended and benefit given on a leap of faith, just like Catherine did when surrendering Winter.

ninegardens

That's... politically/culturally *weird* (for the procians), and I'm sure many wouldn't be keen giving their bodies to an evil polity...

BUT

I could see this working.

I mean, gawd- imagine that as a retirement scheme: "If you are skilled in life, than in your old age, you can go visit a resort town up north, and get pampered for a few years, before having your arts gifted to a younger generation in your death". The Drow have every incentive to make the resort

town appealing, that the craftsmen would have nothing but gain from it.

The fact that it ties nations together just makes the whole thing kind of utopian.

Sugar Roll

In my mind, I imagine Cordelia offering the services of the house of light to help cleanse the remains of the kingdom of the dead after the war. Most of the territory is corrupted and it's a win-win for both parties. The drow will get more out of their territory while the house of light can use the opportunity to mend their reputation and regain their influence.

Xinci

The Drow(at least with current Night) have an interesting situation in that they may form an agricultural and trader class in a more diverse and more emergent fashion than human analogues. The land they have been given is ruined, but a blank slate, so even if Proceran agriculturalists and merchants come to give them their own paradigms they may find the Drow grow a network of relations through sigils fairly quickly. The existence of a thing like Kavian implies a distinct level of potential when it comes to affecting a specific parcel of land and for sigils to form symbiotic interactions through the Night with that area and the type of life inhabiting it. Especially if Night could perhaps be generated from such mutualistic compacts over time since it may be taken from the living without killing them. Given they will be close to the plains of hunger there is a lot of interesting potential interactions with both the ratings and its tough grasses, when it comes to Night harvesting. Its likely that if introduced to alchemist the Night's ability to at fuel the growth of biological matter, could either be sectioned into particular Secrets for modification and growth given directly by Sve or Secrets perpetuated by the study of extant ones, perhaps with purveyance of additional related information and sharing of it encouraged by Catherine and the Losara with Sve Nocs approval. Basically, the potential of the Night and the state of the land may mean that the Drow agricultural and trading classes may dynamically self form to a pressure long term to develop unique strains of flora(likely fauna too since they appear to have brought their animals with them) that would induce various types of trading and sigil formation around those strains. Such things are fairly likely as they spend more time in the area and terraforming efforts in the formerly devastated Keteran regions consolidate themselves. It is a rather interesting change up in pattern for the formation of city-states since baseline needs could become drastically different depending on the method of

Night usage and their distribution. Naturally though will depend highly on the state of Sve Noc by the end of this.

Also, I suppose it's good that Cat will have a scribe. It's unfortunate, that her wordings will be contested in the future.

Her conversation with Akua and Cordelia does sort of line up why she didn't properly form a council with Akua and Masego to help reformat stuff so this all of the things Sve did to forestall this wasn't way too late or done after she lost her powerbase. It appears that Cat formed a boundary on communication and as such was willing to not attempt to get a proper informational framework for their survival beyond immediate threats. ie. She didn't bring in Akua or Masego since Sve mistrusted them and she allowed that state of relations to continue instead of doing the potentially risky thing based on trust to mediate communication between those parties and grow proper channels of communication to forestall future issues. Which has honestly been a pattern with Cat on subjects like this

[Liliet](#)

You need to watch for occasions to use paragraph breaks more when on platforms like wordpress. Oof.

Anyway this is VERY interesting yea.

And Catherine cannot "properly facilitate communication" between ALL parties that could possibly use it, especially given that for Sve Noc to trust Akua and Masego like they trust Cat, Akua and Masego would need to allow them to access their memories and also thoughts in an ongoing fashion, which they, uh. Won't. So that's not a very productive avenue of inquiry.

Xinci

I mean the alternative was a single contingency that failed. A lack of attempts and the consequences therein show that inaction was just as bad as actual attempts to explain issues with the given methodology. If trust is an issue then it must be built and maintained through proper explanations of the situation and context therein.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, when did Cat's inaction bring negative consequences? I'm failing to follow the chain of events you're implying.

KageLupus

I wonder if Akua is on her way to forming another Name, now that she is firmly on the path of working off her past crimes. I feel like she has spent the last few years in an existential state

that didn't really allow it. But now she has a body and is basically back to being human (as opposed to a Winter construct or Night shade) *and* she is starting down a new narrative path.

Ever since she was back in Praes, Akua has been feeling the moral pull to do good and help those in need. She is still ruthless enough to fit in with the Woe when it is called for, but risking the mission to save sacrifices shows a significant shift in personality. That alone probably isn't enough to merit a Name but it also fits in with the general pattern of the Woe.

The Woe are pretty well defined by change and growth, as people and also as Named. Each of them have transitioned through Names even when those Names aren't considered to be transitory (Adjutant -> Warlord, Archer on her way to being Ranger). Akua also had a transitory Name, but by the time she "joined" the Woe she was already the Diabolist. So her journey is more like Diabolist -> shade -> normal (ish) Human -> new Name.

That might look like a stretch, but it is basically the same journey that Vivienne had to go on to become the Princess. First she was an enemy, then she joined up, eventually lost her Name, and then assumed a new role and the Name that came with it. Akua doing the same thing doesn't seem impossible given that kind of precedent.

Given that her new role is something like "help those in need to atone for my past sins" I would expect a future name to be something like the Penitent Shade or something along those lines. (I know she isn't a shade anymore but the Name is cooler that way). She could get Aspects that help her find people who need help, or to contain powerful forces since Cat has been grooming her for that as well.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Akua is doing this "to atone to past sins". Cat has driven in with a sledgehammer that that's not a thing. She's just doing this because it's what she wants to do / feels like doing / likes.

Sinead

This is also why Contrition doesn't fit. Akua isn't focused on her past sins like William was. She is focused on making the best out of today for a better tomorrow.

....

dusts of Compassion!Akua hype train

[Liliet](#)

yssssssss

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Yeah, less "Contrition", more " This looks broken. I can fix it."

mavant

Akua's new name is Bob The Builder.

Miles

Yeah, Ubua sounds sorta like Bob.

Ubua the rebuilder

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

And we should call Cat "Al"
Apologies to Paul Simon.

Santiago A Duarte

God it's really hard to describe how high the peaks of EE's storytelling are. I hope you don't take it harshly if I say that you're not the best technical writer ever, not bad, certainly, but not a master of the English language.

What you are is arguably the best storyteller I've ever read. Part of that is the privileges that come with writing millions of words and everything that you can set up in those, but that's a difficult thing itself. The narratives crafted in PGTE are second to none, the sheer number of characters and stories I care about so deeply is ridiculous. And when you get to the big payoff chapters like the fall of Hainaut, it's some of the best experiences I've ever had with any form of media.

All of this is to say thanks, before this series ends so painfully soon. It's been a source of joy for years, and a truly excellent story.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Agreed.

I read a lot.

In my youth, I'd read the cereal box ingredients list if I forgot my book at breakfast.

Tolkein, Asimov, Heinlein, Clarke, etc. were what I "cut my teeth" on.

This fiction and its use of Trope are Tight.

As far as free web serials are concerned, this Work is equal to that of the authors I listed above.

There are three webserials I count as my favorite, and this is one.

[308924810a](#)

"The Holies wanted the right to hold lands and raise sovereign monasteries, as they do in southern principalities," Cordelia said. "I explained to them that the refusal to parcel royal rights goes back to the rule of the Iron Kings and is considered sacrosanct, but the frustration at being unable to secure a northern foothold is an old one."

I'm honestly surprised none of the Lycaonese ever reversed this privilege in order to cut a deal which would allow them to field more casters.

To my understanding they've traditionally been caster-deficient, and given the Dead King's recent use of swarms, thus not actually credibly capable of defending themselves if he takes attacking them seriously(the only effective method the Grand alliance has found to counter swarms of undead insects and birds is casters using area-of-effect effects). They can't build up more bloodlines of mages because the Dead King keeps killing them all, but the capacity to cast Light seems to be more about the proportion of people with the right mindset in a population, and the degree of willingness of Angels to invest power.

It might be possible to scale up in less than a generation of time just by increasing religious education and the angels seeing a need, and any ownership of monasteries without revocation of ownership rights could be tied to treaties requiring that the House send a certain number of Light wielders north to fight Evil every year or decade or maintain their own version of the order of the White Hand or something.

Not sure whether this is Lycaonese being dumb about prioritizing ancient rights, some weird artefact of their method of centralizing their administration to raise a superior army, or some sort of supernatural cultural legacy of the Iron Kings not being firmly committed to Above(what with the Iron kings possibly ruling as Tyrants).

KageLupus

Lycaonese know better than to make strategic plan based on political dealings, especially with the soft and untrustworthy southerners. The last thing you need are a bunch of non-soldiers who don't owe you allegiance or fully appreciate your mission getting underfoot. Only thing worse would be them sandbagging in fights or outright failing to live up to their part of the treaty.

Sure you can probably deal with them breaking the treaty, but then you are spending time and money and political power on something that didn't help stave off the Ratlings or DK so why

even bother? Better to just keep charging rent and making money and using that to supply your armies since you know you can trust your people. The lack of mages is an issue but at least it is one they can work around themselves. Bad faith political dealings are a lot of work for little gain, comparatively.

Miles

It's not like the south had any more or better casters worth the trade.

The house of light were famously noncombatants early on, at least until the opportunity to fight things other than the DK/Ratlings came along.

mavant

In before the Drow develop an economy based on ~~forged~~ ~~madra~~ Night tokens.

They already use it as their primary store of value, they just need to use it as a means of exchange.

Furthermore, they could use not just raw Night, but Secrets, as tokens of exchange. From the Latin root, that would be... Cryptocurrency.

Meela

Groooaan

Evgeny Permyakov

>My Name thrummed in approval, pleased, and it warmed my veins.

So, a cryptic mentor figure? Interesting.

Chapter 47: Hollow; Hallow

"And so the First Under the Night asked them this: do you know how to kill a god?"

– Extract from the 'Parables of the Lost and Found',
disputed Firstborn religious text

Trokel and Fania made for an odd pair.

The rylleh was wrinkled and wheezing, deceptively slow to the eye but moving with the measured grace of an old killer. The nisi was chubby-cheeked and painfully young, always offering up half-smiles of crooked teeth. It had been very honoured to be chosen as one of my scribes and told me often enough I could repeat the words back with the exact cadence in Crepuscular, accent and all. The dislike between them had been instant, though it was scholarly in nature and not personal. Trokel saw its duty as that of an apostle, squeezing out of my words and actions wisdom for all who partook in Night to follow. Fania was not interested in wisdom so much as stories, on the other hand, and did not write down near as much.

I'd grown, almost against my will, rather fond of their constant bickering. It made me a little homesick, but sometimes a touch of homesickness was good for the soul.

"They can't really be called heretics," Fania insisted, "as they do not deny the divinity of Sve Noc. They simply believe that Loc Ynan is the superior deity."

"That *is* heresy," Trokel informed it, glaring through rheumy silver eyes.

"Not until they've lost," Fania lightly replied. "They have not yet been proved wrong."

"You should have been used for mushroom-feed at birth," Trokel muttered.

"I'm just waiting for you to keel over and die, Old One," Fania grinned. "From nisi to rylleh in a breath, just imagine the songs."

It was almost like I'd been trained to look fondly on a mouthy, playful soul pulling at the pigtails of an opiniated scholarly sort. Gods, I missed Indrani. She had a knack for pulling me out of my thoughts when I got stuck in them, making it all lighter. And Masego missed her too, because I couldn't think of another reason he'd have brought a frankly terrible wooden sculpture of a duck to Serolen. But he had his work and I had mine, so we soldiered on. Now that the spell formula for the ritual had been created and the groundwork to use begun, we had gone on war footing: it was only a matter of time until strife erupted across the canals, and both sides were moving their forces in place.

Unfortunately for us, we had more than just Kurosiv and their schemes to worry about.

Ivah was seated when I entered the room it used as an office, holed up behind an elegant little Proceran bureau that was painted in bright enough colours that your average Alamans craftsman would have rather hanged themselves than be associated

with it. Procerans tended to leave bold colours to banners and clothes, finding them rather gauche on furniture. I waved it down as it began to rise, scribes following behind and bowing almost as low as they did for me, but it insisted on getting up and holding out my chair for me. It had cushions, I noted with pleasure, and given the general drow disregard for those they'd likely been added just for me.

It was the little things, sometimes, but sadly we didn't have time for idle chatting.

"You've got news, I'm told," I said.

The Sisters had already given me vague impressions, but we were in agreement that unless they'd looked at something with their own eyes a report usually better served the purpose of keeping me informed.

"It is so, Losara Queen," Ivah agreed. "From both the southern front and the realm of Procer."

Ah, bad and worse.

"Start with Procer," I said. "At least that one's a disaster I'm used to."

"Arans and Lange have fallen," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "While Aisne buckles under the weight of the enemy, despite a worthy defence and reinforcements from Salia."

And that was only a short respite. The moment the dead digested their gains and raised them as fresh armies, the heartlands would collapse. We'd been aware from the start that the siege of Keter would be as much a race against time as it was a fight against the Dead King himself.

"And the force that laid waste to Segovia?" I asked.

It was the army most worrying me, at the moment. It'd been bogged down by harassment at Segovian hands – they were apt sailors, as a people, and the Kingdom of the Dead was impotent at sea – but that was never going to last/

"It has burned a swath through Orense but ignored the south of that land," Ivah said. "Now it marches east."

Towards Aequitan, I saw after a moment to place the map of Procer in my head. We'd been afraid that the Dead King would just keep pushing south and hit Levant in an attempt to try forcing Dominion forces to return and defend their homes, but I was once more reminded that petty mortal politics were not something Neshamah cared for. Because I could see what he was actually doing, with the Principate's span laid out in my mind, and it was

a fundamentallu different way of thinking. That southern army wasn't there to win ground, it was there to sweep the south clean of every city of more than ten thousand souls.

That was why he'd ignored the south of Orense, which was sparsely populated because of constant skirmishes with the Dominion.

I could see the trajectory in my mind's eye. That army would go through Aquitan, then dip south for Valencis and resume east into Salamans. *You'll even ignore Tenerife at first, won't you? It'll be there for you to pick up when you move on the League.* He'd just march the army north, afterwards, into densely populated Iserre, and by then two thirds of Procer would be undead. Neshamah didn't think of this as war, not really, but though I'd already known that I had never felt it quite as keenly as when I saw traced out in my mind the extermination of Procer.

He was just getting rid of the vermin, sweeping the Principate clean of life before getting to Levant and the Free Cities.

"I took two generations of Callow and garbed them in steel, taking them to die on foreign fields," I mildly said. "And still we'll come out of this war the lucky ones. It's easy to forget that, sometimes."

I shook my head, clearing it of the dark thoughts. We were not yet done.

"And our front?" I asked Ivah.

The Lord of Silent Steps looked grim.

"There as well the Hidden Horror looms tall," it told me. "General Radegast caught an army within a Gloom-shard last night and destroyed it to the last, but we lost General Radosa to a pair of demons on another field."

Fuck, I thought. And the Hushed Dread had always been so good at getting out in time. At this point the Ten Generals was turning into a boast of a title: there were barely any left, and too many of those traitors for comfort.

"Are we still losing ground?" I asked.

In other words, was the city itself at risk? Ivah equivocated with a wiggle of the palm, looking troubled.

"In truth, General Radegast has been going from victory to victory," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "The dead come at us in hordes, relentless but blunt and disorganized. Though we cannot afford to pull back forces, the Guest reports that we have a decisive advantage and a counterattack might drive the enemy out of Serolen entirely."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. *That canny undead fucker*, I thought.

"You see it too," I stated. "That's why you're not smiling."

"I have suspicions," Ivah admitted.

"Then let me lay them to rest," I replied. "Radegast is being baited. The Dead King has been throwing his troops at us so sloppily because he doesn't care about winning the battles. He's keeping the First General stuck south so it cannot intervene here in Serolen."

Because Serolen was how Neshamah handled the drow, not the battlefield. Even if the capital was lost, so long as Sve Noc survived they had the skills to make the snuffing out of the Firstborn a painful, drawn-out affair. Night was exceptionally well suited to irregular warfare, after all. No, the Hidden Horror wanted that messed settled cleanly instead of lingering: either Kurosiv ate their entire race or the infighting between lesser deities broke Night, turning those same reckless attacks into a sudden killing stroke. It was one thing for Radegast to defend with Night, but *without* it?

It would be sheer butchery, an instant rout.

"Spending the dead," Ivah darkly said, "is ever the Dead King's favoured trick."

I grunted in agreement, but my attention was elsewhere. There was something off here, I thought. Instinct had been digging at me ever since we found that tower in the depths of the Relic Grove, but I'd never been able to name it more than restlessness. Unease. Now, though, I was beginning to feel out the shape of something. The Dead King had given out, in one form or another, what was perhaps his most precious secret: the ritual that'd made him. Sure, people who'd studied him or the Kabbalis Book of Darkness – or gone traipsing through Arcadian echoes, like we did – might be able to piece much of the work together, but Neshamah had given out the *real thing*. For what, a shot at settling the drow more quickly? It'd be a feather in his rotting cap to clean that up early, but that wasn't how the Hidden Horror worked.

Above all things he was patient, and risking giving us a look at the very heart of his godhead wasn't worth the trade. Neshamah always lessened the risks to himself, knowing that every personal loss was a permanent one.

"It's not enough," I murmured. "He paid too much, so he bought something I'm not seeing."

"My queen?" Ivah asked.

I bit my lip.

"He's tried to steal Night before," I noted. "It could be as simple as that."

How hard could it be, for him to ride Kurosiv's mind as he had once ridden Masego's?

"As in Hainaut," Ivah slowly said, trying to follow the tidbits I was speaking out loud. "You believe he may one more seek to take the Night from Sve Noc?"

But why? Why do you even care about Night, Neshamah? At Hainaut, when Masego had ruined the Night to prevent the Dead King taking it – the Sisters hiding away the rest within Ivah, tying themselves to it in a manner that made the Lord of Silent Steps my natural successor – I'd believed that the Dead King had wanted the Night as ritual fodder. To get some ritual going. Only he'd proved in the aftermath of that battle that he didn't need the power in the slightest, when he'd opened three Hellgates as retribution to Tariq's sacrifice. So what was it about Night that he cared about?

I knew why I'd come to Serolen, but what did he want badly enough that-

"Oh, *shit*," I croaked out.

Had the Hidden Horror really been that farsighted? As early as Hainaut, when the rest of us were still all stumbling in the dark?

"We are warred upon," Ivah said, and it was not a question.

"I know what the Dead King wants," I grimly said. "It's the same thing I do, just for the opposite reason."

I had come to Serolen so that me might break the Intercessor's hold on Below's stories, breathed life into them. And for that, Hierophant had told me I needed the true Night. I had come north to find a sword to slay the King of Death with and found him already here, looking for the same blade.

Not to wield it but to lock it away forever.

I rose to my feet, seat scraping against the stone and my staff of dead yew under my hand before I even thought to reach for it. Under the worried gaze of the three Firstborn I paced, my limp full of sudden nervous energy.

"No," I told them, "this is good, actually. It was the missing piece. We know all the pieces in play now. There's just more of them than we thought. Besides, t's still Kurosiv's game when it comes down to it."

"Forever schemed against, we," Ivah sighed, lips thinning.

"Could grow fat off enmity," Trokel finished, looking approving.

It liked its classics, Trokel, and even I had learned a few parts of the Songs of Dust.

"Queen of Lost and Found," Fania said, "may I ask for elucidation?"

I flicked it a one-eyed glance, baring a smile full of teeth.

"Do you know how to kill a god, Fania?" I asked.

The young drow stilled, then stiffly shook its head.

"You make another," I muttered, fingers drumming against the side of my staff.

Yes, it would do. It had the right beats to it, I thought as I stared at Ivah, and a fitting pair of hands.

"Now we can win," I told them. "And when we win, we take it all."

Iva's eyes narrowed.

"The counterattack," it said.

I nodded approvingly.

"We get Night settled properly, focus our forces, and Radegast will have it right," I said. "We can sweep the dead out of Serolen on the counterstroke, with forces to spare."

Enough that I'd be able to take a Firstborn contingent with me to Keter for the siege, which would be a great help. No one did night warfare quite like the drow, and when fighting the dead sieges did not quiet down after dusk. Ivah looked pleased at the thought of such a resounding victory, but it had never been one to get too excited.

"First we must prevail here in Serolen," my Lord of Silent Steps said. "I trust in your wiles, Losara Queen, but Kurosiv

"Yeah," I agreed, "and we can't afford to wait any longer. Neshamah's a spendthrift in bones, but he's not *that* wasteful. If the attacks stepped up, Kurosiv is nearly ready. We have to go on the offensive right now."

Ivah blinked in surprise.

"Tonight?" it asked.

"It's that or giving Kurosiv the first blow," I replied, eye and tone distant. "I just need to figure out the where."

Now that I knew what to look for, I could feel out the thread. The beasts in the pit, the kingdom of Night as the prize with scavengers looming in the shadows, and the story had sharpened. I'd figured out more, so I was seeing more. The pit was there, it wasn't just an abstract anymore. But where? I cocked my head to the side, groping about. It was faint, but it had been decided. Somewhere in the heart of the city, but any fool off the street could have told me that. There was a veil preventing me from seeing more. *Come on*, I thought, gritting my teeth. *I can feel the echo, there's a tie to me*. Something personal. I heard indistinct voices but ignored them, clawing at the veil with my will.

It was like swimming against the current, but I'd done that all my life and I wasn't going to let it stop me now. The Beast leaned over my shoulder, huffing out a laugh like a hundred wails, and as I grinned I felt claws settling over my hand – we pulled down, together, and through the tears glimpsed at the truth.

Stone islets in a lake, nestled against a canal, all covered in sculptures and greenery that glowed in the night. Pleasure ships had sailed there once, passing by enchanted metalwork that sang when touched by the breeze. The Flowing Gardens, it was called, and I knew all this at a glance because I had been there before. I had shed blood there. We withdrew our hand, though not quite quick enough the backlash did not smash right into my face. The Beast was gone in an instant and I was drawn to the here and now by the painful sensation of tumbling on bare stone with a half-broken nose, bleeding from the face.

All three drow had risen in alarm, but as I turned with a groan I began to laugh through the trails of blood.

"That cheeky little shit of a would-be god," I wheezed. "*There, really?*"

I gestured curtly for them to sit back down, pushing myself up.

"Losara Queen," Ivah said. "Have you been attacked?"

"I tugged at fate's tail," I smiled, "and it didn't like that in the slightest."

It only looked more alarmed at that, which only went to prove Ivah of the Losara was no fool.

"It's fine, Ivah," I said. "I know what we need to do now. I know how we end this."

I met its eyes with my own, grinning.

"We're going back to Great Strycht, you and I," I said. "Where we killed and made a god."

And this time, I thought, we'd make it stick.

"The Flowing Gardens," Ivah said, ever quick on the uptake.

"It's where it all ends," I said. "And I know how to get Kurosiv there tonight."

"They will be wary," my Lord of Silent Steps warned.

I chuckled.

"You ever fished, Ivah?" I asked.

"I have not," it replied, looking suddenly reassured for some reason.

"I was born in a city by the Silver Lake," I said, "and in those waters there's a kind of fish called the Laure silverscale."

"Named after the lake?" Ivah asked.

"And the shiny scales," I drily replied. "See, the thing about the silverscale is that it's got a touch of magic to it – eat the flesh not too cooked and it'll grow back your hair even if you went bald. So a lot of old nobles want it, and since there's not a lot of them even a single catch is worth a fortune."

I limped back to my seat, wiped the blood off my face and slumped back down onto the cushions.

"Easy coin, you'd think, but there's trouble," I said. "That touch of magic also makes them *smart*. Wary as all Hells. They never take bait and they go deep the moment there's a hint of a net."

"So none are caught?" Ivah asked.

"Oh, we get them," I said. "You just have to be patient. If you can't catch them yourself, you let the tide do it for you. They love to nibble at water milfoil, so some clever Laure lad planted a lot near the shore and set a few stones in place before leaving."

Milfoil only grew near Southpool, usually, but then the silverscale itself was believed not to be a native species. Callowan scholars had usually called them a divine blessing on the Fairfaxes since their appearance a few centuries back, but Praesi historians instead noted that they'd only appeared after a failed attempt to take Laure with an army of orcs with gills

that'd ended with a lot of alchemy-filled corpses dumped into the Silver Lake.

"So the silverscales swim close, see there's nothing waiting and have themselves a meal," I continued. "And they stay, because there's a lot of it and no one comes. Only when they've got full bellies and they try to leave, they find the tide's come down and suddenly the rocks they swam over earlier are higher than the water."

It was an old trick, that one, older than the kingdoms. It'd just fallen out of favour when nobles had started minding commoners mucking about their shorelines.

"And so the fisherman comes back and scoops them up," I said, "because there's nowhere left for them to go. It's called a weir, and silverscales stopped falling for it but for a while it made our fishermen rich."

"You mean to entrap Kurosiv," Ivah said, meeting my gaze.

"They're hungry," I smiled. "So close to victory they can taste it. So we're going to give them exactly what they want: they're going to *win*."

Until they didn't, but by then it would be far, far too late.

"And Ivah?"

The Lord of Silent Steps met my eye, unflinching.

"Find a yew tree and take a long branch from it," I said. "Bring it to me. And most importantly, do it with your own two hands."

—

I sat on the stone bench, a long branch of yew across my lap and the knife that'd killed my father in my hand. I sat there, alone save for the divine, and carved as the ship drifted down the current.

"You once told me," Andronike said, "that the yew is the tree of death."

Her voice was like a hundred whispers woven, and she a ghost in the night. Her cloak was half a veil, trailing in a wind that wasn't, and the ornate iron mask at her hip the last of long-buried evil. Her silver-blue eyes burned in the dark.

"I will not recount to you," I said, "what I scheme. What would be the point? I hide nothing, and you see much."

"What you ask," Komena said, "goes beyond faith."

Ah, the ring of iron and screams. The spray of blood in the air, full-throated wrath. Steel mail from neck to knee, a sheathless sword at her hip that gleamed blue. Every time I beheld her from the corner of my eye her dark face became a long-fanged skull, gone when my gaze returned.

"Faith, huh," I mused, whittling away at the yew. "Funny thing. Chase it and you'll never find it, have it and you might not even know."

A god on my right, and god on my left. Neither behind me. Not yet.

"Before Kurosiv was known as the All-Knowing, it bore another name," Andronike said. "It was called the *Leech*."

"They will drink the blood of us to their fill," Komena darkly said, the chorus of rage echoing. "This I do not doubt. It is their nature."

"So let them drink," I said.

"We *cannot*," Andronike harshly replied, voice like a lie ruining a life.

"You know you're not truly gods," I said, almost gently. "Not anymore. Too much was ruined. It used to be I heard the echoes in your words because of who you were. Now, though?"

The knife that'd killed my father – that I would see red, forever red, no matter how clean the steel – shaved off another sliver, down to the point. I did not look at them, or need to. They were in me, had been since they made me their herald. It was a tie difficult to explain, one perhaps only Ivah would be able to understand. It had, that night in Hainaut, borne their weight for an hour. Such a thing left marks that never entirely faded.

"You're putting it on, aren't you?" I asked. "It's an effort."

That was what they'd been hiding from me. Why it was Ivah that'd been sent to tell me the failures, why they'd sent me to negotiate with Kurosiv's sigils blind to avoid admitting to another. Ruin and rebellion had hollowed them out, and their godhead was breaking apart. Night itself was, like when I'd reached for it at the bottom of the tower only to find nothing. No wonder Hierophant had been so scornful of their apotheosis.

"It is still us," Komena said, voice tired. "No matter how lessened, Catherine Foundling, it is still us."

I might have thought that an empty boast, a claim that even now they were still divine in every way that mattered, but for the

tone. The exhaustion of it. No, she meant something else entirely: *it's all that's left of us, and I fear to lose it.*

"It is not fear," Andronike bit out. "It is concern. You scheme recklessness."

"That is," I replied, "my nature."

"Where is your eloquence now, Queen of Lost and Found?" Komena harshly laughed. "Your silver tongue has yet to appear."

I breathed out, looking at the darkened sky.

"Do you ever think," I asked, "about that night down in the depths? About the choices we made."

Silence.

"Do you regret it?"

My question reverberated across the water, like a mockery of itself.

"No," Andronike said. "I do not regret naming you First Under the Night."

"In this," Komena softly said, "we are yet content."

"I'm glad," I admitted. "We're not..."

I trailed off, the words hard to find.

"You can't be friends with your own gods, I suppose," I crookedly smiled. "But I remember what I saw of you, before I gave up my crown. How you became who you are. And I still see much of myself in you."

Some of the best and some the worst.

"It's not unlike faith," I said. "Because you gave me a gift, that night, that was greater than power."

I thought of that moment in shadowed room, Cordelia and Hanno standing before me. The choice, always the choice.

"You taught me to lose," I said. "And that might be the most valuable thing anyone ever taught me."

The blade paused on the length of yew.

"So please," I quietly said, "let me return that gift to you."

I felt them meet each other's gaze over my head. I did not look, for it was not a moment meant for my eye.

"Heart of my heart," Komena gently said.

"Even now?" Andronike asked, more fragile than I had ever heard her.

"It began with us," her sister said, "it ends the same."

I carved away at the yew, wrist snapping, and left them at it until they fell silent. Only then did they turn to me, leaning over my shoulders. We looked, the three of us, down at what I had made: a spear, a killing point made of death's own wood brought to me by Ivah's hands.

They both stood behind me, now, and no more need be said of it.

"Let's make it," I murmured. "A night worth singing about, you and I."

Their fingers dug into my shoulders, feeling like talons, and my dead eye bloomed anew. Power poured into me, a sea made to fit into a woman's shape, and I saw the Night. All of it. They rode me as the Dead King had once ridden Masego's mind, all of their power at our hands.

Sve Noc whispered, and all across Serolen spears were raised. War, they had ordered.

And we sat on the ship, watching, as violence spread like ink in the water. Our sigils had been waiting, and so had Kurosiv's. The Ysengral smashed through the defences on the riverside, pushing through, but they were drowned in bodies until even the steel walls they had brought were overtaken by the mounds of the dead. To the south our attack was stopped cold, caught in a clever trap and butchered, before Kurosiv's warriors crossed the water to kill and burn. The heart of the city was an orgy of death, the fighting in the maze of ancient wonders so tumultuous that sigils no longer recognized allies from enemies.

We were losing, and all over the city towers of obsidian gleamed. We were losing, and Kurosiv was glutting on our defeat.

So much death, so quickly. The air was shivering with it, Night wafting up like smoke. And as the hour passed, another and another and another, we sat on the slow ship and watched blood trail across stone millennia old. Until Ysengral's beleaguered offensive, forced to a halt, suddenly punched through. The warriors ran for the tower they had been sent after, the reason they had been told they must do or die, and though they ran into entrenched resistance they were still gaining. Loc Ynan after all, had recalled its Traitor Generals.

The offensive on our side of the canal faltered, what had seemed like a promised victory faltering, as a great ice storm bloomed

in the heart of the Flowing Gardens. We saw its birth, the scream that reached up to the sky, for our ship had sailed slowly but with purpose. The slender wooden prow touched the shore and I rose, shadows trailing behind me like a procession of shades. It had been a ship like a knife, a single piece of black wood exquisitely carved, and it had brought me to my destination without need for haste or steering.

I took a limping step on the islet of stone, before me a great blizzard and frost creeping across every part the Flowing Garden. I leaned on my staff, my other hand holding the spear of yew, and on the edge of the white death I found Ivah of the Losara waiting, my two scribes at its side. Tall and thin, hair long and pale, but it was the mark on its face that drew the eye: silver on purple, a tree bearing the fruit of two circles incomplete. Losara, it meant. *Lost and found*. The first of the Firstborn to have sworn to me, the first to have seen something worth taking in my words.

But do I really know you, even now? The Lord of Silent Steps was as the Firstborn themselves, cast in exile in a new world, and I had to wonder – had the drow changed, or only their circumstances? *Who are you, Ivah of the Losara, when all the noise falls away?*

"A nice night, isn't it?" I idly asked.

Ivah bowed low.

"Losara Queen," the Lord of Silent Steps murmured, then bowed even lower. "Sve Noc."

I cocked my head to the side.

"I have need of you, Ivah of the Losara," I said.

"I serve," it solemnly replied.

I held out the spear of yew, end first.

"Take it," I said.

It did.

"You'll know," I murmured, "when to use it. Until then..."

I smiled.

"Be my shadow," I asked, "one more time."

Ivah softly laughed.

"Always, Lately Queen," it swore.

And I took a limping step forward, then other, until I had passed the Lord of Silent Steps and it was swallowed by the procession of shades. The two scribes watched me with the sort of religious awe that was, deep down, at least half fear.

"Moren Bleakwomb stands within the storm," Trokel said. "Are you to fight it, First Under the Night?"

I shrugged, nonchalant. There was a lot worse than Moren at the heart of that blizzard.

"I'm just going to ask a question," I said.

"A riddle?" Fania asked.

"Oh, nothing so convoluted," I mused. "The simplest thing in the world, really."

One step at a time, I reached the edge of the storm. The cold, Gods, the *cold*. It was sinking into me already, like apathy eating away at my insides. Whispering about how easy it would be to lie down and die, to finally rest.

"Already tried that," I told the storm. "Fate dragged its feet."

Komena laughed in my ear, sounding delighted. My back straightened and I looked ahead into the blizzard, seeing nothing but somehow knowing that Moren was looking back.

"All you who hear me," I said, meaning every word, "are you worthy?"

Sa vrede. The words rang out even in the storm, but no reply came. They were waiting, biding their time. I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"If you'll not give your answer," I said, pulling down my hood, "I'll have to come and take it."

I stepped into the storm, batted about by the howling winds before I could so much as blink my eye, but a hand held my shoulder and kept me anchored to the ground,

"Let us," Andronike said, "not stumble at so late an hour."

One step after another, fighting against the headwind. It was coming for me, frosting even the Mantle of Woe, but the weight of my victories was not so easily toppled. The storm raged, ate at my warmth and my mind, but my soul burned like a black flame. It would take more than this to stop me. And so Kurosiv sent out more, footsteps soundless on the snow and a hunter's eye. Ishabog the Adversary tread the blizzard as easily as fish would swim water, untouched and unhindered, and came at me from behind. It was an exquisite blow, I saw through Andronike's eyes, the

perfect amalgamation of the strength of a Might and centuries of skill.

The obsidian tip of the spear stopped a hair's breadth before it could touch the back of my neck, caught by a hand.

"Too slow, Ishabog," the Tomb-maker said, shaking its head. "Always a little too slow. You never learn."

"Rumena," I said, voice echoing with Komena's.

"I listen, Sve Noc," the old drow said.

"Make an example."

Ishabog struggled to draw back the obsidian spear, but the Tomb-maker held it in place. It laughed, the stone under the snow beginning to shift under our feet.

"I obey," the Tomb-maker replied, and then glanced at me. "Losara?"

I glanced in acknowledgement.

"When you find the Leech," Rumena said, "tell it this from me: *this makes eight.*"

The Sisters thrummed with vicious amusement, so I accepted the trust with a nod.

"Arrogance," Ishabog spat.

"True," Rumena said. "Why else would anyone believe they can kill me?"

A scream of fury was its answer, but as the ground rumbled and Night flared I left the Mighty behind. The blizzard barred my path, no longer a blind thing but instead a living malice, and I found my steps slowing. Moren Bleakwomb was narrowing its power, strengthening it where I stood. Stone shattered, the air bit at my throat and my hair threaded with ice. Even the flame of Night burning beneath my skin felt the touch of that. I stopped.

"Enough," I said, and raised my arm.

Fingers extended, I reached for the wind and felt it filter through my fingers. Only it was something deeper I was looking for, and the thousand eyes I bloomed in the Night I found it. Threads of power, threads of Night, pulling at the strings of this city-breaking calamity.

"It's just a Secret, Moren," I said, and my fingers closed around a thread. "And no matter how bleak your storm, my hand can **Silence** it."

I was the fucking Warden, who did it think it was? My blood sang and like a sickness in the blood my aspect seeped into the thread of power, tainting it. From string to string it moved, until it had contaminated the entire maelstrom, and I bared my teeth as Andronike's gentle fingers on my chin turned me to face an unseen silhouette behind curtains of white. I drew back my hand and slowly, mockingly, snapped my fingers.

The storm died.

The winds were snuffed out, the power gone, and a sudden and terrible silence fell over the Flowing Gardens. All around us, as far as the eye could see, snow began to fall with almost sacrilegious gentleness. The softest of powders, and through that tender rain I met the silver eyes of Moren Bleakwomb. I took a step forward and the tall, haggard scarecrow of a Mighty stared at me, something like terror in its eyes. Another step and it flinched. A third and it backed away. A fourth and it reached for the Night, only to spasm and let out a scream. Every drop of power was gone, vanished like smoke.

Kurosiv was cutting their losses, unwilling to let me harvest their strongest Mighty.

I limped through the carpet of snow, boots crunching, as Moren spasmed violently on the ground. It only ceased when I was mere feet away and wormed around to stare at me with abject fear. Legs still shaking, it began to crawl away. The butt of my staff touched the middle of its back, and it went still as a stone. I leaned forward, Komena demanding death in my ear.

"Do you really think," I quietly said, "there's anywhere in the world that would be far enough?"

"Finish it, *cattle*," Moren rasped back.

I caught it by its bedraggled hair, dragging it until it was looking up at the falling snow. Its breath caught in its throat at the sight.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" I said.

"Yes," it rasped, voice raw with a grief too ancient for me to understand.

And as the eerie beauty filled the eyes still, I killed Moren Bleakwomb. That was the most mercy I had in me to offer the ancient drow. Neck broken, it dropped into the carpet of white it had sown and I turned away. The dead would keep. Before us, at the heart of the storm I had silenced, a would-be god awaited my coming. It would not do to keep them waiting, and so I answered the invitation hanging in the air. Limping through the trails of pale falling from the sky, I reached a small islet upon which a

throne had been raised. Whatever else might have adorned the stone was gone, ripped away, leaving only the sight of Kurosiv the All-Knowing, they who called themselves Loc Ynan, to greet us.

I reached for the pocket sown inside my cloak, frosted fingers closing around my pipe, and found a packet of wakeleaf as Andronike sniggered against my neck. Under the unblinking gaze of the monster that would devour their entire race, I stuffed my dragonbone pipe and lit it with a pass of my palm. I breathed in deep, venting the acrid smoke through my nose, and let out a little sigh of pleasure. Why be mortal, if not for the little pleasures?

"I have to say," I mused, "all stuff aside, I've gotta give it to you that you look like a proper fucking villain."

The All-Knowing was taller and larger than any Firstborn I had ever seen, and for all that the impression was of slenderness for the good proportions their limbs were easily thick as two of mine and their neck a forest of black veins. They wore a tunic of sculpted obsidian from neck to thigh, with pauldrons shaped like dragons biting down on mouthful of emeralds, and their ribs had been traced in molten gold – dripping down as if it'd been paint. Their legs were covered in slender trousers of dark cloth, covered by greaves of bone and gold whose emerald settings had been carved into the likeness of a hundred eyes.

Yet none of it was as striking as the face, which the darkest I had ever seen of any drow and set with pure silver eyes. The sigil of the Kurosiv, two straight vertical lines and above them a crescent moon facing upwards, had been set in molten gold instead of facepaint. The lines begun under the eyes, the moon above black brows. Their dark hair, long and smooth and gathered into a long braid down their, ended wrapped around an egg-sized emerald. Across its lap a single-edged sword of obsidian waited unsheathed, a wicked shard without even a guard.

"Catherine Foundling," Kurosiv All-Knowing replied, their Lower Miezan in a pleasant Laure drawl. "You come to me bearing gifts in my moment of triumph."

I breathed in deep and spewed out a stream of smoke.

"Is that," I calmly said, "what you think this is?"

"I have waited so very long," Kurosiv gently said, "to take from the failures riding your shoulder. More years than a creature of your kind could hope to understand."

"Hey, just for me," I drawled, "could you maybe say that this is all going just as you planned?"

"None of that, Warden," Kurosiv smiled, revealing sharp filed teeth. "I was warned about you. No games, not now. I even set out Moren for you to use your aspect on."

I know, I thought. That's what the entire point of that raid on the Shrine of Tears was, isn't it? It's not like the victory really won you anything. You just put Moren in my way so I'd fixate on it as my opponent.

"Damn," I grinned, spitting out smoke that wreathed my face. "You got me."

"I get *everything*, Catherine," Kurosiv said. "That is my fate."

And in a heartbeat, they struck. A sea of Night came down on my head, an eternity of power turned into some mutable, ever-shifting horror – a million tricks stolen from a million corpses, all of them jaws snapping down at me. I breathed in, smoke filling my lungs, and we struck back. Millennia of desperate deals in the dark, every scrap of knowledge and power the Sisters had gathered in their desperate bid for salvation and ascension. The sea against the sea, enormities colliding.

My bad leg throbbed. That was when it began going badly.

I coughed out smoke, struggling to stay up, and as my knee began to bend Komena's arm slipped under my armpit to hold me up. Kurosiv laughed, still seated on their throne.

"Even now, you might have won," Loc Ynan said in Crepuscular. "I recognize this. Though half-hearted, you are yet mighty. But you always make this mistake, the two of you."

Their eyes burned silver. My knee buckled and Andronike had to slip under my arm to keep me standing.

"You invest yourselves," Loc Ynan continued. "You *lessen* yourselves. And in the end, where does that bring you?"

The sea came down and I hit the floor, the Sisters coming down with me.

"There it is," Loc Ynan almost lovingly said. "On your knees."

My hand went for my sword as I rose, but they were *quicker*. The point of the obsidian blade went through my breastplate and came out my back, the impalement a wave of horrid pain. I let out a wet gasp as Loc Ynan's hand took my shoulder from behind, holding me up.

"Before they called me All-Knowing," the god whispered, "they called me the Leech. And oh, how I have *hungered*."

Night began to pour out of us and into them. Trickles, at first, then rivers. The Sisters fought it and my clouded mind struggled to turn this around, take from Loc Ynan instead, but my feeble attempts were batted away contemptuously. Drop after drop, the Night came to Loc Ynan, and all over the city towers came alive. It was not only Sve Noc's power coming home, but ever scrap of it the Firstborn had ever held. And it was inevitable, what would happen then. I could already feel the malicious god savouring the sight. The Sisters were Night, they had left all else behind. They no longer had bodies.

And so they died, one drop at a time.

Komena leaned close to me, fingers digging into my arm as if she were afraid to let go. She went first. Andronike's anguish rippled out and she let out a wail of grief, but she never finished it. The god's face split into an impossible broad smile.

"The worthy rise," Loc Ynan said. "Is that not our rule?"

They laughed. All that was left was ripping out the nails, the last of the meal, and it was all over.

"And so, at last, the Firstborn have made a god."

Blood flecking my lips, I leaned forward into the embrace until my lips were by their ear.

"Mistake," I whispered.

And on the other side of the canals, our towers came alive.

The god went still.

"No," they said.

The flow shifted. The rivers that had fed the apotheosis emptied it.

"No," Loc Ynan snarled. "You insignificant-"

Night gathered, and I could see where. I could follow the threads. An elegant, dark-skinned hand raised its palm up as an orb of darkness gathered atop it. Akua Sahelian, golden eyes smiling, stole the godhead piece by piece. Loc Ynan tried to move, but my hands were tight around them. The sword in my guts kept them close, and we stood there with trembling limbs. What was a god without a godhead? Nothing much, we both knew, and as Night drifted out of our grasp we both fell to our knees. Together, intertwined in my blood.

They were coming. Not only Akua, but Masego as well. I could feel it.

"They couldn't fix it," I told Kurosiv as they let out laboured breaths against my neck. "The Night. They couldn't because their godhead was broken from the start. Even feeding it Winter was just filling a broken barrel."

"It was never power meant for sharing," Kurosiv rasped. "How could you not see that? A single god perfect and eternal, not a million failed ones."

"Do you know how to kill a god, Kurosiv?" I smiled.

They pushed me away and I tumbled into the snow, groaning in pain. I was, once more, dying. But so was Kurosiv, I saw plain as I finally glimpsed their body. It looked ravaged, like it's been hollowed out from the inside. Skin hung loose and the melted gold fell off in flecks, they were drenched in sweat and their breath came and went.

"You fail," Kurosiv laughed. "You still fail, Queen of Lost and Found. You cannot hold the power forever, I can feel it fighting. How long – an hymn, an hourglass? And when it leaves it can only go to me. There is no one else *left*."

"Ah," I smiled, blood bubbling up my throat. "That's not – ah – that's not exactly true."

Neither of us heard it coming. Why would we? Not without reason had it been named the Lord of Silent Steps. Ivah of the Losara, thrown out of my shadow when Night was taken from me, padded silently across the snow. The would-be god's gaze took in the purple-and-silver paint and flinched, only to stutter down to the size of the spear of yew Ivah held and go utterly still.

"Kurosiv," I gurgled. "Hey, *Kurosiv*."

They flicked a glance my way.

"The Tomb-maker tells you that makes eight," I grinned, all teeth and blood.

They went ashen with rage, but a flicker of movement caught their gaze as Ivah moved – the thrust was perfect, smooth in that way it only ever really was in stories. And the would-be god died, their heart's blood dyeing the length of spear of yew, and as I continued to bleed out I watched Ivah. Watched it kneel, reach at the cooling corpse and draw out the faintest whisper of darkness. The Lord of Silent Steps was a drow, and it had killed.

It held Night, the first of a godhead yet to be.

It held the Night and stood there, knowing it could snatch divinity itself.

So who are you, Ivah of the Losara, when all the noise falls away? I had wondered that, in my silence, but there was a question I had asked of it. *All you who hear me, I'd called out before entering the storm, are you worthy?* And Ivah had heard me, dwelling deep in my shadow. But words were just words, and what could they matter when apotheosis was at hand? It was tempted, I could tell. It was the desire of all Mighty, deep down, to become the deity they had served. Silver-blue eyes found mine. My blood was pounding in my ears, drowning everything out, but I still heard every word.

"Maybe tomorrow," Ivah replied.

And it raised its hand above its head, holding up the wisp of Night to the sky, and offered the oldest and deepest prayer of the Firstborn.

"Chno Sve Noc," Ivah of the Losara whispered.

A ripple. Faint, but it was there. The Lord of Silent Steps had borne Night once, borne the weight of gods on its shoulder. It was tied to them still. And in that wisp of Night held up to the starry, snowy sky I glimpsed sisters. *Hello, old friends,* I thought, but my vision was swimming. Darkness was not far away. It was kept at bay, though, by long fingers taking up my cheek.

"Oh, Catherine," a voice soft as silk murmured. "Have you ever won a single thing without bleeding yourself for it?"

I choked on my answer, blood thick in my throat, but I felt lips press against my burning forehead and magic shivered through me. I was not... When had someone taken the sword out of me? Akua helped me up, the softness of her lips burning even more harshly than the fever, and I spewed out blood and bile onto the snow. I felt weak, I thought as I hacked out another gob of blood. Good enough to stand, but not much more than that. She passed me my staff to lean on, but stayed there for me to lean on. Neither of us spoke a word of it.

Masego stood before Ivah, before the wisp of Night, and in his hands he held the stolen godhead.

"This time," Hierophant said, "we do it properly."

The towers burned in the distance, obsidian melting, and the Hierophant made a god. Days of glyph-carving disappeared into smoke in a heartbeat, Masego guiding the Night through the ritual Akua had made, and as the Night fed into that first wisp it grew. Grew until my patronesses stood before me once, more decked in cloak and armour, but there was more to it than that. The simple weight of their presence was crushing, Ivah falling to its knees until Andronike affectionately raised it up. But there was... The

two Sisters suddenly turned to look at Masego, whose face had gone blank, and then at Akua.

Hierophant was looking at her like he'd never seen her before. She was smiling.

"You did something," I croaked.

"So I did," Akua murmured. "I made a decision. A nudge, righting a wrong left to fester."

She paused, meeting my gaze.

"What now, Catherine?"

Am I a prisoner on a longer leash, those golden eyes for the second time, or am I what you say I am? I breathed out shallowly. I'd made the decision already, I realized. I'd made it years ago.

"Then I trust your judgement," I said.

Was it grief I saw in there, or love? Or perhaps what I was most afraid of – that, when it came to the two of us, there might not be much of a difference between the two. I looked away. The question burned, but this was not the hour for it.

"It is done," Andronike said, sounding almost disbelieving. "It is truly done. We are returned."

I left Akua's warmth behind, limping forward leaning on my staff.

"All will be Night," I said.

"Aye," Komena said, smiling a hard smile. "And so now we turn to the paying of debts."

They'd gotten Night back, all of it. And they had a proper godhead to bring it to bear. So they did, Creation groaning at the weight of their will.

The Intercessor dropped into the snow like a wriggling worm.

I knew that face. It was the one she'd worn in Praes, Yara of Nowhere. And cursing, gasping, the Wandering Bard twisted around until she was on her back – and saw me cast aside my staff, limping towards her.

"You idiot," the Intercessor screamed. "You fucking idiots."

She backed away but I followed, slowing only to bend down and take up what she had left behind.

"Don't you get it?" Yara of Nowhere shouted, eyes wild. "He's going to kill you all. If you do this, you give the game to him and he's going to-"

I swung, and the lute shattered against her jaw with the most satisfying sound I had ever heard. Strings went flying and she yelped, so I fucking did it again. I hit her until her face was bloody and the lute broken beyond repair, kneeling down in the snow as she moaned in pain.

"You're not even taking my place," the Intercessor spat. "All this, and you're not even taking my place."

"You took my father, Yara," I said calmly, almost conversationally. "Did it with my own hand. So I'm going to take every single thing from you, except what you most want to give me."

I drove my hand into her chest, through the flesh, and reached deeper. It had taken an artefact, last time, but I was further down along the path now. I was the Warden. With a hoarse shout that came as much out of her lips as mine, I ripped my hand clear of her. I left no wound behind, not even rustled clothes, but in my hand I held a sword. Above had been a book, but Below?

I held in my hand the sword that was the stories of Below and smiled down at the Intercessor.

"Run, Yara," I said. "I'll be waiting for you at the end of the road."

I struck down, but the sword cleaved only snow. Panting out my breath, I rose to my feet. The Wandering Bard was gone. It was over.

Or so he wanted us to think.

I turned towards Kurosiv's corpse.

"Did you think," I said, "that I'd forgotten about you?"

Silence.

"Come now, Neshamah," I said. "Do you really think I'm going to fall for that? I know exactly why you're here."

Kurosiv's body jerked upright, still impaled through the heart. Their eyes had gone red.

"You have grown, Catherine," the Dead King spoke through the corpse's mouth.

I limped forward, sword in hand, but almost stumbled. Masego caught me on one side, Akua the other, and together we went.

"You haven't," I replied. "I saw you coming, Neshamah. You came for the stories because you're afraid of what we might do with them."

"Too little," the Dead King said, "and too late. That is what you hold in your hand. You have grown, Catherine, but you have not grown *enough*."

I laughed in his face.

"You were hoping to wait until dawn and steal the Night like a thief," I said. "Going through Kurosiv, who's the foundation."

Or wait longer, if Kurosiv won. Death would see the Night pass to him and he had all the time in the world to wait for it.

"You failed, Neshamah," I said. "Tonight, you lose."

Another step forward.

"There will be no peace," I told the Dead King. "There will be no truce – only the shiver before the blade claims your neck. You will fight and you will rage and you will weep, but in the end there can only ever be one end to this."

And I stepped back, because this was for another to end. When my gaze turned to Masego, however, I froze. Hierophant, I saw as he pushed up the cloth, had his eye back. One was still of glass but the other was flesh and blood, the same brown I'd once known him to have. He leaned forward, smiling.

"We come for you, King of Death," Hierophant finished, relishing every word.

He snapped down his wrist, speaking a single word, and hellflame devoured Kurosiv's corpse whole. And so I saw the second miracle that Akua had stolen away from the godhead, along with the eye. True Night could change souls, it was how the nails had been made. And Hierophant had lost sorcery because the Saint had severed the part of his soul that connected his body to the power, allowing him to wield it. Akua had healed his soul.

Masego had his magic back.

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KiltedBastich

Ohhhh yeah. That's the stuff. Ahhhhhh.

ErraticErrata

It was one of my favourite chapters to write in a while. Been a long time coming.

dadycoool

It's always nice when an author is excited to write a chapter. You can taste the eagerness in their words and it enriches the entire experience.

Gabe Meadow

Indeed. A true moment of triumph without anything to mar it. Save Cat bleeding pretty nastily for it, but isn't that par for the course?

dadycoool

Is it really a victory if Cat isn't bleeding out?

Sethur

It's only a victory if Cat has somehow mutilated herself and she gets blamed for a fire she didn't actually start. Does melted obsidian count?

Someperson

Hey there's still hope that Catherine gets blamed for burning Kurosiv's corpse to cinders in the draw holy book.

Miles

Speaking of self mutilation, did Akua bother to also heal Cat's leg? iirc that one's due to a soul injury too.

Someperson

I'm pretty sure Cat keeps that one on purpose.

Cpt. Obvious

Yep, that's been mentioned quite often. She keeps it to remind her that she is mortal. She keeps it to remind her that choices have consequences. She keeps it because it makes her think twice.

Two dozen snakes

This. This is the kind of chapter that makes me desperately yearn for a live-action TV adaptation of the Guide

This was fantastic. Thank you EE

[anonymous4968](#)

Nah, has to be animated. Live action would become a CG mess.

Cpt. Obvious

I Dread either option. (Dang it. I've written so many posts here the spell checker thinks Dread is a proper noun...)

Without enough money thrown at it a live action TV production would be so disappointing. And as an animated version odds are their vision would clash badly with the images the books have painted in my mind.

The one fantasy work converted to live action I've seen long after reading is LotR. And it has totally supplanted the visions the books painted for me. The only things still my "own" (ok so good old JRRT described it to me but my mind painted it) are things like the old willow tree, the tomb where Bilbo got Sting and almost all of the Silmarilion. But even there alot of the faces has been replaced by what the movies showed. Luckily they were mostly pretty good, but sometimes I miss my old vision of those stories.

Now LotR was a huge franchise just waiting to happen. The books had been read and loved by generations of reader. The were translated to something like 30 languages and had sold many millions of copies. So yeah there were a lot of money spent on the movie.

As good as I think the Guide is there's no way any company would spend that kind of money on turning it into a TV series. Not unless it first reaches a lot more people than it has so far.

naturalnuke

It was PHENOMENAL!

Oh the beats!

The lines!

THE END!

I'm gushing

'Ladi Williams

I was reading and while reading there was the constant fear that EE would not finish this until next week.
Imagine my joy when I got to the end.
I was like "what!?"

Darkening

Yeah, there were like 3 different parts where I was like, "Okay, this is the bit where we get some cool line and the chapter cuts off and we'll get the big fight next chapter" And then it just kept going lol. Awesome stuff.

[onedollargum](#)

Feels so good.

This may be a story about becoming evil, but it feels so good when a villain falls to hubris.

Santiago A Duarte

I don't think it's really about "becoming" evil... Cat is the closest to "evil" she ever gets in the first 2 books, from like chapter 3. She's just about the lightest Villain possible these days.

Cpt. Obvious

She's the kind of evil that doesn't do evil for evil's sake.

She chose(!) evil because none of the "good" guys seemed to have any kind of plan beyond: "Smite Evil!"

Hero rose. Hero kills Villain(s). Hero inspires revolt. The Dread army stomps out the revolt. The Calamities kills Hero.

Result? One less Hero and a lot of dead bakers, peasants, cobblers and so on.

Rinse and repeat.

Meanwhile the Dread Empire had shown that as evil as they were they had a long term plan that didn't involve killing as many as possible. They even allowed the House of Light to keep holding sermons and educate the people of Callow. They even paid for the orphanage she grew up in, where she got an education and were expected to attend the House of Light.

One side repeatedly brought death and despair with little gain to show. The other was organized and authoritarian, but it had a bureaucracy that she could use to change things. All it required was that she embraced Evil and spent a lifetime working her way up the ladder until she could start making a difference.

And then the Dark Knight found her and all her plans got thrown out the window. Since then she's been scrambling from one pit of chaos to another.

But it all started with her deliberately choosing evil long before she learned she might have a shot at becoming a Villain. But it was never because she wanted to do evil but because it was the way to her goal; getting rid of the Praesi nobles who were mismanaging Callow.

Becoming a Villain changed her ambition from getting rid of corrupt nobles to feeding Callow. But that's just details...

Cpt. Obvious

Feeding Callow?

May the Gobbler eat you spellchecker!

[plantsbeans](#)

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Masego had his Magic back...

Subliminary

Wooooo! I FINALLY caught up on this series after starting it a few months ago. Magic boi got his magic back let's goooo

dadycoool

Oh shit. OH, HOLY SHIT!!! This was an amazing chapter start to finish, but Masego's magic was a major nerf when he lost it. Honestly, the only thing scarier than a fully-powered Sve Noc is a fully-powered Hierophant.

Isaac Martinez

EPIC

[clavesoon](#)

dayam

sidehammer056302

I'm just sitting here laughing maniacally. I can't stop!

Are there words?

ARE THERE WORDS?

XD

Three bitch slaps in one chapter! Godhead restored! Masego

empowered!
There are no words for this!
Hit me up after Chapter 48, we'll talk then..

WuseMajor

Oh.

There are words.

Are you worthy?

[sengachi](#)

Ask me again tomorrow.

KiltedBastich

Three bitch slaps? More like FIVE.

1. "Make an example."
2. "Do you really think," I quietly said, "there's anywhere in the world that would be far enough?"
3. "The Tomb-maker tells you that makes eight," I grinned, all teeth and blood.
4. " So I'm going to take every single thing from you, except what you most want to give me."
5. "There will be no truce – only the shiver before the blade claims your neck. You will fight and you will rage and you will weep, but in the end there can only ever be one end to this."

SO many people got told, after fucking around and finding out.

edrey

you can feel the fire from this chapter.
with this blade they should be able to see his plan, and that
would be a show.
truly great chapter.

[Liliet](#)

AA
YESSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

and wow Catherine really just went to the Sisters with a plan
that said "let him kill me and you" and they really just said
"okay"

and MASEGO AND
AKUA!!

and the PROPERLY MENDED godhead for the Sisters ^^

ANd

AA

dadycoool

Oh good, someone was able to put it into words.

'Ladi Williams

To! Lil, calm down before you get an aneurysm lol.
And the God head is out of akua and masegos hands....they can perform a miracle for you.
But that was a wtf chapter...I think "THE wtf" chapter for this book.

Someperson

Honestly the last chapter I can really hold up to this one is when Kairos went out with a bang.

And that isn't to say we haven't had good things since then.

Crash

there's good chapters, there's great chapters even. but then there's this. woah

Silverking

The Warden has the Book and the Sword. The Crows have relinquished their Ruined power and had it remade anew. The Eternal Turncoat steps forward on a path to a true destiny. The Hierophant has regained his familiar tools, all the better to dissect the Dead King with.

And Neshamah, poor Neshamah. The rules of Good and Evil are back in play, and you have overreached. You got to eat the baby, and now you have to pay for it.

[onedollargum](#)

Neshama lost another piece of his soul, which is dope. =D

Raved Thrad

Chno Sve Noc!

I can't help but wonder at how all this affects the balance of power. Or, perhaps more properly, the balance of the Powers. If "doing it right" means that Sve Noc are true goddesses now, then how does that affect the balance / detente between Above and Below? Are they part of Below, or are they effectively a third divine faction, standing apart as the Firstborn stand apart from Calernia?

I love the developments in Akua's character and power. I don't know if she's going to gain a Name out of all of this, but she's definitely falling into a Role: that of the balancer, the bringer of justice. I'm half-expecting angels to try and recruit her any moment.

The Intercessor getting beaten with her instrument was absolutely satisfying. 😊

With Masego's magic back, that makes possibly the two most accomplished *mortal* spellcasters aligned against the Dead King. Add in Catherine as the high priestess of two goddesses actively in opposition to him, and it promises to be a very interesting final fight.

Konstantin von Karstein

I think their still « only » goddesses, not Gods.

[Liliet](#)

They're not Gods, just gods properly on Nessie's level

Isaac Martinez

Akua... What did you sacrifice?

nick012000

Akua's a heroine now. If she's doing the Right Thing, does she need to sacrifice anything at all?

Konstantin von Karstein

She's not,... yet.

masterofbones

A villain turned hero rarely gets a chance to do anything
but sacrifice themselves.

Sinead

True, but she has a sacrificial Cat as a reusable scapegoat.

Or to put another way, Cat put Akua on the long path, which has a pay-off of not costing her life necessarily. And has in part bought it with her own sacrifices as well as through trust and lesser trials.

[Liliet](#)

> True, but she has a sacrificial Cat as a reusable scapegoat.

My god. I'm stealing this line.

Rey d`Tutto

They die after having been redeemed.
Ubua cannot be redeemed. She is a can without a deposit,
made of worthless materials.
The Penitent Whatever needs to live a long life making a
dent in all the red on their ledger.
Heroine, of the Great Evil Long Path Redemption arc/trope.

Miley

Oh dang, it's even been foreshadowed from the beginning.
The one feature all Heroes have in common is how pretty
they are. And Ubua is the prettiest of them all.

Big I

Fuck me. That was awesome.

Speck of Stardust

So the next question I got is Yara going to get to watch the dead
king go or is Neshamah going to see Yara's removal?
Either way the the final meetings before the end are what
interest me the most.

Also dead king you lack the ability to judge growth when it comes
to the matters that surpassed you, cause you've never seen it
done before.

dadycoool

It seems the same goes for Yara. They've been the two highest
"mortals" for so long that they simply can't fathom anyone
rising to and above their level.

Liliet

Pretty sure that's Yara's explicit plan.

Reader in the Night

This chapter was awesome beyond words, but I admit I didn't fully
understand it. How was the Night un-Ruined in the process of
stealing it and then feeding it back?

Because we have bits of Sve Noc being diminished by the ruined of
the Night, and also the fact that their godhead (which is
different from the Night? Or is their godhead and the Night one
and the same?) was broken from the start. But how was it broken
originally, how was it fixed, and why does fixing it give more

power back to the Sisters than what was stolen in the first place?

The Night has been since it's very inception a zero-sum game, and the only way to introduce more power into it was to steal it from somewhere else. Did fixing the godhead allow Sve Noc to actually gain more Night through the faith of their followers, or something?

Because if so, that's... Actually a huge fucking deal for the drow. If Night stops being a zero-sum game, then the Drow don't have to continuously cannibalize themselves to grow stronger.

So... Is that it? I don't expect the author themselves to answer, or anything, but. Was the original flaw of the Godhead the fact that Sve Noc couldn't turn prayer into power, and now they can? Or was it something else? And if so, what exactly is going on?

Reader in the Night

And even more questions: The part where Ivah replied the question with a "maybe tomorrow" was absolutely fucking glorious, but how the hell would Ivah even have been able to become a god anyways? It only had a single wisp of Night, while Masego actually held the bulk of the power and the godhead itself. If Ivah ate the wisp of original Night.. Wouldn't it just have gained a tiny amount of Night?

And jumping from that, how the hell did Akua fix Hierophant's soul with the Night, a power that is meant for everything but fixing soul? Sure, we saw that thing about Nails, and how a godhead can effectively alter souls, but to do that, wouldn't Akua have needed to use a portion of the Night? So did she steal a portion of it to patch up Hierophant's soul, or something? If so, is the Night permanently missing that little bit of power?

nick012000

Ivah had the rights to the new godhead because he'd been the one to score the killing blow on Kurosev.

Darkening

And he'd been linked to the godhead from the time when sve noc hid inside him, so he was already forged into a vessel for it to inhabit. Just like kurosiv expected it to flow to him when akua and Masego lost containment of it, it would have gone to him since he was the only remaining wielder left.

Reader in the Night

Ah, now I get it. Masego and Akua's containment ritual would eventually fail, and then the godhead would "leak", or "run downstream", to Ivah.

Still, Ivah receiving a godhead without the proper rituals to absorb it... It probably could be done, but its godhead would have been even more "broken" than Sve Noc's.

Snappy270

The point about Ivan getting an even more broken god head is so true, but their whole culture is about getting more power so would still be tempted.

As for how it broke, it happened when they were created. They were offered godhood by the bard to stop the twilight sages. But it was they had no idea what they were doing so when they accepted it went wrong. Without proper training they were suddenly goddesses and resulted in breaking their own power, also with two of them pulling in different ways didn't help. They gave out their power to stabilize themselves and started a killing culture to make sure it didn't pool into one being.

They ate Catherine's winter godhood to try to use more power to fix themselves. When Cat willing gave her power they were able to stabilize themselves without the need of giving out night, but weren't fixed. Even in their own world (the gloom) they couldn't keep DK out which shows how they didn't have complete power over their godhood.

It got fixed cause Masego was able to pull all of night together and make it into a proper godhood. The sisters now knowing how to use the power didn't break it immediately so were able to change creation, pulling the bard to them.

Hope that makes sense.

[Liliet](#)

They didn't "give out the power to stabilize themselves", it was meant to be shared among the drow as their life force from the start. They were trying to do a very complex thing.

KageLupus

That assumes that all of the various power players left on Cat's side let Ivah live long enough for the ritual to fail. Between Akua, Zeze, and the Tombmaker I doubt it would have happened. Really, if Ivah had fallen to temptation then it would probably have had a very short

lived run as a proto-godling before getting snuffed out. But that would have prevent Sve Noc from receiving the godhead and the whole thing would have gone pearshaped.

Luckily, Ivah is a true gentlethem and a believer, in Sve Noc and the Queen of Lost and Found.

Darkening

Ehhh. If Ivah had finished Cat off as he very easily could have in that moment, it's not like there would be a lot of options available. Rumena was stripped of night just like every other drow, so Ivah would have been the only drow with even a scrap of night and I suspect without night to prop him up Rumena's age would be an issue. Akua and Masego were both occupied with the ritual and them trying to stop and kill Ivah would have just caused containment to fail earlier and given him the power. Sure, Masego and Akua could probably make a decent go at godslaying and probably wouldn't be feeling particularly rational about restraining themselves from murdering cat's murderer but it wouldn't be a certain thing. Especially since Ivah's *whole thing* is being inhumanly stealthy so his power would likely express itself that way pretty natural and make him hard to catch.

Syndic

My take: Akua and Masego, or actually the ritual and whoever did it, needed to have all of the Night in one place to change (fix) it. As long as some of it was still in Sve Noc, or in the "nails", no ritual could affect *all* of it, so it could not be fixed. So to fix it, they had to get it out of the goddesses, the pretender gods, and the firstborn.

As to why it needed fixing – because when the sisters first tried to become gods, they were desperate. Their ritual back then was not complete, not perfect. It made them something like gods, but there were flaws.

And for the miracles Akua performed to fix Masego: They held the entirety of a god in their ritual. All its power, all its sway over creation. A god could easily(?) give a mortal an eye back and reattach a severed bit of soul without diminishing itself, and so with the entirety of a god in their ritual so could Akua (and Masego).

Reader in the Night

I agree with your take on te broad strokes, but the lack of specifics is what confounds me: You posit that Sve Noc's forst ritual wasn't perfect because they were hurried, so

there flaws, which in turn prevented them from being a "true" god. And that makes sense.

But what were this flaws? Why and how was the godhead broken, and more importantly, in which ways is the godhead "better" now that it's fixed?

And why does Sve Noc have **more** power after fixing it? We know the Power isn't a consequence the godhead, it was originally a gift from the Gods Below, then it got Ruined.

It would make sense if they were able to use the Power they have more efficiently because their godhead is better now, but the chapter seems pretty clear that they just plain got more power out of it. How? Where did the extra Power come from? Neshamah's own ritual?

hakureireimu

We do know their godhead was "broken"; it says so this chapter. As to what was wrong? I think we'll know that in future chapter.

I don't think Sve Noc has more power; rather they have better power. Same power without some of the drawback for example. Like Cat lost power but gained flexibility by losing Winter and getting to borrow Night.

Quwertuiopp

Its better now in the same way a palace is better than the burned out rubble of one. It is more powerful the same way a hammer is more powerful when hitting nails than a blob of Jello of the same mass as the hammer would be at that job. Just because it has the same amount of power as before, that doesn't mean it isn't in a more potent shape.

A battery and a pile of coal may have the same energy content, but ready to use electricity is more versatile in usage while still being more powerful when turned to a singular task. If you want make an engine, an electric motor is going to be more efficient than a steam engine powered by burning coal.

tmchin75723

They have a perfected godhead ritual (though using it 1:1 is asking for usurpation). Thanks dead king! Akua and Masego then cannibalized it to remake Sve Noc.

Darkening

A few millenia of Night being grown by harvesting outsiders, even if it was a relative trickle, is an easy

explanation to grab for the total amount of Night being greater, plus Winter getting mixed in, and this is the first moment since the dawn of their apotheosis that they've had all of the night back in themselves and not invested into their entire population. So this is the first moment we've ever seen them without Night being scattered across their entire population, all of it concentrated in one place and whole. So Night might not be more powerful than it was before the ritual, it's just that it's all in one place now instead of most of it being parceled out to the population. Plus Akua/Masego undid whatever Ruin did to weaken it I guess? I dunno how that worked exactly. Presumably Sve Noc will be nerfed a bit when they start raising Mighty again. Wonder how many former Mighty are gonna get knifed for their previous actions.

Reader in the Night

Ah. That makes sense, I forgot to account for the fact that the Night was mostly parcelled off before the Ritual.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, the Sisters specifically discussed how they didn't have enough for themselves because Night was invested in workings. The Gloom shards, the part Kurosiv had stolen for itself... The problem was not that the total was too small. I mean that's also something Ruin did, Night is smaller now than before that, but with the Kurosiv problem fixed and the Gloom shards dissolved and reabsorbed, and the whole thing made more efficient, it's still *enough*.

Dillon

Keep in mind that Neshamah was riding Kurisov through his death; I wouldn't be surprised if they got the Ruined portion of Night and maybe a bit more than that in the trade.

So Sve Noc is at 100% power and unbroken for the first time. Plus we've never seen them fully concentrated since they've always been significantly invested in their followers. It stands to reason that they're way more powerful than before.

[Liliet](#)

Think of the godhead as a vessel. The power fills it, and the vessel is what allows it to be moved and shaped.

The Sisters' vessel was broken and crooked, more so for having been Ruined. That took some of the power but more importantly it warped the vessel further – as little as Masego could, I'm sure, but the problem was already there.

So this chapter, the vessel was *disassembled*.

And then Masego made a new one.

It wasn't *fixed*, it was literally remade. The Sisters died and were brought back to life from the imprints they left on their faithful. Ivah's killing of the previous god gave it the... start of the thread, to knit the whole thing back together, and it chose to give the thread to the trace of the Sisters it had instead of taking it for itself. And Masego did the actual knitting.

We don't yet know the details of how exactly the remaking to be un-cracked this time will impact the result. But Night was never REALLY zero-sum. It could be added to by killing and stealing, and also by learning and sacrificing. It was ALWAYS something meant to grow from new Secrets added to it. The zero-sum thing was just a result of the drow being locked inside the Gloom, only the few exiles going aboveground to try and win honor by adding to Night.

And of course, there was already enough power, even with Masego's Ruin. Even with Kurosiv having stolen like two thirds of what remained, the third was enough to hold back the Dead King and maintain the Sisters, if in a fading state, and their entire side. With that power back, the Sisters have a modest but whole godhead, lesser than it would have been if Masego had fixed it before the Ruination, but *good enough*.

Reader in the Night

Yours was a nice metaphor, and it really helped me visualize how the Night (filling) and the Godhead (vessel) interacted with each other. Admittedly, the pottery metaphor got a little tortured by the time Hierophant was knitting (?) it back together, but I got the gist of it.

That said:

>The Sisters' vessel was broken and crooked, more so for having been Ruined.<

I think what was Ruined by Hierophant was a part of the power, not the godhead. The godhead continued working the same way (if at a lesser strenght) afterwards.

And since we're touching on the subject of power: You said that the sisters have a godhead that's fixed but less powerful, but the chapter really makes it seem like they have **more** power now than when they talked to Catherine while she

was making the spear. And while you said that the Night was not a zero-sum game, you correctly pointed out that any extra power had to be brought in from an external source, so where did the significant power boost come from?

My current theory is that Neshamah's own ritual somehow generated more Power for Kurosiv, which then got ripped out along with the Night and fed back into Sve Noc. But by your own metaphor, Trismegistus' Ascension Ritual is probably more about shaping the vessel, not creating the filling. In Neshamah's case, the Power was the lives of an entire Kingdom. In Kurosiv's, it was Sve Noc's own power that it stole.

Maybe it was the fact that a bunch of drow died in the fighting? Would that have provided extra (necromantic) power, on top of the Night that was collected when they died?

Snappy270

Its less more power and more they now can do more with said power. Like the power they have is more concentrated allowing for it to have a greater impact in reality.

Creation will now listen to them as they now have the authority.

Most gods have this authority but it took them several goes to get it.

In the beginning all they could do it maintain the gloom and give out night. With catherine they gained enough control to move the gloom and build a city, but they still didnt have complete control as DK could break in and even gained ground. After ruin all they could do was break the gloom to stop DK.

Now in their home creation bends to their will, probably only in gloom as that is their domain. But in there they are all mighty.

KageLupus

Here is another analogy, related to power and the godhead:

Imagine the original godhead as a monster truck or other big vehicle. But, it was put together by amateurs who didn't have a blueprint and had only kind of seen a monster truck in passing. They got really close, but the wheels are misaligned and the axels sag and the whole thing kind of chugs and rumbles and stutters along. You can drive it over damn near any other vehicle because it is bigger and stronger, but the whole time you are crossing your fingers

and hoping the next bump doesn't cause something to fall off.

To really stretch the analogy, Cat then convinced the Sisters to take their hunk of junk to the local scrap yard. The whole thing gets broken down into various parts and given over to a couple of incredibly knowledgeable engineers who manage to build an actual functioning car out of it. It is much smaller than the monster truck, but sleek and fast and runs smooth as silk. Ivah holds the keys to the car and thinks about taking it for a test drive, but then decides that the Sisters really do deserve it and hands the keys back to them.

Now Sve Noc has a vehicle again, which is smaller and less powerful than the monster truck, but has the added bonus of not being at risk of falling apart after every big bump. They also learned that sometimes you can go around a problem, rather than over it, but that is a metaphor for another post...

tmchin75723

They might not actually be more to night, even if it is fixed. Right here, we're seeing them with all of the power, uninvested.

[Liliet](#)

> You said that the sisters have a godhead that's fixed but less powerful, but the chapter really makes it seem like they have **more** power now than when they talked to Catherine while she was making the spear.

Yes. It's less powerful than it was before Ruination, not before this hot potato game. They literally have more powerful than when they talked to Catherine *because they took back from Kurosiv his portion*.

(I expect the part that had been invested in the Mighty got immediately reinvested back into them, so that wouldn't make a lot of difference)

> And while you said that the Night was not a zero-sum game, you correctly pointed out that any extra power had to be brought in from an external source, so where did the significant power boost come from?

Kurosiv.

Insanenoodlyguy

And capable of growth again. The Drow have been learning the hard way how to do more with less, and they just got at least their original way to use Night back. So as they take more, everybody's that much sharper for learning to do without. This was a pivot moment and the race just got a second wind.

Gerionar

I'd go a step further and say: the godhood is like a power grid. A power plant feeds Night into the grid which in turn fuels all drow and great workings. The quality of the engine and the grid determines how efficiently the god can use the Night. According to Masego's statement from a few chapters back, the machine Sve Noc were using was a crude and inefficient thing, badly tuned and probably leaking in several places.

Then Heinaut happened and Night was Ruined. Pressure dropped to critical levels. The godhead itself probably suffered, too. Parts of the power grid were amputated, which lead to even more problems managing the strain on the system. Kurosiv tapping into the grid and stealing Night only made things worse. Blackouts were the obvious result. You could attempt to repair the power plant, add more pumps, buffers and valves, patch leaks, bypass clogged sections of the grid, and disconnect the broken parts. But this is sunken cost fellacy. It is much better to completely scrap this faulty abomination and get a new system, one designed by professionals. Even though there is less total Night in circulation, it runs so smoothly that you can barely hear the soft humm. It has a lot more UUMPF! to it, too.

But transfusing the Night from one vessel to the other is a risky thing. You have to shut everything down (including life support for the elderly!), extract all the Night from the system, collect it safely, and feed it to the new power plant. A lot of things can go wrong: the technician (Kurosiv) responsible for bleeding the Night from the old system could botch the job. The designer for the transfer process (Akua) could have added something in secret and used the Night to power a working of her own (which she die). The person (Ivah) charged with feeding the Night into the new machine could have decided to take the seat at the controls. And probably a hundred other things.

It worked out only because everyone was trusted to do their job.

Daniel E

Do you know to make a God? And so the First Under Night spoke thus; Have you tried turning her off and then back on again?

Frivolous

Sadly apropos, Daniel. Haha.

Frivolous

Good explanation, Gerionar.

Salt

If I'm not misunderstanding it, the problem in the first place was that the Twilight Sages made a deal with Below to mortgage the lives of all future generations for lifespan and power to fight the kingdom under. Turns out it was a shit deal though, because it wasn't enough to let them win and, as the dwarves slaughtered the Drow, it lessened the number of future Drow that would be born in the future. Their debt basically became impossible to repay, and defaulting on it would mean the end of their entire race.

The Sisters renegotiated the deal to save their people, killing all the twilight sages in the process, but they also got shafted because the new deal essentially just turned the entire race into sacrifices to Below via the Tenets of Night, and they were still never going to be able to finish paying off the initial debt.

Looks to me like what they just did by breaking apart the godhead and reforming it was a miracle in the divine sense. They broke apart the flawed godhead by sacrificing god-Kuroshiv, reformed it afterwards as a proper godhead, and essentially erased the twilight sages original debt to Below – bringing the future of their race back for real. Quite literally a miraculous birth by sacrificing a minor god on Below's altar.

As far as why they seem stronger now, my personal speculation is that their own growth and accomplishment is in itself an entirely separate tribute to Below, and they managed to pay back their original debt and more, the excess of which they're getting this additional power from. Basically they finished paying the mortgage on their godhead and have some pocket change to boot.

The reason I think the debt was so completely paid is because we have to remember that the original bet between Below and Above isn't lowercase morality-wise good and evil, so much as an argument about whether it was best for mortals to be ruled (Above) or guided to greater things (Below). At the end of the day, Below isn't in this for something as trivial as the lives of a mortal race, something like that isn't even valuable to entities on the level of Above or Below. Their actual goal is to guide mortals into becoming greater than what they would've been by following Above's rule, proving Above wrong in the process. This kind of growth is a major point reinforcing their

argument that mortals can be guided to those “greater things” after all.

The fact that the Sisters managed to learn to lose and still get their due, learn to make leaps of faith, to escape the bucket or the pit or whatever you want to call it, resulting in the true revival of their race and becoming something greater, is a tribute to Below in and of itself. Especially because it was independent of divine mandate, and was basically a self-deterministic act of growth based loosely on Below’s philosophy – “are you worthy/maybe tomorrow”, which essentially means always strive to be better than you were yesterday.

... meaning this entire debacle basically paid back a debt of something Below doesn’t really care about (the lives of the Drow as a race), with the currency of THE singular thing of true value that a mortal in Creation can give to Below (weight on the scales proving them right and Above wrong), which actually put Below a bit in the red instead. Whatever additional power they got from this could just be the natural tendency of Below putting their finger on the scales to balance their accounts.

Reader in the Night

Your theory is plausible, but... If it’s what happened, then the narration simply doesn’t give us the correct context clues to reasonably conclude it. Even when Cat’s stealing the artifact of Below’s stories, there’s no mention of debts paid, gifts from Below, or Below directly intervening to help or hinder any of the involved, even with three effective godlings on the scene duking it out (Bard, Dead King, Sve Noc).

Lobo logo

We know that the leech has been hoarding night for centuries – even before the ruin and it attempting godhood in earnest . The sisters also said that getting it’s night returned would put them back in the black. The power up is as a result of them having all of the leech’s night and all other night returned to them

Insanenoodlyguy

This. When Masego worked this thing into the new godhead, he had a good amount of the original untainted material, and with the rest broken down, it could all be put back together in a working order.

[Liliet](#)

I've been under the impression, and still am, that Winter was what let them pay the original debt. Even before the miracle Akua said that only the older Mighty would die from losing Night for good – because it maintains their lifespan, and that nisi and dzulu would be fine.

zenanii

This is how I understood it:

Creating the godhood from night could be compared to creating a sword. And the sisters are really mediocre smiths who don't understand the fundamentals of swordsmithing.

What they ended up with was a unbalanced sword full of impurities, a real mess. Then Neshama stole part of the "sword" and Masego ruined it as well, so now they had a chipped sword with no guard and a cracked pommel.

What they did here was take the entire sword, smelt it all down into liquid steel, and then have Masego, an expert "blacksmith" forge the entire thing anew. And while they might have ended up with a bastard sword instead of a longsword, because of the night that was stolen by Neshama, the finished product is still one helluva lot better than what the sisters started out with.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure a bastard sword is larger than a longsword
;u;

Regret

A bastard sword's blade is usually as long or a bit shorter than a longsword, the big difference is the grip, that is longer.

Some say they tended to be a bit heavier though.

EmEss

It depends on what definition of 'long sword' you are using. In Dungeons and Dragons terms (and other works drawing from it) a long sword is a one handed weapon and thus smaller than the hand and half bastard sword. In HEMA (Historical European Martial Arts) (and more generally by historians) a long sword is a two handed weapon with a cruciform hilt and thus larger than a bastard sword.

[Liliet](#)

interesting! ty

*arcanavita*15

AHAHAHAHAHAHAH HYPEPEYE OHOH OH.

This was astounding just astounding it shows how much everyone has grown, so many story lines wrapped up wonderfully, she got a total victory weakening and maybe killing Yara, killing the fake god, reforging the godhead of the sisters, Masego getting his magic back and telling the dead king he is coming for him, it was just amazing.

WealthyAardvark

"And so ErraticErrata asked them this: do you know how to make a reader fanbase hoot and holler in delight?"

SomeoneSomewhere

And the readers answered: "yes He does". And licked the display screen in inappropriate places.

Juff

Typo Thread:

brough a > brought a
last/ > last.
fundamentallu > fundamentally
one more seek > once more seek
that me might > that we might
breathed life > breathe life
Besides, t's > Besides, it's
Queen, but Kurosiv (missing words)
the last of long-buried evil (something's wrong here)
then other, > then another,
a Might and > a Mighty and
Night I found > Night found
which the darkest > which was the darkest
like it's been > like it'd been
fell of in > fell off in
fell of in flecks, they > fell of in flecks. They
an hymn > a hymn
stutter down to the size (something's wrong here)
my staff to lean on > my staff (it's repeated)
down ad > down at

[pirateddesigns](#)

Not a typo so much, but the whole story about the Laure Silverscales being caught in a weir by the tide... Silver Lake would not have a tide as it's not the ocean where lunar gravitational pull causes the water level to oscillate on a planetary scale. In the midst of an otherwise superlative chapter, this killed the flow for me for a moment. But then I shrugged, said to myself "magic planet," and moved on.

[Liliet](#)

Okay so in my previous scream I forgot to mention: SEER CAT SEER CAT SEER CAT

WHO ELSE WANTS TO SEE CAT CHAT WITH AGNES NOW BECAUSE
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

that power is so great and hype

"i understood more so I could see more" SEER CAT SEER CAT I WANT MORE MORE MORE

shikkarasu

I want a chapter where Catherine Speaks to the Augur at length, only to end with her waking up two weeks before hand. Cat then decides against making the journey to talk to her, since they've both already had the conversation, retroactively.

caoimhinh

Also, we apparently now have the authors of the two Drow religious books based on Catherine.

Trokel wrote the "Tenets Under the Night, Book of Losara"
Faina wrote the "Parables of the Lost and Found"

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Fania, not Faina.

Mirror Night

Yeah the mechanics don't make total sense to me. Nor am I fan of reversing sacrifices made previously so while I like Masego, him getting his magic back doesnt quite work for me.

It was epic enough I suppose even if how it all worked out doesn't check out in my book.

'Ladi Williams

Okay, so I had been ecstatic and hyped and reading all comments....but I couldn't comment bcos I didn't want to take the stress to sign in.

BUT, when I saw your comment, I had to sign in to say this....
"YOU ARE ALONE IN THAT BELIEF"

Mirror Night

Best not to speak for others unprompted. For instance Reader in the Night seems pretty unsure about how it all worked as well. So no I am not alone. Not that I especially care about the opinions of others or yours in particular.

shikkarasu

I completely get that. Sacrifices that get reversed inherently mean less. However, I will suggest that going 3 years and 2 books without his Magic, and all the character growth that he made during this time, mitigate that quite a bit.

Unlike when Pilgrim came back to life a bell or two after dying, or how Cat gets new powers almost immediately after losing her existing skillset, Masego had to learn how live like people without the Gift (who he used to think of as useless). We got to see how he coped with magic being a tool that was borrowed, rather than an extension of his being. We even got to see him turn down lesser versions of what he had (see his vicious refusal of Sve Noc's offer).

Mageso has had a full and satisfying character arc with **Wrest**, and now we get to see him, for the first time ever, at the true height of his power. I think this was a reversed sacrifice done very, very right.

Insanenoodlyguy

If it was simply reversed by default or a "reward" it'd be shallow, yes. His price has meaning because it wasn't settled by him l. Akua gave it back to him. She no doubt sacrificed something in the process. She basically just used a wish on Masego, probably a lot of other thing she could have wished for. Masego had no expectations of getting his magic back here, if he'd gone for it himself it'd probably screw him fate-wise later.

Salt

Masego losing his magic wasn't really a sacrifice though. Not all loss is a sacrifice – it has to be a willing trade.

Hakram cutting off his own hand to gain Vivienne's trust was a sacrifice. Something willingly given to gain something else.

Being corrupted by the Dead King and having Saint cut off the taint is just a wound. Nothing wrong with healing wounds imo, story wise

RoflCat

It's Akua doing her thing.

She basically reverse engineered the Night nails and make something that can heal Masego's broken soul since as established True Night can affect souls.

You can see the moment that happened when Sve Noc fully came into godhood again, when they looked at Masego and him turning to Akua upon realizing.

It's simply Sve Noc "repaying debts" to Masego for his help.

M0och123

This was such a great chapter OMG!

lowinternetspeed

Obviously every part of this chapter was pure fucking awesome and with the chapter title its going to be followed by a bunch of interludes which are going to be great. Everyone can agree this is one of the best chapters in the series (which is no small thing in this series.)

but Ivah

Ivah going "Maybe tomorrow" is my new favourite one-liner.

pyrohawk21

Huh, just had two interesting thoughts. The first is that the symbology behind the form that which the Stories of Good and Evil took was fascinating. The Sword and the Book which is also known as a place where a Pen Writes.

And which is mightier? The Sword, which triumphs over the Pen as it forces the Pen to obey. Or the Pen which even when forced to obey by the Sword, creates changes in the world which in time will have the Sword pulled back from the Pen... The correct answer? Hell if I know, and I don't think the Heavens know either!

The second thing however was the fact that Masego has his missing eye back now... and it's an eye of flesh and blood. I can't help but wonder if that might actually be even more useful than if it replaces it with another artefact similar to his remaining Summer Glass Eye. Because by having both, it ensures that he sees both 'God Sight' and 'Mortal Sight', and thus misses only those which can not be seen by either. A much harder task that foiling one or the other.

Entirely possible he's going to end up replacing them, but having them remain as they are is a thought...

caoimhinh

Interesting, though keep in mind that it is not a Pen, it's a Book.

Above's stories were a book, like a storybook or a Book of Law, which goes well with what they portray themselves as, and what is encouraged by those stories: do what is right, play by the book, the plot is on your side.

Below's stories are a sword, hacking away obstacles and carving their own place in Creation by force and wicked viciousness to make the world match the vision and madness of the wielder.

Liliet

Masego did not replace his eyes because an artefact was cooler, he replaced his eyes because they went blind from looking at the Summer Sun up close.

Like, an artefact was also cooler, but Masego didn't just self mutilate for it.

Frivolous

I'm surprised Wandering Bard is still in her incarnation as Yara of Nowhere. She bit her tongue off the last time. I thought she'd died and been rebodied.

except what you most want to give me – I'm guessing Catherine intends to deny her the death she wants, and for her to live forever. Nasty.

I'm also surprised Catherine used WB's own lute to smash her, instead of using her aspect of Silence. Very satisfying and physical, yes, but not what I expected.

I suspect the lute will not be remade. Forever broken. That still leaves WB the liquor, though.

Does this imply Silence is a once-per-day aspect?

nimelennar

Most Aspects are only useful once per battle (except the passive, always-on ones like Ranger's). If they can be used a second time, they tend to be a lot less effective the second time.

Mirror Night

Not per se. It depends on the power of the Aspect. More powerful Aspects can only be used once per day generally... weaker Aspects can be used more often.

Silence so far has seemed pretty darn strong so it makes sense Cat is limited.

beleester

I think Yara of Nowhere is her true identity – who she was before she became the Bard.

Insanenoodlyguy

This is her original form. She went into active non passive war, outright declaring her intention to kill Cat. That kind of dramatic divergence means this time it's serious. So she gets her true form, with all the strengths and weaknesses that entails (typically your true form is the state you ultimately die in)

Frivolous

All right. Still think she's not going to die, though. Catherine believes in long prices and she seems to indicate so.

The King of Death, who wants nothing more than to live (or not-live) forever, will die.

The Intercessor, who wants nothing more than to die, never ever will.

ninegardens

So... sorry if I missed something, but WHAT did Akua mess with with Sve Noc?

Apart from fixing Masego's magic? Cause it sounded like that was the 2nd thing.

Or is the first thing she did just something that we haven't been told yet?

caoimhinh

She took from their power to forge a miracle: restoring one of Masego's eyes and fixing his soul so that he could have his Gift to use magic back.

Insanenoodlyguy

The way I look at it, channeling all that power, you can do a lot without really lessening it, but probably only one thing in the short amount of time unless you try to hold on to the power (which has its own consequences) so basically, you get a wish. Lot of things you can do with a wish and her kind of smarts. But what she spent it on was restoring him. Presumably with that kind of pivot, she had at least one really good idea that would more directly benefit herself. But she sacrificed that for the sake of another, which makes it all the more effective. Because Akua is now playing a hero for real.

Rey d`Tutto

I expect Akua to gain a Name.
She was Committed to Old Skool Evil for the Lulz. She committed atrocity after atrocity after insult after aggression. She attempted Elegant Evil, and was Prideful up until she was Smote by Cat.
And turned to a Cloak Shade. And gained a shard of Winter. Cat Manipulated her into someone who would gladly take the long price of Atonement to keep the Dead King as Evil in a Can.
She Escaped that end, by embracing the idea that she can never be penitent enough to be good, and evil fer th lulz bites yak dick, so just make other's lives suck less. It makes her feel good to help folks.
She learned better than Cat taught.
So she's the Unforgiven hero archetype.

Insanenoodlyguy

The way I look at it, channeling all that power, you can do a lot without really lessening it, but probably only one thing in the short amount of time unless you try to hold on to the power (which has its own consequences) so basically, you get a wish. Lot of things you can do with a wish and her kind of smarts. But what she spent it on was restoring him. Presumably with that kind of pivot, she had at least one really good idea that would more directly benefit herself. But she sacrificed that for the sake of another, which makes it all the more effective. Because Akua is now playing a hero for real.

Wonder

"Kurosiv," I gurgled. "Hey, Kurosiv."

They flicked a glance my way.

"The Tomb-maker tells you that makes eight," I grinned, all teeth and blood.

They went ashen with rage.

Just look at the joy Cat expresses when she tells Kurosiv Rumena's message. She is incorrigible even nearly dead. She happily shares Rumena's Secret with him.

And on the other side of the canals, our towers came alive.

The god went still.

Did Masego and Akua build their own Towers?

Did Masego kill the shard of Neshamah in Kurosiv?

Since Cat ate the Book of Somethings ,she definitely has to eat the sword in some way too, the Name demands it , right?

Cat can be made a mage by Sve No now , right?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

She has more power as First Under the Night than she knows how to Mage.

Otherwise, I agree

Isi Arnott-Campbell

List of important people Catherine has hit in the face so far:

Dread Empress Malicia, first of her name.

Yara of Nowhere, the Wandering Bard.

Was there anyone else in previous volumes of the series? I know there was that guy from the very first chapter, but he wasn't important like these two. Anyone else hoping she'll get a face-strike in on Neshamah, making her 3 for 3 on main antagonists?

shikkarasu

Does mugging an Angel count? I *want* mugging an Angel to count, but I understand it is much less literal.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Since Angels could be argued to be not-quite-literal in the very nature of their existence, I'm willing to count it.

Darkening

She killed the Lone Swordsman by repeatedly stomping on his head after she stabbed him, does that count? She felled an ogre with a single punch to the face back in the War College if you believe Robber's version of it, though that probably doesn't count as an important person. Pretty sure she explicitly **didn't** hit akua in the face back when she broke a bunch of her bones after killing William. Problem is, back in her facepunching days important people were generally **too** important to be in her weight class, and once she was powerful and influential enough to get away with it she was more about slapping people around with magic or just stabbing them to death. Ah! She punched the Duke of Violent Squalls in the face during their duel. That's pretty mid tier for importance.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Ok, so, updated list.

War College ogre (on the one hand this is merely alleged and the person isn't notable; on the other hand the claim was made by best boy Robber, meaning it is by definition important to me).

William of Greensbury, the Lone Swordsman.

Hashmal(lim) (metaphorical/metaphysical; honorable mention to that Angel of the Choir of Endurance, who shows up when we see an example of Cat's practice of drawing heroic bands to her, asking them to leave, and then having to kill them in self-defense).

Duke of Violent Squalls.

Dorian Theodosian, the Exiled Prince (metaphorical; counting it because I decided to count things like the Angels. For anyone unable to place the name or the Name, it's the guy who got shot in the throat because he took off his helmet).

Dread Empress Malicia.

Mighty Kurosiv (verbal; see above. This verbal face-punch is notable mostly for the recipient's immediate annihilation, whereas most of Cat's verbal sparring partners have substantial time to retort. Granted, I'm sure this isn't the first exception to that, but if you couldn't tell by the ever-loosening rules this is kind of a casual thing for me).

Yara of Nowhere, the Wandering Bard.

Xinci

Mm so they did indeed die but were remade. There may be a cost for doing this, as their presence is so heavy it may be that they cannot interact with the Drow as they once did. This would explain the disputed nature of the text, alternatively, it may be that the information contained in the Night was not shared when new Drow are born after this event as Sve is now too heavy to intermingle as easily. Of course, as this is the precipitation of a new era for them, this may be the time to dispense information to the Losara, make better networks of Night distribution, and decry new tenets to help prevent a situation like this from happening again and in general aiding cooperative growth on the surface so the Night can grow itself against various future threats somewhat preemptively. They may also perhaps bring dead Drow back, as their information/souls do appear to be containable or at least be actively recorded somewhere in the Night given the active workings Sve was reinforcing. Many opportunities have arisen here even as limitations loom for their future.

Mm, so Bard was definitely aware of Cats growing pattern, but I do suppose with the role being institutionalized and spread out

like it will be in the Age of Order, unfortunately, doesn't give her the death she needs. Or at least doesn't give her an immediate/easily wrought successor for her exact position. Perhaps the role of the Intercessor too spread out under such a paradigm or perhaps Cat could kill her and more fully take up such qualities anyway if she truly wanted to instead of desiring to inflict misery in revenge? Hard to know, Cat may have simply sidestepped that trap inherent to Creation, so Bard will stay alive til this Order ends or a Warden mercifully ends her life.

Well, Masego can achieve apotheosis now, I suppose given Nights transubstantiative nature, repairing his eye is not unexpected. I wonder if he kept any scars he has? I do suppose if there was any time to do so it would be now, and this should reduce the cost of apotheosis for him quite a bit. Seeing the exact ritual the Dead King used, along with pure Night, the stories of Above and Below, Angelic remnants, and the Summer sun should give him some rather excellent conceptual bones to build himself with.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, they are better then ever. A lesser god that became that to prolong their lives just risked it all sacrificing their lives. Below doesn't care about the power itself, just the sacrifice, the price paid. There was no promise it would all work out, they died knowing that, so it was real, they are going to be more capable now. Maybe a lower starting level of power, but that can be fixed easily enough. There is a war on.

Zahariel

OK, so first, this was awesome. I cannot wait to see what kind of crazy stuff Masego gets up to next.

Second, can anyone please tell me if the whole "that makes eight" thing between Rumena and the Leech is a reference to something? From context, I can incur that the Leech has tried to kill Rumena seven times and failed (and hey, seven and one, fancy that), but are there mentions of that elsewhere in the story? I can't remember if there are.

shikkarasu

"I have a tongue of fire"

"You are only an eight year snake"

-The traditional opening of an Epic Rap Battle of the Everdark

More succinctly: 'Get on my level,' *takes a drag of wakeleaf*
'Bitch.'

GluestickGenius

I first assumed it was about Kurosiv's sigils that Rumena destroyed before, but as per Ch. 12 Contest, those only add up to five ...

Xinci

It did raid on two of the sigils under Kurosiv recently though. And that last one would make eight if it did indeed annihilate the others...

AK

We actually learn why it's 8 in the bonus interlude "Tomb" posted about a month later (on patreon; will become open when the book ends).

nimelennar

Given that Fania is the one who prefers stories to words of wisdom, it doesn't bode particularly well for Cat's attempt to put a nisi's perspective even with a rylleh's that the recounting of this story is in a "disputed" Firstborn religious text.

Insanenoodlyguy

Who do you think is disputing it? The two probably still argue and critique each other's articles all the time.

shikkarasu

In the opening quote of 5:25 – Dead Ends

"And so the First Under the Night came across a portal where great danger might lurk, and upon witnessing it halted and sought the council of Sve Noc. 'O Night,' said the First, 'what wisdom do you offer?' And so the Young Night answered thus: 'Try a foot first.'"

– Extract from the 'Parables of the Lost and Found', disputed Firstborn religious text

I think 1 or 2 First Under the Nights later the Drow lose some appreciation for Cat's flippant description of her Patrons.

[*Liliet*](#)

Sure, but it's *still* out there.

[*sengachi*](#)

I think *Cat* is the one who disputed it.

Someperson

Yeah, that sounds about right.

Most of Cat's authority in a religious capacity comes from the trust the Sisters are willing to back her with. Which is clearly not something to be underestimated, but I'm pretty sure Sve Noc isn't going to be bothered if the drow don't take Cat's sayings as gospel truth. Heck, even while Cat is still First Under the Night the Sisters have basically approved of Rumena repeatedly mocking and disrespecting her, and it's pretty clear that beyond giving Catherine power over Night they are happy to let her reputation sink or swim based on her own merits and worthiness.

We can also be pretty sure the next First Under the Night will be Ivah, which is fun. Honestly Ivah's one-liner may have been the most epic part of the chapter tbh.

Xinci

It's a bit weirder since Night can package information, so it's fairly possible that Secrets could be used to dredge up information from the Night from when she did say that information and have the exacts noted. This could be a bungling on Cat and Sve's communication again, where the scribes are allowed to feud and misappropriate information later because Cat said she wanted two people on this. Basically, Cat is blind to a different possibility in information transmission due to the nature of the Drow, and instead goes with her experiences with human societies scribes. Sve just letting it happen would be weirder otherwise, since letting such things be disputed directly weakens the office of First Under Night and the support Sve Noc gives it, and thus indirectly her own tenets.

Dave

Oh that's some *good* shit!

ISiejek

I have so very much I want to say about this chapter, but honestly, I'm not sure how.

Instead, let me just say, this might well be the best chapter so far in the entirety of the story.

I can't wait to re-read the entire thing once it's finished to confirm!

shikkarasu

I would like to nominate Book 3, Chapter 65: Elision. The Fourfold Crossing is by far my favourite trap in the Guide, and

the insight into the various shades of Catherine was fascinating.

ninegardens

...
Wait a second.
WAIT a second.

None of this makes any sense.
Laure is a LAKE. Callow is landlocked. What fucking business does a lake have having TIDES?

The whole premise of the entire story is suspect now. Has Cat even SEEN the ocean?

Come to think of it, if your going to have crabs in a bucket, do lakes even have crabs in them?
How BIG are these lakes, exactly? What is going on with the hydrology in this region?

Daniel E

I honestly, sincerely appreciate that you are asking the real questions here.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'll answer your question with another question. Did you really think cat could toss around so much lakeomancy without consequence? It is all explained by that.

shikkarasu

I've held my peace for 6 Books, now, mainly because fantasy maps are rarely realistic in their geography, but the Wasaliti river runs coast to coast. From sea to sea. There is some serious hydrofuckery in Calernia.

Abrakadabra

Yep the wasality is strange. But not actually impossible, provided there is a great lake in the middle from which two river runs in different directions. The lake has to be in a great valley which collects water AND it have to have consistent precipitation. So not actually impossible, but highly improbable.

Ed

Where I live is on a drainage divide, everything that falls here runs away in one of three different directions.

Darkening

Considering the other callowan lake we saw had an island that was only there if you took 1 specific magic boat and was also an angel corpse, and that Callow has had a couple millennia of madmen throwing every magical doomsday scenario they can imagine at them, a lake with tides barely budes the needle for me. If anything I'm astonished Callow is as mundane as it is. They've got the waning woods on one border, and the wasteland and all its horrors on the other, too, you'd think some of those horrors would wander.

Darkening

Come to think of it, the proceran angel corpse was in a lake too until Cordy dredged it up. What's with Angels and dying in lakes? Is this all foreshadowing to Lakeomancy being the greatest weakness of angels and we're going to see Cat score the third angel kill in Calernia?

ninegardens

Mostly, I'm just thinking: Procer had a lake Angel. It also had a lake border with the king of death.

The obvious thing to do is move said angel so that you have an entire lake of holy water as your front line.

Now... obviously that isn't a *good* plan, and Nessie would fuck with it some how eventually... but I'm still suprised no one tried it

Darkening

Now... I suspect trying to use necromancy on an angel would backfire horribly, but I still find the idea of putting a dead angel anywhere near the worlds greatest necromancer viscerally horrifying. Just, on the off chance he could actually do something with it.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Funny that his nickname is "Nessie," given the whole lake thing being discussed here. And he is, without a doubt, a monster...

ISiejek

You guys do know that lakes can have tides right? Any large body of water is the same...

Really wanna mess with your head? Realise that the sea is basically a really big and deep lake 🤪

beleester

It's a pretty big lake – I don't think we're ever given a scale for the maps, but it looks to be around the size of a province in Procer? If it's somewhere around the size of one of the Great Lakes, it'll have small but noticeable tides – although maybe not big enough to catch fish with.

The Great Lakes don't have any native crabs, but apparently the Chinese Mitten Crab is an invasive species that's spotted there occasionally. Who knew?

[Adrian V](#)

This must mean Cat wasn't the first Lakeomancer!!!!

[Mary Gentle](#)

Big lumps of water have tides. As for how big they have to be... The Great Lakes don't hack it:

"Studies indicate that the Great Lakes spring tide, the largest tides caused by the combined forces of the sun and moon, is less than five centimeters in height. ... Consequently, the Great Lakes are considered to be non-tidal. Water levels in the Great Lakes have long-term, annual, and short-term variations."

<https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/gltides.html>

Trouble is, I can't find a scale on any of the maps, so I don't know if the Silver Lake is a similar size. or bigger, or smaller than the Great Lakes.

We can always rely on New Scientist:

"The smallest body of water in which lunar tides have been measured is Loch Ness in the UK, which is 37 kilometres long. Here, the tides have an amplitude of about 1.5 millimetres."

Read more: <https://www.newscientist.com/lastword/mg24332501-200-time-and-tide-what-is-the-smallest-body-of-water-with-lunar-tides/#ixzz7B02fzf9d>

Loch Ness isn't very big. I bet you'd be hard put to tell a millimetre and a half tide from the ordinary little waves on the shore there.

To work out the size of Silver Lake, we'd probably be reduced to measuring the amount of road a legion can march during a day (normal day, not one of Cat's short cuts), for a known pair of points, from one city to another, say. And then extending that until we have some idea how big Calernia is, and what proportion of the landmass the lakes represent.

On the OTHER hand...

The Wasaliti River runs from ONE EXIT TO THE SEA to ANOTHER EXIT TO THE SEA. The only way I can see this working is if it flows inland (like the tidal bore up the Severn!) at one river-mouth, and flows out the other end – except it's doing this so it exits at both mouths of the river simultaneously, so the Wasaliti is actually FLOWING IN TWO DIRECTIONS AT ONCE!

And we're going to worry if the lakes have tides? 😊

I don't have a problem with this, for what it's worth. The continent has been severely fucked over by magic, time and time again. I think they're lucky to have got away with a river that flows in two directions simultaneously. Things could have been much worse.

Wiki tells me there are plenty of freshwater crabs. Bring own bucket.

Liliet

Wasaliti is a sea channel and not a river and you can't tell me otherwise. It doesn't actually flow anywhere, it's just straight up a crack in landscape, including through a MOUNTAIN RANGE. Ship navigable through said mountain range, because it's explicitly a trade route with Free Cities.

Mary Gentle

Do we know the Wasaliti doesn't flow? (Serious question, I can't remember if it was mentioned in the last 6.5 books.)

It has the Isle of the Blessed in the middle somewhere, don't the waters flow past that?

Trying to think of an equivalent length of sea channel in our world – off to look at Google Earth...

Liliet

No, no we don't. It's fanon explaining how the FUCK-
hakureireimu

There are freshwater crabs

Rey d`Tutto

Mud crab tastes like mud.

Dungeness is the low end of what I consider Crab. Snow and King are superior tastes, but grow in difficulty of extraction.

I believe there are freshwater crab that don't taste like regret... But I ain't been introduced to them yet.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Saw a mudcrab the other day. Horrible creatures.

[BueWinds](#)

I am left with one burning question from this chapter:
What was the third miracle Akua stole from the godhead?

Daniel E

I'm surprised this hasn't come up yet. What do we call the embodiment of Below's Stories? The Sword Of Everything Else; Unoriginal ; Pointy End Facing The Enemy

shikkarasu

I want to see someone pick up the Severity and the Everything Else, then fight Ranger with them. I think I would be OK with the end of Calernia if we could just see that match on Pay-per-Scry before the undead overtake us.

Reader in the Night

Call it the Sword of Get to The Point.

[Adrian_V](#)

Convincing Argument? Pointed Argument?

[Mary Gentle](#)

"That's A Likely Story"?

[Liliet](#)

The Sword Of Other Things

mavant

I find myself experiencing an unexpected pang of sympathy for Moren and a grief too ancient too understand.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

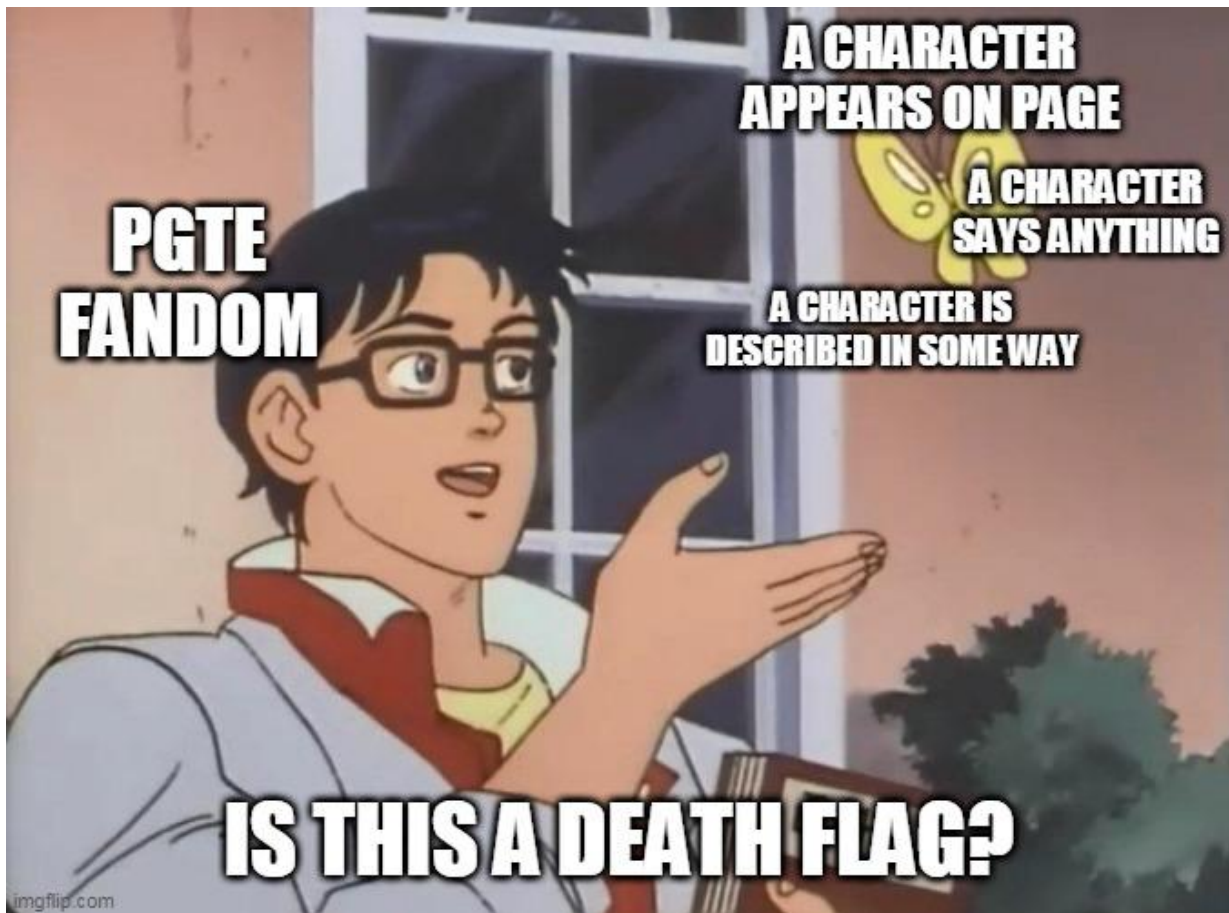
Wonder if it was another who remembered pre-Night.

[Mary Gentle](#)

I'm really glad the Tombmaker survived.

Been thinking for the last couple of chapters that maybe it had death flags being planted on it. I don't know why, but I just really like Rumena. Maybe it's its sense of humour. 😊

[Liliet](#)



Rumena is fine.

[Mary Gentle](#)

Well, it WAS, but now you've said THAT...

That's right up there on a level with "this is all going just as I planned". 😊

[Liliet](#)

Historically, in this work, for me, no it really isn't.

Indrani's been alive since Book 4.

SuitorShooter

"Are you worthy?

Maybe tomorrow."

So damn cool. I love when Cat's plan is about having faith in people, and seeing it rewarded.

Rustlegion

So I have a question, I know that as far as nations go none of the ones that we've seen rate as world powers, with the exception of the dwarves and I'm assuming the Dead, but how do figures like The Hierophant or Warden stand as far as individual power?

MoreBeer

I'd assume Heirophant is sitting around the height of individual named strength. He's at least as strong as Amadeus or Laurence was, and is probably approaching Ranger.

Warden probably stands among the strongest of regional (ruler) names along with names like Dead King, who has continental influence.

IIRC there are three name tiers loosely grouped as to power. Transitional names, full names, ruler names. I don't think regional names are necessarily stronger in a fight (Ranger could surely kill any dread emperor or Good King) but they have more influence.

BargleNawdleZouss

QUESTION: now that Masego has his magic back, does he still have Wrest as an aspect?

[Liliet](#)

There's no particular reason for him to have LOST an Aspect, no :o)

Masego was *already* casual godslayer levels of terrifying.

This has just become, uh, casualer.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I don't know... Fly Causally...

shikkarasu

It does beg the question of what **Wrest** will be used for, now. Masego likely cannot surpass the limitation of one-spell-atta-time that all mages are subject to(yet). He can still shut down a Spellcaster with **Wrest**, but in a way that feels like an under-powered version of **Take**. Less permanent, Sorcery/Night only, and he can already imitate Miracles with the Gift, so he doesn't even gain the level of flexibility that Roland has with **Confiscate** & **Use**.

This is not to say that I see this as a problem or obstacle, I am hype for what new trick Masego will learn now that **Wrest** is a tool, less a crutch.

RandyTheTwin

This is why I read these books. Shit like this just awakens a deep hunger in my chest for more, even though I know I won't get any for another 20 chapters. Still, I can't wait.

Frivolous

Hey, ErraticErrata – Hope you remember that Catherine asked Rumena for Ishabog's remaining ear to decorate her hat with in Antecedents.

I hope that when we next see Catherine the ears are on her hat, though I'm not sure she actually wears a hat.

[Liliet](#)

That was for next time she talks with Kurosiv's gang. I doubt she will again.

Someperson

I would make a joke about Neshamah eating crow, but... That is almost explicitly what didn't happen.

Frivolous

I like that Yara screamed and that her eyes were wild. She seems desperate, frenzied.

Is she truly worried now, for perhaps the first time in her long long existence, or was she just acting and lying as usual?

I wish we could get an Interlude from her POV. I want to see what it's like for the Intercessor to be completely blind to stories, to answer some questions:

Does her memory for stories compensate in any way for her blindness to stories, or does it make it even worse?

Is her ability to Wander in any way affected or weakened by the loss of her Story-fu aspect? Does she still Wander where she's needed, yet now is unable to see why she's needed there, or does she now Wander to truly random places?

Not sure if we or she could tell the difference, though.

David Stone

I'm a god. How can you kill a god? What a grand and intoxicating innocence.

Frivolous

This is very late, but EE, if you read this, I'd like to know what kind of sword Catherine drew out of the Intercessor.

A short sword? A longsword? A rapier? Zweihander? A bastard sword? A katana?

Two edges or one?

What kind of sword it is would, I think, reveal something about Below and Below's stories.

I wonder if it's an executioner's sword, like Terminus Est.

shikkarasu

10 Denarii on an Arming Sword, fit for Catherine's height, same as she has been using since Book 1 as her default. The type of sword less reflecting where she acquired it, and more that she has **Claimed** it for herself.

Salt

If it's supposed to be Below-themed, imo it probably doesn't necessarily have a defined shape.

Below's entire thing has been all about being flexible, ever-changing, and ceaselessly growing. Any single shape for the sword wouldn't make sense to me, as once it's defined it'd be a rigid weapon fit for one specific purpose, dependent upon being unchanging in properties. Regardless what type of sword it is, that's more Above-themed than Below

It'd be more fitting if the sword was entirely undefined in terms of specific length, shape, etc... and just refused to allow itself to be defined by a single description. Either by details of it being very conspicuously omitted, or constantly changing in terms of how it's perceived. Basically having none of the strength that comes with the rigidity associated with a single shape, but being impossibly versatile and always having the potential to be a better **fit** for the situation

Frivolous

I'm also kind of worried about Masego. I think it very likely he'll ask to borrow the sword so he can study it.

And then he might lose one or both of his eyes when the experiment blows up in his face again.

[*gnaruscat*](#)

Nice!

Storm

This would have been so much cooler if Tomb came before it

Chapter 48: Root

*“Summer’s friend, winter’s stranger; winter’s friend,
stays forever.”*

– Lycaonese saying

The Flowing Gardens would never be called that again.

The old enchantments here had unravelled, unmade by the greater powers that had run wild across islets and canals. What had been left behind was beautiful in the eeriest of ways. Moren’s final winter lingered, the luminescent trees and flowers trapped in ice – forever perfect, forever blooming. A pale carpet of snow that no footsteps could mar remained, sparing only the frozen canals. There the last echo of the ancient songs of the Garden remained, for under a layer of cracked ice water flowed and so the canals groaned out strange hymns that made the heart shiver. And at the heart of it all stood a broken throne, before which we had killed a god by raising another.

Loc Ynan’s corpse, scoured clean of the Dead King’s soul shard, remained there with a spear of yew through the heart.

It was a hallowed placed, for good or ill, and its beauty was not unlike that of the Firstborn: strange and terrible and keening like a broken heart. I stood among the paleness with an old friend at my side, his eyes – one mortal, one anything but – alight with wonder as he watched the wind thread through his fingers.

“It will snow,” Masego said, “every time the moon is full. I can see the echo.”

I hummed in agreement. I could feel it too, how tonight would return to this place again and again.

And it was not yet over, for all that we were all bone-tired, keep on our feet only by the strange febrile energy that came of

victory and feeling it all coming together. That tonic would fade before long, but we still had a little while in us still. So the two of us, together, watched as Sve Noc embraced the divinity that the Hierophant had forged for them. The night thrummed, as if defiant of the dawn yet to come, and wind like a warm breath rippled across Serolen. I couldn't see it the way Masego could, his eye laying bare the truths of the world, but I trailed down my finger down the string of the story and smiled. The Sisters, at long last, were slipping the noose.

"Light and Night, huh," I murmured. "Symmetry in all things."

"Their godhead was flawed," Hierophant mused. "Split from the start. What they received they gave out, keeping part for themselves, but that was making a single broken god and a million godlings. The godhead is a trick of perspective, Catherine – it can be shared, but it cannot be *divided*."

So they'd fixed it, he and Akua. Gathered it all together again, dissolving the nails that bound all Firstborn to the Night, and handed it back to Sve Noc to put together into a true godhead. And now Sve Noc, the Sisters and the Crows and a hundred names more, were giving their gift away once more – but not in the same way they once had, oh no. Firstborn no longer held Night, no more than humans held Light: it was outside them, borrowed. Granted by a higher power.

"They won't like it," I quietly said. "Not at first. But they'll get used to it."

The worthy would still take and rise. Night could no longer be taken the old way, because now to harvest it from drow or others grew the Night as a whole instead of a Mighty's personal hoard, but there were still gains. No one had ever quite figured out what defined how much Light individuals were capable of wielding, answers varying from a birth talent to the depth of faith or strength of the body. There would be no such doubt over Night: the more one added to it, the more of it one could wield. As one's power grew, their body would change along the same lines holding much Night had once caused: indifference to age and silver eyes.

Sve Noc would not shortchange those who had fought for them, their loyal Mighty not suddenly faced with decrepitude.

I knew exactly what those changes would feel like because I'd already gone through them. My eye was not silver – not yet – but the rest? There were none, save perhaps Radegast the Guest, who could come close to wielding as much Night as I could. And as for age... I'd once told the Dead King the years would kill me and the old monster had just smiled, before answering – *ah, but how many years would it take?* Many, I knew. Enough that spending eleven years of my life to snuff out the Saint of Swords had not left a

visible mark. I was not sure how to feel about having been the precursor to what Night would now grant, the first draft of the work.

"It won't matter," Masego said, openly pleased. "The Sisters have faith, now."

I almost smiled. Someone who did not know Hierophant might have taken that as a spurt of religiosity, but I knew better. He was being quite literal, because when he'd mended Night and guided Sve Noc into rebuilding it he'd done more than just smooth away a few hard edges. He'd fixed it, the flaw. Now it wasn't just a shoddy mantle of power that the Sisters bore and that... changed things. I raised my hand, a mirror to his, but it was not the wind I was grasping. It was threads, millions of them blooming. Night had been born finite, parceled from its very first breath, but that had changed. It was no longer something that could be counted or measured.

I watched the faith, the earnest belief of millions of drow swelling the godhead of Sve Noc, and let out a convulsive laugh. After all these years, all the sacrifices and the despair and the darkness, the two sisters had found the end of their winding road: they'd slipped the noose. The debt of the Firstborn would be wiped clean, the destruction they'd staved off with a loan and then Winter's flesh at last gone for food. They were no longer finite, their godhead a living and breathing truth, and so what did a few measly years mean for them to pay? Faith fed Night, fed its twin goddesses, and like a beacon in the dark their power filled the sky above us.

Sve Noc paid the old debt of the Twilight Sages, returned the years borrowed, and for them it was no different than a sigh. Time meant nothing to the immortal.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

Masego turned to look at me with his mortal eye.

"What does?"

"How does it feel," I smiled, "to be first man in Creation to ever make a Choir?"

Because that was what he and Akua had done, when it came down to it. In Night instead of Light, but that was a shallow difference when it came down to it. Should I call my patronesses angels of thievery and murder instead of gods, what would it change? And that, more than the rest, made it plain the scope of what he'd achieved to night. Because Choirs did not choose a single nation, and single people, and remain bound to them. They were not so... limited. And come morning, neither would Sve Noc be.

I gave it a month before the first goblin was blessed with Night.

Masego considered my words, face pensive.

"Do you remember," he finally said, "what the Queen of Summer said to me, when I tried to throw off her binding in Arcadia?"

After the Battle of Five Armies and One, I recalled, and it took me but a moment to recall the words.

"If you'd had a few years, Masego," I quoted. "You have not seen enough."

He smiled, closing his fingers around the wind.

"If I met her tomorrow," Hierophant simply said, "she would be wrong."

Nothing more need be said.

The two of us stood there, in companionable silence, until dawn came and pulled the final curtain over it all.

—

The First General gilded its patronesses new crown with fresh victories.

Three battles won in a day, Gloom-shards keeping the day's bite away from the Firstborn, and now the dead were on the backfoot. It was a matter of weeks until they were driven out entirely. General Ysengral used the time to purge Serolen of the most egregious traitors – an easy enough task, given that Sve Noc now refused them the wielding of Night – and consolidating our hold on the city. There was no organized resistance to the effort, the second apotheosis of the Crows and Kurosiv's murder having snuffed out any thought of rebellion in even the most hardline of the opposition. It was one thing to deny a god when you had the protection of another, but without that?

Only fools and the mad kept holding their spears, and those were made short work of.

I myself had another duty. I sat in what drow now called Verde Zyebug, the Garden of Dead Gods, and told the scribes of the Losara of what had happened. Not all, for some truths were better left buried, but enough. We sat among the snow whose cold never seemed to reach my bones and spoke, until day turned to night and day chased it away. I left the Garden exhausted, leaning on my staff, but there was more yet. My presence was required, for Cordelia Hasenbach had finally sought her audience with the Crows. The deal she had come to Serolen to strike was to be unveiled at last.

I limped my way to the temple-fortress, returning to the depths, and stopped by my quarters loon enough to wash. It was with fresh clothes and wet hair, still half-combed, that I made my way to the war council room where the princess would be allowed to make her case. I was, I found with mild amusement when I entered, the last to arrive. Two crows were perched on the back of my throne, so even the goddesses had gotten here before I did. Declining to apologize, I limped across the room and settled into my seat. On my left was Ysengral, and on my right Rumena – neither of which looked particularly interested in what Cordelia Hasenbach, standing before us straight-backed, had to say. She had won some respect by fostering the civil war among Kurosiv's sigil, but in the wake of our more recent victory that counted for less than before.

"Princess Cordelia," I said. "As First Under the Night, I grant you audience in this hall."

The fair-haired woman bowed, as was the etiquette. My words were pretty much a formality, given that though I had the highest status of the mortals in this room in practice it was Rumena and Ysengral that ran Serolen – and the Sisters who had the final say on agreements with Procer. I suspected that Sve Noc would take a step back as the years passed, distancing themselves from earthly affairs, but it would wait until the storm had passed. I felt a flicker of approval from Andronike.

"I thank you for the privilege," Cordelia calmly replied, straightening. "I come on behalf of First Princess Rozala and the Grand Alliance to offer treaties to the Empire Ever Dark."

If this were a Proceran court that'd be the part where we moved to a more comfortable setting, but that wasn't the way of things in Serolen. She'd be standing through it all while we sat, which I felt bad about but not enough to start standing on my bad leg. I flicked a look at Ysengral and gestured it could start speaking, letting the negotiations begin. In Chantant, since Hasen- Cordelia spoke no more than a few sentences of Crepuscular. The start of it was nothing unexpected, reaffirmation of the alliance against Keter and Rozala 'expressing her firm belief in the importance of our friendship' through her envoy, but then we got to the parts that mattered.

The promise to balance: Keter had been promised to the Herald of the Deeps for his support and to the Firstborn for theirs. It could not be held by both.

"You are not asked to cede lands that were promised to you," Cordelia plainly spoke. "The Kingdom of the Dead remains yours, whatever else is said today, and our talks concern only the acquisition from your empire of the Crown of the Dead as well as surroundings."

A map had been drawn and was now brought forward, one I'd seen before – it was the one the Herald had agreed with. The city of Keter and a significant but not particularly large amount of land around it were marked out. Enough farmland that the city could be fed without needing imports, that had been the calculation made. After we got all the poison out of the ground, anyway. Pretty phrasing on Cordelia's part, I thought, casting this as the Grand Alliance buying a claim from an ally instead of offering it to someone else. The Sisters were not so easily swayed, but presentation mattered if you wanted to keep trust.

"And why," General Rumena bluntly said, "should we care to cede a single thing to Procer? We have bled for every inch of that claim."

And now the moment of truth came, as I had genuinely no idea what Cordelia would bring forward. She'd been having trouble finding a price, I'd known that, but our last conversation had seen her declare she'd found it. She started out predictably enough, offering on behalf of Procer things the Firstborn would need after the war: seeds for fields, cattle to begin herds and goods made in Proceran cities. Neither Rumena nor Ysengral were sold, I could tell from their presence in the Night. They knew they could get all those things without needing to cede territory. But that had been the prologue, and then she got to the meat of the offer.

"You have been asked to bleed for the west," Cordelia acknowledged, eyes sliding to me for a moment before looking away. "To make sacrifices for human kingdoms few of you have ever seen. And none have ever paid you back for the losses, save in promises now bargained over."

"How can the word of humans be worth?" Ysengral scorned.

It did not bother to exclude me from that, but I didn't take offence. Mighty Ysengral was one of the Firstborn who believed that my being First Under the Night meant I wasn't human, not in the ways that mattered. Maybe not drow either, but far from cattle.

"I do not blame you for the mistrust," Cordelia said. "It was earned. And yet we need the Kingdom Under if we are to win against the Dead King, so sacrifices must be made."

Neither of the generals were pleased to hear that, and truthfully neither was I.

"So let Procer pay its share," the blue-eyed princess said. "We ask of you to cede territory, and so we offer to cede the Empire Ever Dark territory in turn."

I hid my surprise, feeling that of the others. Even Sve Noc. The map she brought forward this time marked the territory she

proposed Procer was to cede and the sight of it had my eyebrows rising. It was a third of the Principality of Cleves, namely the northern third. Coastlands and rocks, little land good for farming, but if we won the war? The city of Cleves was in there, a natural harbour near the crossroads of the Grave, the Tomb and Lake Pavin. A natural harbour at the end of well-kept roads going south. *It's going to be one of the trade centres of Calernia in the coming decades*, I thought. *One of the richest cities on the continent.*

And there lay Cordelia's cleverness. Because she was giving away something hugely valuable, but for it to be valuable there needed to be trade between the Empire Ever Dark and Procer. And trade meant relations, meant a measure of peace. And that meant First Princess Rozala would sign the treaty, because peace with the Firstborn would be worth so much more to her than lands she did not hold and were infested with undead.

"A worthy offer," Mighty Rumena conceded.

"You are owed more," Cordelia frankly replied. "The Firstborn have stood by Procer in its darkest hour, dying by the thousands so that our realm might survive. And so I would return that pledge."

I leaned forward.

"On behalf of the Grand Alliance, I would offer this treaty and oath," the blonde princess said. "So long as the Grand Alliance and the Empire Ever Dark stand, I pledge that the full might of the Grand Alliance will be mustered in the defence of your empire in the face of any attack by the Kingdom Under and its vassals."

Ah, I smiled. *So that's what you figured out*. Loyalty. From our talk, she had decided that what the Empire Ever Dark really wanted – really needed – was a guarantee that never again would they be forced into another exodus. That never again would they stand against the dwarves without allies, without an alliance spanning half of Calernia and willing to make a fucking ruckus on their behalf. Cordelia kept talking, delicately making it known that the pledge would be written to stand even if members of the Grand Alliance had been suffering raids, but I was already leaning back in my seat with a pleased sigh.

I already knew how this would end.

—

I had not slept in too long when I found her.

It added a haze to all I saw, as if the edges of the world were blurred. Her, though, I saw clear as day. Akua was seated on a worn old paving stone that must've been ripped out of the street,

looking at an altar that could not be more than a day or two old: a simple tile of ceramic, on which two crows had been painted in black. It was faint, but I could feel the power in there. Honest faith had been offered up to that tile, the kind that left ripples behind. And Akua Sahelian's golden eyes watched the altar with a distant look, the long skirt of her black dress draped about her seat. Cloth-of-silver drew the eye to her waist and only a single small pin kept her hair in place.

She was a vision, I thought, though of what I could not quite find the word for.

"Thinking of converting?" I asked.

An amused glance was flicked my way.

"Are the perks worth it?" she lightly asked.

"Eh," I shrugged. "I've seen better."

I felt the Komena's indignation echo from a distance, which only improved my mood. Akua chuckled, running her fingers gently across the dried paint.

"It is not a small thing that we did," she said. "In some ways, it might be the most consequential action we ever undertake."

"Ending Keter will beat that," I said. "Hard for Night to matter if there's no one left to use it."

She conceded the point with a nod but did not look entirely convinced. She wasn't entirely wrong, either. Keter had been beaten back before, but what we'd done here with the Night? It didn't really have a precedent, as far as I knew. It was just that this war with the Dead King wasn't like the others, even if it was hard to understand. Neshamah was laying it all on the line, this time, knowing it was the best shot at winning he'd ever get.

"How did dear Cordelia's talks go?" Akua idly asked.

I hummed.

"She's convinced them," I said. "Now all that's left is shaking hands with the dwarves."

"A most convincing woman, Cordelia Hasenbach," she mildly said.

I cocked an eyebrow. That hadn't entirely sounded like a compliment.

"That something you mind now?" I asked.

An assessing look, then she for some reason she looked satisfied.

"Not so long as she doesn't overstep," Akua vaguely replied, then offered me a smile.

I frowned at her, unsure what exactly that was supposed to mean. She thumbed the painted crows one last time, then withdrew her hand.

"Are we to depart from Serolen soon, my heart?" she asked.

"Two days at most," I said. "I am to... speak, before we go, but we will be marching on Keter with reinforcements after."

By now, the siege should have begun. And there were only a few days left before the Hellgates opened, not that I was too worried about that. Amadeus of the Green Stretch had, once more proving his mind was a steel trap, found a way out of that horror that was more than simply closing the gate. I'd ordered his legacy to be seen through to the end, and it would be. Akua nodded, eyes lingering on me.

"You did not come to tell me this," she stated, as if she knew it to be a fact.

I grimaced. Sometimes it still surprised me how well she could read me. It had snuck up on me, the way she'd become one of my closest friends. It might be a nightmarishly complicated thing, this relationship, but it was no less deep for that.

"I wanted to see how you are," I admitted. "Now that it's done."

She'd held a godhead in the palm of her hand, for a moment. And bent it to her will. But when she chose to use that power, what she'd done with it... I'd known Masego was her favourite of the Woe, but I'd not seen what she did coming. And even now, it did not feel entirely like a personal decision.

"How lightly you have learned to tiptoe in your old age, dearest," Akua drawled.

I grunted in displeasure.

"Fine," I said, eye turning to the crow-adorned tile. "You made a decision, that night."

Healing a friend over godhood. Once more lending her hand to a ritual that would change the world.

"Do you still stand by it?"

It was one thing to choose in the heat of the moment. But night's veil had passed and been replaced by the cold light of day. Akua did not answer at first. I snuck a glance at her and found she was staring at where I'd stopped: the crows on the tile.

"You told me once," Akua said, "that nothing could ever even the balance for the Folly."

I nodded, but she didn't see.

"Yes," I got out.

"I didn't really understand, then," Akua admitted. "I saw one hundred thousand lives and thought it was a heavy debt, but not beyond settling."

She breathed out.

"I learned differently in Praes," she murmured. "I saw..."

She fell silent.

"It ripples out," I murmured.

Those full lips stretched mirthlessly.

"It ripples out," Akua softly agreed. "More was lost than lives that day."

She looked down at her hand, clenching her fingers.

"It is not a debt I can repay," she said. "Not even should the rest of my days be spent on the labour. And so, for a time, I thought to do away with the thought entirely."

"And now?"

She hesitated.

"I like him," Akua confessed. "Masego. He reminds me of my father in a way that doesn't sting."

"So you wanted to help him," I said.

"All it took was a nudge," she mused. "I had the knowledge for it, and I was in the right place – at the right time. I felt so easy that the real question was why I *shouldn't* do it. And that was when I saw it, Catherine."

Golden eyes turned to me.

"It's not about whether the debt is repaid, is it?" she asked. "It never was."

She laughed, a little bleakly, and my heart clenched at the sound of it.

"It's about whether you're the sort of person who'll try," Akua said.

I licked my lips.

"Are you?"

"I don't know," Akua Sahelian admitted. "But sometimes, I want to be."

—

Fifteen thousand. That was the sum of the reinforcements that Sve Noc had agreed to send south to the siege of Keter, though more might follow if Radegast's victories continued to rack up. I was grateful they could rustle up that many to spare, after the rough year Serolen had suffered, and did not hide it from my patrons. Even more of a boon was the Might meant to lead the expedition.

"I swore in Iserre, Losara Queen," Mighty Rumena reminded me.

"Before nine years have passed," I muttered.

"Keter's gates will lie broken," the old drow finished. "I will keep not break my oath."

"It wouldn't be the same without you," I honestly replied.

The sincerity seemed to take it aback, which was rare enough I rather enjoyed it. Beyond the mustered sigils, though, there was another duty left to me in Serolen. Much had happened in the city since I came, and though in time the words set down my scribes – which would follow me south, as part of the Losara contingent under Ivah – would spread among the people, there was a need for a more settled conclusion. An end to the journey that had begun on the outskirts of the Gloom and taken us all the way here to Serolen, the entwining of my fate with the Firstborn's coming to the end of the road. All we had left now was Keter, but I owed more than that before my mantle was passed to another.

And so the Firstborn gathered to the Garden of Dead Gods.

A tide of grey flesh as far as the eye could see, from the lowest of nisi to the heights of the Ten Generals. One hundred thousand, two? I could not tell, and the Sisters whispered in my ear that it didn't matter. I was First Under the Night: sooner or later, all drow heard my words. I had not needed to carry word north of the reforms of Iserre for them to bear fruit. So I stood before a people not mine – sometimes close, but never quite – and leaned on my staff. The eyes on me were not only those of the few, the Mighty, but of all who dwelled in Serolen. How many of these nisi and dzulu had never so much as caught a glimpse of the First Under the Night before today?

It was not my place to fix these people, to mend their broken pieces. I did not understand them enough for that, and even if I

did would they want the meddling of my hand? No, I had been chosen as the herald of the Crows because I was the stranger. The dark mirror through which they could look at themselves, the asker of questions. And that was what I had to offer them, today.

"In the depths of Twilight," I said, "I asked you something."

A pause.

"Are you worthy?"

Sa vrede. And that harsh question I had once castigated the Mighty through was no longer simply that. It was a ritual now, now, something that they owned more than me. And Ivah, oh Ivah had made something true of it. Something worth believing in. *Sa vrede*, I asked them. *Cera aine*, the Firstborn answered, as they once had in Twilight.

Maybe tomorrow.

"You have come," I said, "a long way. But a long way yet lies ahead of you."

I looked at the ocean of faces, the shining eyes and those that Night had not yet silvered.

"So I must ask you," I said. "Who do you want to be, children of the Ever Dark?"

I looked behind me, at the god slain with a spear.

"Will you reach for the Heavens with hungry hands?" I asked. "There is glory in the Old War, let none tell you otherwise. In defiance against the tyranny of the sun."

I looked at the blue sky above, the endless expanse that held so much promise.

"Or perhaps you would take the winding path," I said. "Make accords, raise stones. There, too, there is glory – in casting aside the old empire to make one greater. To conquer peace as you have conquered war."

My one-eyed gaze swept them.

"I ask you again, children of the Ever Dark," I said, voice echoing. "*Who do you want to be?*"

Some answered, words or curses or oaths, but they were few and one answer was louder than all the rest: silence.

"That, too, is an answer," I gently told them.

And not a bad one. Ignorance was a blank slate.

"The choices are yours," I told them, warned them. "So hear me now-"

I extended my arms, encompassing all the world around us.

"These are no longer the Burning Lands," I said. "Do not look back, for there is no path there to be found. Your home is here, and so you receive the greatest of gifts: in this strange land, your fate is your own."

I leaned forward, smiling toothily.

"Struggle and rise," I told them. "Struggle and fall. But, above all, *struggle*."

I struck the ground with my staff and the earth shivered,

"Today," I told them, "you have nothing."

Or so little, I thought, that there was hardly a difference.

"But tomorrow? Tomorrow is an empire there for your taking."

They were an old people, the Firstborn, but made young again. Let them not waste that chance.

"So go out into the world, children of the Night, and carry with you my blessing and my curse."

I laughed, and thousands shivered.

"May you ever get what you deserve."

*arcanavita*15

Holy Shit the choir of night!!! The sisters are now Night Choirs and Night is now similar to Light!!

dadycool

It always felt like Night was supposed to be the answer to Light, now it really is.

[*Kletanio*](#)

It never balanced right that "Light" and "Sorcery" were opposites.

Dome Zasrekh

Sorcery was always inferior to light, just more versatile.

SeventhSolar

I liked that dichotomy. The power of the divine vs. the efforts of mortals. The sanctioned and the blasphemous. The soul and the mind.

[sengachi](#)

There are many dichotomies in Guide and I love them all.

[Liliet](#)

They never were.

ruduen

Boost!

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

Quite a lot to process. Surprise among surprises, it seems like Akua might... get it now. Of course, it's hard to say just what that's going to mean when they actually reach the end of the journey.

I wasn't sure whether or not we'd see the resolution here or be jumping back to the way, but it seems there's little time for respite – back into the breach they go.

[Liliet](#)

Is that actually surprising???

burlindw

I am very excited to see Night wielding goblins. The Matrons will be pissed though; Night will act as an equalizer that they will have difficulty controlling, so there'll probably be some conflict there.

pyrohawk21

It's even worse, because their standard response is to throw assassins at the target. Because the wounds caused dealing with all them cost more than any benefit their deaths could give, thus ensuring eventually one assassin will succeed.

But now? With Night? All those deaths mean more plentiful and rich sacrifices to give to the Night. Meaning now they need to have very effective assassins which will succeed with the fewest deaths possible.

You know what they call those? Rivals.

Komplode

Imagine a secret alliance of normal gobos keeping the matrons in check!

Hellspirit

It is called "the great goblin conspiracy"

Rynjin

Now I'm even sadder about Robber's demise. So close to being able to realize his true, even more terrifying potential.

nimelennar

All would have trembled at the sight of the Greater Footrest.

shikkarasu

Wait until Cat comes to **Collect** on her debts. There's nothing to say that Robber is gone forever. Cat's first trick was Necromancy, and it has grown as much as her habit of making trinkets from the souls of the fallen.

Night! Robber is no more impossible than anything else the Woe have done.

Cpt. Obvious

How I wish we could see that. But unfortunately there's no corpse to reanimate, and so far Cat has needed that. And I doubt his ghost is lingering. If anything the Gobbler probably made sure to grab him asap. Such a tasty soul...

RoflCat

I can see them pulling the old goblin gambit of having some split off to try the new thing i.e. some Matrons convert, some try to keep the old ways.

Whichever way the dice roll, the goblins live on.

I can see Night becoming their equivalent to Christianity, with the old ways becoming the witchcraft/pagan path down history. And of course Catherine is the Snark Jesus.

Aureum

Imagine Goblin Ammunition with Night.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Dark Goblinfire?
Light it once on Keter. Wait.
No more Keter.

Tenthyr

Night rich male goblins will be ageless. Goblin society is about to shatter in the best way. Pickler will be delighted...

Someperson

Especially seeing as a longer lifespan is one of the biggest concrete difference that the matrons hold over the rank and file goblins, and extending one's lifespan is literally the oldest miracle granted by Night.

dadycool

It's very hard to follow a climax like Hollow; Hallow, but this somehow managed to stand with its own glory. And at the end of it, Cat gave voice to a truth everyone saw way back when she first encountered the Empire Ever Dark: Here was a nation of people just like her. Strugglers.

Mirror Night

I am also curious about what determines the amount of Light lol. It seems super imbalanced even among Heroes.

burlindw

Some sort of weird measure of piety or faith probably. Not by human standards of either, as it's meted out by angels and gods, but I think its a sound guess.

arcanavitael5

I think it depends on the story and narrative of an person how good are they, how important is their story, what type of good are they things like that.

erebus42

A roll of a Divine D12

arcanavitael5

I feel like that speech in the end shows how far everyone has come as individuals and as a people it has a bit of the talk from Akua from it with the whole who do you want to be, it also

shows how far the Firstborn as a people have come they are as Cat said a blank slate. Odin vibes from Cat intensifies.

Raved Thrad

A couple of thoughts:

1. If it's inevitable that goblins will be able to wield Night, then what about the Armies of Callow? What of all the soldiers marching to banners with crows' wings painted on them? How long before the House Insurgent is marching alongside the Callowan chapter of the Priests of Night?
2. Akua is really starting to grow on me, if only because she reminds me of one of my favorite old characters, from Baldur's Gate: Viconia deVir. My paladin romanced her, and when I carried my game over to Baldur's Gate II I managed to turn her from NE to TN. So many memories. I hope she gets a better ending.
3. If Night can hold back aging, does that mean that we might, in future, see (functionally) immortal Night-wielding goblins? Should Calernia be afraid? Is the Gobbler running away in fear yet?

dadycool

It utterly tickles me to think of the rivalry that would arise from the two Callowan faiths.

I think the Gobbler would cackle all the day long.

Salt

Even if they're not functionally immortal, just the idea of a long-lived Night-Powered goblin is fucking terrifying. I don't know if Catherine fully realizes what kind of a horror this is going to be, it's no joke.

Goblins are incredibly intelligent, wickedly cunning, and insanely adaptable. They're also natural engineers, thieves, alchemists, and assassins. They have so much potential that they tend to be an absolute terror if they even manage to live long enough to be a teenager. The only reason they're not a greater force on the continent is because of their two crippling weaknesses – a short lifespan and being incredibly weak individually. Both of which the Night solves perfectly.

The only thing they have to do is worship deities of theft-in-murder who have no real morals to speak of, and in exchange they get a bag of tricks and power that (according to Catherine) can grow infinitely as long as they continue to murder and steal. Which is basically all they do anyway.

Give it a few centuries, and the goblins are going to start producing their equivalent of Horned Lords through the Night. Except unlike Horned Lords, whatever the hells you call an ancient Night-Powered goblin is going to have intellect and cunning that matches or outright exceeds the power they have. The greatest of the goblins, if they reach their full potential in the Night, could legitimately make demons and Named Horned Lords look like schoolchildren.

aurikdomi

Horned lords do supposedly hold the intellect and cunning that matches their power

shikkarasu

I doubt most Callowans will be bloodthirsty enough to attract Sve Noc's favour. Too many farmers trying to protect their home, not enough hubris. Goblins, on the other hand, were roughly following the Tenets of Night before Night even existed, and added the Crows to their worship almost immediately.

That's not to say Callow won't have any Night users, I just don't see it growing near as influential among humans as the House of Light, or even House Insurgent.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The Long Price.

Callowan Grudge.

There will only be a few, but those few... Don't Piss Them Off. Callowan Night Villains could just be ol' Jeb/Jess, out on his/her back 40, who the gangs, bandits, and assorted scumbags learn not to disturb.

Theft and Murder and Vengeance. And a relatively peaceful area where the Villain makes his/her home

erebus42

Is...is Akua jealous of Cornelia?

That was a nice callback to Struggle

I wonder if now that the sister's are true goddesses and the Night has been stabilized if it won't be as much of a pushover to Light and Sorcery.

Also if the sisters can be considered the "Choir" of Night, Theft, and/or Murder I wonder what "Choir" Masego will form when he finally achieves apotheosis. The Choir of Sorcery? The Choir of Knowledge? The Choir of Stiklers?

erebus42

*Cordelia

SeventhSolar

I trust in Masego not to disappoint. When he breaks his way out of reality, he'll leave behind a Choir-shaped hole. It will be utterly fascinating and drive all who view it mad as they stumble halfway out of reality themselves.

nimelennar

I definitely think Akua is jealous. An attractive woman, who is now on a first-name basis with Cat, who was previously her rival and equal but now is in a more cooperative relationship, someone who has wronged Cat much less than Akua has, and for better reasons? The only other person who could relate to Cat so strongly would be Malicia, and that's more of an "evil stepmom" vibe than a romantic one.

I don't particularly ship Cat with anyone (at least since the Kilian ship sank), but I can definitely see why Akua would have something to worry about here.

erebus42

"What are you doing Evil Stepmom?"

But in all seriousness, I would agree that there definitely seems to be symmetry between Akua and Cordelia, though I think in terms of historical and intimate weight I'd still say Akua has the edge between the two.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but Cat has not sworn a solemn oath to never sleep with Cordelia...

(Which, admittedly, she technically hasn't for Akua either, but I'm sure you know what I mean)

Mary Gentle

"Is...is Akua jealous of Cornelia?"

Remember waaaay back, when Killian told Cat "You're rather horrible at this"?

Cat's still horrible at this. 😊

If Cornelia and Ubua turn up naked together in Cat's bed, I can see Cat asking "Oh... Is there a blanket shortage?"

erebus42

To be fair, at least with Akua, she has been suggestively dancing around Cat from the start. Granted their feelings do seem to be genuinely coming to a head now but still...

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I am a bad man.

I want a (cannon or not) Cordy + Akua + Cat fanservice chapter.

Yep, I'm going' to hell.

edrey

i was half hopping that they would trick the forever king in paying the debt but this still a good end for the drow arc, a choir of night, Dark angels? it fit the seven and one pattern, and make calernia one of the most special places in creation.

erebus42

Honestly, I'm still kinda hoping that we'll get an elf vs. Drow showdown -even if it's just a one on one.

Salt

Rumena might be one of the only living individuals on the continent that can match the elves in all three categories of power, skill, and shameless rage-inducing arrogance. On top of that, it's highly likely that even the Emerald Swords don't have a way to defend against the Secret of Scathing Retorts. It'd be a show for the ages

erebus42

Even should the elf survive I imagine the emotional wounds would never heal.

Harrison

They will carry it with them for the rest of their lives.

Konstantin von Karstein

We don't know the exact number of Choirs, so no 7 and 1 here 😊

mavant

The ones we've seen are all named from the traditional Jewish angelic hierarchy, so I would assume there are ten.

[Liliet](#)

"Types of angels" don't 1:1 correspond with choirs, we've heard of at least one type (either seraphim or cherubim) called out as being a part of two separate choirs. There's no fixed number of choirs iirc

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

No, there are a fixed number of Choirs, and Angels. Which is why Angelic Corpses are such a big deal. Even when an Angel dies, the Choirs' Numbers are still inviolate. Logic be damned. Their number doesn't change. There are an ever-changing number of Hells, and an amorphous amount of demons, devils, imps... More Order vs Chaos than Good vs Evil.

[Liliet](#)

> No, there are a fixed number of Choirs, and Angels.

Hmm. Let's dig into WoE:

> Xinci:

> Ah, yes I did want to know if this is spoilery or not. But have Choir names changed over time? Like Strength to Fortitude?

> EE:

> Choir names have changed, yes
some names refer to the same without people being aware of it

> Tzeentch:

> Probably gets asked a lot, but is there a complete list of Choirs? Or even a more filled out partial list?

> EE:

> no complete Choir list, never saw a need

> hakureireimu:

> Are servants of Heaven also Angels in Yan Tei, or they something different.

> EE:

> no angels in Yan Tei lands

> Liliet The Adorable Nerd:

> are Choirs the same everywhere or do they vary by culture?

> EE:

> interpretation of Choirs varies by culture and era

> There's twenty-three different kinds of demons, related to the first twenty-three Hells. Devils are beyond count in both amounts and kind. As for angels, the actual number of Choirs is hotly debated by scholars

– heroes don't know, since it's unheard of to be affiliated to more than one.

> There's a great many choirs, so listing them in their entirety would be more confusing than helpful.

> "Q: What are all the Angelic choirs

> A: I believe I've been asked that question before, but pretty much there's enough that listing them is pointless since only a few of them will ever be relevant to the story. Other Choirs have already been mentioned, though, notably Mercy and Compassion."

...so all this doesn't technically contradict the number of choirs being fixed yea. we just don't know how many there are 😊

Certainly more than ten though, is what I'm getting from this

Reader in the Night

Fuck. That was... Powerful. That whole chapter, was immensely powerful. To kill a God, is a single moment of glory, albeit great. But this speech from Cat will be one to echo through the ages.

And not just among the Drow, because the Children of the Night are now all those who Struggle. Honestly, Catherine's Creation of an Evil religion that asks the question "Are you worthy?" might be a greater contribution to ending the Old Order than even the Accords would ever be.

Because the Worthy take, the Worthy rise. But the Worthy are cautioned against stealing power they didn't earn, and that can stop a great deal of Evil's self-destructive tendencies.

dadycool

Oh, fuck. Every street rat and urchin will suddenly feel empowered by the Carrion.

Reader in the Night

In Calernia, Evil is all about DIY, and now everyone who keeps to the faith of "take what you need instead of expecting it to be handed to you" will have a Patron Goddess on their corner (as long as they don't ask for more than they give).

KageLupus

Calernia is full to the brim with people who follow the tenets of the House of Light but cannot wield that power.

You still need the ability to channel the power, Night is just different in that it has a built in level-up mechanic if you can contribute more Night to the pool. But how much Night is that little street urchin really going to contribute?

Also, the main point of the original Tenets of Night was a focus on power above all, not just theft. Taking Night from a fallen foe was simply your due because the strong rise. Even now after the Hallowing the same basic system is in place. A Drow wouldn't increase their personal store of Night by killing another Drow now, but murder is still how you increase Night in general.

So a street urchin who stole an apple would not warrant the attention of the Goddesses, and even if that urchin killed a merchant for the apple they probably wouldn't care. But if that urchin was decked out in Crow iconography and prayed for the strength to murder a merchant (and meant it), that might be enough to get the ball rolling.

Salt

I don't know about making fanciful prayers or wearing religious garb making a difference. Seems way too shallow and definitely way too human, not something the Sisters would appreciate

The Sisters are mortals that reached apotheosis by rebelling against the Twilight sages to save their people, endured watching the remains of their people cannibalize each other for millennia while barely kept together a flawed godhead, and slipped the noose by taking a leap of faith that resulted in actual death after being mauled by the Dead King and their own followers.

They're going to look favourably on one thing, in the end – people who have that same spark that they once did as mortals themselves. They'll only pay attention to people who are willing to endlessly fight to be more than the hand that was dealt to them, and they'll only reward them with one thing – the opportunity to make that spark into something great with their own hands.

The street urchins that have enough fire in them would likely get an offer, the same way choirs like Judgement and Contrition give offers to mortals that fit their own ideals. If they accept, they'll be given nothing at all (or at least nothing permanent) except the ability to harvest night. Basically a single path out of the pit in a hopeless situation, and if they can make the best use of it to build themselves up bit by bit? Great, they deserve

it. If they fail to grasp that opportunity and become great? That's fine too, they weren't worthy.

As far as what the poor urchin child could contribute to the Night? That's secondary. Contributions will come naturally through the act of taking, and if they manage to become great people through the Night it's a foregone conclusion that their contributions will be proportionally great. What matters isn't how much they can contribute right then and there, so much as whether they have the mindset and potential to get there eventually.

'Ladi Williams

Why is everyone limiting Night to street urchins though? The Noble that has proven to have a fire or a "spark" as @salt has said gets noticed. Basically anyone that embodies the ideal of the sisters gets noticed.

Salt

I don't think anyone is limiting it to street urchins so much as that just being the topic to begin with in this particular comment chain lol. Realistically it's whoever and 'what'ever the Sisters approve of, ideologically.

Every single random orphan among the endless multitude gaining potential to upset the balance of power also tends to make for a much bigger potential change though, compared to a few nobles among their already limited number potentially gaining more power on top of the power they already have, so the former is more worth discussing imo. It's analogous to how the army getting more tanks isn't even worth discussing, but potentially every single civilian alive getting their own personal tank out of nowhere is kind of a big deal.

Big I

I think the most likely human Named to get access to the Night would be a Hunter, or a Slayer from Levant.

Salt

That's a very interesting point, Levantine culture for slayers especially does seem to fit in well with the tenets of night. Levant is a Good nation, traditionally, that the likes of the Barrow Sword are trying to turn more grey, so it'd be interesting to see how that changes the culture of Levant long term.

'Ladi Williams

Holy Shit!

I still maintain this would be an awesome series if they can somehow capture the spirit of the Story!

I want that lady that played Ayra Stark to act as Cat in the series...she's a scrapper!

'Ladi Williams

I also can't wait to see the dead kings comeuppance...grins like Cat

[Liliet](#)

Animation only.

'Ladi Williams

Animation wouldn't reach a very wide audience.

That's the only issue I have with animation...

If it wasn't animation...that guy that played Gandalf automatically goes for the Grey Pilgrim..

Aqua man would be the Kingfisher Prince.

Iron Man (End game) would be Rogue Sorcerer...

I don't know their names that's why I use movie roles to describe them...lol

shikkarasu

lol, after Khal Drogo and Ronin I can't imagine Aquaman as the Kingfisher Prince. He feels much more Barrow Sword.

I'm with Liliet, though; this needs to be animated. Think Avatar or the Netflix Castlevania.

John Pratt

The Grey Pilgrim has been firmly Middle Eastern in my mind since his introduction, just because of the name. His last name "Isbili" and the way his early life in Levant is described make me think of a descendent of Mohamud becoming a holy scholar. So I think I'd cast that guardian guy from "The Mummy" assuming his hair has gotten that salt and pepper look by now.

[Liliet](#)

Levantines were specifically called out as looking like "cousins to Taghreb" and we've heard that Taghreb legend that basically says they had once been brought to the south of Praes as slaves. So yeah.

'Ladi Williams

You are right. I fucked up on the Pilgrim cast...and @Liiliet has turn me a new one on some other casts...Lool. Who would you cast as

1. Masego
2. Black
3. Indrani
4. Captain

At least you agree with my choice for Cat...right?

Rey d`Tutto

Masego? John Boyega. As much as I loathe the Star Wars non-Machete films, his acting brought life to a Corpse-like script.

Black? Bruce Williams.

Indrani? Gal Godot or Salma Hayek.

Captain? Gwendolyn Christie in lotsa makeup.

Who would play Scribe? Sigourney Weaver.

Hanno? I'm drawing a blank on his description.

Wandering Bard = How many Actresses, exactly?

Cordy? Theif/Princess Dartwick?

Dead King? Morgan Freeman just for the MindF*ck.

Akua? Sophie Turner.

Who am I forgetting...

BargleNawdleZouss

Tariq Isbili and the Levantines have always been Ottoman Turks in my mind, rather than Arabic. To ignorant Americans such as myself, this might account for the "cousins of the Taghreb" feel between the two cultures.

Rey d`Tutto

As an ignorant American, I resemble that remark.

As Carlin said, we fought the Germans because they were horning in on our action in attacking little brown people.

I love my Country. My Government?

Yeah, I have Afghani as In-laws. I know the world is bigger than I can know. And a lot of it happens in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and South America that I can't get "News" on.

And I read the NY Post, RT, Al Jazeera, BBC, Epic Times ... Ive learned to read between the propaganda. Everybody has their own agenda/spin.

But not much is being said.

Anyhoo, thanks.

Allafterme

Curious, as a Turk I always thought them as Andalusians before the Reconquista.

[Liliet](#)

I disagree with Iron Man being Rorgue Sorcerer SO MUCH I can't even describe it.

Animation or bust, and tbh I don't care about audience size nearly as much, like... even a tenth as much. Live action for Guide is a horrifying idea, like you just know they'll fuck up all ethnicities (like the Gandalf guy for Tariq... who is Levantine... which are arabic... which Ian McKellen is very not), all large battles or large sorceries (just due to technical limitations) and all appearance details other than ethnicities too. Just... no. No, god, absolutely not, never, I do not consent to this. I know nobody's asking me, but... blaargh. Ew.

'Ladi Williams

Lmfao... I can just imagine you shuddering while typing this...lol.

Yeah... I fucked up on the casting of Grey Pilgrim... I now remember he was Arab-ish...but why do you disagree with the Rogue Sorcerer casting also...oh, you can't describe your dislike and disagreement...lmao.

Okay...you guys win...animation it is...they should just please please please do it...and do it well...

But please twll.me you agree with my cast for Cat.

And maybe Angelina Jolie for Ranger. Who would you cast Black as? Or Indrani? Oh, who's going to do Masego?

I would probably have as much fun casting this series.

[Liliet](#)

My best attempt at description of my disagreement:
REALLY DIFFERENT VIBES. Robert Downey Jr is... boisterous and larger than life, while Roland is more subdued, as low key as he manages to be and dryly snarky.

Is Angelina Jolie Korean?

Also, I know like 3 actors, all of them from MCU. I am NOT a live action person.

Who is your cast for Cat? And are they half Native American (of specific tribes too) like Cat is?

[Liliet](#)

(Like, I don't know that many actors, and I DEFINITELY don't know that many actors WHO AREN'T WHITE.

Significant characters who are white are like... Amadeus (though tbh i hope ee will change that in a rewrite), Vivienne, Cordelia and uhhh *peers closely* Brandon

Talbot? Rozala Malanza? Anne Kendall? John Farrier?
We're going into D-list here boys and girls)

Liliet

We do know EE would cast Cillian Murphy as Amadeus!

...but I honestly just hope EE changes Amadeus from white to mixed in rewrite. It would fit the lore w/ Duni being *descendants* of white people in the Empire (this was highlighted with the Thirteenth whose mixed children were viewed as Duni), AND it would fix the "white savior" vibes his storyline otherwise has. Would be a good thematic highlight of how the dominant ethnicity designates mixed people as "not us" in the way opposite from IRL – we have "white" and "not white", while they have "Soninke and Taghreb" and "not Soninke or Taghreb".

shikkarasu

Amadeus is Irish, who were not considered 'Caucasian' until the 1900s, because the concept of 'race' is so horrendously arbitrary that it beggars belief. The Duni are a very good addition to Praes for this reason: Praes is not the 'in-universe Africa;' it is the amalgamation of ethnicities that had the worst reputation in Britain, historically. The people that have been pointed to and labelled 'evil' or 'lesser' for no good reason, IRL. France is only excluded because of Procer, and Callow needed a 2nd aggressor nation for the plot.

Including the Duni in the Empire of Praes, who do not visibly fit with the theme from a 21st Century perspective, highlights how arbitrary racism really is. This is a group that, in 1800s, was considered lesser than 'white' humans by some, but in 2000s are considered the among whitest people out there. I think Catherine's "but you're Duni?" reaction to Killian being proud of her country is also a great scene that wouldn't work otherwise: just because you *look* like the people that hate you (Callowans) doesn't mean you 'pass' around them, or that you would want to.

Long story short: pasty white Praesi make about as much sense as the Wasaliti's status as a river, but I think they reinforce the overall theme of the story too much to change.

Liliet

Amadeus is what now?

Are you extrapolating from Kilian being red-haired?

Because she's the only Duni we hear of being so, and she's explicitly a descendant of one of the Wild Hunt... her coloration is not necessarily Duni-related.

Duni are descended of Miezens and Callowans. There's nothing Irish about them. Deoraithe are the Irish reference, their language is borrowed from them.

'Ladi Williams

Okay....this got intense...fast! Loveeet! *grins madly*

shikkarasu

Double-checked a few things and I was dead wrong. Need to do another revision of my notes. My brain probably got stuck on green stretch equalling emerald isle or some such. Thanks for the call out!

Abrakadabra

Amadeus being Irish is not about looks, but about how the Irish were treated in the empire is similar to how the Duni is treated in the empire.

[Liliet](#)

The analogy is not nearly as strong for him being Irish as for any number of other ethnicities in similar situations.

BargleNawdleZouss

Here's a random collection of actors that are my headcanon for certain roles. This is by NO means complete. Also, for The Woe, in reality they'd have to pick a bunch of 18- to 20-year old newcomers. This is just how I see them in my head while reading:

- Catherine Foundling: Zendaya
- Indrani: Priyanka Chopra Jonas
- Amadeus the Black Knight: Tom Cruise (1. He can do it. 2. He's vertically appropriate 3. Let's face it – his involvement would bring in ALL the investors)
- Wekesa the Warlock: RuPaul
- Dread Empress Malicia: Angela Bassett
- Robber: Peter Dinklage (Tyrion Lannister from Game of Thrones)
- Eudokia the Scribe: Glenn Close
- Dread Empress Triumphant (May She Never Return): Viola Davis
- Kairos Theodosian, the Tyrant: Timothee Chalamet

- Tariq Isibili, the Grey Pilgrim: Ian McKellen (yeah, I went with Gandalf, couldn't help it, that's how I see him in my head. He'd find the role redundant, I'm sure)
- William of Greenbury, the Lone Swordsman: Kit Harington (Jon Snow from Game of Thrones)
- Laurence de Montfort: Judi Dench or Meryl Streep
- Rafaella the Valiant Champion: Melissa McCarthy (she can bring the humor!)
- Roland de Beaumaraais, the Rogue Sorcerer: Ezra Miller (played The Flash in the Justice League movie)
- Prince Frederic Goethal, the Kingfisher Prince: Ryan Gosling or Chris Evans/Pine/Hemsworth.
- General Abigail of Summerholm: Kristen Schaal
- Hanno of Arwad: Chadwick Boseman (if only!)
- Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful: Chris Rock
- Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan: Catherine Zeta-Jones

[Rynjin](#)

Jesus Christ don't inflict a fucking nightmare like this on me.

'Ladi Williams

Lol

'Ladi Williams

I'm going to have to Google most of these artistes to know if I agree with your selection...but tentatively I agree with some of the ones I know...
What do you mean by Ian McKellen would find the role redundant? It has plenty of screen time and a major role in shaping the socio-policies of the entire continent...and he would feature big time in at least 5 seasons before he "dies".

BargleNawdleZouss

'Ladi Williams: as others have commented here, Tariq is similar enough to Gandalf from Lord of the Rings that I speculate Sir McKellen may not find it interesting. I would love for it to happen, don't get me wrong! 😊

shikkarasu

I think Ladi was being sarcastic, listing ways that Tariq the Grey (Pilgrim) is similar to Gandalf the Grey with a cheeky "but this time he won't die and

come back in the first movie, it will be *much* later" at the end.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I think it's a reasonable idea to do this in animation, but given the MCU...

My Voice Actor choices would be much different than those I posted as a wishlist

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Also, Saturday Morning Cartoon PGtE?

Take my Money!

[Liliet](#)

MCU is A big reason why i dont want to ever see Guide in live action

tawawara

"So go out into the world, children of the Night, and carry with you my blessing and my curse.

May you ever get what you deserve."

I got chills, man. Literal chills.

Salt

The second Tenet is going to make for some hilarious situations when defeated human foes tell a Drow that they'll get what they deserve one day, and the Drow reacts by being very approving that this cattle understands Drow culture so well

[onedollargum](#)

"I hope you get what you deserve" is a fantastic blessing and curse. Probably even higher than "May you live in interesting times".

arcanavitae15

The Carrion Choir is a good name I think for the choir of the night which is a callback to Amadeus and Catherine while also being fitting for the Drow who feed from corpses and the sisters favorite avatars of crows.

BargleNawdleZouss

I am enjoying that Cordelia has offered Cleves to the drow, when it was the Langevins of Cleves who attempted to plot against them

and screw them out of the territory promised to them after the war.

ninegardens

Oh brutal.

Let it never be said that Cordelia doesn't know how to be petty.
Tactical AND petty.

[sengachi](#)

Holy hells I hadn't caught that, thank you for pointing it out!

Juff

Typo Thread:

hallowed placed > hallowed place
keep on our > kept on our
still had a little while in us still (two 'still's)
down my finger down (two 'down's)
for food > for good
achieved to night > achieved tonight
patronesses new > patronesses' new
loon enough > long enough
I felt so easy > It felt so easy
the Might meant > the Mighty meant
keep not break (odd wording)
down my scribes > down by my scribes
drow heard > drow would hear
now, now, > now,
"May you (extra space)

Frivolous

"Carry with you my blessing and my curse: may you ever get what you deserve."

– Extract from the 'Tenets Under Night', Firstborn religious text

The above is from Name (Redux). Something Catherine said that is not in the Parables of Lost and Found, and is not disputed.

Masego can call himself not mere Kingmaker but Godmaker. Awesome, no?

I suspect he is now close to apotheosis. Maybe very close. Maybe just a hop, skip, and a jump away from being not just Sve Noc's physician but also Sve Noc's peer.

What happened to the sword? Did Catherine absorb it already?

EE: If you didn't see my comments in the previous chapter, I'd like to know what kind of sword it was. Could you please describe it for us?

Also, if Catherine hasn't absorbed Below's stories, Masego will surely want to run experiments on the sword. Hopefully it doesn't blow up in his face like the Book of Some Things.

Frivolous

Addendum: I think that the exploits and hacks that Keter found for Night before this may no longer work as well, or work at all.

I think that is why Radegast won 3 victories in one night. Because Masego and Akua repaired the vulnerabilities in Night.

I think that if Neshamah tried now to use the same ritual he did at Hainaut, to usurp Night, it wouldn't work anymore.

Insanenoodlyguy

It won't, as noted here, each Drow with night was a little bit of sve noc. Lots of night in one place meant he could grasp and pull. This time, the string is dissonectable.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, the trap in Hainaut closed around Rumena having Komena riding on its shoulder. She was there in person.

MoreBeer

I suspect Radegast won due to Kurosiv's followers losing their Night. This seems to have been part of Cat's plan all along; to lose in such a way as to draw her enemies out right where she wanted them, for the moment triumph turns to ashes.

ChillyPepper

Ivah the God Slayer when?

shikkarasu

Maybe tomorrow

Sam

Something I've just realised: for most of those involved, the events of last chapter were the climax to a whole lot of preparation and will have world-shaking consequences, perhaps the most important thing they'll ever be involved in.

For Masego, it was a practice run.

Rey d`Tutto

"Tuesday"

Earl of Purple

Cat needs to go stare at Rumena or Ivah. Because now Night is equal and opposite Light, I think drow can get Names again. Maybe one of the other Ten Generals instead, if any live.

Syndic

Like "Rumena" isn't already a Name. Might be a bit weird to be a claimant of that, but that's only an issue if Rumena ever dies to free the Name up for the taking... 😊

(Also, giving Rumena additional powers feels like... going back to slap the baby you took candy from. Or taping dynamite to a nuke. Basically it feels like the only reason one would do that would be mocking whoever is on the receiving end of a Rumena beatdown.)

Liliet

> Basically it feels like the only reason one would do that would be mocking whoever is on the receiving end of a Rumena beatdown.

Are you telling me Below is above slapping a baby they took candy from?

SuitorShooter

I feel like Drow inheriting the literal Names, and the associated temperament and powerset, when that Drow died would be VERY on-brand for Drow. Respecting not the institution, but the personal cache of Night accrued by that individual, and expanding it with their own great deeds.

Someperson

Night prevented Drow from getting magic. Do we know that it prevented Names as well?

It's a reasonable assumption, seeing as there haven't been any Named drow as far as Cat is aware. But it might also have something to do with their stories, after all orcs only recently started getting Names again and I wouldn't be surprised if their time between the two Empires Ever Dark was not the most conducive to Named.

On an unrelated note, I have just realized that I can't think of a single character in this setting that can wield both sorcery and Light. I wonder if they are mutually exclusive on a spiritual level, or if it's just very different skillsets and

mentalities required? Jaquinite sorcery at least does incorporate faith, but I'm pretty sure Masego would be less dismissive of them if any of them could actually manifest Light as part of their workings.

If Light and Night are truly similar to each other now, then I doubt many Drow will choose to forgo Night to pursue sorcery, even if they now have the ability to if they wanted.

Earl of Purple

I believe there's WoE on the discord that Night-as-it-was was already power from Below, and a Name on top of that would have been double-dipping, which Below disapproves of. Maybe it still does, but maybe because Night is now equal to Light, which can be granted alongside Names.

Given that Light interferes with sorcerous workings- hence why prayers etched onto the armour of Callowan knights offers protection from war-mages, Levantine binders' pets and why Hanno disrupted the enchantments on that bronze-clad Revenant last book or one before, on his way to rescue Nephele in a Lycaonese fortress- I'd say it's impossible to use both without Aspect trickery.

Someperson

Even if you can't use Light and sorcery at the same time, and even if learning them is not at all complementary, I guess I'm still a little surprised that **nobody** learns both.

They have different enough strengths and weaknesses that being able to choose which to rely on in a given situation isn't a trivial thing.

SuitorShooter

That would definitely be a spiritual thing. Skill with Light (and with Sorcery) leave a trace on the user, and those traces would absolutely interfere.

Xinci

Fitting I suppose, they started in a pit and made a microcosm of Below's patterns on Creation with Night. They have epitomized the virtues and methodology of its advancing permutations, so what better Angels could Below acquire? The existence of Night serves to perpetuate and permutate different methods and can be freely given tools to those who need to advance their methodology. Catherine gave it a month for the Drow, but I won't how long it will take for this to shift some of the methodologies of Villains over time. Adding to the Night still gives some pressure to take from others but at the same time very much incentivizes collective collaborative networks for such activities.

I would also suppose that Sve's focus on the bigger picture and distancing herself from mortal affairs may then be why we end up with some of the information that was given by Cat being disputable. Information can be stored and transmitted through Night, the words said is very applicable to transmission. However, as Sve presumably has control over that Night even now a mixture of who she deigns to give it to and calcification as time goes may leave gaps in the commonly propagated information throughout the Night. At least her blessed curse was carried on , whole, into the future.

nimelennar

"Neshamah was laying it all on the line, this time, knowing it was the best shot at winning he'd ever get."

I guess I don't see why this is still the case. The Bard has been taken out and the Villainous stories returned into play, under the control of the Warden, no less; basically all of Calernia is now united against him, probably soon including the Kingdom Under; the Drow have been reforged; and there's a weapon on its way North with the Dead King's Name on it, specifically forged to defeat him. Not to mention that Black has supposedly, somehow, found a way to neutralize the Hellgates.

Yesterday, sure, this was his best shot at winning he's ever get, but I don't see how that's still true today. If it were still an option (he's pissed off enough people at this point that it really, really isn't), I would take the L, retreat, fortify, and lock my wounds for a few millennia, if I were him.

shikkarasu

The Intercessor has been wounded for the first time since he came to learn of her existence, He already has most of Procer and in a few months he will have all of it, barring Salia. His opposition is headed by a Villain, and so not owed a last minute victory over him. The rest of the continent is starving, deep in debt, and desperate enough that if this next offence fails most of them will clamour over each other to take deals like what Kurosiv was promised.

It's hard to imagine that, even 2000 years from now, Nessie will have a better board to play on. Pulling back means that he will be out a *lot* of resources and will need to wait for the next crusade to gather more Revenants. A crusade that will have all of his current enemies' resources and more. He may be able to grow his fodder with the Serenity, but the backbone of his forces -the Scourges and other former Named- he only gets to replenish when they come for him.

[Kletanio](#)

One more detail: if Neshemah obtains Night he gets the power to *permanently* suppress the downsides of Evil Stories. If he doesn't go basically all-in on this one move, then his enemies will be able to turn back on his greatest vulnerability, and the next time he'll be in much worse shape. So not only does he have a legitimate shot of winning this thing as-is, he has a legitimate shot of making that much more certain. In other words, not only would his victory be assured, he could finally *tell* people that his victory was assured without disassuring it.

sengachi

The thing is, Black won in the face of overwhelming narrative disadvantage, it *can* be done. The trick he pioneered was not leaning into villainous tropes which earn a backlash and instead just being *better* than his opponent by building up his forces through means the 'Good wins' narrative couldn't contest. Things like logistical and hierarchal rationalization of the military, progressive racial inclusion, cultivating positive cultural identity, extensive training and strategic planning, etc. Then once he got to the battlefield, even if Callow won every single battle it was possible to win and pulled every possible rabbit out of the hat, the Legions of Terror were *still* going to win.

And the Dead King has kind of done the same thing. He's spent millennia building up his forces in Hell where narrative can't touch him. Procer has also lost a *ton* of its capacity to feed its people, which is something narrative can't just fix with a wave of its ephemeral hand. He also got a bunch of (maybe?) freebies while the villain stories were down (and if they're not freebies, well, he's about to eat the backlash regardless of what he does). He's in a position not dissimilar to Black, so long as he shows relative restraint with his apocalypse buttons from here out.

But in the future?

In the future the Dead King is *fucked*.

There's now a Warden who literally wields the stories of Above and Below, and her and all her successors will seek his death at every opportunity. That's gonna be a problem for him three thousand years down the road as surely as it is today. He is also completely encircled by the Kingdom Under, which will only reinforce its borders more as the years stretch on. The Firstborn have a new godhead which is only going to get more settled and powerful as the years go on, and they hate him with a burning passion. And the rest of Calernia is never going to be this weak again.

This is his last chance. He will never have a shot like this again.

Gabe Meadow

Indeed. And don't forget, for all that Cat won a big victory for the Firstborn here, it was a defeat Neshamah could afford. The siege of Keter is, after all, the Grand Alliance's last chance as well. They need to win outright here, and the Dead King has more than one to skin a Cat (pun intended).

If he deters the Kingdom Under from providing supplies, or gets them to break off in the middle of the siege, he wins. If he turns it into a grinding stalemate, he'll probably win in the end. Not to mention all the other nasty goodies he has stored away. Sure, the villain stories are back in play, but that didn't prevent him from pulling the triple Hellgate trick back at Hainaut when they were active.

Of course, if Kreios decides to lead the giants to war after all, the Alliance has another safeguard against those...

[Liliet](#)

Procer's still devastated, and the Hellgates are still about to open. And meanwhile retreat is not an option, as you have pointed out. Going all out is still Neshamah's best shot at victory simply because he's all out of the others.

Someperson

This tbh.

Neshamah could maybe pull out of Procer but he still doesn't exactly have anywhere to retreat to if Calernia is hellbent on storming Keter.

Dome Zasrekh

The reason he's chances are bad is why he can't retreat. They would hunt him down.

MoreBeer

Pretty sure Black's plan for the hellgates is thousands of devil-binding Praesi mages being on-site to take control of any/all devils that come through.

It was Cat's plan, but Black co-opted it to ensure Alaya couldn't be executed. And Amadeus died to make sure there was only the one way it could work.

arcanavitae15

I wonder if humans can use Night now in addition to other races which would be neat like maybe the orcs can get some because their whole hungering gods thing fits the theme of Night.

Someperson

No reason why they couldn't. Although Cat's guess about goblins being the first is probably a good one.

I wonder how long it will take for some kind of "Heretic" Name to pop up: a member of the House of Light that instead uses Night, or one of the Mighty that instead uses Light.

Sam

Or, for that matter, the first Night-wielding heroic name.

Dome Zasrekh

Unlikely, like Light in villains is not possible.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Anti-hero at best.

mavant

Akua ♥

BargleNawdleZouss

Further thoughts:

1. Imagines Robber imbued with the power of Night *shivers*
2. I'm surprised that neither Cat nor Masego made a comment about fixing the godhead of Sve Noc was good practice for Masego's own apotheosis. I do wonder what Masego will use as fuel/fodder for his own rite of ascension, however...
3. I'm glad that EE addressed the point about Cat sacrificing years of her life in order to kill the Saint Of Swords. As The Woe are all about the same age, I had expected some comment about a change in Cat's appearance, most likely from Indrani. I don't know if it's quite hanging a lampshade, but I appreciated the explanation regarding her villain's anti-aging status quo.

[Liliet](#)

> I'm surprised that neither Cat nor Masego made a comment about fixing the godhead of Sve Noc was good practice for Masego's own apotheosis.

That just goes without saying; Cat had remarked Masego would enjoy the project she's putting him on for a reason.

> I'm glad that EE addressed the point about Cat sacrificing years of her life in order to kill the Saint Of Swords. As The Woe are all about the same age, I had expected some comment about a change in Cat's appearance, most likely from Indrani.

This was stated directly back then. This is not a new explanation, just a callback.

> Four, five, six, I counted as she spoke, and she stiffened with the last. It was close, then. I'd wondered how long she would last. I touched me too, but Gods forgive me the touch was lighter than I'd believed it would be. The Dead King, it seemed, might have been terrifyingly correct.

Frivolous

I'm surprised and pleased to note that there are millions of drow.

I hadn't expected that from a race that doesn't care much for procreation. I thought their numbers were in the low hundreds of thousands at most.

[Liliet](#)

They'd sent fifty thousand of just the warriors (dzulu+) south with Cat as an "expedition" while also having the rest of their species mass evacuating and attacking the DK from the north. Math really wouldn't have worked out for "low hundreds of thousands".

Someperson

The Crows have become something akin to an angelic Choir, but...

Below already has the infinitely numerous hordes of devils and demons to serve as their reflection against Above's angels. I don't really see how they have a vacancy for the position, so to speak.

Makes me wonder.

What if the position the Crows are now occupying is somehow the one left behind by the Choir of Judgement?

May you ever get what you deserve, indeed.

Mary Gentle

Somewhere down among the devils, I hear the Tyrant of Helike laughing.

'Ladi Williams

Okay...Zendaya and Priyanka are solid matches so far...
RuPaul is another dead ringer...you are on fire!
Glenn Close is too old for scribe
Timothy Chalamet works for kairós...has the look already...lol
I disallow Jon snow for lone swordsman...I like Jon snow and lone
swordsman not so much.
Judy Dench works...
Melissa McCarthy is perfect
Ezra Miller...? Meh
Kristen is good for the role...funny and all
Zeta Jones I don't really know...
Chadwick...*insert tears *
All in all...you did very good

BargleNawdleZouss

Yet more thoughts:

1. Now that the Grand Alliance is about to start the siege of Keter, I cannot wait to see what Pickler has put together for the assault. I'm hoping that goblin machinery can breach the walls and sweep the field, so that all the Names are fresh for the combat with the Dead King and his Revenants, demons, and rituals he's been keeping in reserve.

2. Elves and the Spring Crown – will we see an update, or is that plot point a red herring? If that pool of power is utilized, how will it affect Quartered Seasons and the weapon they've made of the Autumn Crown?

3. Bands of Five to be assembled for the final assault:

- The Woe, of course, as Team Autumn Crown: Warden, Warlord, Hierophant, Archer (Ranger?), Akua Sahelian
- Team Severance: White Knight, Witch of the Woods, Mirror Knight, Valiant Champion, Forsworn Healer
- Team Rogue's Angels: Rogue Sorcerer, Blessed Artificer, Silver Huntress, Silent Guardian, Vagrant Spear
- Teen Titans: Knight Errant, Apprentice, Stalwart Apostle, Page, Young Slayer
- Team Evil: Barrow Sword, Harrowed Witch, Royal Conjurer, Hunted Magician, Headhunter (this needs more muscle and/or a healer, but I'm not sure who else is left that'd be good in the field. The Red Knight seems like an even worse idea than the Headhunter, though)

Earl of Purple

Young Slayer's dead, and Harrowed Witch and Royal Conjurer already have a Band.

I'd love to see a Team Knight, though. If Hanno gets a Knight Name again, we'll have five confirmed knights- White, Black, Errant, Mirror and Red.

BargleNawdleZouss

Oh crap, I blanked on Young Slayer. Thanks! Possibly slide Blade Of Mercy into his slot, then, if Antoine has matured in judgement a little.

SuitorShooter

The only way to increase your personal power, increases the collective power. That's a hell of a trick for binding millions of psychopaths into a coherent nation.

Archaon

"Not so long as she doesn't overstep," Akua vaguely replied, then offered me a smile.

Dangit Akua, don't you get in the way of glorious CatDelia, the ship aint even sailed yet, but the boat is built!

Interlude: End Times II

"Dread Emperor Heinous led the Legions into the seventy-ninth Hell, and once the devils gathered an army in the face of his incursion he laughed and addressed his soldiers thus: 'Fear not disaster, sons and daughters of Praes, for of all the peoples of Creation it is our birthright alone to ride it as a steed.'"

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

It was tradition that a flying fortress not be named.

Dread Emperor Sorcerous had later made it into a law that no tyrant had since seen fit to repeal, but the tradition itself was as old as the first large rocks that Soninke sorcerers had raised into floating altars for their people to worship at. To give the constructs names, Alaya had been told, tended to make them... temperamental. Inimical's Boot was the example mages tended to quote at her, which after being given the name had begun accidentally crushing people the emperor disliked with alarming

frequency and an even more alarming dearth of explanations about *why* it was doing that.

And so the fortress that Chancellor Alaya of the Confederation of Praes – a name yet to be officially ratified, but now that the Tribes had given ground she knew where the votes lay – rode had not been granted a name, though it didn't stop soldiers and servants from calling it the Limping Sister when they thought no one was listening. The sobriquet was apt enough: the construct was smaller than the three behemoths known as the Old Mothers that'd followed Catherine Foundling west, and of the smaller 'sisters' this one was by far the slowest.

"An imperfection in the central ritual array," High Lord Sargon had told her. "Too much bleed, it lets wind buffet the shields and slow us down."

"And the lights at night?" Alaya had asked, morbidly curious.

"Not ghosts, Your Grace, that is mere superstition," the High Lord of Wolof had been quick to assure her.

Perhaps a little too quick, she'd thought, and she muttered 'probably' she was fairly certain he'd added under his breath had done nothing to reassure her. The uncertainty left her to consider whether being haunted by the giant spiders used to raise the fortresses would be better or worse than being haunted by humans, which sadly was not even the most outlandish question Alaya had been forced to ponder over her many years of rule. That still remained whether or not devils, some of which considered souls a form of currency, should be made to pay taxes over any such gains made within the borders of Praes – and more specifically what the monetary value of a soul should be.

There had been spirited debated over the matter, some of her advisor even noting that if devils paid taxes they might be considered to be citizens of the Empire in some ways, and purely to piss her off Amadeus had returned to Ater with an entire *treatise* about- Alaya's stomach clenched. She heard the sound of the knife sinking into flesh, the small gasp as she stood there helpless, and the orc across the table paused in his sentence.

"Your Grace," General Grem One-Eye said, "is something the matter?"

I think you'd understand, One-Eye, Alaya thought. *Better than most, for you loved him too.* But she was not looking for understanding, much less comfort. Life had been breathed back into the husk she'd become so that she might serve a purpose, to serve as the bridge between the old Praes and the new, but Alaya of Satus knew better than to call it a second chance. There was too much blood on her hands for that, too many sins for her to answer for – and at the end of her road, the Warden would be

waiting with a sword in hand. So what did it matter, that sometimes she came across a familiar turn of phrase in a report and she choked on a sob? She was not meant to escape the shadow she had cast, and so there could be no use at all in confiding in anyone.

Not even someone who'd understand.

"No," Alaya replied, tone smoothed into calm. "Please continue, general."

Grem One-Eye slowly nodded, then resumed his report on the estimated timing of the Praesi forces marching to reinforce the Grand Alliance's siege of Keter. Though in principle the private armies of the High Lords had all been disbanded when the soon-Confederation of Praes was founded in Ater, in practice that had not been feasible. Breaking up the armies and reorganizing them under the command of the Black Knight, High Marshal Nim, would take months that they simply could not spare. Instead the commanders of those armies had been temporarily drafted into the Legions as auxiliaries with their forces under them.

The sheer amount of supply trains that had involved was staggering, given that the armies of the High Lords were themselves made up of the armies of lesser lords, and it had been one of the reasons that Praes' armies had been staggered into three waves as they began marching west. Some of the house troops were acclimating to the changes better than others and General Grem was not shy in pointing out those that trailed behind: Takisha's lot were the worst offenders, the High Lady of Kahtan's already loose grip on her many vassals having further weakened since the Fall. Not that the need to acclimate was in short supply, these days.

Grem One-Eye had taken with good grace his demotion from being the senior military commander of the Empire to being a general under High Marshal Nim for the Confederation, but he could not quite hide the lost look that sometimes flickered across his rough face. While he'd been a prisoner the fate of Praes had passed him by, leaving him to emerge into a strange new world where he was not quite certain where he fit.

Alaya could sympathize.

"Warlord Hakram tells us that the Grand Alliance's main host will be arriving on the outskirts of Keter within the week," General Grem concluded, "which puts us in the area of fourteen days behind."

"Evidently it was the right decision to send the bulk of our sappers with Marshal Nim," High Lord Sargon said, offering up a boyishly crooked smile. "It is best that the siege works be in full swing when we arrive."

He'd grown, Alaya thought, into quite a dangerous young man now that his soul was no longer held in a box. Thought outwardly the High Lord of Wolof was dedicating himself to the campaign against Keter with great enthusiasm, Ime had already picked up on his longer game. He meant to gain acclaim from being instrumental to Praes' contributions to the war: most of the flying fortresses had been raised by Sargon and his cadres of Wolofite mages, or according to Sahelian rituals he'd handed out. Circulating said rituals outside Wolof had been a great gift, and earned him personal regard among mages and highborn beyond the broader gain of having his name associated to every single such fortress.

What he meant to do with the acclaim was still unclear but given the offers he'd already floated to help with the reconstruction of Ater she suspected he was already beginning to position himself as her successor. The people of the capital had long memories and would not soon forget High Lord Sargon Sahelian putting roofs over their heads again. If he bartered his marriage well and remained liked in Ater, well, it was only a matter of courting enough of the greenskin vote for Sargon to serve as the Chancellor after her.

Alaya was not yet sure whether she should help or hinder him. One of many decisions that would have to be taken after the war.

"We have our part to play before lending our aid in the reduction of Keter," Alaya said. "One just as important as securing the foothold, in some ways."

Grim nods all around. Procer was falling apart behind them, but the Hellgates opening would turn what was a slow descent into annihilation into a heedless tumble down the cliff.

"Speaking of," Chancellor Alaya idly said, eyes turning to the last person at the table. "Are we still making good time, Lady Nahiza?"

Nahiza Serrif was not, strictly speaking, a lady – though highborn, she had never been in line for a title. But as one of the most brilliant mages of Praes' last generation, once a rival to Wekesa and Dumisai of Aksum, she was usually granted the title out of courtesy. Not that the sullen, sour-faced old woman had ever cared. She was infamous for two things. The first was her reluctance to ever leave the mage tower she'd won by killing the Necromancer and making his ghoulish army eat itself as well.

The second was her genuinely *foul* temper.

"Do I look like a ship captain, Chancellor?" Nahiza grunted. "Find a window and look out, if you're that curious."

High Lord Sargon cleared his throat.

"I'm told we are on track to arrive in time," he contributed.

"Cribbed your cousin's notes to figure that out too, did you?" Lady Nahiza peevishly said.

Sargon was visibly angered by the comment, cheeks reddening, which rather impressed Alaya. It was hard to get under his skin these days.

"Your insinuations," Sargon bit out, "do you-"

"We'll get there in time, don't you worry about it," Nahiza interrupted, addressing the Chancellor. "With a few hours to spare, I'd say. The sister's limp is not so crippling when you figure out how to talk to her, no matter how many meddling boys botch their numbers."

The High Lord of Wolof's expression further darkened, to Alaya's private amusement. The old mage was not the most helpful of this informal council, but she did have a way of making even the most tedious meetings entertaining. Still, better to end this before it got out of hand.

"Then I believe the day's business is at an end and we may adjourn," Alaya pleasantly said. "I will see you all tomorrow."

There was some shuffling around the table as they rose and offered the bow mandated by the new modes of etiquette, save for Lady Nahiza who walked out of the room without acknowledging anyone else. The only time General Grem had commented on it, she'd chewed him out for making fun of an old woman's shrinking bladder and no one had quite dared to call her out on what was most likely – but not *certainly* – a brazen lie. Alaya did not linger, instead taking to the luxurious halls of the flying fortress at a brisk pace with her personal bodyguards following behind.

Even before it had been known that she would travel on this particular construct it had been one of the most comfortable, the entire central bastion having been salvaged from the ruin of one of the fortresses that Dread Empress Regalia the Second had raised for her invasion of Callow. It had been meant as her personal vessel, but never been used – it'd been sabotaged by the High Lord of Kahtan, as Regalia's popularity early in her reign had worried many of the High Seats. They'd wanted to blacken her name a little, unaware that the once-promising empress would be largely remembered for starting the Sixty Years War in the centuries to follow.

It'd since served as a sort of fortified mansion outside Ater for whoever held the Tower and been further touched up for comfort, which had made it a natural pick when the Wasteland was scoured for potential fortresses after the Fall. The suite that Alaya had

inherited was almost as comfortable as her old accommodations and near as thoroughly warded, which had been a pleasant surprise when she made her home there. Still, it was not why she had chosen this fortress out of all the others. The reason for that was just ahead of her, past a door that opened at her bodyguard's knock and revealed a dedicated scrying room.

The mirrors and pools were without the frills and ornaments that their equivalents from the Tower had accumulated over the centuries, but no less functional for them. In truth, given that the Grand Alliance – by which she meant Catherine Foundling, staring down the crowns west of the Whitecaps – had shared some of the improvements on the old scrying rituals that'd been made in the Arsenal. It was not the scrying room Alaya had come for, however, but instead the smaller one attached to it. A glorified cupboard crammed with shelves of scrolls and a desk groaning under piles of parchment, with a single seat held out for visitors.

There Ime sat, hair drawn back into a loose braid and wearing a pair of ivory-framed spectacles. She'd always hated reading in magelight without them, and there was no other lighting in her packed archive room. Alaya turned to dismiss her guards with a glance and a smile, stepping into the room and closing the door before sliding into the seat.

"Chancellor," her spymistress greeted her.

"Ime," Alaya replied.

It was... not the same as it once had been, between the two of them. Ime had betrayed her. Betrayed her to the only person in all of Praes willing to do anything to keep her alive, but it had still been a betrayal. That changed things. Alaya was not one prone to unconditional trust, but there had been few people alive she trusted as much as the woman on the other side of the desk. That the trust had been shown warranted and not with the same act added shades to the act that the dark-skinned woman was not yet sure how to parse. It did not help she could no longer read her spymistress through the means she once had.

Connect, like her Name and all her aspects, was gone. Never to come back, if the age lines now touching her once perfectly smooth skin was any indication.

"You have news for me?" Alaya asked.

"Word from Duskwood," Ime agreed. "The Warden has crushed a plot of the Dead King's to steal the Night, dealt with the rebellion within the drow and now marches on Keter with reinforcements."

"How many?"

"Fifteen thousand," she replied. "Many of them Mighty."

A considerable force, especially after nightfall, though these days thousands of soldiers felt like nothing more than drops in a pond. There were only so many battles that could be fought – won or lost – before the numbers began to feel... unreal. Disconnected from the brutal realities of the war on Keter.

"She wasted no time," Alaya finally said. "She can't have been there longer than three weeks."

"Probably less," Ime ruefully said, "but then she's become rather formidable, hasn't she? Little Catherine Foundling, who would have thought."

Amadeus did. But then Alaya doubted even he had suspected that his apprentice was to become one of the leading figures of their era – arguably *the* leading figure. There were others just as powerful or as influential, but none who had their fingers in quite as many pies as the Black Queen.

"I never thought she'd make it this far," Alaya admitted. "Even when she returned from the Everdark at the head of an army out of legend, I expected her to stumble in Procer."

"She still lacks polish," Ime frankly said. "She's just very skilled at putting herself in situations where it doesn't matter – and she'll run out of those, come times of peace."

Alaya was not so sure. Of all the traits Catherine Foundling had inherited from the man she'd called her father just in time to murder him, perhaps the one that mattered most was the knack to find talent and bind it to her. *What will it matter that she lacks polish, when her foremost diplomat is Cordelia Hasenbach?* It did not get more polished than the former First Prince, who unlike Alaya had given up her crown with dignity and elegance that could only be envied.

"We'll see," Alaya said, then looked away.

The collection of scrolls was not particularly fascinating, but it allowed her the time to gather her thoughts.

"All that's left is Keter," she finally said. "It will be our crucible."

"If the siege fails, the continent is lost," Ime quietly agreed. "And we've begun building ships in Nok, but it won't be enough even if we hold the Whitecaps for years afterwards. We just don't have the resources or the sailors to get more than a third of Praes across the sea."

If that, Alaya thought, and that was if Callow and the Legions volunteered to die to the lost to delay the advance of the dead. She had seen the numbers, though, and she agreed with Marshal Juniper's opinion: if Procer was lost, so was Calernia. The population of the Principate was simply too large for any army to have a hope of holding against it once the Dead King armed it and sent it after his enemies. Her lips thinned. She had begun it all, she knew. A desperate bargain made with Keter had given the Hidden Horror his opening to come out of his lair.

It would have happened without her, she knew, for the old monster was a deft hand at convincing others to call on him. But it could not be denied that the pact had been her own, and so she had a share of responsibility in all the deaths that had followed from it. It was a dizzying thought, too large for guilt to truly reach her over it – it was simply too *enormous* a concept for it to be able to feel personal enough for guilt to follow. Oh, and it was a complicated chain besides. Would Alaya have ever struck the bargain, without the Tenth Crusade marching on Praes?

No, and yet how much of Hasenbach's eagerness for that march had come from her own meddling in Procer? Which itself had come out of fear of Proceran meddling in their affairs, and on and on it went without end. There could be no beginning or end to human affairs, save the First Dawn and the Last Dusk. Everything else flowed from those threads, an unbroken tapestry. Yet Alaya had made a decision and now Calernia teetered on the brink.

That was not nothing.

"We must prepare what we can to flee," Alaya said, "but I cannot disagree – there would be no mitigating the death blow that would be defeat in Keter."

"We're sending the largest coalition army in the history of Calernia after the city, at least," Ime noted. "There's never been that large an alliance facing a common foe."

"It only speaks to the truth that we are all desperate," the chancellor grimly replied. "Empress Basilia committed the League because she knows she will be unable to win the war by the time it reaches her doorstep."

She breathed out.

"Let's us not pretend that this is anything but a gamble, Ime," Alaya said. "We roll the dice on Keter because at least with a roll there is a chance of victory."

In a more traditional war, there no longer was. That ship had sailed the moment the Proceran fronts collapsed and the dead poured into the heartlands. The odds might be against the Grand Alliance when it besieged the Crown of the Dead, but at least

defeat was not writ in stone – and it was the only real chance the nations of the living had to *defeat* the Dead King.

Unfortunately for them all, the Hidden Horror knew that as well.

“He’ll be waiting for us,” Ime said, echoing her own thoughts. “With all the nastiest tricks he still has up his sleeve.”

And that was the stuff of nightmares, though Alaya’s own would burn green for years to come.

“He always defends Keter most fiercely during crusades,” the chancellor quietly said. “It is the only ground he has never ceded.”

“It’s the only ground no crusade has ever taken,” Ime darkly said.

And so that was their last hope: taking a city that had not fallen in several millennia from the immortal lich that had spent all that time devising fresh blasphemies to defend it.

“This is not a crusade,” Alaya said, injecting confidence into her voice. “And Keter has never faced *us*.”

The other woman slowly nodded.

“I suppose it hasn’t,” Ime murmured.

Silence filled the room, neither of them pressed to break it. Alaya leaned back into her seat, closing her eyes, and for the first time today allowed herself to feel how fucking *exhausted* she was. Like string pulled so taut it was beginning to fray. There was always so much to do and she could not afford to rest, not when Maddie had *died* so she’d get this shot fixing their mess. And she was not sure whether it made her want to sob or laugh, that she could only allow herself this speck of sincerity when shut in this room with a woman who’d betrayed her. A woman she had kept as her spymistress and closest advisor, for all that, because *who the Hells else was left?*

Alaya had not been one of the Calamities in life, and in death they’d left her behind again.

But there was work to be done, an oath to keep, so piece by piece Alaya of Satus put herself back together again. Her eyes opened and she rose to her feet, meeting Ime’s gaze.

“Tonight,” the Chancellor of Praes said. “Tonight you’ll see why this one is different.”

You and all the Grand Alliance, Alaya thought.

—

Though the wind whipped wildly at the walls, she did not feel so much as a breeze.

Alaya's hands gripped the arms of her throne as she sat ramrod straight, her stomach clenching as the fortress plunged through the sky. Lady Nahiza was giggling almost girlishly, sorcery swirling around her in strands so thick they were visible to the naked eye – the old woman kept guiding the construct down, through the clouds that fled under them until there was a hole in night's roof and moonlight plunged down after them. The city of Sauvion had been levelled by Keter's Due when the Hellgate was opened mere miles to the north of it, leaving behind only husks that looked like charred bones under the moon's eye.

The gate itself stood above a bed of ashes, perfect and round and sealed by the sorcery of the Gigantes. Behind some howling Hell waited to be unleashed, the runes burned onto the sides of the gate awaiting to bind the infernal host to the Hidden Horror's will. An army of tireless monsters, awaiting only the end of the 'Riddle of the Lock' to be unleashed.

The fortress shuddered as it hit the ground, force rippling out in a shockwave. Alaya, seated at the very top of the highest tower, saw every detail of it. The clouds of ash and dust that kicked up, the rolling wave of earth and stone the impact sent outwards. The flying fortress landed on the ground of the Principality of Cleves like a hammer's blow, the few undead that had been close enough to contest the arrival of Alaya's force crushed and scattered. Coming out of the Twilight Ways high in the sky had given the Original Abomination no warning, and now it was too late.

Lady Nahiza turned towards her, grey eyes wild with warlock's flee and tanned cheeks flush with pleasure. In her hand, she held a stone orb covered in runes.

"Your permission, Chancellor?" the sorcerers asked.

Alaya's eyes moved to the Hellgate, staring down the smooth surface.

"Begin," she ordered.

Sorcery flared, the orb burning bright as the sister-runes in the depths of the fortress sent the signal to the mage cabals that had been preparing the ritual for hours. Alaya had, when she felt the noose tightening around her neck, tried to bargain with a way out for the Grand Alliance: her finest diabolists had agreed that a Greater Breach could not be closed, save perhaps through the wrath of a Choir, but that it could be... added to. Seven days a year, that had been the lock Alaya proposed to add. Devils would only be able to cross during those seven days and nights, buying

the Grand Alliance at least another year to deal with the Dead King.

Alaya of Satus, who had once been Malicia, watched the gate as below her sorcery bloomed. The Dead King's gate, the end of the mistake she'd made that had begun it all. That had cost her almost everyone she loved. But there was one last gesture she could make in the face of that, for while she had been seeking the words of mages Amadeus had been doing the same. Only it was Nahiza Serriif he had sought, asking her entirely different questions.

"So tonight, King of Death," Alaya said, "listen closely, for you hear our last song. My part and his – half from the grave as is ever your due."

And magic filled the night as the Riddle of the Lock died, the first step of the ritual coalescing into burning shackles around the Hellgate. Seven nights and seven days, beginning now. Alaya's refrain, fitted to the song. In the breath that followed the first devil crossed, a hulking shape covered in spikes, but the sorcery was not yet finished. The second step, brazenly mad, began with half a ton of coal was set alight. Smoke billowed out in thick trails through vents, the heat feeding into arrays whose powers mirrored that of the gate. Thousands of aurelii's worth of the most expensive magical reagents known to man were being expended every thirty breaths, cabals of mages at the beginning of constant rotations spending themselves raw.

The diabolists were stealing the leash on the devils beginning to pour out of the gate, and the sound of it was Amadeus' refrain.

It would keep going for seven night and seven days, until the gate closed for a year and Alaya sent the thousands of devils that had been stolen north with one order only: *make war on the dead*. The two of them had shaken the world once upon a time, when they'd been young and the worst of them had not yet caught up to the best.

"One last time, Maddie," Allie softly said. "You and me against the world."

Thunder rumbled, but what did she have to fear? She was the one who'd brought it.

[Droughtbringer](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

ruduen

That will certainly do. I was wondering just what magic Amadeus was still looking at, and it's interesting to find that it's going back to something we've seen early on in the series – applying a binding on every devil to cross the gate. Of course, this is likely on a very different scale than we were used to.

Here's hoping that another solution or an alternative solution pops up in a year's time, but that's a 'later' problem.

Time to see how many Interludes and how much fighting we see before Cat's arrival – after all, it sounds like they'll have to be in the thick of things before those reinforcements come at the right moment.

[Liliet](#)

The Dead King's Greater Breaches were already going to have bindings applied to devils as they crossed. This ritual OVERRIDES that.

Unrecovered

Well he do have a living population that consider him a hero, so I can see it. He just needs to call them to arms to protect their kingdom.

Gabe Meadow

Masego told us time and time again: Usurpation is the essence of sorcery. And while Amadeus was never a sorcerer, it's just like him to turn a threat into an asset of your own.

Someperson

I'm pretty sure they aren't going to permanently cheat the hellgates out of their due, at least not in this era.

The whole "evils sally forth for one week out of every year" thing feels too much like the fixings for a story set in the world after.

But usurping the binding from this year's batch of devils is certainly a nice trick to turn against Keter.

tynam

Notice how much it solves old issues as a theme. Instead of needing to guard one border all the time – where over centuries the Lycoans can resend doing all the work while the people they protect forget what that is like and stop helping – we have a great in three locations distributed across Procer, where everyone can more easily help and has reason

to, happening seasonally so the cost in blood and gold is affordable and predictable.

Not a safe world, but a better one... a long term threat, sure, but it doesn't get worse over time and it doesn't scheme for centuries to make you neglect it the way Neshamah could.

tynam

*resent doing all the work.

Quite possibly a cat

A city making its last stand against an army of devils, the Villainous chancellor already having declared they will take the city?

I really hope the Dead King hasn't trained a secret squad of Heroes.

[benthelynx](#)

He hasn't trained them. He raised them from the dead in his service.

Mirror Night

Yeah but they are not really Heroes anymore they are Revenants...I am not sure the distinction actually matters for former Heroes or Villains any more at this point.

Also I don't think any Hero could help DK without falling.

Jason Ipswitch

Unfortunately for the Dead King's "bend dead Named to serve my will" plans, his opponents have the Warden, whose named is pretty much tuned for putting other Named in the place. I suspect Revenants are going to fall like bowling balls before Cat's new Name.

burnsy

Cat, strolling through a battlefield: You get a Silence! And you get a Silence! The Tempest gets a Silence! Everybody gets a Silence!!

Miles

He could have heroes too, for all we know. He's got an entire kingdom of the living who revere him as a god-king. If one of them decides it's an injustice that these foreign invaders are besieging the city they might just meet whatever the requirements are to be a hero.

Hargabga

He probably does have a squad of living Named, but no Heroes. It's one step from this to "a Hero realises that their teacher is secretly an eldritch monstrosity and rises in rebellion".

Someperson

Evil chancellors commanding armies of devils to lay siege to a city may be prone to failure, but so are crusades of priests and heroes to extinguish an evil on the evil's home turf. Keter has taken multiple crusades on the chin without flinching.

Like Alaya pointed out, the fact that this isn't a crusade, the fact that priests and the diabolists are all working together on this one, is one of the single greatest single things that the side of the living has going for them at this point.

It ceases to be a story about a heroic crusading white knights or power-mad evil empresses, because it's simply a story about life vs. death.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Sure, its a story about life vs. death to the people topside, but to the people down Below in Serenity? They are fighting off attackers from beyond reality trying to murder God. To the people in Creation, they were attacked, but to Serenity this is just a continuation of the Fifth Crusade.

Luckily, I'm pretty sure the Dead King isn't the type to raise his own Heroes.

Someperson

I genuinely don't think he could raise Heros.

I would wager that knocking off some of Above's gifts using Revenants is actually the best he can get away with on that front.

The situation at large matters, not just the person becoming Named.

Which, as I recall is something that Cat was pretty frustrated about with the Tancred situation. Unless the surrounding story lines up just right, the Heavens won't send a miracle.

And no matter what narrative finagling happens, "servant to the Hidden Horror, the guy who murdered his previous kingdom and is currently exterminating all of the surrounding countries" is more than a bit of a problem for any heroic story, unless the thrust of that story is one of betrayal.

Above is neither terminally dumb nor particularly shy about picking sides, especially where the Dead King is concerned.

That Fool

There may be a chancellor may be leading a horde of devils from a flying fortress, but they allied with Good against a greater evil, making the narrative heavily favor them. Especially because this could be spun as a last stand against annihilation.

*arcanavita*15

This feels so fitting an end for Malicia. Alaya really explains her thoughts on everyone and I really love the reflection she and Ime have on Catherine its just fitting. A real masterpiece of writing EE to give the antagonists so much character, I really love Alaya's character arc.

[Liliet](#)

OH MAN THIS IS GREAT

SpaceDorf

I have caught up again. 😞

After re-reading the whole grand saga from the beginning I started dreading the Date Stamps.

Cera Aine is all that I can do.

Wonder

Poor Ime, she betrayed Alaya out of love to save her, now their relationship is bitter for it .
I Feel sorry for Alaya that her death is going to be demanded by everyone after the war.

Juff

Typo Thread:

her advisor > her advisors
the stood > he stood
would take months > would have taken months
associated to > associated with
In truth, given (missing something like "they were better")
warranted and not (maybe add "both" for clarity)
help she > help that she
to the lost > to the last
unable the win > unable to win
Lets us > Let us
room, neither > room; neither

warlock's flee (something wrong here)

sorcerers > sorceress

coal was set > coal set

worst of them had not yet caught up to the worst. (is this right?

feels like one if the 'worst's should be "best")

LD1977

warlock's flee → glee

worst of them had not yet caught up to the worst → I think
second is "best"

*arcanavita*15

This goes to show the emotional impact Amadeus had upon people and the world, it is part of what made him such a wonderful character, I really like how EE portrays deaths and the impact they have.

Death Knight

Made more excellent by the fact that Amadeus is a child murderer. We're rooting for a guy that had no qualms killing kids before they become a problem of a Heroic sort. Sure, it was mentioned in passing and heavily implied but yeah. Props to EE.

*arcanavita*15

I wonder what the wider reaction of what happened in the last chapter will be, what will Alaya think of Akua now is something I am very interested in, I really liked there character interactions.

[*Hargabga*](#)

To this day I honestly can't understand why Cat had to kill Alaya back in Ater. Like some kind of grand fixation, impulsive and unreasonable, refusing to acknowledge any other way, refusing even to wait until the war of annihilation is done, before taking her long price. I am not saying to not kill her, just why she didn't wait? To stake her entire reputation, her entire plan on one point of failure...

And the resolution, where she killed her father only to spare the women she allegedly had no choice to kill, it just so absurd it boggles the mind. If she had to kill her no matter what, why did she stop? If she hadn't, why did she knife Black?

It's not like she doesn't have a reputation to write it all off as some elaborate plot. She did unconditionally surrendered to Pilgrim before, it's not like there was anything meaningful to

lose, reputation-wise. And she is patient enough to wait on her revenge, as Aqua clearly demonstrates.

I had largely forgotten about this, but seeing Alaya again made the old doubts surface.

[Hargabga](#)

Kill Amadeus I meant.

*arcanavita*15

She wasn't explicitly planning on killing Amadeus but she was willing to do so, he just forced her hand, I also think the Due he paid in part is at least part of the reason Alaya got spared for a time as well, not something that made it happen but nudged it, this is just a head-cannon.

RoflCat

>It's not like she doesn't have a reputation to write it all off as some elaborate plot.

Her Warden Name was on the pivot at that moment, so no she couldn't just play it off.

She came to Praes declaring everywhere that she's here to end Alaya and not in a peaceful way.

So when Amadeus made his ultimatum, it was either giving up on her Warden Name (massively reducing the chance of winning against Keter in her opinion) to keep Amadeus's life, or the knife comes out.

And she made her choice, one that Amadeus probably knew she would.

His death was a payment not to reduce Alaya's sentence (death), but to delay it because he was the Chancellor and she was the only acceptable replacement for him at the time. Once her term as Chancellor is over, it's execution time.

ninegardens

"Her Warden Name was on the pivot at that moment, so no she couldn't just play it off."

I think Hargabga was pointing out that SETTING UP the pivot (which Cat did... over and over again), was a mistake. It was a critical failure of story fu to set up a pivot from which loss was a very real and serious option (and, indeed, happened)

RoflCat

>And I considered it, for a moment. Maybe if I made a compromise, then – and immediately I let out a soft gasp. The stars were dying. The black was fading. The Name itself, after all this time, was waning.

>It was never only Named or nation, I realized with dim horror. I'd always needed to have both. I'd just been tricked into thinking it was a choice.

She didn't even realize she was on a pivot until the very moment of it.

Also, even if she saw it coming, I honestly don't see anyway for her to avoid it.

>"There might come a time where you earn a kind hand, a protector, but not tonight," I coldly said. "Instead you earned me. You dealt out evil and it has been returned to your gate, but you think that at this hour of reckoning you can flee from your dues?"

>"Who am I?" I hissed. "I am Below's watchman, the enforcer of the black laws, and I tell you now that if you do not settle your debt in full then I will cast your shivering souls out into the darkness from where is no return."

Do you see anything in there that suggest her Name would be happy to let Alaya live?

The only way Malicia could've survived was to flee from Calernia on her own initiative, which Catherine already said she wouldn't pursue due to Keter priority.

Also do keep in mind the person who made this into a pivot and not just a path in her Story was Amadeus, not Catherine.

Snappy

I was because at that point Alya had to die, the story of Praes was broken but could be rebuilt (according to the Tower in arcadia) if she was left alive Amadeus would of forgiven her and she would probably be his chancellor, over throw him and become empress again restarting the old stories. But when Amadeus stopped cat, he created a Pivot for her name and she had to see it through. Killing Amadeus broke Alya too stopping her from ever rebuilding Old Pares and becoming a defender of New Pares in honor of him.

It was awful and brilliant at the same time.

Ike

Catherine is human and she has flaws. The callow tendency to extract long prices is one of them. It is a flaw the Bard exploited when trying to stop Catherine from becoming the Warden of the West.

*arcanavita*15

She needed to kill Malical because she was allied with the Dead King and allowing someone to live after doing something like that would really hurt the whole image of the New Age thing she is pushing for, she would still be able to pull it off but it would be a lot tougher. She wanted to kill her for the Night of Knives where she killed Ratface, basically she fell got caught up in the whole Long Price thing. She needed to spare her because she was the only person who could actually run Praes besides Akua who just denied the throne and wasn't interested.

Letouriste

"Inimical's Boot"

That's a freaking name and a half, lol.

Salt

It was an entirely sensible decision to draw a hard line in the sand for Malicia to die in my opinion. The list of horrible things she's done throughout like every single book in the series is insane, and she was still an utterly unrepentant major liability in the war against the dead king.

Malicia specifically allowed Second Liesse to happen – she knew Akua was attempting to open a greater breach and she hid it from Black because she wanted a super weapon to threaten the rest of the continent with. She had a fair number of Catherine's personal friends murdered during the Night of Long Knives. She planted brainwashing in Juniper and quite a few legionaries that mentally destroyed them. She actively fought an indirect war against and sabotaged the Grand Alliance through her actions in Mercantis. She was also the main reason holding back Praes from joining the war against the Dead King, as she specifically allied with him through the entire thing till her death, which is kind of a problem when he's opening greater breaches and the GA as a whole is losing the war, badly.

Meaning that she's a powerful, dangerous, and malicious variable with a political acumen that neither Catherine nor Cordelia have a foolproof answer to. Not only is her track record the worst it possibly could've been, there was also no indication of her changing her ways or reforming whatsoever. She was actually on a downward power-hungry spiral in mentality for the last couple books, if anything.

I don't think it's unreasonable at all for Cat to be fixated on finally killing off the knife that's been at her back for about four books running. Malicia waxing sentimental about Black and ime this chapter after having to be brought into submission by force in the first place doesn't really change much imo, other than giving her a bit of closure as a character. Having relatable sentiments after the fact doesn't really make up for the things she's done, nor does it change anything in terms of the practicality of why she needed to be put down at the time.

nimelennar

"Alaya sent the thousands of devils that had been stolen north with one order only: make war on the dead."

Oh no. Cat's poor horse...

Ciel Morgenstern

Hm.. I admit I hadn't thought of her "horse" (monster-crow-hybrid *ahem*), but rather what other casualties this could mean along the wayside, if one doesn't give that devilish horde any framework to work with other than "kill x". I mean, what do they care if they kill "a, b, c, ..." alongside "x"?

Miles

I'm sure Praes' finest are not *that* bad at what they do.

Benjamin Huang

It would be massively gigabrainied if the DK foresaw ALL of this. He KNEW the hellgates and their devils would be hijacked. He KNEW praes would go full Old Evil against him, flying fortresses and all.

Stop me if you've heard this before, a shining city on a hill (dark cliffs surrounded by bottomless abysses but potato potato) Attacked by a ruthless horde of devils Lead by a Tyrant riding a Flying Fortress

As the Alliance nears the walls of Keter, the DK unleashes his trap card.

A ragtag team of five plucky preteens who, leaving their Serenity against the rules, undergo a desperate quest to save their home and utopic way of life.

After all the DK has had the opportunity to make a lot of orphans over the years.

And we all know what orphans mean.

Heros.

Sykomantis

Yeah, but as someone mentioned earlier, DK can't do that. He's not just A Villain, he's THE Villain, and a story like that is just asking for the Hero pivot "My master was actually an eldritch abomination, so now I must put him down while having angst about having to kill my almost father figure". DK is too careful to allow a plan with that kind of story fu loophole. He's only survived this long by never allowing any story that could leave him vulnerable to happen, and trying to manipulate Heroes while being a Villain is just asking for a comeuppance.

Now, villains in the other hand...

Konstantin von Karstein

Taking control of the devils sounds like a good idea at first, but wouldn't the DK be able to take it back? Let's hope he has enough on his plate to prevent that, but that's not sure.

ninegardens

I mean... its still better than NOT taking control of them.

Xi Cree

The problem lies in the way their bindings were applied... the very mechanism to call each devil was what applied their bindings.

Ie. There are too many of them now in the world bound with an individual binding to grab them all up.

Also Make war on the dead is such a general command that the ones that grow smart enough will realize it gives them HUGE leeway once in the world and aware.

Thorium

Lets hope 'one order only' is only figuratively. Or at least seperate from the binding. I got the impression that the thing that seperated a good diabolist from a dead one was that their bindings were thorough enough to make lawyers weep. A binding with a single command would be useless for everything except causing utter mayhem.

Daniel E

If I were a bad Demoman, I wouldn't be sittin here discussin it with ya, would I?!

ninegardens

So, being back with the Preas team...

Does anyone know what happened to Akua's antagonistic minion dude?

Cause like, he was awesome, and kind of just evaporated after that story arc, and that seems a shame, throwing away a cool character.

nimelennar

I don't think Kendi has been seen since the Tower fell. Which, yes, is a shame.

Lord Haart

I had the impression that she had actually killed him earlier and it was his "ghost" she was taking to.

Xinci

Hmm, well that was interesting. We now have further potential signs of titles aiding the differentiation of matter in Creation. I am rather curious about how much the potential souls of the spiders, humans, or really any flora or fauna who may have gotten tied to it affect the Sister.

It looks like their ritual used the smoke as a carrying agent for the bindings, burned the reagents for proper material to form the bindings in the smoke, and the heat from the burning to help power the arrays. Truly their rituals are getting more efficient.

As a side note, I wonder how long it will be until a praesi uses the line of logic on souls that devils who took souls could be citizens to get around the diabolism laws.

I do also wonder how Maddie would feel about his scheme in Praes being known as the Fall. Quite dramatic, but he did tend to love melodrama.

Darkening

So, Alaya spends her whole time as dread empress acting like a chancellor. Now she's a chancellor and she's acting like a dread empress leading a fleet of flying fortresses and usurping armies of devils to wage war against the King of Death. Funny. Couple of loose ends to the praes storyline I hope we get answers to. What happened to Akua's treacherous lieutenant since he hasn't been mentioned once since she set the tower on fire, and did cat keep the giant undead spider queen? I suppose using an undead spider against the dead king could backfire, but it's too cool to just dismantle for parts. I kinda want to see Cat just yank a giant monster spider out of her Night pocket dimension at some point. What a fun surprise that would be for somebody.

Tom

> and more specifically what the monetary value of a soul should be.

> There had been spirited debated over the matter

I see what you did there

Daniel E

I've gotten in the habit of doing quick search on any potential names or places. This chapter marks the second time we've read about flying fortress of Dread Emperor Inimical. Ahem:

"Admittedly, it was my fault for not specifying the flying fortress had to be able to fly in directions other than up. Oh, it can fly down as well? Splendid. Guards, drag the Lord Warlock beneath my fortress. It'd be a shame not to use it at least once." – Dread Emperor Inimical, the Miser" – Chapter 30, Quarters.

[sengachi](#)

Hahahaha, oh thank you for dredging that up, that just makes this better.

Chapter 49: Arrival

"There is no more one last war than there is one last tide. Perhaps even less, for the moon will change before men do."

– King Jehan the Wise of Callow

The last campfire before the plunge, I felt, ought to have been more momentous than this. Instead it was strikingly mundane, the rabbits Cordelia had shot during the day's travelling ending up roasted by Masego over the open flame as I went to pick up firewood and Akua groomed the horses. I'd actually thought I'd get out of firewood duty by catching a few birds, but Zombie had gobbled the first up – purely out of spite, the damned bird didn't even need to eat – and screeched so loudly the rest had scattered, so down into the brush I went. I tied her to the tree furthest from the fire, informing she had been a Bad Girl and She Needed To Learn Her Lesson. She cawed at me rather skeptically, which I did not take to be a good sign.

I blamed the Sisters, they were a bad influence.

I got back with the last batch of dry wood in time to get my skewer fresh off the fire, Cordelia doing a decent job of hiding her horror as Masego told her why it wasn't actually a good idea to cook with hellflame even though the temperature was more stable.

"The taste of brimstone is quite overwhelming," Zeze sagely told her. "My experiments were conclusive."

"By that he means that Indrani talked him into scrapping our entire meal twice," I drily said, swallowing a groan as I lowered myself into sitting on the ground.

It was a nice little clearing that we'd chosen as our camp site for the night, surrounded by just thick enough a thicket that it gave us the illusion of privacy even as we sat in the midst of a host of fifteen thousand Firstborn. I'd set down a boundary line in Night that added some genuine privacy to the appearance of it, but getting the drow to actually keep their distance had been more difficult. Upon learning that I intended to eat fresh meat nineteen sigil-holders had volunteered their sigils to hunt game in my name, and they'd been halfway through talking themselves into duels over the privilege when I put my foot down.

Amusing as the thought of five thousand Firstborn scouring the countryside of the Ways clean of every living creature larger than a mouse was, Cordelia's rabbits would be quite enough.

"I am not sure whether that is technically blasphemy," the fair-haired princess noted, "but I cannot help but feel that it should be."

"It sometimes shows that you have never been hosted in Praes, darling," Akua told, strolling out of the woods. "Dinner canmost *definitely* be blasphemous."

Cordelia, feet not going over the side of the blanket she'd laid on the ground by so much as a hair and hands folded primly over her lap, offered the other woman a flat stare as she sat to my left.

"It sometimes worries me," she said, "that when you speak of Praes, it is hard to discern what is a jest and not."

"And if you think *that's* a joke, I've eaten what she thinks is appropriately seasoned chicken," I muttered at Cordelia under my breath. "It'd make you wish for the goddamn brimstone."

"Your national dish is stew, Catherine," Akua retorted, unimpressed.

"Stew's good," I protested. "We eat it all the time."

There was a choked noise that sounded suspiciously like suppressed laughter coming from my right. I narrowed my eye at now suspiciously expressionless princess.

"Out with it," I sighed.

"I once asked the palace's head cook to make traditional Callowan beef stew for Princess Vivienne," Cordelia admitted, "and she offered me her resignation."

An indelicate snort from my left, followed by the two of them letting out quiet peals of laughter. Typical, I grimly thought. Like the country of my birth, I was plagued by base treachery out of Praes and Procer. Fucking nobles the both of them too, I glowered. I wasn't sure how that played into it yet, but give me long enough to think and it absolutely would. A skewer was pressed into my hands and I looked up to Masego's smiling face.

"Eat your rabbit," he said. "It's getting cold."

I bit down on the juicy flesh, still glowering.

"Fine," I told him as I chewed. "But just because it's you asking, Zeze."

I polished off the rest of my rabbit skewer and was hungry enough to dip into the bag of dried berries afterwards, though it wasn't long before we moved on to the kind of dessert I actually enjoyed: a bottle of aragh, which Akua had been keeping in her pocket space for the entire trip like a complete hog. She hadn't opened it yet, though, so as I did I informed her of my forgiveness.

"How generous of you," Akua replied, impressively enough without so much as a hint of sarcasm.

"Sometimes, when she wants ours things, she says it's taxes and takes them," Masego told Cordelia.

The recently retired First Prince of Procer fixed me with a stare that could best be described as soulful disappointment.

"Eh," I shrugged. "Why even be a tyrant if you can't steal booze from your subjects?"

It was a pretty good stare, I'd give her that, but I'd had to deal with the Grey Pilgrim for years. No one did disappointment like Good's communally mandated grandfather, may the old bastard rest in peace. I poured a cup and pressed into Masego's hand as he rolled his eyes – it was somehow even more distressing a sight now that only one of them rolled all the way around the socket – and grabbed the cups for the rest.

"I always did find it unusual how few creature comforts you've claimed over the years, given your repeatedly professed desire for them," Akua languidly said.

She was sprawled over her blanket like it was a reclining couch and some oiled-up manservant was about to start fanning her. If anyone thought it was coincidence that the position ended up pressing her riding dress flatteringly around her, I had a real nice house in Keter I wanted to sell them. She lightly took up the cup when I offered it.

"I guess I ended up more the iron military rule kind of tyrant, huh," I mused.

"By far the most boring sort," Akua opined.

She was, sadly, pretty much right. Should have gotten known for a spot of decadence before I started going around in plate and a black cloak everywhere, now I was stuck with the reputation and it was too late to change it. *After the war*, I promised myself. *Pastel dresses for a year*. Still, let it not be said I'd allow myself to be cornered without a sortie.

"Besides, Your Highness," I said to Cordelia, "don't try to sell me you've never pulled at the bounds a bit – no one sits on top of a shitshow like Highest Assembly for years without allowing themselves *some* way to let out the steam."

The put-upon innocence that appeared on the princess' face was believably good, which was impressive because those pretty blue eyes could only do so much for compensate for the warrior's shoulders on her. Akua jeered at her and Masego was sipping at his drink, looking like he was gauging whether he could get away with discreetly dumping some in the fire – I glared at him to signify he would not, to his chagrin – so she gave ground.

"I did once have a banquet served for Amadis Milenan where every single of the nine services tasted of oranges," Cordelia conceded.

I cocked an eyebrow. Didn't sound like much of anything.

"He is," the blonde princess mildly explained, "deathly allergic."

Akua actually smiled.

"Ah," she said. "He could say nothing, because accusing you of trying to poison him would have been an act of treason, if then proved untrue."

"Oh yes," Cordelia said, her savagely pleasant smile never wavering. "The near mutiny from the cooks when they were asked to

bake bread that would taste of oranges for the cheese platter was worth seeing him squirm in his seat through every single service of a formal state dinner."

I sipped at my drink, hiding a grin. I'd always known there was a petty streak hidden under the manners, but it was nice to have it confirmed for posterity. I let myself relax into the blanket as the cups emptied and the bottle was passed around, letting the warmth of the fire seep into my bones as Masego was drawn into a conversation about the benefits of a mage guild's existence – I knew better than to believe Cordelia had laid the breadcrumb leading to that by happenstance – and though Akua occasionally interjected I was happy to let them have at it.

The good feeling was lingering in my limbs, sweet and heavy enough it was hard to tell apart from sleepiness.

"- without standardized magical education, it is impossible for any society to have artefacts on a more than local scale," Masego said. "If there no common principles a mage cannot undertake the upkeep of the artefact another made, so the knowledge end up kept by apprenticeship lines."

"Which are vulnerable to being ended by happenstance," Cordelia acknowledged.

She had it right. Callow had suffered from the weakness over the years, and after the Conquest the Dread Empire had pretty much snuffed out organized Callowan sorcery by interrupting the master-to-apprentice passage of knowledge: only a gutted Guild of Hedges had survived, and all the talent there had been pushed into the Legions.

"Exactly," he enthused. "Learning should never be so unsafe. Every secret that dies with its holder is a loss for all of Creation."

I felt Akua's gaze move to me.

"They'll be at this for a while," she noted, faintly amused.

"I can't tell if she's humouring him or genuinely interested," I said.

Akua rolled her eyes at me.

"She seeks a closer relationship with him," she chided, as if it were obvious. "Our dear princess already has her eye on Cardinal, my heart. She foresees his presence there in the coming years, and catches a second bird with the stone by obtaining his thoughts on the matter of organized sorcery under a central authority."

Which would inevitably ensue, considering the school that would be at the heart of the city yet to be built. It would draw mages like flies to honey, and you couldn't just let loose a few hundred mages – or more – in any city without supervision. They'd have to be organized, and the ruling council of Cardinal would be the natural authority for them to be under. Cordelia had a history of endorsing that sort of thing, too, having created the first mage order since before the Liturgical Wars during her reign. The Order of the Red Lion, effectively a guild of scrying-capable mages. I grimaced.

"Thought I'd get at least a year after the war before that sort of thing started up," I admitted.

Akua flicked my shoulder, which surprised me enough I had to bite down on yelp.

"Poor Catherine," the golden-eyed sorcerers gently mocked. "She only wants to build the most important and influential city on Calernia, but somehow this has drawn attention and intrigue."

A pause.

"Who could have *possibly* foreseen this state of affairs?" Akua mourned, laying a hand over her heart.

"Ouch," I muttered. "I mean you're not wrong, but still ouch."

"You'll survive," she retorted, merciless. "Do get out of your head, dearest. It will have been a waste of my bottle otherwise."

I snorted at that. Fair enough. I dragged myself up, brushing my hand against her shoulder, and cracked my back with a little sigh.

"Fire's making me fall asleep," I told them all, having drawn the others' curious stares. "I'll go for a bit of a walk, get the blood flowing."

The ring of forest around us wasn't all that deep, but the branches and leaves were thick enough that limping to the edge got me the treat of breaking through to a starry sky. Under it the Firstborn had made camp, the absence of fires still strange to my eyes after all these years. They were used for cooking, but no longer than that, and by now had long been snuffed out. The fifteen thousand that Sve Noc had sent south with me had still raised their tents along sigil lines, a far cry from the professional lines and avenues of a Legion camp, but the campaigns had taught the drow the virtues of order.

There was a cross of broad avenues going through the camp now that no Firstborn army would have bothered with five years ago, as well as designated latrine pits and supply tents.

"How many centuries has it been since the Empire Ever Dark fielded armies?" I asked.

I had felt its presence even through the dark and silence. Night hid little from me, these days.

"None have been sent to war since the years after the Gloom descended," Ivah of the Losara replied.

"So more than a thousand years," I murmured. "You're adapting dreadfully quick, Ivah."

It wasn't empty praise. There were modern armies that simply hadn't caught up to the methods introduced by the Legions of Terror during the Conquest, be they the combined arms or the professional ways of making war, and it wasn't because they'd lacked coin or time to. The Great War hadn't refined Procer war-making, it'd scrapped armies and beggared thousands into being disaffected mercenaries. And the Dominion was, in a lot of ways, just as tribal as the Firstborn: Ten Generals instead of the great lines of the Blood, captains and companies instead of Mighty and sigils.

The drow, though, were taking well to war on our scale. Tactics were still specialized instead of standardized – the Ysengral for fortifications, the Jindrich for heavy infantry – but I could already see the bare bones of Firstborn armies emerging and they'd make fearsome beasts to wrestle with. Heavy skirmisher contingents like no one else still fielded, startlingly quick massed spear infantry and Mighty as replacements for either cavalry or mage cabals. It was only a matter of time until sigils began to turn into professional soldiery, and when that began the Firstborn would be well on their way to having respectable standing armies.

"Of all our talents, strife has ever been our favourite," Ivah mused. "Our blessing and our curse, one might say."

The echo of my words made me turn. I found my successor as the sigil-holder of the Losara – and likely First Under the Night – leaning against a hollow tree. The shadows of the branches reached across its painted face, the silver tree-on-purple cut through like claw marks. Ivah rarely bothered with more than the lightest of armours, my Lord of Silent Steps preferring long coats with wide sleeves paired with intricately woven scarves, and it might have been taken for simple traveller if not for the way its presence burned in the Night. In a way, after what it'd done in Serolen it deserved my title more than me: it had made the first of the new Night, when it slew Kurosiv.

It was connected to it even more deeply than I, for while it'd been my scheme Ivah had been the one to bloody its hands with a spear of yew.

"You're displeased?" I asked.

"We are what we are, Losara Queen," the Lord of Silent Steps replied. "I fear not the seeking of Night, only that in embracing the spear we might forget how to hold all other tools."

That becoming too good at war would see the Firstborn lose interest in the less exciting labours of building a home in the Burning Lands, it meant.

"It'll be on you," I quietly said, "to teach them better."

The Sisters had chosen me for the exile, for the war, but it was coming to an end. They would not leave me afterwards, I thought, for I had spent too long as their herald to be severed from them after. But I would be a priestess among many, no longer the towering figure in the Night I now stood as. That was fine by me. I had been Sovereign of Winter and Squire once, and learned from it that one power always grew over the other. To be Warden was more than the old coat I'd once worn as a girl, but to be First Under the Night was not a small thing either.

Better to make it cleaner, so that fate's course ran without hidden eddies.

"It will be," Ivah just as quietly replied, looking up at the sky.

It was the first time it acknowledged what the both of us had known for years: that it had served as the sigil-holder of the Losara while being groomed for my role as high priestess for years, chosen by Sve Noc themselves. Each of the Sisters had their favourites among the Mighty, but neither had thought to elevate one as the greatest of the Firstborn under them.

"Afraid?" I asked.

A long silence.

"Yes," Ivah murmured.

Its jaw clenched.

"It is one thing to kill a god, another to grow a garden from its bones."

And the flowers born of blood were lovely, I had learned, but ever poisonous. I had tricked Winter into death and devoured it only for it to rot me from the inside. Yet in the end, was that too not an answer of sorts?

"How do you kill a god, Ivah?" I asked.

Silver eyes on mine.

"You make another," it replied, thoughtful.

If you don't like the altar the Firstborn worship at, I thought, make another. We stood there under the starlit sky of the Twilight Ways for a long moment, the two of us leaning against threes in companionable silence.

"I wish," Ivah murmured, "that you did not have to leave. That we would keep you."

My heart clenched, but I would not answer the sentiment with a lie. It offered me a wisp of a smile.

"We borrowed you for our purposes," the Lord of Silent Steps said, "and you borrowed us for yours. It was a fair bargain, the faith doled out repaid threefold."

"The Firstborn," I acknowledged, "have never failed me."

And I found that I meant every word of it. Baffled, disappointed and sometimes angered but never *failed*. From beginning to end, they had kept their oath like a knight's pride and a devil's due.

"We have long memories, Losara," Ivah said. "We will not forget Callow's Queen or the soldiers we bled in the mud with. That affection, I think, may just survive us both."

I looked down at my hands, those worn old things that'd never quite wash out the red.

"Wouldn't that be something?" I smiled, daring to hope.

It softly laughed.

"It would," Ivah murmured. "It is a long road ahead, and we could all do with a few more friends on it."

"Then do not be afraid, Ivah of the Losara," I gently said. "For we'll be walking it both, and I count you as one."

The drow stiffened at the words, like a cat afraid of scalding, but as the moments passed it unwound.

"And you," Ivah brusquely spoke into the silence, as if afraid to get the words out.

I did not smile, afraid it'd shame it, and instead let silence linger. The embarrassment only thickened, though, and I need only glance at the cast of its shoulder to know it felt like squirming. Taking pity on it, I cleared my throat.

"You sought me out for a reason?"

Ivah nodded in acknowledgement.

"Words has arrived from Creation," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "We will be the last to arrive in the hinterlands Keter. The Praesi fortresses arrived last morn."

I half-smiled.

"The last to the party, huh," I murmured. "Best make our presence count, if we've made them wait."

Ivah pushed off from the tree and offered me a bow, shallower than it had been before Serolen.

"Good night to you, Losara Queen," it said.

"Good night to you, Lord of Silent Steps," I replied.

It left the same way it had come, through the dark, and I returned to the warmth of the fire and company. There would be precious few moments like those, in the coming days, so it would not do to waste even a single one of them.

—

We crossed back into Creation a little before Noon Bell.

Riding ahead on Zombie, taking to the sky, I noticed two things in quick succession: first, once you got high enough the clouds of poison thinned enough you didn't even need to breathe through cloth. Two, even as the first sigil set foot in the dust of the Kingdom of the Dead a battle was being fought about a mile to the north of us. Much as I my instinct was to spur on Zombie and get into the thick of it, I held myself back and took in the situation from the sky. The Crown of the Dead was a dozen miles to the west, the great fortress-city jutting out of a chasm miles deep and a spire of black stone rising even higher, and around it in a loose circle I could see the encamped armies of the Grand Alliance.

Fortified camps, too. Pickler had been busy, because though the angle wasn't right for me to see everything it looked like the Grand Alliance had encircled Keter with ramparts of its own. It had then gone further and built a ring of walls behind the camps, something called contravallation. Sensible, I thought, given that the Dead King still had armies out in the field that'd be headed our way. We'd be fighting as much from the back as the front while the siege continued, we'd known that from the start, but I was still impressed Pickler had gotten so much done so quickly. *She has Legion sappers now as well*, I reminded myself.

Zombie circled slowly up in the sky, the wind batting at my face as I returned my attention to the battle up north. By the look of the banners and the massed cavalry being used, it was Rozala Malanza and the army that'd held Cleves out there in the field.

On the other side I saw mostly a mass of bones, with only a few necromantic constructs – the dead had numbers, maybe twenty thousand to First Princess Rozala's ten, but it wasn't helping them much. The Proceran shield wall held, Light burning away the poison in the air and tearing through the skeletons in thick rivers to disrupt their formation. And by how quickly the constructs were going down, I'd guess there were Named on the field.

A victory in the making. At guess, Neshamah had sent out some expendables to hinder the crossing of the Firstborn and Malanza had caught it flatfooted. *Tied them down with the cavalry, did you?* I mused. She'd always had a knack for cavalry tactics, even back during the Tenth Crusade. It had been her tacit threat to send cavalry south into Callow and hit the Vales from behind that'd forced Juniper and I to give her a fight at the Battle of the Camps.

I waited until the first two sigils had crossed and a vanguard had been established for the Firstborn before going out to return the favour. Night came clean and crisp when I pulled, flowing better than it had since Hainaut – and even better than before, at least when the sun was out. I unleashed trail of black flame through the heart of the enemy formation, torching Bones by the hundreds as Procerans cheered. It had a charming element of novelty to it, the Principate's soldiers being glad of the sight of me. The battle had already been won before I arrived, and my contribution just helped turn it into a rout.

I passed twice more, dropping trails of fire, and noted approvingly that First Princess Rozala was moving to encircle the dead. It'd be a mistake against a living army, since cornered soldiers fought like devils, but undead didn't rout so there was no point in leaving them a way out. Bones just got stupid and disorganized when you killed enough of the Binds leading them, some of the bands wandering off as the cohesion of the army broke down. The forward ranks of skeletons kept breaking themselves on the Proceran shield wall, increasingly less skilled in that assault, while fantassin companies swept the flanks and the cavalry began riding down the bands of skeletons that broke away from the host.

Already over, and it was looking like light casualties for the Procerans. Now we just needed to win the next hundred of these, all the while besieging the single most powerful fortress in all of Calernia.

I left First Princess Rozala to her moment of glory, knowing that after Cleves her soldiers could likely use a battle having gone cleanly their way, and rode Zombie back to the beachhead. Sigils had begun to spread out during the hour I'd spent north, the Firstborn assembling into a marching column headed for the camps

to the west, and seeing that General Rumena had it well in hand I saw no need to stick my oar in. It'd been herding sigils around since before the city I was born in was founded, it didn't need me breathing down its neck.

Impatient at the pace of the advance even though I knew in the back of my mind that the drow were quick on the march as far as armies went, I landed long enough to have word sent to my companions that I'd be heading out to the camps in advance and took to the sky again. Zombie was in a good mood, I noted, having puffed her feathers vainly at the cheering earlier and remained convinced she'd been the star of the battle ever since. I saw no need to disabuse her.

The flight west was longer, the winds turning strange and quarrelsome the closer we got to Keter, but we made good time. I watched with thinned lips as the hulking shape of the Crown of the Dead rose ever higher, that island of stone connected to the land around it only by four great bridges. I'd tread one of these on foot, once upon a time, and before this was over I would again. A look back and a flex of Night told me that the Firstborn were mostly done crossing by the time I reached the camps, the column snaking west along with First Princess Rozala's victorious army.

It was with a sense of vindication that I led Zombie into a slow circling glide above our camps, taking in the sight of the armies that'd been gathered. There'd never been a coalition like it in the history of Calernia: Praes and Callow, Procer and Levant, the League and the Empire Ever Dark. All the greatest armies left among the living had been marched here for our great siege of Keter, and though I knew that was no guarantee of victory the sight of it was deeply satisfying. We'd done it. Through Hells and high water, we'd mustered all that was left to muster. Now we simply need-

Power bloomed, deep in the heart of Keter, and my blood ran cold. Sorcery rose from the camps, but it wasn't us the Dead King was aiming at. As a torrent of magic shot up in the sky, past the great spire and the green clouds, Creation shivered.

Then the sky began to fall, one panel at time.

I thought it an attack at first, when shards of northing hit the ground and kicked up great clouds of dust, but the few that hit the camp broke harmlessly against the defensive wards. I had seen this before, I realized in a moment of eerie clarity. Just not from this angle. I looked back, to the drow and saw that the last few sigils had been dropped down from a height. Like the Army of Callow was, when Akua shattered the Twilight Ways under us.

"Gods," I croaked out, as destruction spread as far as my eye could see.

Miles in every direction, one break at a time, like a ripple on the surface of a pond. We'd brought the great muster of Calernia here to besiege Keter, I thought, so the Dead King had broken the Twilight Ways. How much of them I couldn't know – miles, a third, maybe even enough that the realm itself would begin break down. In the end, it didn't really matter. Neshamah had let us in and then tightened the noose: now there could be no retreat.

We would take Keter before supplies ran out, or we would all die.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Mirror Night

Yeah i figure DK would crack the skies and break Twilight eventually ala Akua. Some good character moments before the storm I suppose.

But god this pacing still confuses me. Cat and Drow are off the board with some of the heavy hitters and yet they can already see the Crown of the Dead? How the frak did they turn it around and push so deep in Keter when DK was beating the break off them when Cat when to handle the Drow Issue. Did the Praes Mages and Orcs really make that much of a difference? I mean I suppose its kinda implied they just ported in with Twilight but considering Akua already compromised that seems kinda arrogant to do that and just ignore supply lines.

[Liliet](#)

They have no use for supply lines from Procer because there are no supplies there. Dwarves or nothing, and dwarves do have exits to where they are.

SpeckofStardust

I mean the biggest problem of the Ways being shut down is that the Villains have nowhere to hide when angel weapon gets used.

[Liliet](#)

HORRIBLY TRUE

caoimhinh

Nevertheless, it seems the supplies from the Dwarves still have to come through the Twilight Ways and thus now can no longer come?

Still seems weird, considering the Dwarves haven't arrived yet.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Cat was able to negotiate a withdrawal for the Drow so the Dwarves could encircle Keter.

The Dwarves just need to dig Up.

caoimhinh

Yeah, but they *sealed it off*. That encirclement wasn't to make tunnels and place people, it was a full construction to prevent Keter from expanding underground, no?

I'm starting to think maybe the Dwarves can't just dip up right at Keter due to that encirclement they built. Maybe that's why Cat is saying supplies aren't coming?

Still weird, since the Dwarves army has not arrived yet, and they would need supply lines.

[Liliet](#)

I think the dwarf supplies are supposed to come from the underground tunnels. And the dwarves haven't agreed to the Keter deal yet, yeah.

caoimhinh

- 1) The Dwarves already agreed. That was the whole deal with the Herald back in Salia before Cordelia abdicated.
- 2) If the Dwarf supplies are supposed to come from underground tunnels to Keter, then why did Cat say "before our supplies run out" if they still have the option of the Dwarves bringing them?

[Liliet](#)

(Because the Herald was only authorized to conclude the deal he had originally brought to them, and all he could agree to was bring the new deal to his superiors)

agumentic

They did just port in with the Twilight Ways and will be relying on dwarves for supply lines. There wasn't any other way to reach Keter.

caoimhinh

Yeah, but it's weird, because last time we saw those armies (except for the Praesi one), they were all on retreat from Keter's armies, and the frontlines were being pushed heavily into Procer's territory.

Did they just decide to ignore everything else when launching this offensive and leave the heartlands of Procer unprotected while the siege is going?

Also, that last line seemed to imply there weren't any new supplies coming now that the Twilight Ways were damaged.

tynam

Yes, that's exactly what they've done. Containment is impossible at this point, since they've lost the natural geographical barriers and the undead are just spreading out everywhere in Procer... so they've left behind the minimal militia and garrisons to slow that down at the big cities and used the Twilight Ways to bypass the entire campaign field straight to Keter.

That plan is a guaranteed loss of Procer, but that's already where they were... so the only winning move is "the enemy's gate is down", a decapitation strike on Neshamah. If they get him the undead left behind in Procer change from 'unstoppable army that grows larger faster than anyone can keep up' to 'millions of dangerous but stupid skeletal raiders that will just wander aimlessly in lands mostly already empty'. Without the Dead King you can take the rest back slowly over the course of decades if you have to, expanding as your population re-expands to fill the space. Even if they can survive the Dead King's end, Revenants are no match for Named – without Neshamah plotting how to avoid losing stories for them, they're just dead Named with weakened aspects and they literally can't learn, which is extremely fatal when you're up against the Cat-trained generation of heroes coming up...

(Clearing this up, of course, will give all those new ork and dark elf mercenaries something useful to do while those societies start adjusting to trade and industry.)

[Hargabga](#)

They basically lost a war, so they bet it all on their armies killing DK faster than he can kill the rest of Calernia. Do not misunderstand – this is very much a last desperate gamble.

Darkening

Yeah, they definitely didn't fight all the way through here, they just went via the Ways. And yeah, they don't have supply

lines, so they're all dead in a couple months if they're still here. But, well, desperation more than arrogance. At least DK couldn't break Twilight *before* they got here, since that would leave their only desperate hope as sending a band of five into the breach and with literally no other options existent in the face of apocalypse, that band would have some pretty incredibly weight backing their story.

ISiejek

The crow have multiple fronts and also used twilight ways to avoid walking through enemy territory not to mention they were the closest to keter already

spencer

Narratively, I was expecting some sort of challenge in the ways before reaching Keter. I agree that going straight to the boss fight was a bit abrupt. But I guess there will be plenty of juicy story within the Keter campaign.

Hellspirit

I don't think there's anything that could reasonably be a challenge on the way.

[Liliet](#)

Aaaaaaaah.

[gnaruscat](#)

Yup

erebus42

Well shit.

I've said it before but the Drow are probably my favorite faction. And while it has always been pretty introspective now that it has stepped out of Cat's shadow (both figuratively and literally) I'm glad to see how clearsighted Ivah appears to be. I suspect Ivah will grow to surpass even Cat as First Under Night. That was also a rather sweet moment the two shared. Also the orange prank was a delightfully cruel and hilarious move on Cordelia's part.

Sinead

At this level, I think the ideas of 'surpassing' is the wrong way to look at it.

Ivah would not be where it is without Cat.

And Cat could not have gotten where she is now without Ivah.

They are really one shadow of crucial reformation of the Firstborn.

You can probably draw some comparison between Andronike the General and Komena the Twilight Sage.

The Green Mouse

"Andronike the General and Komena the Twilight Sage." I think you got those mixed up.

Christian Oaks

Damn good stuff, and if we must rush to the finish of the books that is an excellent way to do it.

Gabe Meadow

This was our last deep breath before the plunge. And what a plunge it is! The siege commences, neither side can back out. That just leaves the big hanging question marks: the Herald and the Kingdom Under, Kreios and the Gigantes, the Forever King and the elves.

Plus what other nasty tricks are respectively stored away in the Hidden Horror and Grand Alliance's arsenals.

Christian Oaks

The dead king could retreat into the serenity and secretly be the only person who knows how to close a hellgate behind him. Or at least do what warlock did and open another so closely it can't be used

letouriste

i really love these in-between chapters. That was really sweet

Benjamin Huang

bruh this is just GG no re for the Dead King lmao. protags are next to his base, he's cut off their escape, guide ends in mid-february.

the timeframe feels really really rushed. it's only been 3 weeks since Cat left and somehow they've managed to

a) surround Keter

b) construct double rings of massive, city-encircling fortifications

all while their main leadership is gone.

hopefully something cool happens.

[Hargabga](#)

Yeah, if I was the Dead King, I would've tried to stretch the war past February and into hiatus.

[Liliet](#)

It hasn't been three weeks.

[Liliet](#)

Er, as in, it's been more like a couple of months.

shikkarasu

Oh? I thought it was 2 weeks to do to Serolen, 2-3 days there, and a week travel to Keter. Seems like a lot of us missed something. What do you have for the timeline?

[Liliet](#)

I think it was like 2 weeks to Serolen before meeting Ivah then 2 weeks with Ivah, at least a week or two there, and two-three weeks to Keter (this long cause they're taking an army).

That said, I'm having trouble stretching the timeline to have the Hellgate locks release already. It was a year, a month, and a day, we have 13 months to account for. It's like, three and a half months from Hainaut to Praes, three months in Praes (total six and a half), three and a half months back (total ten), a month in Salia (total eleven) and two months to Everdark and back (total thirteen)? Travel times are eternally nebulous in Guide and the Wasteland doesn't have normal seasons, so this can be stretched into shape. Two months in Praes feels more right to me, which would necessitate four months to get there and four months back... or more than a month in Salia... when I think a month in Salia is already a stretch, it ought to have been more like a couple of weeks... Like, I get that armies get a long time to get moving, but I think four months and counting is uh, a lot.

[Hargabga](#)

Hold up, does Catherine now has an undead giant crow as a mount? When did it happen? And how does it work?

Konstantin von Karstein

It happened when she attacked the camp of that Praesi noble at the beginning of the book. From Aksum, I think?

Matthew Wells

Cat raised Zombie 8 right before raising Abreha. She's one of the Arcadia Resplendent Fae's mounts.

Alex Teates

No, it is a Praesi monster that Catherine saw and immediately went MINE!

[irritantseraphim](#)

Twas during the campaign to settle Praes, in the build-up of the battle in this hillside, I forget the name. Zombie died during an assault on the camp of Aksum, so she reanimated one of the dead crow-horse-mutants.

zenanii

It was one of the wasteland monstrosities killed during the second praes arc. The sisters helped raise it I think which is why it still has a personality.

[Liliet](#)

A griffin/hippogriff, presumably a crow one.

ohJohN

This Zombie was originally one of the monsters brought to Kala by the Aksum forces. First seen from Talbot's perspective in Juniper's Plan (Redux):

[...] by the time he arrived she was tossing a dead fae in the path of a devil belching vivid red flames while trying to fend off what looked like... a hippogriff? No, not quite. He might never have seen one of those outside heraldry, but while the creature had horse's legs and tail it instead of a hawk-like appearance it had great crow's wings and head.

It also bit off the head of the queen's horse, before she stabbed it in the neck.

[...] By the time he was done, the queen was sitting astride the dead crow monster with a smugly satisfied look on her face. No, not dead Brandon saw. Undead, for it blinked and let out a happy screech that had him wincing in pain.

In the next chapter Cat mentions that the Sisters (Komena in particular) helped with the raising process so, much like the Winter-raised flying fae Zombie, this one has more personality than her usual undead mounts.

ohJohN

hmm WordPress ate my link, here it is again: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2021/05/28/interlude-junipers-plan-redux>

BargleNawdleZouss

Lines of contravallation in anticipation of a larger relieving force? It's Julius Caesar at the siege of Alesia!

Kletanio

It's pretty standard siege tactics going back thousands of years. Gotta keep your enemy from attacking you while you're attacking them! So naturally, you sometimes end up with sieges of sieges.

(Been reading Bret Devereaux's series on siege warfare and fortifications. I didn't know this, but apparently "starving them out" was a really rare tactic. More often the siege was a long, slow assault build-up. Dig close to the walls to undermine them, build up a ramp to go over the walls, etc. Highly recommend.

<https://acoup.blog/2021/10/29/collections-fortification-part-i-the-besiegers-playbook/>

<https://acoup.blog/2019/05/10/collections-the-siege-of-gondor/>
)

Hargabga

Except the dead won't run away because they thought that "the cavalry is here".

Sykomantis

And so it begins

Juff

Typo Thread:

eve need > even need
canmost > can most
at now > at the now
too, I glowered > too. I glowered
pressed into Masego's > pressed it into Masego's
pressingly > pressing
like Highest > like the Highest
for compensate > to compensate
there no > there are no
end up > ends up
on yelp. > on a yelp.
sorcerers > sorceress
already seen > already see

simple traveller > a simple traveller
against threes > against trees
need only > needed only
Words has > Word has
hinterlands Keter > hinterlands of Keter
that form the > that from the
batting as > batting at
At guess, > At a guess,
unleashed trail > unleashed a trail
Princes Rozala > Princess Rozala
northing > nothing
Callow was, > Callow had,

[shimizubad](#)

Last time a Zombie showed that much personality it was bisected. I'm already crying for this one

Darkening

Well, there was a theory thrown around that Zombie 8 would survive and be the final one because Cat's Odin imagery made her need a sleipnir equivalent and sleipnir had 8 legs lol.

ohJohN

7 ZOMBIES AND 1! 7 ZOMBIES AND 1!

[shimizubad](#)

This wasn't supposed to be a reply

[laguz24](#)

Dead King, the villainous stories are active again I think. And you should have sensed it, you literally just made a heroic last stand for the ages with everything riding on the line. How are you this stupid? Next you are going to say that you're invincible and stuff.

Darkening

Well, his alternative is to let some of them escape, which will inevitably include named. And then those named, faced with the end of the world and out of possible alternatives, will form a band of five to dive into the breach with an incredibly weighty story behind them. I guess the dead king would rather bet on being able to snuff them all entirely in battle rather than have a band of nigh unkillable assassins coming for his head.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

That's why this is the End of the Age of Wonders.
DK wins? Age of Undeath.

Coalition of Life wins?
DK minions cleanup, and detox of deadlands. Ratlings. Golden Boom twats.
Founding of Cardinal. And attendant stories...

ohJohN

Well, no explicit confirmation this is the case – Cat has the Sword of Everything Else now, so theoretically she has the ability to turn Evil stories back on, but she hasn't mentioned doing so. Perhaps she hasn't figured out exactly how yet, or she's waiting due to tactical considerations: she and her fellow villains can also benefit from the lack of Evil stories, and she might be holding that card to play at a pivotal moment when it would REALLY screw over the Dead King.

Darkening

It was described as the bard actively using an aspect to suppress the stories at all times, so I think they would have turned back on the moment bard lost her grip on them, rather than being a toggleable option cat has to enable.

[Sugar Roll](#)

The Dead King be like, "None of you seem to understand. I'm not locked in here with you. You're locked in here with me!"

charl X

Yeah everything since the tower fell HAS felt a little rushed, in previous books id have expected the serolen arc to be at least 50% longer, maybe even approaching twice as long

But the praes campaign wasn't paced too badly, the tower itself falling was a little bit rushed but still a very satisfying conclusion to that arc

Like when you compare the serolen arc and praes campaign arc to previous ones they do feel like they are going much faster, though slow pacing is a criticism some people might level at other books in the PGTE, i never minded that though


Serolen arc especially feels a bit rushed though, still written well and not unsatisfying, no big gaps to annoy me or anything, but its a noticeable change from previous arcs

And well the start of the assault on keter is blindingly fast, not even some other pov interludes or anything, just BAM the armies are all set already

shikkarasu

In fairness, the walls were raised in the 3 weeks that the Serolen arc (travel time included) took to resolve. We know that a company of 100 sappers can basically raise a keep overnight from the War College arc. Emptying out Praes of their Sappers, giving them any extra hands they need, and prepping bits of wall in advance makes complete encirclement of Keter sound pretty doable in 3 weeks, to me. I'm sure it isn't Wall Sina or anything, but better than a ring of heavies holding up tower shields.

As for Seolen being a fast arc, it was. I think the whole thing took 2-3 days? Maybe if we had more Drow POV it would have made sense to stretch out, but Cat, herself, really didn't have much to do there. She brought god-slaying talent and served as an Avatar of the Sisters for an hour at most, but ultimately she is settling into the role of figurehead while her successors run things. I, for one, don't have an issue with the pacing there.

...plus EE probably doesn't want to divide book "5" into 3 parts


*arcanavita*15

I really loved the first half of the chapter with all of the character interactions and then Ivah moment. The second half was really weird pacing, I understood it but it just felt weird in a pacing sense.

[onedollargum](#)

Such a nice little moment with Ivah. The fireside chat was cozy too.

spencer

The sexual tension with Akua is taut! When Cat snuck off for her walk in the dark I half expected Akua to follow for some pre-battle destressibg.

Darkening

Yeah, I definitely expected some moment between them when she walked off. But we got Ivah instead, which was also fun.

ohJohN

She offhandedly mentions that she brushed Akua's shoulder when she stood up, and while I fully expected Cat to not (consciously) ascribe any meaning to it I thought for sure Akua was gonna follow her like "AWW YISS SHE GAVE ME THE SIGNAL, IT'S HAPPENING"

j

Nah that was on purpose. Akua flicked Cat and then Cat returned the touch. It's on.

Levir

Once more, into the breach

nimelennar

Am I missing something? Is there some reason why Cordelia was a First Prince, but Rozala is a First Princess? Is it because they're from different regions?

Zggt

In the earliest appearances it was specifically mentioned that Cordelia wanted to be called First Prince rather than First Princess

braxen1

Yes. If I'm remembering correctly Cordelias native tongue doesn't have a word for female ruler so Prince is the traditional title. So she chose to use prince as her title.

I always thought she did that to play up her unsophisticated brute from the north image before everyone else realized what a master of statecraft she was.

Or maybe it was a bit of a silent protest over tradition.

ohJohN

I'm also only working from memory so I can't say for certain, but I thought it was a specifically Rhenian cultural quirk – I believe Reitz (Cordelia's native tongue) is the primary language for all Lycaonese principalities, yet Mathilda Greensteel is called the Princess of Neustria.

I vaguely recall it being a matter of pride to Cordelia to use 'First Prince' – embracing the (admittedly outmoded) Rhenian address to draw attention to her status as the first Lycaonese head of state – but knowing her she was probably playing a few angles simultaneously through that choice (I think at one point some southern royals even mention it explicitly as an example of her brutishness, so mission accomplished!).

(Her other title, Princess of Salia, is also interesting: my guess is that, because it's the only one that is jurisdictionally unrelated to Rhenia, those cultural factors didn't apply.)

braxen1

Found it. Good thing I remembered it was in a Cordelia Interlude. In the Prologue of Book 2. Would have needed another read through if it was a Cat chapter.

"It seemed to dumbfound southerners that she still went by the Rhenian formal address rather than the more gender-accurate one she'd gained upon her election as the ruler of the Principate. While she was technically the princess of Salia, now that she'd gained the title of First Prince, she refused to allow the southlings to slight her heritage by refusing to acknowledge that she came from the northernmost principality of Procer. Rhenia was still backwards in some regards and the laws had never been officially amended to reflect the reality of women ruling, but she was proud of her origins nonetheless."

I was close, but definitely off on the tradition aspect.

nimelennar

Thanks! If I ever noticed that, I have certainly forgotten it!

Daniel E

What became of The Sword Of Everything Else? Is Cat just keeping it as an artifact?

Sinead

I assume she will use it in a suitably dramatic moment to break the Dead King.

Perhaps she cuts off his Due or something, so he gets no death curse.

Rabblrouser

This is the endgame.

Alexey Romanov

Do they know tides are caused by the moon?

Chapter 50: Clouds

"O Fiona, would you weep,

*of your old bargain now?
Queen to not, a price steep
that they now disavow*

—

*A just king was promised,
just a king's what we got
and our coin's still honest,
but it heads south to rot*

—

*Deliver us, o knight of Dunloch,
Your honour fierce and proud
Singing of the kingdom lost
Whose banner is now a shroud*

—

*Faith kept is faith earned
But when oaths lie forgot
No king can call it treason
To speak true of our lot*

—

*So one night I may leave,
Abandon home and hearth,
choose the sword and believe
in getting an oath's worth*

—

*But it will not be tonight,
the step is cold with rime.
But under the dying light,
I'll sing it one last time —*

—

Deliver us, o knight of Dunloch,

Your honour fierce and proud

Singing of the kingdom lost

Whose banner is now a shroud."

— *"O Knight of Dunloch", Callowan rebel song from the northern baronies*

The arrival of the last army to join the siege of Keter should have been an uplifting moment, like the beginning of the end for the Crown of the Dead, but instead the coming of the Firstborn had been drowned in the shadow of Neshamah's counterblow. I landed in the Third Army's camp to cheers that rang a little hollow and didn't bother to make a spectacle out of it: posturing would not remove the sight of the sky falling from the minds of my soldiers, and it'd look all the more laughable for trying. I handed off my reins to a stout Vale boy and let myself be guided to the command tent, informed by one of the phalanges that Juniper was already waiting for me.

More than just her, as it turned out. All four of the Army of Callow's generals were there, as well as the expected old hands — Aisha and Pickler. So was Kilian, to my surprise, but I kept the sentiment off my face. It made sense, given that these days she was the longest serving of our Senior Mages. Our surviving ones, anyway. I took Juniper's offered arm with a wan smile, clasping it in a legionary's salute before turning to the others.

General Bagram, the oldest veteran in the room, had visibly aged since I last him. The orc's fangs had yellowed and his eyes grown sunken, even if his back was still straight. Zola Osei looked better rested, and more confident for her solid performance during the Praesi campaign. She'd not be shy before, but not that assurance was less of a performance. Lady Abigail — of House Tanner, nowadays — still looked like she'd bot out of the tent given a halfway decent excuse, her eyes a little too wide kind of like a panicking horse, but her Third Army's reputation towered above that of all the others.

The last and freshest addition was an old man with a crooked nose and blue hair, still built like a bull for all that his hair had turned white. General Jeremiah Holt, formerly of the Thirteenth Legion and now instead of the Fifth Army. The First and Second, merged after the heavy losses at Hainaut, would remain that way for the rest of the war. It was better for Vivienne for them to start their own legacy, anyway. She'd get to grant them a cognomen herself and cement the close tie, like I had with the

Third. Besides, it would have left a bad taste in the mouth to hand this strange Hune's old rank.

"Where's Princess Vivienne?" I asked after the round of greetings.

I'd forgotten how very *red* Kilian's hair was, I'd admit. It was still as striking a feature as I'd found it at seventeen, even more so now that she wore it a little longer.

"The White Knight sent for her," Juniper told me. "There's been correspondence from the Kingdom Under."

I sucked in a breath.

"Good news?" I asked.

The tall orc looked at me with irritation.

"If we already knew," Marshal Juniper growled, "she'd be here, wouldn't she?"

I grinned, which startled her and so the grin only grew. I patted her arm, to her bafflement.

"Missed you too, Hellhound," I fondly said.

She cleared her throat.

"Yes, well, we have military business," Juniper stiffly replied.

She was already getting enough amused looks at her expense that I decided to spare her further teasing. I invited everyone to sit, helping myself to the cup of water that Aisha had poured me. I noted the taste of lemon, which I'd grown to like in Praes, and shot the Taghreb beauty her an appreciative look. I got a wink back. Ah, Aisha. She was still tempting even with Juniper at the table and a fresh reminder of the dangers of sharing a bed with a subordinate squeezed in between Pickler and Zola.

"So," I said, setting down my cup with a sharp rap. "Fill me in."

Given that this was a siege, who was to report first was evident enough no order need be given.

"We'll be finished surrounding Keter by tomorrow evening," Sapper-General Pickler said. "We started by making gate-fortes in front of the bridges, but we're planning a full encirclement."

She paused.

"Both circumvallation and contravallation," Pickler specified.

I could think of a few reasons why the Grand Alliance would bother to wall up our side of the 'moat' that was a chasm miles deep, but one in particular came to mind.

"They've been shooting at us, I take it," I stated.

"Ballistae and sorcery," Juniper said. "At night especially, though they change the hour to keep us on our toes."

"And we're handling the magic?" I asked.

Juniper slid a look Kilian's way, who brushed back a strand of red hair in a way that brought a faint pang of nostalgia before she cleared her throat and spoke up.

"Our wards are sufficient to handle the swarms," Senior Mage Kilian informed me, "and ritual attacks have been going sharply in our favour, at least on the defence."

I breathed in sharply.

"The Praesi made that much of a difference?" I incredulously asked.

"We estimate we might have as many as twice the number of mages as there are within Keter now that we have both the cabals and the Magisterium," Kilian replied. "It's still hard to guarantee that we can surpass the enemy in any single place when they concentrate their forces, but alongside Lady Nahiza Seriff we've set up proactive defences to get around that."

I cocked an eyebrow at the vagueness.

"We hit their rituals with ours before they can hit our troops," Kilian summed up, tone dry.

I swallowed a smile.

"Well done," I praised, meaning it.

Wouldn't work forever, since our mages got tired while Neshamah's didn't, but while we finished our siege works it was a solid defensive measure. When we went on the offensive, however, we'd have to pull mages off the defence and then things would get nasty. *But they'll get even worse than that if we don't have cadres of diabolists waiting for the demons we're sure to get dropped on us.*

"Siege preparations?" I asked the table at large.

"Bombardment of the southern and western gates has already begun," Juniper replied, "but we're having a hard time getting through the wards in the stone. We're holding off until we have a way to crack them."

"I'll put Akua on it," I absent-mindedly said.

Masego was better at wards, which was only natural given that his father had been the undisputed master of them in this lifetime, but I'd need him for something else. I needed to know how badly the Twilight Ways had been hit. It should just be a temporary shattering in the Kingdom of the Dead, I thought, but if it wasn't... I'd planned to imprison the Dead King in the Ways, after forcing on him the poisoned Crown of Autumn. I'd even picked out his keeper, someone I could trust to keep him forever contained. I grit my teeth. The latter part of that scheme was already in doubt, but if even the premise was buried I was in the deeps.

Had he known? Was that why he'd hit the Ways like this, even though he had to know that cornering heroes was putting the wind at their back? I had yet to break the sword I had ripped out of the Intercessor to restore Below's stories, keeping that blow as a card up my sleeve, but he had to know that when I did that counterstroke would cost him. It smelled of a mistake to me, and we were too late in the game for the King of Death to be making this kind of mistake. Something was up. *What's the angle here, Neshamah? What is it you're after?* I drifted back to the present, noticing that most the table was looking at me expectantly.

I'd probably been asked a question, I realized with faint embarrassment. Not acute enough for me to stop, though.

"Have there been any sorties?" I asked.

"Not since we've finished raising the gate forts," General Jeremiah replied, frowning. "Your Majesty, if you would-"

I raised my hand to silence him.

"Not *one*?" I insisted.

"No," General Bagram told me, leaning forward with clear interest. "All the fighting's been at our backs. The devils are chewing up the dead in the south, but every other skeleton's headed our way. We've been chasing off armies led by Scourges."

I drummed my fingers against the table.

"The earlier sorties," I slowly said. "Were any of them led by a Scourge?"

Blinks of surprise. Aisha was the first to answer.

"None," the Staff Tribune said. "There were other Revenants, but none of that calibre were reported."

Only Neshamah wouldn't send out all his best Revenants out in the field, he had to know he needed assets to handle the hero death squads we'd be throwing at him. *Meaning he's keeping them back on*

purpose, I thought. Trying to prevent our Named from catching one of them and putting them down early? No, he wouldn't be thinking that way at this point. Trading a single Scourge for ten Named was the kind of bargain he'd take with a smile, because there would be no more Named reinforcements. Every Named he killed was one less story, one less aspect we could use against him. If anything, he should be *eager* to bleed our numbers dry.

It didn't make military sense for him to hold back the Scourges, which meant he was moving according to another set of rules. And one I knew that, his intent was not so obscure after all. I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

"This is," I muttered, "a goddamn mud trap."

Neshamah had no intention at all of fighting us in a desperate last battle. He was just keeping us here for the two, three months he needed for his armies to finish destroying Procer and raising it. That was the real way Calernia lost, when he devoured the Principate and fielded an amount of undead beyond our capacity to beat. He'd keep throwing expendable armies at our back to prevent us from mounting a proper assault on Keter, but I suspected that if it came down to it he might actually cede his capital. Did he really *need* the Hellgate and the Serenity behind it, if he already had the rest of Calernia on a silver platter? They were conqueror's tools, and the conquest was already halfway done.

And beyond even that, a sudden fear assaulted me. We'd bet it all on ending the Dead King here to end his armies, but was he even here? No, I told myself, I was overcorrecting. I could still feel the thick knot of stories coming together in Keter, as if it were just out of my sight, and that couldn't be anyone else. *He wouldn't have risked it*, I decided. *Providence would have pointed us at him anyway, and there's nowhere he has better defences at than Keter.* And yet... I pushed back my chair, brusquely getting to my feet. The eyes of the highest-ranking military officers in Callow were all on me, showing varied scales of curiosity and wariness, so I kept my face calm.

I needed to talk with Hanno and soon. I had to be sure. *The heroes must have a way to check if the Hidden Horror's in the city*, I thought. Before that, though, we needed to adjust our basic strategy.

"Begin preparing for assaults as soon as tomorrow," I ordered. "Our timeline has changed."

Juniper's eyes met mine.

"Warlord?"

"The Dead King's trying to run out the hourglass on us, Juniper," I darkly said. "So let's remind him why he should know better than to take us so lightly."

—

The council Vivienne had gone to was done by the time I got there, but I got lucky. She'd stayed behind to have a drink and a talk with Hanno — Callowan diplomacy at its finest — which allowed me to catch the both of them together. The first thing I noticed when I laid eyes on them was that Vivienne was looking great. A little taller than when I'd last seen her, which smacked of Name given that it was late for her to get a growth spurt, and she'd gained some muscle too. Wearing armour and going around carrying a sword had added tone to her arms. I swept her into a hug before we even greeted each other, and if the way she tightly returned it was any indication she'd missed me too.

"Princess," I smiled, drawing back.

"Warden," she smiled back.

Only then did I turn my attention to Hanno, who'd be looking at us with tolerant amusement. He'd not changed much in the time since we'd last seen each other, at least not physically. But the power I could sense him, however tightly constrained, gave away that he'd gotten something back since our talks in Salia.

"You're Named again," I said.

"Not yet," Hanno of Arwad serenely replied, "but I believe it imminent."

"I'm happy for you," I told him, a little surprised to find I meant it.

He'd be a lot more useful to me as enforce of the Accords as a hero, of course, but it went further than that. If Hanno had gone through the doubts and all the reproaches I'd crammed down his throat when he tried to become Warden of the West, then he'd end up better off for it. He'd been struggling with hesitation and his own sense of what was just ever since the Seraphim had gone quiet, so if he'd found a measure of peace with his situation I could only be glad.

Besides, with serenity came strength and we'd need heroes of his calibre to take Keter.

Vivienne set aside the abominable brandy they'd been drinking to pour me a cup of wine, further reinforcing that she was the right choice for my successor, and I joined them at the collection of folding tables they'd been using as a single larger one. I raised an eyebrow at the high number of chairs, which Vivi caught.

"We had to give the Free Cities five seats," she explained, "since the Blood has five as well and giving less would have been an insult."

"So Procer got five as well," I said, rolling my eye. "Please tell me you didn't make a scene for us as well."

Hanno snorted.

"Two of those seats are empty in your name," he said. "One for the Warden, the other for the Queen of Callow."

I sent Vivienne an aggrieved look. She well knew my opinion on having too many people sitting in council – it was an inconvenience at best, trouble at worst. A conference was one thing, but a council needed to actually be able to hear itself talk.

"It does wonder for my leg room," the Princess told me, entirely unrepentant.

"I always knew the power would go to your head," I sighed. "I should have seen the signs, just look at the kind of people you've been rubbing elbows with."

Hanno shot me an interested look.

"She plays dice with Indrani," I told him. "No one of decent repute would ever subject themselves to that."

"Sidonia once told me she cheats most relentlessly," he noted.

"Eh," Vivienne said. "Her sleight of hand could use some work."

I smiled into my cup, drinking of the wine – some Proceran pale that'd likely get rare in the coming years, given that the undead had not been great for vineyards – and letting the warmth of it soothe my throat. I set it down with a dull thud, the sound getting their attention. They'd both known me long enough to recognize it as a signal for us turning to business.

"Got a question for you," I told Hanno. "I don't suppose there's a heroic Name trick that can be used to confirm the Dead King is in the city?"

He looked surprise, the plain but honest face slowly developing a frown.

"You're afraid he's abandoned his capital in favour of Procer," the dark-skinned hero said.

"It shouldn't be the case," I replied. "But we're not in a place where maybes are something to tolerate."

He nodded in understanding.

"There is no such trick," he said. "Providence can sometimes be bent to the purpose, but it is unfortunately unreliable when it comes to the Hidden Horror."

I grimaced. So much for that.

"However," Hanno continued, "I have reason to believe he is in Keter as of today. Antigone's opinion is that the ritual used against the Twilight Ways earlier was directed by his own hand."

Vivienne stirred.

"One of the Scourges is a mage," she pointed out.

"Not sure the Tumult could handle a ritual like this," I noted. "It's a gestalt soul, not a practitioner capable of this quality of magic."

"That is still," she said, "a maybe."

I grimaced. She wasn't wrong, I conceded as worried my lip.

"I'll see if Masego can find out," I said, reluctant as I was to heap more on his plate. "A godhead, at the very least, shouldn't be possible to hide."

Which also meant Neshamah knew we had the Crown of Autumn in our camp, but he couldn't know what we meant it *for*. With that matter as settled as it could be in the moment, I pivoted to the greater consideration.

"So," I said, "I hear we've got word from the Kingdom Under."

Both their faces were grim, a sight that had my stomach clenching.

"Two letters," Vivienne said. "A personal one from the Herald, carried by Seeker Balasi, and a formal one from the negotiator for the King Under the Mountain."

She'd phrased the letters as coming from two different people, which had a worrying implication.

"The Herald's no longer in charge of negotiations," I stated, and it was not a question.

"He has been replaced," Hanno said, "by a Lady Sybella. Who informs us that any promises he might have made were done so without the backing of the Kingdom Under."

"*Fuck*," I feelingly said.

I leaned back into the chair, closing my eye and tilting my head back. That wasn't quite the worst outcome for us, but it wasn't far either. The amount of soldiers we'd gathered for the siege of Keter was the single largest army – of the living, anyway – in the history of Calernia. Numbers were a little vague given the many moving parts and lack of records in some armies, but we should be somewhere between two hundred and two hundred fifty thousand souls in all. Cordelia had pulled off fucking miracles getting enough supplies to feed an army that size on the march from a crumbling Procer, and gone even further by getting enough to feed us for part of the siege, but it wouldn't last.

"How long do we have before we're out?" I asked.

"For water, two months," Vivienne said. "We've already started rationing food, and at this rate we have three to four weeks left."

"If the Dead King does not hit our supplies," Hanno reminded me.

We needed the dwarves. We had around two months before Procer was done and Calernia with it, but we wouldn't even last that long if the Kingdom Under didn't bring us food. I breathed out, forcing calm, and opened my eye.

"All right," I said. "Hit me with it. What does Lady Sybella want?"

"The original terms the Herald proposed," Hanno said. "With the addition of the city of Keter."

I thinly smiled.

"Does she also want Laure while she's at it?" I bit out.

"The phrasing of her missive was... strong, Cat," Vivienne said. "She's not interested in negotiating terms with us. We take it or leave it."

My fingers clenched. One of these days, we'd have to get around to teach the Kingdom Under a modicum of humility. They were the great empire of Calernia, but their hegemony had always relied on keeping out of surface affairs and playing nations against each other. Now that they were putting a knife at our common throat to extort us while the Dead King tried to kill us all, they'd outed themselves for the bandits they were. If we survived this fucking war, I expected that diplomatic efforts to squeeze the dwarves out of our affairs would find fertile grounds.

But first we had to survive.

"She has to know at least half of us would rather tell the dwarves to bite it and take our chances with Keter," I finally

said. "And that was before she further upped the price. She's overplaying her hand. Why?"

"The Herald's letter shed some light on the matter," Hanno said, jaw locked tight. "He tells us that the Kingdom Under has learned of the ealamal's existence."

I blinked. Yeah, hard to keep that under wraps when it was getting brought here for the siege. What would that change – no, he couldn't *possibly* mean that.

"You can't be serious," I quietly said. "They actually *want* us to use it?"

"The mathematics are simple, from where they're standing," Vivienne ruefully said. "Either we give them everything they want and they lend a hand, or we blow them off and lose to the dead without them. Then, in our despair..."

"They think we'll blow ourselves to the Hells and the Dead King with us," I completed.

"Not so much to the Hells," Hanno said, "but that is the essence of it. They expect the ealamal to empty large swaths of western Calernia, leaving the lands ripe for the taking."

Why bother negotiating with the humans, I thought, when they might do you the courtesy of emptying their own lands so you could take them? And since the ealamal was unlikely to reach as far as southern Procer, they could still take the cities they'd asked for by force with the populations intact afterwards. Gods, with the continent so ravaged some might even be grateful for the protection.

"That's one of the vilest plans I've ever heard," I said. "And I have heard *vile* plans, Hanno, even speaking a few myself."

"It is unconscionable," the dark-skinned man agreed. "The Herald of the Deeps agrees, hence his warning. He also reiterates his promise that he will do all he can."

I almost rolled my eye at that, refraining only for Hanno's sake. So far all the Herald had done was try to roll us when we were vulnerable and then fail to be of any use when turning his cloak. I'd spare a speck of gratitude for the warning, but wasn't putting a lot of hope in the dwarf. He'd done nothing to warrant it and much to do otherwise. The room fell silent and I began drumming my fingers against the table, lost in thought. Eventually, though, I had to speak up.

"I don't see a way out of this," I quietly admitted. "Our bet was that the Herald would come through, and it appears we've lost it."

"With the rationing we still have three weeks," Vivienne said, but we both knew otherwise.

It would hardly be a victory to take Keter within that time, because our armies would likely be fucked anyways: we couldn't forage in the Kingdom of the Dead, which mean that to eat we'd have to march *back*. To Procer or Serolen, but both were weeks away. Weeks where hundreds of thousands of soldiers would be expected to march with empty stomach. They'd die, we all knew. They'd die in droves, and darks things would be done as we grew desperate to survive. Even if we won, I realized, even if we got the Dead King, we might still lose. Not because of Gods or sorcery or a story, but because we were too far out in enemy territory without a supply line and our diplomatic efforts had failed.

"The cause is not lost," Hanno said, unruffled. "Being cornered with everything on the line lends us strength enough to overcome the impossible."

He paused, brown eyes moving to me.

"And that sword at your hip is not a sword at all, Catherine, unless I'm gravely mistaken."

People didn't actually tend to notice the sword at all unless it was pointed out to them, even Named, but then Hanno's name hadn't been picked out of a hat when he became the Sword of Judgement. But Vivienne, from the half-hidden startlement on her face, had not noticed it until just now. I unclasped the sheath from my belt, a beautiful wooden piece carved and painted by an artisan of the Ysengral Sigil that displayed the northern constellations on moonless night, and slid out the blade. It didn't look like much, really. Just a smooth steel arming sword that lacked a crossguard, its edge wickedly sharp to even a casual eye but otherwise unremarkable.

It was only fitting, I supposed, that Below's stories would take the form of a double-edged blade without a guard. Sometime my Gods had a halfway decent sense of humour

"No," I agreed, "it's a little more than that."

"You can free the stories at any time, then," Hanno said. "And it might not be as simple as sealing his doom in a single stroke, but..."

"It'll tip the balance," I finished.

It'd hurt him. That was the reason behind the strategy I'd begun sniffing out today, after all: Neshamah was afraid of the stories coming back. That was why the only armies fighting the Grand Alliance were coming from outside the city, why they were led by

Scourges and why he was hiding behind his walls. It was even why he'd shattered the Twilight Ways only after the Firstborn had crossed: he was religiously avoiding direct confrontation. Because he knew the moment it was him against us, everything on the line, I'd break the sword and the result would not be a finger on the balance so much as a hand around his throat.

We were in deeps, I wouldn't deny that, but so was *he*. And that meant we were still in this war.

"Masego called it the Book of Some Things, the other one," Vivienne said.

"Not my choice," I defended. "He insisted that since he'd made the artefact he should get to name it."

"I thought the name rather charming, actually," Hanno smiled.

Ugh, he would. I shared a look with the other Callowan in the room.

"So what are you calling this one, then?" Vivienne asked.

I raised up the blade, noticing it did not gleam even under candlelight – as if it refused to reflect light entirely – and studied it, then smiled. It'd be a shame not to keep to the naming scheme now that Hierophant had started it, since it was too late to take back anyway.

"I'm rather partial," I replied, "to the 'Sword of the Rest'."

elanevensong

Thank you for the chapter!

[*Droughtbringer*](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

[*Liliet*](#)

Damn, congratulations to the people who called it.

The sword's name, I mean.

Frivolous

shikkarasu – 10 denarii to you. You were right, the Sword of Other Things is an arming sword.

Frivolous

Also thanks very much EE for describing the Sword for us. Very informative.

Quote: It was only fitting, I supposed, that Below's stories would take the form of a double-edged blade without a guard. Sometime my Gods had a halfway decent sense of humour

Quote: I raised up the blade, noticing it did not gleam even under candlelight – as if it refused to reflect light entirely

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Inswordmative, if you will.

shikkarasu

Thank the Gods; I must still be 25 in the hole from all my *other* bets.

Tenthyr

I deeply desire Catherine to at least stab a Scourge to re-death with the Sword of the Rest...

dadycoool

So, is there a Sword of the Best that I don't know about? It's always fun to watch the gears turn in her head. Such a meta schemer.

[Hargabga](#)

Also Sword of the Test and Sword of the Pest.

dadycoool

Hm, Best, maybe East, Fest for holidays, Hest for stand-ins, Jest for the court fools, Lest for the soothsayers and oracles, Nest for the birds, you mentioned Pest, Quest for adventurers, you mentioned Test, Vest for the fashionable, West, someone else mentioned Zest.

Anyway, I figured it was a "One for the best, and another for all the rest" kind of thing.

Reaper

Sword of the Pest was Irritant's sword

D. D.

"Book of Some Things"

"Sword of the Rest"

[onedollargum](#)

I really like that name. Some Things and The Rest.

M0och123

Lest we forget the sword of zest

dadycoool

Oh, that's the pun. OK.

shikkarasu

The rest of the stories, wrested from the bard, to lay her enemies to rest. Oh, Cat, didn't you tell us you dislike puns? You beautiful liar, you.

RoflCat

After thinking about it, I think the name is more fitting than I thought at first.

'some things' might be generalizing but it implies it's there, that the speaker is thinking of specific group at least. While 'the rest' has this dismissive, uncaring sound to to what they're referring to.

Which I find rather fitting to how Above and Below operates with regards to their Named.

Above pick and choose their Heroes, while Below take in anyone willing, including those rejected by Above (rip Apostate)

SpeckofStardust

So the dead king is in a holding pattern because he scared of a story fight where he is really really in a bad spot, the kingdom under is the problem for the age of order, with the elves and giants being the only 2 powers not involved in the current crap storm.

So where's the twist to shake the current status that bard will be betting on?

Darkening

I'm expecting the herald to show up at the head of an army of deed seekers and disaffected dwarves at some point.

Santiago A Duarte

That's not really how armies work, though. Especially when you're talking about mercenaries and adventurers spread out beneath an entire continent and gathering them without the

approval of a central government. You simply can't do that and get to where you want to go within three weeks. If Herald had started the process six months ago, sure, but then it would have been mentioned in the letter

[Liliet](#)

Not necessarily! Mentioned i mean.

asazernik

Especially given he knows a bit of Namelore, and a surprise reinforcement is more apt to arrive at just the right time.

Mirror Night

Well also DK is sweeping across the land of Procer. He just needs to not lose here. He doesn't have to win just wait about 2-3 months or so and his forces elsewhere will win. But yes Cat having the Sword of Villainous Stories prevents him from making a big move and over committing.

[egregiousmiscellany](#)

There are ostensibly Good people in the Serenity. DK can probably try flipping the good/evil dichotomy.

Cicero

That choice on the part of the dwarves is blood feud level of insult.

I'd seriously consider killing all the dwarven envoys and sending back their heads as answer.

What does it matter that it will enrage the dwarves, they've already sided with the Lich King, what more can they do. It's war to destruction now.

SpeckofStardust

Now its not that bad.

But they did basically decide to sit this one out because they know that the dead king will lose and best case it be due to a suicide attack by the surface nations.

But ya the kingdom under is 100% going to be the problem for the next age to deal with.

letouriste

Wasn't Bagram dead?

Yep, Bagram's Dead

Yes, Bagram is dead, though it was only reported to us by Cat as narrator as a casualty report, it didn't play out in the text itself

Juff

Typo Thread:

Queen to not, (is this right? should it be "naught")
be shy > been shy
but not that > but now that
bot out > bolt out
wide kind > wide, kind
this strange > this stranger
beauty her > beauty
gate-fortes > gate-forts
this lifetime > his lifetime
And one I > And once I
of Name given > of a Name, given
sense him, > sense in him,
enforce of > enforcer of
Hanno had gone through (should be more like "overcome")
does wonder > does wonders
looked surprise, > looked surprised,
as worried > as I worried
to teach the > to teaching the
empty stomach > empty stomachs
sense of humour (missing fullstop)

ChillyPepper

Not sure if it's my English being bad or what, but there is the bit with Jeremiah having blue hair, but then says its white? (kinda confusing me a bit, gotta admit)

Earl of Purple

It should be eyes, not hair. He has blue eyes.

Reader in the Night

Could be because "blue hair" is sometimes used as a synonym of grey or silver hair.

Agent J

Could be he went white and then dyed it blue. That's my new headcanon anyway.

Cat feels oddly zen in this chapter, I feel like she is becoming more and more like the bard and the dead king just in her own way or at least something similar to them.

*arcanavita*15

I am hyped for Cats other two aspects, and maybe expansion on Silence.

ChillyPepper

Is that a red flag on Kilian, she gonna die, ain't she?

Dome Zasrekh

Or (hopefully) she will help break the ice on Cat's love life. She's still sooo bad at this, she needs help!

ninegardens

The flag is red only in the most literal interpretation.

GluestickGenius

Nah, that's her hair. Easy to confuse, however.

frederic

I'm curious. Why do the dwarves assume that the ealamal will not affect them as much, or more, than the surface if it is used? Usually area of effect is a sphere, not a surface-following circle.

M0och123

That's a good point, Fireball is a 20ft radius sphere after all.

dadycool

So when I cast it in a tavern, I'm also vaporizing the people upstairs?

Miles

Only if your xM is paying attention, which is a big ask.

[Liliet](#)

The ceiling is in the way, and has its own HP.

Presumably the dwarves expect the, well, ground to keep them safe.

(The GA's calculations back in the Arsenal did account for the Whitecaps serving as an obstacle to the spread)

Eris

Pretty sure it has been established that the Ealamal wouldn't go over the Whitecaps, i.e. sufficient amounts of earth serve as an "insulator" of sorts

Earl of Purple

It's slowed down by solid rock, it's why Callow and Praes survive. The Whitecaps get in the way and get vaporised. Plus the main dwarf cities are further south than this, so it's only recently settled territory bearing the brunt.

shikkarasu

I'd love to know why the dwarves are so certain that no-one will sneak the ealamal down into the deeps and fire it there. A half mad Hero, Villain, or just the last member of House Insurgent. Dial it up to 11, forget about surviving and just blast them all.

Do. Not. Piss. Off. Callow. What was it that one into quote said? If you steal an apple from a Callowan farmer you can expect their grandchild to find yours 50 years later on the other side of Calernia, punch them in the eye, and steal 3 apples on their way out?

mindsword2

Chapter 47: And Justice For All

"The question of who the most vindictive people of Calernia are has long been debated. Some say it is the Arlesites, who will duel to the death over the use of the wrong adjective in a verse. Others say it is those of the Free Cities, where the moving of a border by half a mile will spawn a war lasting three generations. Others yet say it is the Praesi, who indulge in political assassination the way other nations enjoy a cup of good wine. I would humbly put forward, however, that the answer is the people of Callow. Steal an apple from a farmer of the Kingdom and fifty years later his grandson will find yours on the other side of the continent, sock him in the eye and take three apples back." – Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

RoflCat

And the story of them making suicidal push into Procer (or was it Praes?) to the point the ruler at the time had to make massive remunerations just to get them to go away.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I think you're thinking of the incident that taught Mercantis not to fuck with Callow, but the point stands regardless.

Daniel E

Credit to the author for creating the first instance of Dwarves that I dislike. The drunken work-a-holics of Dwarf Fortress, the honorable misfits of Tolkien, even the soccer hooligans of Warhammer. All great Dwarves. But these guys take 'greedy jerks' to a whole new level.

jack

I was expecting "The Double Edged Sword"

I'm also expecting the Dead King to try to steal it from her. Probably successfully.

When have any of Cat's plans ever worked out when he was involved?

She'd probably be better off breaking it now, before she loses the chance.

[308924810a](#)

Who is this and what has she done to our pun-hating Catherine? What with sword of the rest being used in both the sense of a sword containing the remainder, and a sword which brings an end to activity(either of the dead king, or of stories).

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has always had her moments of slipping up in her pun hatred...

Gideon

And now, after weeks of binging, I am finally caught up to present. What a wonderful ride.

DC

Between Anaraxes and Hanno, I wonder if this is going towards Judgment being tempered to a safe level before the weapon is invoked

Alien4ngel

'The sword that is not a sword, but a promise...'
But I can't recall the chapter.

Darkening

You thinking of the staff that was a sword that was a prayer?

ruduen

So, the dwarven villains have unshakably strong positions while the dwarven hero is desperately trying to keep his vow and make things better.

Will breaking the sword also have an impact on dwarven stories? The comeuppance on that side is also liable to be swift and harsh, if dwarven stories are anything like the stories we've seen.

Chapter 51: Arsenal

"Thirty-three: it doesn't matter how good the sword is, if it talks put it back where you found it. Yes, even if it lets you beat your nemesis. They probably thought their talking sword was a good idea too and look where that got them."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Indrani was carving away at the table when I found her, sprawled under it.

"I may have to call the guards," I mused out loud, taking off my riding gloves, "there appears to be some kind of table goblin in my tent."

I got a scoff in answer and she popped out her head long enough to roll her eyes at me.

"Please," Archer replied. "I'm at least the height of two table goblins."

She retreated under the table, steel rasping against wood as she shaved away at a detail, and when she spoke up again I could hear the goddamn grin in her voice.

"Unlike some," she airily added.

"That's treason, it is," I gravely replied.

"This is why we call you Sanguinia behind your back, you know," Indrani informed me.

"She was a visionary ahead of her time," I defended.

Dread Empress Sanguinia II had outlawed being taller than her in the final – relatively more – despotic years of reign, which was a sensible enough decree. She'd also outlawed cats for some reason, which I honestly I could take or leave. I unclasped my sheath, set it on the table and leaned against it to dip under and at least have a look at her face. What I got instead was pulled by the collar followed by warm lips against mine, with a hungry little nip at the end that had me lingering for more. Must have stayed there a while, because I was still enjoying myself when someone cleared their throat behind me. I dipped back out, a little out of breath, and found Vivienne eyeing me impatiently.

"Vivs," Indrani drawled, still under the table, "I know you want in on this real bad, but wait for your turn."

The Princess's blue-grey eyes considered me, then moved to Indrani's half-visible body.

"I could do better," Vivienne shrugged.

"Who's she talking about?" 'Drani asked from under the table.

"Both," she replied in my stead, not hesitating for a moment.

"Hey," I protested. "I got stabbed in Serolen and it still kind of stung less than that."

"You should probably stop making plans that have a step where you get stabbed, you know," Indrani advised me. "I'm no expert, but it does seem like a flaw in your plan-making process."

"You can't ask her that, Indrani," Vivienne chided. "You know it's what she always uses when she's missing a step. Like, don't know how to convince that princess?"

"Get stabbed," Archer chortled, the filthy traitor. "Don't know how to beat that hero?"

"Get stabbed," Vivienne completed, meeting my eye with a look of smug satisfaction.

I glared back. We both knew Indrani was going to worry that joke like a fucking bone for at least a year now, which Vivienne had inflicted on me purely as her long price for forcing her to see what she'd walked in on.

"Why did I even miss you people?" I asked.

My eye narrowed.

"And it's my goddamn tent you know," I told Vivienne. "Don't think I won't find Arthur some nice noble boy and crown his ass instead, Dartwick."

"I have no idea what you might be referring to," the Princess smilingly lied. "I only came to inform you that we've talks to wrap up with Prince Otto at Evening Bell."

I blinked in surprise.

"About..." I leadingly said.

"Yes," she confirmed.

"I didn't think you'd get it done this quickly, given the circumstances," I admitted. "Well done."

"Do not overpraise me," she demurred, lips quirking anyway. "Reitzenberg proved a remarkably straightforward man to deal with even before Prince Frederic joined his name to the venture."

The Kingfisher Prince was in as well? No, of course he was. That'd always been the most admirable thing about Frederic Goethal: he always tried to do what he thought was right, whether or not it was convenient for everyone else. I'd cursed him for that at the Arsenal, when he'd refused to give Cordelia and I our easy way out of the situation with the Red Axe, but it wouldn't do to forget that most of time it was a boon that the Prince of Brus went out of his way to be a good man.

"I'll be there," I said, then paused. "And get Pickler to come as well, would you?"

I was fixed with a steady look.

"As is she fond of telling me," Vivienne said, "she is busy enough for five of her, which sadly Masego has not yet figured out how to make because as usual sorcery is useless."

"Make her come anyway," I said, and it was not a suggestion this time.

She nodded. Good. I'd meant it, when in Serolen I'd told Cordelia I intended to repay every drop of my debt to the people that'd raised me up. And Pickler had been in that room, the first time I strayed from Black and Malicia's plan to make something of my own. The first time I committed treason to their cause for fidelity to my own. She'd argued, she'd been afraid, but in the end she had sworn.

And I had not forgotten.

"I've got correspondence that could use your attention, if you have the time," Vivienne said.

Barely two hours into camp and already I had a dozen duties pulling me in different directions. Serolen, for all the dangers there, had been strikingly less demanding in that regard. A

reminder that I was not a figurehead or a symbol here, that I had made myself an integral part of the Grand Alliance and its policies.

"Can't," I replied. "Hanno suggested I have a look at something the Blessed Artificer has been cooking up."

I'd had a look at it back in Salia and been impressed by the power of what she'd created, but when the Sword of Judgment called something 'significantly dangerous' we were dealing with another league. Adanna of Smyrna had been eager to tell me that Masego wasn't the only one who improved his craft through conflict, and though I couldn't think of an enemy she'd have fought in my absence that would kick her up a notch she *had* been in charge of guarding the Crown of Autumn.

"I'm not certain where she is," Vivienne said, heading off my question before I asked it. "I'll put the phalanges on finding out."

I nodded in thanks, rolling my shoulder.

"Might go have a talk with the Mirror Knight first, then," I said. "They can reach me there."

That had been Hanno's other suggestion, as it happened. Christophe de Pavanie had been chosen to be the Severance's bearer, and though I didn't believe for a moment that the sword we'd made out of Saint's aspect would be enough to do in the Dead King there was no denying he'd play a key role in how we'd pull down Keter's roof on his head. To have a look at him as the Warden, feel out the stories he was bound to, was only sensible.

"Won't need to," Indrani said, dragging herself out from under the table.

She set down her knife on the carved wood, but now that I had my first good look at her since returning my eye was looking beyond flesh. I went still, sharpening my focus. There'd been the faintest trace of the story before I left, but it had since set in stone. My Name pulsed in my veins as I followed the thread, trying to make out the timing but finding it too elusive to narrow down beyond 'soon'. Still, there was no denying it: she'd be getting a visit. And following that chord I could get a glimpse at the knot to come, the makings of the fight, and that gave me a look at the people who'd be fighting. Some of which I'd not been sure would be involved. *So you'll come, after all*, I thought with satisfaction.

Good. It meant I still had one card up my sleeve that not even Neshamah would see coming.

"Cat?" Indrani asked.

I shook my head.

"Looking at your Name," I told her. "Nothing to worry about."

She must already suspect, I thought, that though she was still the Archer she was now reaching for another Name entirely. Indrani shrugged.

"Sure," she dismissed. "Like I was saying, I know where the Artificer is. She's at the Bitter Blacksmith's forge, out in the Proceran camp."

"Huh," I replied. "What for?"

"Making a sword with her," Indrani said. "At least that's the word around the camps."

I'd start there, then, I mused. Definitely not because I was putting off talking with the Mirror Knight as long as I could.

"Intriguing," I mused. "I'll have a look, then."

"And don't stay to drink after your talks for too long," Archer instructed me.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"You're putting Masego to work already, so you'll be busy making it up to me," Indrani informed me.

I knew that glimmer in her eyes well, and it usually heralded a good time. I cleared my throat.

"Seems only fair," I conceded.

She leaned in to kiss me again, but I did notice that in the moment before that she shot a smug grin at Vivienne. Indrani, I could not help to notice before I got pleasantly distracted, still had a knack for coming out of a conversation the only winner and at everyone else's expense.

—

Of the two Bitter Blacksmiths, I was understandably more familiar with the villain. I did know a few things, though, from reports and the short few conversations we'd had in person. Helmgard Bauerlein, elder of the estranged siblings, was not a mage. And unlike her brother she did not work enchantments into steel, or even Light for that matter. What she had was a supernatural knack for handling exotic materials, which was why of the two she'd been the one chosen to head to the Arsenal and work on the creation of the Severance. She'd also slept with the Hunted Magician while there, which while amusing gossip didn't do much to tell me about the kind of woman she was.

Aside from one with poor taste in lovers.

Pulling at her threads as I approached her smithy, I got a much closer look at the stories that drove the heart of her. Her chords were all intertwined with her brother's, dozens of knots ahead where they'd end up killing each other but a short length away, and it all went back to a pair of moments. A teacher – parent also, maybe, but it was hard to tell – had given them a lesson that'd marked them. Something along the lines of 'the smith makes the blade', which they had understood very differently. Something they'd done had then led to the death of their teacher, which they bitterly blame each other for.

It'd hardened their differences into philosophies I could make out pretty clearly. Helmut Bauerlein, the brother, now made 'blades only he could make'. His Name allowed him to craft superbly nuanced enchantments, sorcery-wrought steel like the Lycaonese had not seen in generations. Helmgard, instead, had learned that a smith could 'make a blade out of anything'. Her path was pure mundane skill, her Name simply allowing her to make blades out of anything in Creation.

It had me curious as to why the Bitter Blacksmith would want or need the Blessed Artificer's help in making a sword, though the first answer I got when I finally found the smithy had no relation to either woman. Outside the small stone house whose chimney was letting out column of white smoke, a young man was sitting around with all the awkward restlessness so common in those of that age. Arthur Foundling, lately the Knight Errant, was trying to look casual leaning against the wall when he very clearly felt like pacing. I hummed, limping in his direction, and looked deeper.

There was a chord here, binding him to someone inside the smithy. Or *something*, maybe. Wasn't good enough at reading the differences to tell yet.

The Knight Errant straightened up out of his slouch the moment he noticed me, blue eyes widening in surprise. He had what almost looked like a spasm when he couldn't seem to decide whether he should salute or bow, settling into a gesture that tried to be both and fell short of either.

"Arthur," I greeted him. "Or should that be Sir Arthur, these days?"

"I have not been knighted as one of the Broken Bells," the dark-haired boys seriously replied.

I almost snorted. It was true I'd never taken back my order to Brandon Talbot that nobody was to knight him, but you might say someone had gone above my head for that. Ugh, pun not intended.

"And Hanno's not a lord," I said. "Yet people went as far as calling him a prince, not so long ago."

For that matter, I seriously doubted Hanno of Arwad had actually ever been formally knighted by anyone. Well, anyone mortal anyway. I wasn't sure I wanted to recognize the Choir of Judgment's ability to make knights, which made it all the more fortunate I had someone in my corner arguing the matter. As far as I knew, Anaxares the Diplomat was still up there making a racket. Gods bless the madman, at least as many as cursed him.

"I am not Hanno of Arwad," the Knight Errant firmly said. "And I'll not deny my Name, but neither will I claim a title I do not hold."

I found myself smiling. *What a brat*, I thought, not entirely without fondness. I'd have to see about getting him knighted properly, then: we'd look like right fools if he went around having Knight in his Name with no mundane title matching it.

"I'm sure something must be in the works," I replied, remaining vague.

I shot a glance at the closed door of the smithy, the faint sound of metal being hammered coming from the inside.

"I take it it's your sword getting forged in there?" I asked.

He looked faintly embarrassed.

"I was gifted star metal by a friend for my transition from Squire and asked the Blacksmith to make a blade of it," Arthur admitted. "It proved to be more difficult an undertaking than I'd expected."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Must be," I said, "if the Blessed Artificer was pulled in for it."

He nodded, seeming unsurprised I knew of that.

"They-"

He was interested by a shiver in the air and a flash of Light searing at the threshold under the door. Gods, I would have felt that even without my Name senses. The smoke billowing out the chimney turned even paler, as if ivory had been made into wisps and released towards the sky. And now I knew why Adanna of Smyrna was here.

"She's heating the furnace with Light," I stated.

"The Blade of Mercy volunteered for the work," Arthur said, "but the Blacksmith says the quantity must be perfectly even throughout and only the Artificer's artefacts can easily accomplish that for long enough."

I let out a low whistle.

"That's not the kind of star metal you can buy in markets," I said. "I've seen blades made of the stuff before and they don't need anywhere near that much work to be made."

They were popular with nobles for their beauty and lightness relative to average steel, but there was nothing particularly special about them otherwise – just that the ore had fallen from the sky. Some old legends insisted they were a bane to devils and demons, but then there were old legends about like a hundred different materials doing that. In my experiences with their kind, the stabbing tended to be more than important than what you stabbed them *with*.

"It isn't," the Knight Errant confessed. "The Page says it was taken from the stars that fell over Hainaut, sold to him by a fantassin that near burned his hand off taking the stone."

I went still.

"That," I slowly said, "is one Hell of a gift."

A piece of Tariq's last act, the pilgrim's star called down on the Enemy. My eye returned to the pale smoke drifting up. No wonder it had taken Light to be forged. When the Grey Pilgrim had cast it down, it had burned so bright in the sky it'd been blinding.

"It is," Arthur quietly replied. "Gaetan is... perplexing."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"He's an intolerable arse most of the time," the Knight Errant elaborated at my unspoken prompting, "but sometimes he just has these surges of gallantry. He'll take the lash for someone else or toss away riches like they're nothing. It'd hard to square together."

"The first time I met Archer, she sucker-punched me when I could barely walk and after she strutted about like she'd won a prize," I drily told him. "There's hardly anyone I trust more now, though."

"I *wish* he was more like Lady Archer," Arthur muttered, which was honestly one of the harshest things I'd heard said about someone in quite a while.

"The good doesn't wash out the bad," I told him. "No more than the bad washes out the good. It's on you to decide what part matters most."

He sighed.

"Jury's still out," the dark-haired boy decided. "But it really was a princely gift."

"No lack of princes, on this side of the Whitecaps," I easily replied.

That got a smile out of him, as digs at Procer tended to with my countrymen, but the amusement was soon gone and replaced by something more complex. Wariness, guilt? Something else, too.

"You're sitting on something," I noted.

He hesitated, though when I cocked an eyebrow he gave in.

"I thought you'd be angry," the Errant Knight said.

"About?"

He squared his shoulders, and his courage along with it.

"In the Tower, I fought against your plot," Arthur said. "The one to kill the Empress."

There was an implicit accusation I didn't even bother to deny. I had very much been after Malicia's head that day. And though she was only Alaya these days, I'd not forgotten or forgiven the Night of Knives and all that came afterwards.

One day the time my father had bought her would run out, and I would come to collect.

"You weren't brought in on the plan," I said. "You disobeyed no orders by fighting it."

"I would have anyway," the hero said, sounding more like a boy confession than a defiant champion of Above.

I studied him, leaning on my staff of yew.

"I would have anyway," Arthur repeated, "and so part of me feels like I should apologize."

I cocked my head to the side.

"Did you think on the consequences, before you acted?"

He sharply nodded.

"Do you regret the decision you made?"

"I don't," the Knight Errant replied, and this time there was an ember of defiance.

"Then don't apologize," I said. "It's a waste of words."

I could no longer hear hammering from inside, even when I pricked my ear, only the hiss of vapour. Quenching the blade, were they? Nearly done. My eye found the boy's.

"The first lesson my father ever taught me," I said, "was a question."

My fingers clenched around the haft of dead wood, thinking of the knife I still had strapped against my arm.

"Do you know," I asked, "what sets apart people who have a Role from people who don't?"

Arthur shook his head.

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

I met his eyes.

"Do you believe you've done the right thing, Arthur Foundling?"

His jaw clenched.

"Yes," the Knight Errant replied.

"Never apologize for that," I told him. "When all's said and done, it's the only thing you get to keep."

And I hardly needed to look, to see the chord binding us. Not a teacher and an apprentice, but not entirely like it either. You could learn from people without being seconded to them. I'd learned from Tariq, as both a foe and a friend. I could do worse as a role to play than the Grey Pilgrim, only with more of the grey and less of the pilgrim. The moment hung between us, fragile, and when the door to the smithy creaked open it ended. I glanced at Helmgard Bauerleins' surprised face and smiled.

"Blacksmith," I said.

"Lady Warden," she replied, her Alamans heavily accented. "This is a surprise."

She looked wary. Wondering if I'd come to paw at her work, perhaps.

"I came looking for the Blessed Artificer," I said. "Found a little more than that."

"And finding's half of your queenship, allegedly," Adanna of Smyrna cut in, peeking out the door.

The golden eyes behind those spectacles were as startling as ever, that shade so rarely seen outside the Wasteland. The two women were heavily garbed in leather, as was only sensible in a forge.

"We are done, Arthur," the Bitter Blacksmith said, addressing him directly. "Come have a look."

She paused, hesitated.

"You as well, Your Excellency, if you wish," she added.

Not exactly enthusiastic, I noted, but she was staying polite. I was curious enough to enter anyway. There was a strange scent in the air when I entered after Arthur, almost like incense, but I paid it little mind. As the three heroes crowded around the anvil where the blade had been placed I hung back, leaning against the wall, though for all my discretion I availed myself plenty of looking. It was, I'd admit, one of the most exquisite swords I had ever seen. It wasn't finished yet, neither the guard nor the pommel mounted, but the simple length was strikingly beautiful already.

I'd never seen the like of that metal before: it seemed as if it'd been made of pale smoke, the turns of it fuming down the edge. When you looked at it from the corner of your eye, it gave the illusion that the smoke was still billowing. I knew better than to touch it, cooled or not, and so stayed back as the Errant Knight ran his finger down the length.

"It's gorgeous," Arthur quietly said, sounding choked up. "Thank you."

The Bitter Blacksmith gently smiled, a strange sight on such a rough face.

"You brought me the materials," Helmgard Bauerlein said. "All I gave you is time and skill, and for a hero I'll always offer those freely."

Somehow I doubted her brother would be quite so generous with Below's champions, I silently noted. Or even that he'd sell them much of anything, when instead he could spend the rest of his life making legacy swords for wealthy nobles and charging them through the nose for it.

"It's good work," the Blesser Artificer said, almost grudging.

She paused.

"No, it's a masterwork," she continued, shaking her head. "That is no simple blade, Arthur. It will seek out deeds, and before it begins that journey it deserves a name."

The invitation was clear, but Arthur hesitated. I could understand why: it was a choice that'd likely have consequences rippling out beyond his lifetime. At the heart of that blade, of this moment, I could feel a nascent story. Adanna had told it true: it was blade that would seek deeds.

"A sword like that," the Knight Errant said, "we call it a legacy blade, back home. The kind you pass down a family line."

The dark-haired boy smiled, more in sorrow than joy.

"Only I'm an orphan, see," Arthur Foundling told them. "Just one from a house of a thousand foundlings, all of them my brothers and sisters. And this blade is to be ours, our legacy of foundlings, then it's not mine to name."

Blue eyes turned to me.

"There's already a head to our house," the orphan quietly said.

My throat caught. The face of both heroines grew cold as they looked at me, but I didn't care for them at all. It was the other Foundling I looked at, and his gaze was unwavering. His decision had been made and he would not take it back. I pushed off the wall, Mantle of Woe whispering on the floor behind me as my staff rapped against the wood. Feeling the air thicken with Creation's attention, I leaned over the blade and dared to touch it. It was nearly burning to touch, already no friend of mine, but it awaited a name nonetheless.

I had been given the right, or perhaps the burden.

I looked at the metal like smoke and thought of that night far to the south, when an old man had given everything up as a prayer to a better tomorrow. I'd not loved Tariq Fleetfoot, but I had come to respect in him a way I respected very few people. And now this piece of the star he called down to save us all, the Pilgrim's Star he had put out of the sky, had come to be forged into a blade. There could only be, I thought, one name for this.

"Peregrine," I quietly said. "Its name is **Peregrine**."

Creation sighed, as if letting out a breath it'd held in, and all the weight that had been pressing down on us faded. I withdrew my fingers before they could be burned, somehow knowing it was about to bite. I found the faces of the three of them hard to read, but it did not matter. I was done here, and Adanna felt as much.

"You asked for me, Warden?" she said.

"Hanno tells me I should have a look at your work," I said.

She nodded, visibly pleased.

"I will show you to my workshop, then," Adanna said.

I nodded my goodbye to the Blacksmith, who returned it, and only slowed on my way out when I passed by Arthur – who was still staring at the sword, fascinated.

"Tariq Fleetfoot spent his life trying to make a better world," I said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "If you're going to wield a piece of his light, then do him proud."

Withdrawing my hand, I stepped out of the warm smithy and left silence behind me.

—

The Blessed Artificer's workshop was cramped and overfull, like she'd crammed two wagons' worth of goods in a single stall. There were two dozen different lengths of wood I could hardly tell apart, stones ranging from pebbles to emeralds and enough tools to arm three generations of masons and carpenters. Maybe the only place in there that didn't look like it was waiting on the excuse of a stiff wind to fall on me was the large carving table in the middle, which by the looks of the dirty plates and half-full glasses was also where Adanna ate most days.

She tried to put those away discreetly, and in an act of mercy I pretended not to notice.

What lay on that table, though, commanded my attention and refused to release it. It recognized the bare bones of the artefact, because I'd once seen in Salia: a wooden pillar half a foot wide and seven long, crisscrossed by rods of copper. The carvings on the surface had been sanded off, replaced instead by twisting sequences of glyphs that burned my eye to look at, and something... more had been added. Inside, maybe? I limped closer to the pillar, ignoring the discomfort of standing so near something that gave off Light like it was some kind of preachy handmade sun, and had a look at the bottom.

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. There was a copper sheath, but it did not cover the sight of the bottom of a stone sculpture that'd been inserted inside the pillar. She must have hollowed it out, carefully enough she didn't touch the copper rods all the while, and even more carefully inserted the sculpture. I tried to grasp the nature of that sculpture with my Name's senses, but immediately stepped back with a hiss of pain.

"Fucking Hells," I quietly said.

"It has been improved, as you can see," the Blessed Artificer smugly said.

"Improved?" I disbelievingly replied. "That thing is a..."

I grimaced.

"Well, not quite a godhead but a passing imitation at least," I said. "But no, that's not what you were actually trying to make is it?"

I paused, golden eyes familiar and yet not fixed on me.

"You made an angel," I said. "A one-heartbeat angel."

It'd last only for that heartbeat and then be spent, but that was about the strength I could feel in that thing. And considering it was giving me a headache to feel it out I wasn't even sure whether or I was going too low.

"Not an inapt way to put it," Adanna mused. "Though I have been calling it the Ram."

My eye narrowed.

"You want to knock down Keter's gates with it."

"That is my very intent," she smiled, baring pale teeth.

"Can you make more?"

She looked away.

"It was a moment on inspiration," the Artificer admitted. "I have not been able to enter the right mindset since."

I bit the inside of my cheek. She could call that inspiration if she wanted, but I knew better. *Above's putting a finger on the scales.* And part of me was relieved, for Gods – Above and Below – knew we could use the help, but it wasn't that simple. Looking at the Ram I was not thinking of the breach in Keter's walls it might become, but instead asking a bleaker question.

How bad was it going to get, for the Heavens to start helping before we'd even begun?

Well cat is in the same weird place as Bard.
But still consider a villain when the question gets pushed.

[Casey Glick](#)

But notably, she is using the power to make people better, at nearly every opportunity. Better for their own sake, and in their own minds. She knows she has the power to weaponize it, and is choosing not to, at the moment.

ruduen

Boost!

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

I see that everybody is gathering their optional sidequest weapons at this time. Now all we need is for the dwarves to bring a merchant in front of the gateway of no return, and we'll be ready to kick this final battle off!

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Test

erebus42

Awww, Cat's getting all sentimental and maternal in her old age.

[Liliet](#)

her ripe old age of 23/24 ♥ ♥ ♥

dadycool

Well, for a Villain, eight years of high-profile villainy is a long time. Especially with GP and SoS glaring at her.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

That I initially read these acronyms as "general practitioner" and "save our souls" (what sos stands for in the context of a real-life emergency) seems apropos, considering he healed people and she was unspeakably dangerous to fight.

Sam

Random trivia: "SOS" doesn't stand for "save our souls", or anything else. It's just a very easy to remember morse code sequence. Everything else is a backronym.

Cpt. Obvious

And the international radio emergency call isn't SOS but PAN-PAN for a non critical emergency or MAYDAY critical emergency.

You could say that if there is no immediate risk of lives then use PAN-PAN. So a ship having an engine failure in open waters and calm weather would be a non critical emergency.

However the same ship having the engines fail in shallow waters during a storm warrants a MAYDAY.

erebus42

I mean, considering her chosen occupation and roles that is pretty old.

[Liliet](#)

Well I couldn't possibly argue with that lmao

shikkarasu

Plus 11 years after killing Saint, arguably. Possibly less, given that she's been First Under the Night for about 3 years. It really depends how you measure it.

[Liliet](#)

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH so good!

Indrani the carver, her and Vivienne and Catherine in a room is always a joy.

ARTHUR!!! I fucking knew it, well okay no I HOPED, that his takeaway from the situation would be feeling like he ought to apologize to Catherine and not like she ought to apologize to him.

Catherine is finally in less denial about him, which I suppose the denial did buy her a better story?

THE PEREGRINE SWORD AAHHHHHH

Catherine you already know how fucking bad your situation is, I'm pretty sure the Heavens leaning over to help is not, like.. unexpected just from what you know. Your entire hope for victory already rests on this lmao

[Liliet](#)

ghhhhhh the head of House Foundling

god Arthur so totally picked up on how much this means to Catherine

gingerlygrump

That plucked the heart-strings. She has spent her whole post-orphanage life building the family she didn't have as a child. He truly honored her.

[Liliet](#)

It's not just about that!

Thematically, Catherine being an orphan with no record of her origin has from the start served as a symbolic beat of her being "the everywoman", the "purest" representative of Callow. Having no defined origin meant she could have *any* origin, and in a sense has them all. Catherine has gotten offended about the suggestion that she change her surname to something less generic, and has conspicuously NOT used the magic in her easy reach to find out her origins.

Catherine has *deliberately claimed* her origin as a point of pride, and brought it honor.

Arthur, here, is... responding to that. Recognizing it. Making a gesture of grand acknowledgement.

And it's so good to know that yes... the orphans noticed.

gingerlygrump

I hadn't thought of that: at this point she could easily find her parents... but why bother? She has the family she's chosen, and that's what matters to her.

[Liliet](#)

c u r i o s i t y

Catherine is normally *curious*, the fact that since book 2 when she learned about bloodline rituals to this day she still hasn't answered the question suggests to me that it's a matter of deliberate principle to her, and we do have corroborating evidence

RotGut

Why do you type like you have a brain injury?

[amit27592](#)

That's not a very nice thing to say and not a nice way to say it.

Please keep your grudges and whatnot out of this chat thread.

[Liliet](#)

I type like I have a brain injury? In what way?

*arcanavita*15

Its so epic I loved that entire scene with them talking and the hit right to the feels with him allowing her to name the sword.

ninegardens

Arthur and that conversation was a treasure (Arthur +Nim team up when?)

But also, we now have matching swords Perigrine and Severence (From Saint and Pilgrim), so THAT feels significant (Arthur+Chrisoph pair up when).

Feels like those three belong in a band of 5.

The Perigrine-Cat connection is one of my favourite dynamics in this entire series. Like... there's a lot of stuff going on, but it always felt that for me, scenes with Perigrine just WORKED.

and now we have a sword.

(Kind of funny that this sword does NOT go to the blade of mercy, given Tariq's choosen choir)

Ciara

There could only be, I thought, one name for this.

"The Blade of Mercy," I quietly said. "Its name is the Blade of Mercy."

"Am I a joke to you?" The hero in question asked, having entered while I was occupied.

"Yes," I said, miming ripping his arm off and beating him with it again.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

LMAO (laughing my arm off)

[Casey Glick](#)

Black Knight, Mirror Knight, Knight Errant, White Prince, Kingfisher Prince?

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Antoine ever had a lot in common with Tariq or his path.

Isaac Martinez

Well, you know, BAD. But don't worry, It WILL be WORSE.

Juff

Typo Thread:

I honestly I > honestly I
most of time > most of the time
help to notice > help notice
out column > out a column
He was interested > He was interrupted
than important than > important than
boy confession > boy confessing
was blade > was a blade
And this blade > And if this blade
respect in him > respect him in
It recognized > I recognized
she didn't touch > she hadn't touched
Ad considering > And considering
whether or I > whether or not I
moment on > moment of

Mirror Night

I mean its obviously pretty bad since they got to get it all done in a Few Months before DK kills everything. It might not be so bad if they weren't on such a tight clock but since they are on the clock well you are going to have make progress rapidly. I doubt DK makes it easy and fights them outside the gates.

dadycoool

I like how Arthur, and presumably all the other Callowan orphans, look to Cat as their Head of House. The name she gave was apt, as well. That whole segment was simply good.

Hellspirit

They actually don't, but this has probably made it so.
(Afterall, Arthur showed us that Cat's background is a rumor).

dadycoool

Oh, yeah. Maybe the bond between the two of them, the one she saw forging/strengthening is that of Head and Member? If so, that has interesting implications.

[Liliet](#)

That would require Cat to have actually made an organization, stories dont spring out of nowhere at all.

No, Arthur has just adopted her as his and also everyone else's big sister... much like Cat had adopted Amadeus as her father way back when.

shikkarasu

The orphanages were set up by Amadeus, and Cat is his successor... She soft claimed herself the heiress to all of Callow on those grounds before. I accept the literal truth of your take, Liliet, but I think I'm with dadycool on this one.

ninegardens

Arthur meeting Amadeus "Yo, Grandpa! stop burning things old man"

[Casey Glick](#)

Pickler, greeted by a younger generation of demolition-sappers: "okay boomer"

agumentic

I imagine it's a rumour every orphan in Callow believes, though. So they might look up to her regardless.

shikkarasu

Orphan 1: "I heard she castrated an Ogre in single combat."

Orphan 2: "That's nothing, I heard she went back in time to found the same orphanage that raised her."

Orphan 3: "Yeah! And she left clues about how to win all her unwinnable battles under a floorboard that only her younger self would look under."

Orphan 4: "I talked to a soldier who saw her blow up a wall with a goat!"

Orphan 1: "... That doesn't even make sense."

Orphan 4: "No really, she controlled it with her mind, made it run into a wall, and BOOM!"

Orphan 3: "You are so full of crap, Kevin."

arcanavitael5

I like the attention being given to Cats most positive aspects in this chapter the queen of lost and found which was commented on and reinforced by the whole giving other races homes and the whole Arthur scene, which was beautiful. The whole talk and ten Arthur letting her name the sword which was really fitting,

ohJohN

Thank you, I didn't make the Queen of Lost and Found(lings) connection and this got me there!

arcanavitael5

I'm happy that Cat had a nice thing happen to her and let it happen which is really great.

[Liliet](#)

IKR???? Finally something good!

arcanavitael5

She mentioned having a surprise that the dead king would see coming which is very interesting personally I think its the ranger. Quote "And following that chord I could get a glimpse at the knot to come, the makings of the fight, and that gave me a look at the people who'd be fighting. Some of which I'd not been sure would be involved. So you'll come, after all, I thought with satisfaction.

Good. It meant I still had one card up my sleeve that not even Neshamah would see coming."

ohJohn

Yeah that's what I thought too: Hye is the only one really who Indrani has a strong connection to and isn't already committed to the war effort.

My second thought was the elves, through or because of Hye somehow, but with how much they hate him I think Neshamah would absolutely see them coming. Hye, though? She's quite possibly the closest thing he has to a friend, and until now it would have been incredibly out of character for her to join this fight.

ninegardens

Doesn't Hye go hunting in Keter fairly often?
Is she even here for the sake of this battle story, or is she gonna be like "Welp, its July, guess I'll got hunting in Keter. Oh Look! *Foundling is here*. Guess this will be an interesting season then. New prey"

Clmineith

Actually... could Ranger decides to attack *Cat*? You know, because of the whole father killing thing?

LarsBlitzer

When Arthur was about to apologize for working against Cat I was halfway expecting her to remind him of her house's motto "Justifications Matter Only to the Just." But Having her be steadying influence on him worked much better, I think.

[Liliet](#)

House Foundling ayyyyyyyy

BargleNawdleZouss

So, Arthur and Gaetan as a future couple, hmm?

[Liliet](#)

YUP

SuitorShooter

There could only be, I thought, one name for this.

"Peregrine," I quietly said. "Its name is Peregrine."

Oh yeah, that's some good shit EE.

Xinci

Hm the formation of a angel for a heartbeat definitely has interesting implications for prayer and the runes used for things like knight armor. It's a one time deal here but there is potential in development for the concept in the future. Makes a good comparative to Masegos non-denominational smite

Reader in the Night

The Peregrine Sword. Just, shivers.

The Peregrine Sword for an Errant Knight. The blade being smoky and gray, like Tariq's clothes. Cat charging Arthur to do the Grey Pilgrim proud. The whole thing, it drips momentousness.

We can really feel like Catherine just shaped one of the new generation's greatest stories yet to come.

Salt

It'd be an interesting read to see how the story of the sword shapes up/how it interacts with the wielders.

Tariq was, in a lot of ways, a model Hero in terms of intention, but his story was anything but happy, and his hands were anything but clean. In a lot of ways it was as tragic as the Saints, and in some ways he was just as brutal as a result. At the end of the day the Pilgrim was a dude who would put his

life on the line at the drop of a hat because he cared about alleviating the suffering of even one more person, but spent his entire life being put in the position of choosing between killing an innocent with his own hands to save two others, over and over. He spent his whole life being forced by his own morals to commit acts he found repulsive and appalling, because often a lesser evil was the only way that he could achieve a much greater good.

The story of sword itself is probably going to have elements of that, and the thing itself will likely be as necessarily brutal and dangerous as the person it was forged from. It might very quickly become one of those Heroic artifacts that's known as a burden that needs bearing, rather than some pleasant glory to be chased after.

ninegardens

Maybe the weilder will see it that way.... but remember, Tariq always had good PR. People *outside* seldom got to see the ruinous cost.

Another possibility is that Tariq was always a mentor. It could be that the sword fills a similar role, always being handed to a young hero in need of guidance, never staying with one hero too long, but instead bouncing around, and always finding its way to the hand of greatest need.

[sengachi](#)

Huh, was this a second Aspect for Catherine? Maybe Name?

ninegardens

It's the ****Name**** of the sword. It gets the same caps because the sword has that much weight, but its not an aspect or anything.

Hell, it might not even stick around- in that future mentions of the sword will just be normal, its only bold because this was the ****naming**** of the sword.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Love Arthur's little bit about "House Foundling."

BargleNawdleZouss

1. Glad we got to see how Artificer is going to make a qualitative difference. Now, I look forward to seeing how Pickler and Concocter will contribute their force multipliers.
2. Speaking of Cocky, I can't wait to see her reunited with the Doddering Sage.

3. I'm also anticipating Sapan the Apprentice having her key moment and transitioning to her final Name.

4. Very curious to see the reaction of the Orc Horde to the undead.

superkeaton

God dammit Arthur, you pure fucking ray of sunshine

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

No shit, right?

I'm So Meta Even This Acronym level Story-fu.

DC

The thought occurs that Below doesn't HAVE to intercede on behalf of the Dead King, if for whatever reason they'd prefer he lose. They could apply their boon to villains fighting him instead.

KiltedBastich

It's been mentioned before that Below isn't too fond of the Dead King, because he threatens to end their wager with above prematurely by killing everyone and turning them into undead either mindless or slaved to him. Above and Below both need mortals with free will, able to choose one or the other, and the Dead King could very possibly wipe that out completely. Below doesn't like that any more than Above does.

Chapter 52: Mass

"And so the Black Knight, having survived the battle, knelt before Dread Emperor Irritant and addressed him in despair: 'Your Dreadful Majesty, our cause is lost. What can we do in the face of such utter defeat?'. To this the Emperor answered: 'Naturally, we must make more enemies.'"

– Extract from Volume IX of the Official Imperial Chronicles

Christophe de Pavanie was training alone.

I wasn't familiar with the particular drill, but I'd gone through enough of the same sort to recognize what it was for: I'd been a

sword and board kind of girl too, back in the day. Might still be, if not for my bad leg and how it made taking on hits a real bad idea. The Mirror Knight was moving in full armour, footwork smoothly moving back and forth as he timed the thrust of the blade to go through throat-height in a fluid killing blow. Then pivots to the side, taking a phantom hit on the shield and cutting the side, only to pivot back and begin the sequence all over again.

There were tracks in the dirt, noticeable enough he must have been at this for hours.

The training grounds were empty except for him and the whole place felt like an island of calm in the sea of the Proceran camps – I could barely even hear soldiers around their cooking fires further out. Though the man's senses were sharp enough he must have heard my limping gait nearing, he did not stop in his exercises. I was in no great hurry, so instead of interrupting I hoisted myself atop the wooden fence delineating the grounds and waited him out. Another thirteen sequences and finally he stopped, sheathing his sword as he turned towards me.

"Most Named don't keep up drills," I called out, curious. "The argument's that you get more out of spars."

The Mirror Knight took off the polished silver helm, revealing sweat-soaked light brown hair and a serious face.

"Sidonia offered," Christophe de Pavanie said, "but I need the drills."

I cocked my head to the side, considering.

"Because you keep getting stronger," I guessed.

He nodded.

"If I do not regularly drill my fundamentals, I begin to make mistakes," the Mirror Knight admitted.

I hadn't actually thought of that. Supposedly the man got a little tougher and stronger every morning, but my reaction to that rumour had been more one of general disgruntlement at the unfairness of such an aspect more than the practical realities of constantly changing. No wonder he drilled regularly, if he had to adapt to a different grip every three months or so.

"Most of my swordsmanship was taught to me after I got my Name," I told him. "And my teacher taught it consequently. I notice you're not using any of the better-known Proceran styles, though."

"It was an inheritance from my teacher," the Mirror Knight said.

"One of the duellist schools?" I asked, curious.

Arlesite duellists were famous, though I'd never heard of any who used shields. The green-eyed man snorted.

"Nothing so high-brow, Warden," Christophe said. "It was my predecessor as the Mirror Knight who taught me when preparing me to take up her duties."

Huh, I thought, surprised.

"I hadn't heard of another Mirror Knight in our lifetime," I said.

"You would not have heard of me either, if not for the Tenth Crusade," he ruefully replied. "Our charge is to defend the Elfin Dames and it does not involve much travelling about. The Enemy always comes to us, not the other way around."

"That does tend to be the way," I sighed, then studied his face. "Were you close?"

His face turned thoughtful.

"I understood her," Christophe de Pavanie finally said, "perhaps better than I have ever understood anyone. That is not always a kind thing."

I nodded, understanding perhaps better than he knew. I'd also had a mentor who was a reflection of the ugly as well as the rest.

"I miss her," he said, with a sincerity that struck. "But her time was finished from the moment I was chosen to succeed her. It'd be ungrateful of me to begrudge her peace."

I hardly even needed to reach out to lay a finger on the chord, old and faded as it was. Chosen champions, each fighting an opponent and wining. Each fading away in the years that followed, until the Elfin Dames chose a successor and the mantle was passed. I wondered what it was that the lake spirits sat on that needed such protection. Some old horror, no doubt, or one of those wonders that were just as terrible.

"Do you miss it?" I idly asked.

He looked away.

"It was a simpler world," the Mirror Knight said. "Oaths, duty, an enemy. The paths were straightforward, both the good and the evil."

"Would that it were always so simple," I wanly smiled.

"The Grey Pilgrim once chided me for saying the same thing," Christophe quietly replied. "That making the world black and white was to give away half of Creation to the dark."

He paused.

"That we could do better."

"And you agree?"

He looked sad.

"I don't know," the Mirror Knight confessed. "In the end, Warden, he was such a sad man."

My breath caught.

"He was not proud of his work," Christophe de Pavanie disbelievably said, shaking his head. "Him, the *Peregrine*! All those evils laid to rest, and still he held himself with such sorrow."

"There are costs to victory," I said, "and Tariq Fleetfoot was the great victor of his time."

"It was the look in his eyes that I have grown to fear," the Mirror Knight said. "The *tiredness*. And I am slow of thought, Warden, but on that look I have thought for long."

I balanced my leg against the wooden plank, studying him in the gloom of the spreading dusk.

"And what did you decide?"

"That I do not want to ever have that look," the man bleakly laughed. "And that mayhaps the first step down that road is to admit that I cannot go back."

He looked down at his armoured gauntlet, clenching the fingers.

"I have seen too much to be able to fit in that small, simple world again," the Mirror Knight sadly said. "Sometimes there is no going home."

"But leaving it," I replied, "is the only way you get to see beyond the horizon."

He did not disagree, pushing back a sweaty lock of hair.

"May I ask why you have come, Warden?"

"Curiosity," I said, fingers closing around my staff.

As to why Hanno would advise me to go and see you.

"And is it sated?" he asked.

I smiled.

"You've grown, Mirror Knight," I said.

And I understood what Hanno saw in him that made him want to trust the Severance to his hand. The man I had faced in the Arsenal had been tempered by the passage of time, by the fires he'd gone through. I could still see the flaws in him, but they no longer threatened to devour him whole.

"Is it really growth," the man tiredly said, "to simply earn fresh scars?"

"Sometimes, Christophe, I think it's the only thing there is to earn," I confessed.

He did not look relieved to hear it, but then he wasn't meant to. I slid down the fence, landing in the dust, and began to limp out of the training grounds.

"Was that truly all you wanted, Warden?" he called out.

I turned and met his gaze, then inclined my head the slightest bit.

"I look forward to working with you, Mirror Knight," I told him.

And I found, as I turned my back on him, that I might actually mean the words.

—

Prince Otto Reitzenberg was something of a rising man these days.

He'd begun the Tenth Crusade as the third in line for the Principality of Bremen but over the same bloody evening that'd seen him earn the sobriquet of 'Redcrown' he'd shot up the line of succession all the way to princeship. And now he was in line to inherit a great deal more, as Cordelia had not hidden her intention to pass him the crowns of Rhenia and Hannover when she left to settle in Cardinal. Considering Mathilda Greensteel of Neustria had left no close heirs, Otto Redcrown was most likely going to end up as prince of all Lycaonese when the war ended.

Prince of broken lands in the hands of the dead and a people made penniless refugees, but it would not stay that way forever. The northerners would return home, in time, and do so with both swords and ploughshares strapped to their backs. *And they won't spread out too much at the start, they'll clear out a few cities and territories, which is why Cordelia's scheme might just work.* After a generation or two of building and fighting together, even if the Lycaonese spread outwards would they still think of

themselves as Neustrians or Bremenites? Cordelia had bet that they wouldn't, that her people would come out of it with the boundaries between them erased.

The dour man didn't particularly look like a prince set to rule over lands that'd make up about a fifth of the territory of the Principate, though. His dark hair was cut rough and short, his clothes plain. And not the kind of plain that was a subtle boast, precisely tailored and woven: it was badly died woolen shirt he wore, a little too broad around his shoulders, and his hide trousers were worn enough that the seams going down the sides were loosening. He was not handsome, his nose large and almost hooked, but dark eyes and thick eyebrows made him look rather intense.

It was a face naturally made for brooding, I reflected, which seemed like fate as work given his known propensity for it.

Frederic Goethal could not have been more different, from the fair curls to the sunny demeanour, which made their evident closeness all the more eye-catching. The Kingfisher Prince had come decked out in enough silk to compensate for the other royal's plain clothes twice over, all in the blue and red of his house. They were pretty tight on his body, which was worth a second look I wasn't too shy about taking. After all I knew from... personal experience he didn't exactly mind. Vivienne looked like she wanted to elbow me when she noticed, but thankfully we were in front of royals so she had to hold back.

I offered her a pleasant smile that was not smug in the slightest before turning my attention back to the other two. They'd gotten here a little early so Pickler wasn't there yet – it would have been a feat worthy of a Name to drag her away from the siege preparations a breath earlier than was necessary – so we'd been making light conversation over drinks, but I couldn't help to notice something a little off about the both of them.

"If you don't mind my saying," I began, "the two of you look to be in a rather fine mood."

Better than I'd expected, given that they should both be aware of the answer we'd gotten from the Kingdom Under.

"It is the news from the north," Prince Otto said, his Chantant somehow always sounding a little curt.

He was visibly pleased, though. I cocked an eyebrow.

"News?" I asked, flicking a glance at Vivienne.

She shook her head, as much in the dark as I was.

"Before the Ways were shattered, we received word through Salia," Frederic smiled. "Rhenia yet stands."

Not the principality, obviously, since it'd pretty much collapsed the moment the undead forced the Rhenian Gates. He meant the capital city of the same name, Cordelia's seat.

"I'd heard it was under siege," I ventured.

"It's Rhenia," Otto Reitzenberg said, lips twitching. "It fears sieges like a fish fears water."

"There is fortress dug inside the mountain," Frederic explained. "The people retreated when the walls were lost."

"They lost it since," Otto informed us, "but there's tunnels that lead to the cavern-keeps."

"The cavern-keeps," Vivienne slowly repeated.

"Lost those too, so they collapsed them on top of the Enemy," Frederic cheerfully said. "Then they retreated to the Old Chasm while the undead dug up the tunnels."

"The giants used to mine there for ore," Prince Otto told us. "The stories say the Chasm used to go all the way down to lava, until some of the cliffs fell. The Rhenians burned the bridges behind them and dug in."

"And they're still holding?" I asked.

"There's a secret passage from the Old Chasm to the mountaintop," Frederic said. "They sent a messenger up there and towards Salia three months ago."

"They'll hold," Otto said, not a speck of doubt in his voice. "They're *Rhenians*. By the time the Enemy takes the Old Chasm they'll have built a fortress atop the mountain."

I'd often heard that Rhenia was the strongest fortress raised on Calernia by mortal hands, greater even than Hannoven's famous seven walls and Summerholm's brutal street-by-street slaughterhouse, but it was only now I was genuinely starting to believe it.

"A stubborn lot these Rhenians, I take it," I said, cocking an eyebrow.

Otto Redcrown, his mood still the finest I had ever seen of him, went as far as venturing a few bars from a song I did not know. The Kingfisher Prince was the one to add words to the chorus, though.

"I broke your wall, said Old Bones,

So Rhenia built another," Frederic Goethal grinned.

The Prince of Bremen joined his voice to the rest, lips twitching.

"I took your keep, said the Rat,

So Rhenia built it higher!

And we'll never run out of stone,

so you'll have to try harder!"

I traded an amused glance with Vivienne, which did not go unnoticed. The Lycaonese looked abashed, but Frederic utterly unrepentant.

"Drinking song?" I idly asked.

"An old favourite," Prince Otto admitted. "Even outside Rhenia only *Turn the Season* is sung more often."

I was curious enough to ask about that, always in the market for a good drinking song, but that was when my legionaries announced Pickler. She was sent in without wait, the Sapper-General of Callow eyeing me with mild irritation that turned to confusion as she took in who Viv and I were entertaining. No one rose to greet her, she was by far of the lowest rank in the tent, but she got a round of greetings – she'd worked out in Twilight's Pass with the two princes for over a year and there seemed to be genuine amity there.

"Take a seat," I invited. "We were about to begin."

Pickler slowly nodded.

"The phalanges weren't clear on what this is about," she said.

"You're here to listen," I simply said.

She looked like she was swallowing a sharp retort at that, but she sat anyway. I glanced at Vivienne, who got the conversation started. As well she should, having handled most of the negotiations for this.

"I was glad to hear of your response to the amended terms," the Princess said. "I would not press you to formally sign a treaty while we are besieging the Crown of the Dead, but I believe an agreement in principle would be pleasing to all parties."

"I am ready to sign the formal treaty whenever it is presented writ to me," Prince Otto bluntly replied. "There is no difference between principle and ink."

I found myself believing him, to my surprise.

"I appreciate the intended courtesy, Princess Vivienne," Frederic replied with a smile, "but it is not bending our arm to see this inked. Our word has been given."

"Then I will see it arranged at the earliest convenience," Vivienne calmly said. "And tonight we can simply end the talks with a drink."

"The very best way," the Kingfisher Prince approved.

I snorted. So did Otto, so I winked at him. He actually looked amused.

"Congratulations are in order," I said. "Bremen are Brus will be the first crowns west of the Whitecaps to officially invite goblin tribes to settle in their territory."

At my side, Pickler went still as a stone.

"If only more would come," Prince Otto grouched. "Six will hardly be enough to settle the entire Kaltwend."

"You should have offered better tax incentives," Frederic sagely said. "It is how I convinced my tribe to settle in the marshes. Gods know they'll be rooting out undead for years."

"All I can fill my treasury with is iron," Otto Redcrown sourly said.

A sentence that had no business sounding as arresting as it did, I noted. As the talk continued about where the seven tribes that had accepted the offers extended to settle in their lands through the intermediaries of the crown of Callow and the matron-attendants of the Snake Eater Tribe – our own Callowan goblins – I felt Pickler's breath slow as she listened to the words. It was a comprehensive treaty, for all that Vivienne was refraining from boasts. The goblins were formally recognized as subjects with all attendant rights, the tribes guaranteed certain territories and tax exemptions in exchange for duties agreed-upon.

Mostly taking up arms against the ratlings, mine mountains and work on the Lycaonese great fortresses. Frederic instead wanted his tribe to work on roads as well as the Bruseni mines, which was why he'd also offered generous terms to any former sappers that might want to settle in Brus. He was rather canny for a hero, one of his more attractive qualities.

The talks tonight had been a formality, an end to the negotiations where I'd be present to make it clear that I was endorsing the treaty, so they did not stretch out overlong. After a few drinks the princes took their leave and Vivienne, ever

discreet, took a single look at Pickler and I before excusing herself. It left the two of us alone in the tent, Pickler of the High Ridge Tribe's face unreadable. Those large amber eyes did not blink as she stared at me, her once-smooth skin now creased with wrinkles. Goblins, even those of Matron lines like her, aged so much quicker than humans.

"You did this," Pickler finally said.

"Vivienne handled most of it," I said.

"But it was possible," she said, "because you put your weight behind it."

I did not deny it, since it was true, but she was putting too much on my shoulders. The Lycaonese had already been interested, it'd just been a question of getting the practicalities of it done. And getting Rozala Malanza to approve, though strictly speaking her approval wasn't actually needed since princes were free to handle such a matter as they wished. It'd helped, though, and would prevent trouble from the Highest Assembly down the line. The way Vivienne told it, Rozala hadn't been eager but she'd been disinclined to fight the matter. I expected if there hadn't been clauses about no goblin munitions being made in Procer she would have been more enthusiastic, but I could only push Praes so far before Chancellor Alaya was forced to fight me.

"When Vivienne had it announced that goblins were free to settle in Callow," Pickler quietly said, "I thought that was the end of it. That it was as far as it would go."

She grimaced.

"It was already no small thing," she admitted.

But it wouldn't have been enough, we both knew. To just open the door in name and then do nothing more with it. To let it end there. To tell the goblins they could go elsewhere but then let the Matrons make sure they never saw it. So it wasn't what we'd done, because I still remembered that night in the tent the plea she'd made on her knees. *They kill us for sport*, she'd said, echoing the words of someone we both missed like a limb. *Please*, she'd asked. *If not you, then who?*

"You told me," I quietly said, "that there are fifty thousand more like him in the Eyries. Boys that never got out."

"And every day," Pickler murmured, "they die choking in the dark."

"It's a box, Pickler," I told her. "And it only works so long as the Matrons can keep it closed. But after the war, oh after the war..."

No longer. Too many tribes had taken the offer to leave, to settle abroad. It would be impossible for the Matrons to keep it quiet, and from now on every time they raised the whip it would be with the knowledge that now goblins could leave. That the choice was no longer the Matrons or the grave. And I saw that knowledge sink into Pickler, down the marrow of her bones. Saw it burn bright like a candle.

"I cannot repay you for this," she finally said. "I do not have the years. But anything-"

"You told me," I said, "that your people don't believe in debt."

She smiled, baring teeth like needles.

"For this, Catherine," Pickler replied, "I would learn."

"There's nothing to pay back," I gently said. "Even if it weren't the right thing to do, even if there was nothing to gain, I would still have done it."

I met her eyes.

"Because I do believe in debts," I said. "Because you're one of mine, Pickler, and you asked."

Goblins didn't really touch others, not unless they were either trying to kill each other or sleep with each other. But her small, spindly fingers found their way into my own and squeezed. I squeezed back. We sat there in silence for a long time, the only sound in the tent our breaths.

"Do you think," she murmured, "he would be proud?"

I swallowed, finding my throat dry.

"Yeah," I murmured back. "Yeah, I think he'd be."

And we sat a little longer still, the two of us and the ghost we hadn't named, until I had to leave.

There was still one conversation ahead of me tonight.

—

Even now that she was no longer First Prince or Princess of Salia, Cordelia's tent was heavily guarded. Fortunately my name was among those that were to be ushered in when they arrived, and I wasted no time taking advantage of that.

I was surprised when I saw the drinks on the table — mead — but less so when I recognized the other woman sitting with Cordelia. The resemblance wasn't strong, but it was there: Agnes Hasenbach shared the clear blue eyes and blond hair of her royal cousin.

The Augur always looked a little lost, I'd thought, with those big blue eyes and short bob of hair, but I knew better than to think her foolish or harmless. Oracles were always a little odd, it came with the territory. Besides, tonight she was smiling and more... present than I could ever remember seeing her before. They both rose when I entered the tent, though Agnes needed to be reminded.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I said.

"It's all right," the Augur said. "I saw you coming."

I eyed her warily.

"Prophecy?"

"The window hole," Agnes solemnly replied.

Had I just gotten had by Cordelia's unearthly waif cousin? It was, I grimly thought, certainly looking that way. And the other Hasenbach's amused quirk of the lips, which we both knew she was allowing to show *entirely on purpose*, wasn't helping things.

"Your Excellency," Cordelia greeted me. "A pleasure."

"Not an unexpected one, apparently," I drily said.

Agnes enthusiastically nodded, which honestly made it hard to stay miffed at her.

"I'll just borrow your cousin for a bit, if you don't mind," I told her.

"So long as you put her back when you're done," the Augur said.

"Agreeable terms," I replied, so we shook on it.

Cordelia's eyes were soft as she followed me to the back of the tent, behind a flap and near to what appeared to be a bathtub and some very nice sleeping robes. Silk and fur, huh. I cocked an eyebrow at her, but she strategically refused to meet my eye. Feeling rather more even than I had until then, I cleared my throat.

"She seems to be doing well," I said, jerking my head towards the flap.

"She ceased pushing herself after the march on Keter began," Cordelia said, sounding relieved. "There is no point in the exertion when the Dead King's power clouds all auguries regarding him."

Good on her, I thought. We could use the edge, in truth, but I'd heard some stories about what happened to soothsayers that looked

a little too close at the Dead King. It didn't tend to end prettily.

"Glad news," I said. "Not the only ones for House Hasenbach today, I hear."

Cordelia's backed straightened, as if reminded she was yet Prince of Rhenia.

"I expected no less of the capitals," the blue-eyed princess said. "I saw to it that enough of my subjects too refuge south that we were not gambling it all on Rhenia's walls, but I have no doubt they will hold until the end."

"No doubt," I affably agreed. "I've been told Rhenians are a stubborn lot."

Narrowed eyes.

"If we must," Cordelia Hasenbach very mildly replied.

I raised my hands in peace, which sadly did seem to entirely appease her. A bloodthirsty lot, these Lycaonese.

"And how did your talks with Prince Otto go?" she asked.

"Like you don't already know," I snorted.

"It is polite to pretend," she serenely replied.

"Treaties were signed," I said, rolling my eye. "I've already leaned on Chancellor Alaya, so it's pretty much a given that tribes will be settling up north. Who exactly will depend on recruitment after the war, but I wouldn't be surprised if you did end up nabbing some of my sappers after all."

Vivienne would be settling another three tribes in Callow after the war – Kegan had thrown a fit, I was told, but had bent to the argument that we needed sappers and couldn't exactly keep bringing them in from Praes – but across the Wasaliti was still a little too close to the Eyries for some. Those that went would do so with my blessing and a bag of coin to help them get started.

I had to spend the Sahelian treasury on *something*.

"Congratulations," Cordelia said, sounding honest. "From what I have seen of goblins, they will take well to the spring wars with the ratlings."

"It'll be like they never left home," I drily replied.

Only better, because the rats weren't anywhere as clever as rival goblin tribes. Given the sheer amount of territory Lycaonese needed to reclaim, their fortresses needing to be rebuilt and

their borders in need of skirmishers this was pretty much a match made in the Hells.

"A diplomatic success is heartening, given our other... difficulties in this area," Cordelia added.

I grimaced. So she'd been told about the dwarves.

"Wasn't sure you'd been told about that," I said. "Making sure you were was half the reason I came."

"The gesture is appreciated," she assured me, eyes calculating. "And if I were to inquire as to the other half?"

Do you still think we can win, I did not ask, or should I be worrying about the ealamal lighting up tonight? Only it wasn't fair to ask, or entirely true, so I didn't. Cordelia didn't look like she despairing, I thought, but she was so tightly controlled a woman I wasn't sure I would be able to tell if she were. She wouldn't pull the trigger early, though, I knew. She wasn't the impulsive sort. *Even if that's the decision she'll make, she'll let us try and fail first.*

"I'll be pushing for an attack tomorrow," I told her instead, pretending it was that. "We need to take a swing at Keter so we know the kind of opposition we'll be facing."

Her face tightened slightly. Hadn't bought that, huh?

"How bad is it, Catherine?" she quietly asked.

I began to answer, but she raised her hand.

"Not the answer you would give a general or a subordinate," the fair-haired princess said. "What you truly think."

I exhaled, passing a hand through my hair.

"We're cornered," I admitted. "On parchment we have three weeks, but in my opinion we'll know within eight days at most whether it's feasible to take the city with our forces. Past that crest, our strength will be going downhill."

"But it is not," Cordelia slowly said, "impossible?"

"No," I told her, and honestly. "It'll be damned bloody work, mark my words, but we have a few nasty surprises for him that no army's ever brought to his gates before. That, and there's still a ball I tossed up."

She stared at me flatly, which after coughing into my fist I took as an invitation to elaborate.

"It's something the Tyrant once said to Hakram," I said. "A classic heroic trick: when you're juggling stories, you make sure that when they come to a head the ball you want falling down at just the right moment is the one you threw."

At the Graveyard, the Grey Pilgrim had sent all the horse of the Grand Alliance into Arcadia under the guidance of the Rogue Sorcerer. He'd been keeping a heroic, overwhelming charge up his sleeve the entire time we'd been fighting. Sadly for him, Kairos and I had both seen it coming.

"You still have a story up in the air, then," Cordelia said, following the thread.

More than one, really, but there was no need to lay it out just yet.

"There's more than one way to skin a cat, let's leave it at that," I replied.

Blue eyes studied me.

"You are keeping your cards close to your chest," she finally said.

"That's the way this game's played," I replied.

She was not pleased, those fair eyebrows creasing, but she'd been in my boots often enough as First Prince not to argue.

"So it is," Cordelia replied, inclining her head.

I hesitated for a moment, then clapped her shoulder. She looked as surprised as I felt.

"We've still got arrows in the quiver," I said. "Spend time with your cousin while you still can, yeah? Tomorrow it starts and there will be no time for comfort." A slow, hesitant nod and I drew back. Agnes was emptying some of her cousin's mead into her own cup, trying to be discreet about it, and I offered an approving grin she guiltily returned. I left the last of the Hasenbachs to their drinks, striding out into the night, and went to a reunion of my own.

Indrani would be waiting, and I wasn't above taking the advice I'd given Cordelia.

So, uh, what do you think that the Dead King is going to do to the Elfin Dames once the undead forces rampaging through Procer get their hands on them with no Mirror Knight there to protect them? That feels like a pretty ominous question mark hanging over the Mirror Knight's story to me.

Mirror Night

I don't think DK is going to bother. DK will handle the side quest after he has done the main quest. DK is not the one in the rush, as Cat notes they have 8 Days to make significant gains. DK just has to outlast this siege while his armies massacre civilians across the land for the most part.

I assume Aspects from Cat, Hanno, Indrani and even Viv will factor in. Cat and Hanno only have one Aspect...Indrani is Ranger transitioning so who knows and Viv I think she is suppose to be Princess but its weird she doesn't get invited to any Hero Meetings. Also Hanno doesn't have a name at all right now so presumably that will be plot relevant at some point.

I also based on the setup fully expect to get a back to back badass scene with Christophe and Arthur. Since they have swords forged from an aspect of the two great Heroes from the Old Age. Not to mention Christophe is a rather obvious Lancelot Expy and Arthur is well you know Arthur.

Agent J

"It is going to be a long war," Tariq whispered, the weight of the years heavy on his shoulders.

"Longer for us than most," Laurence replied, barking out a laugh. "We'll be part of the five, old friend. You can be sure of it. I already feel the pull."

-the two of us, the Pilgrim added silently. Relics of an age already past, dusted off one last time.

—

And so it comes full circle. Splendid as always, EE.

naturalnuke

OH GODS THE FORESHADOWING OF THAT.

Honestly that's just impressive

Cicero

Well, Cat seems to be expecting the Ranger to show up at the end game anyways. Not certain why she thinks Hue is going to help kill the Dead King instead of her, but we'll see.

Someperson

Honestly, I doubt Hye even wants to get rid of the Dead King, seeing as she has raided Keter a fair few times before basically just for fun, and made a point of not trying to actually put an end to Neshamah. But neither do I imagine she particularly wants to see him win for good, for much the same reasons. It is safe to assume she will show up, but as a bit of a wild-card. Still, even just knowing that she will show up is something you can make plans around...

[boballab](#)

It's not about Hye, it is about the Name Ranger. The Dead King for all his age and power is not very good at Name Lore because, it has been established that Named make ruts in creation called stories and stories repeat, he let Ranger make a rut in creation. Why she wants Hye to show up is because Indrani is on the cusp of becoming Ranger as her Warden powers told her. Indrani takes the Name from Hye and that rut that has been created over time shows that as Ranger she can get to the Dead King. As to why Hye hasn't killed him is very simple... The Ranger only hunts those worth hunting and the Dead King has long went out of his to never appear as that.

"I am the Ranger. I hunt those worth hunting. Rejoice, for you qualify." Book 3 Chapter 32 Close

Remember that is why she fought the Summer Queen.

agumentic

I think Elfin Dames are somewhere on the other side of Procer, so by the time the Dead King's forces get there, whatever he could do with them would be a moot point.

[Liliet](#)

Can't be too other, Christophe is Alamans, not Arlesite.

ninegardens

Welp, that seen with Pickler was heartbreakingly sweet, and I actually cried.

Mirror knight was... pretty good. Mention of the Perigrine (two chapters in a row) was pretty heavy and... I feel like this is one of the best cases of EE pulling off character development *really well*. Mirror knight takes a long time to develop, and it feels effective and genuine. Very cool.

Loving all these "calm before the storm" chapters.

Mirror Night

I think it works better coming from Christophe lol. I don't even remember Arthur having a convo with Tariq. I mean it matches thematically as in Christophe is more like Saint in the Ultimate Weapon sense. He is tankier and has better physical stats but lost out on the Mental and skill Front. Arthur especially with his name also matches up well with Tariq, Grey Pilgrim and Vagrant Knight kinda suggest a similar Role. And as I said above I expect a team up between Mirror Knight and the Vagrant Knight.

So many goddamn Knights...I wonder if we can get a whole power rangers style team up at this point lol. We got a Mirror Knight, A Vagrant Knight, Red Knight, Black Knight...I think that is all the Knights maybe Hanno counts as Honorary as White Knight if his new name doesn't have Knight in it.

Razorfloss

I need band of 5 made up of only knights. All we really need to round out the party is the magic knight.

Raved Thrad

Which version? The original series Sailor Moon-type magic knight, or the OAV version with spirit beast mecha? 🤪

Mirror Night

I think they just mean more of a Knight and Mage Hybrid so Magus, Eldritch Knight, Spell Blade type...

shikkarasu

Obviously Mystic Knights of Tir Na Nog. We just need General Catastrophe to serve as Pyre, with the Red Knight riding her into battle.

Abaddon130

I know this is an old comment, but I just wanted to point out two things. The first is that Arthur isn't the Vagrant Knight, he's the Knight Errant. Yes they roughly mean the same thing, but I still think it's worth pointing out what the actual name is. Second, there's no need to use an honorary Knight to fill out the band of 5. You missed the Blood Knight in your list. Black Knight, Knight Errant, Mirror Knight, Red Knight, and Blood Knight. That band would be heavy on melee fighters and have no healers or ranged attackers (Unless you count the Black Knight picking up Mirror Knight and throwing him at enemies as a ranged attack. Based on the fact that that tactic has been successfully used

to drink a turtleship and breach a fortress, it seems valid.), but it would still be hell to put down. With BK's ability to control another body, how devastating RK's Devour Aspect had been said to be, how ridiculously tough MK is, and the unknowns that are BK & KE that seems like a group that would be a headache and a half to put down. 3 Heroes and 2 Villains also means you'd have Above's borderline cheating to deal with as well as Below's underhandedness. Good luck to whoever had to deal with that.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

"You get a goblin tribe, and you get a goblin tribe, goblin tribes for everyone!"

Juff

Typo Thread:

– Extract from Volume IX of the Official Imperial Chronicles
(outside of quote box)

wining > winning

badly died > a badly dyed

fate as work > fate at work

help to notice > help but notice

is fortress > is a fortress

Bremen are Brus > Bremen and Brus

mine mountains and work > mining mountains and working

tent the > tent and the

wouldlearn > would learn

capitals, > capital,

too refuge > took refuge

wouldn't surprised > wouldn't be surprised

bee fighting > been fighting

reunion of my own (missing fullstop)

dadycool

The impulsive boy has grown, the goblins are spreading like a plague, and the Augur is a devious little trickster.

Marco Boscolo

Am I the only one getting more and more concerned about Cat? Her plan to trap the Dead King is getting derailed: the ways were shattered, the Crown is a big question mark, Akua might not be the jailer she wanted her to be. And guess who has a Name that means "a person responsible for the supervision of a particular place or thing" and is also used to indicate the superintendent of a prison?

[Yamageddon](#)

nimelennar

Liliet

THE GOBLINSS

Catdelia friendship!!

dadycool

Frivolous

onedollargum

["There's more than one way to skin a cat, let's leave it at that," I replied.]

That... I hope that's a metaphor and not a cosmically ironic pun.

Someperson

This is one of the only times I would say it is fortunate that Cat hates puns.

nimelennar

I think what I'm going to miss the most when this is over is Dread Emperor Irritant.

Daniel E

Agreed. He is, to my knowledge, the only Dread Emperor with Story-fu strong enough to have a Story-based law named after himself.

Reader in the Night

You know who's missing for this party? Larat. Pretty sure he still has one last debt to settle with Catherine, and I think calling in the Wild Hunt ad literal cavalry is one of the balls Cat has in the air.

Someperson

Doubt that this would be a winning blow but it'd certainly be a nice eleventh hour reinforcement that keeps the side of the living in the fight for a bit longer until they can do their thing.

ohJohN

Emotional moments in stories don't often provoke a physical reaction from me, but damn did I get choked up during the Pickler bit 🥹.

This entire chapter was just excellent, three different character payoffs ON TOP OF the ones from last chapter. Expertly done.

Someperson

On the one hand, I really hope we get an epilogue when all is said and done.

On the other hand, we have enough foreshadowing about what might come next that I can already imagine the kinds of stories you might get.

BargleNawdleZouss

1. Agnes Hasenbach aka The Augur: I am picturing her as a very sweet woman with Down Syndrome.

2. Still awaiting Kreios the Riddle-Maker to show up at the last minute and make a contribution.

Someperson

Neshamah: Nothing can stop my world domina—

Kreios: iF yOu HaVe FoUr PeNciLs aNd I hAvE sEvEn AppLeS, hOw ManY PaNcAkEs CaN FiT oN tHe RoOf?

Neshamah: what

Cat: proceeds to shank Neshamah at a critical moment of distraction

Chapter 53: Motion

“Greatness is a chariot pulled by ghosts: it goes nowhere without deaths, but too many will tear it apart.”

— Argea Theodosian, Sacker of Cities, Tyrant of Helike

It was the bloody middle of the night, so if they didn’t have a good reason for waking me we were going to have a brisk round of hangings.

“I’ll eat their livers,” ‘Drani groaned, pulling the pillow over her head. “Won’t even season it, yue bashtards.”

She was usually better at waking up than me but she’d, uh, put her back into it tonight. We were still both pleurably sore and exhausted. I blinked away the light from the candle borne by legionary behind the partition in the pavilion, sliding on a robe, and limped out without bothering to hide my irritation. The large orc on the other side coughed, visibly embarrassed and unsure where to look, which was mildly amusing considering that while I was showing skin it wasn’t like I had anything an orc would care to look at. My teeth were sadly herbivorous, I’d been told, and my skin thin as paper.

“There’s a situation, ma’am,” the legionary got out.

“I’d guessed,” I bluntly said. “What kind?”

“Urgent?” he ventured, carefully staring at the quill sharpener on my desk.

I sighed.

"What's the urgent situation *about*, sergeant?" I impatiently asked.

"There's trouble with the drow," he hastily said. "The Firstborn, I mean. And soldiers."

My eye narrowed.

"Which Firstborn?"

"The Lord of Silent Steps, ma'am," he replied. "And another two that are supposed to be scribes."

It took me a moment to shake out the rest of the sleep, but once I had it fell into place immediately. It'd finally happened, then.

"Send word I'm on my way," I told the orc.

He could not get out of the tent fast enough. Indrani was somewhat more awake when I returned, though when I told her I needed to go out she decided to gather all the covers to her like a cocoon and pout instead of helping me dress.

"Might not be too long," I told her as I pulled on my last boot.

She snorted, kissing my clothed shoulder affectionately.

"Yeah, like I'd buy that," Indrani said. "Take too long and I'm helping myself to your liquor stash, fair warning."

"Pest," I fondly replied.

I left her to it, closing the flaps on the Mantle of Woe and finding my staff waiting for my hand. The night was oddly pleasant – weather around Keter was largely unchanging, knowing neither winter nor summer – and I took a deep breath as I limped out. With wards to filter the air, there was no need to worry about the poison mists in the camps. Two legionaries were waiting to escort me to the 'situation', saluting as I approached, but it was not to them my eye turned. A dark shape moved against the dark sky, lazily gliding until it took a dive towards me. Soldiers cursed and reached for their swords, but I raised a hand to stop them.

Andronike landed on my shoulder, light as a feather, and dug her talons into the cloth of the Mantle.

"Heavy-handed of you to come in person," I commented.

"The time for subtlety is passed," the crow replied.

I snorted.

"Sounds like something your sister would say," I teased. "Where is she, anyway?"

"Bringing to life your little notion," Andronike said.

Huh. Taking that long?'

"Mastery has proved laborious," the Eldest Night conceded.

"Worth the investment," I replied. "We need all the nasty surprises we can get."

"So Komena said," the crow sourly replied.

I brushed my mind against the goddess's, intrigued, and got half a thought in answer. Andronike was convinced her sister was so enthusiastic because she wanted to be able to step on people, which I honestly thought she might be right about. Not that the elder sister was in any position to throw stones.

"Like you don't also hunt rabbits for sport," I replied, rolling my eye.

The legionaries had been careful not to stare as I bickered with the massive god-crow made of malevolent shadows, but I saw in my peripheral vision that the two oldest ones – a Soninke captain and his Callowan lieutenant – seemed genuinely indifferent. I glanced at their hips, finding goblin steel blades in the sheaths, and swallowed a smile. Old hands, these two, probably from as far back as Arcadian Campaign. They'd seen me argue with so many unspeakable eldritch abominations it didn't warrant much interest anymore. My lips twitched.

"All right," I said, rolling my shoulder and getting an offended squawk from Andronike when I didn't spare the one she was on, "let's go have a look. It's a damned ungodly hour to be at."

"Ma'am," the Soninke captain replied, saluting with an amused glint in his eye.

It wasn't a long walk, or rather it was a shorter walk than it would be in any other part of the ring of camps. Juniper had begun planning out the layout of the siege encampments for the Army of Callow before we even left for Praes, so the ease of movement was only to be expected. High Marshal Nim's sappers might have matched us if they hadn't been saddled with the Wasteland's noble armies with a coat fresh paint slapped on them, but they'd had to wrestle with that headache so we'd come out ahead. Pickler, I suspected, would have gotten quite smug about that.

She'd not taken well how our sappers had gotten regularly outdone by those of the Legions at the Battle of Kala and since grown enthusiastic about getting one over the 'cousins'.

The soldiers at the heart of the incident weren't under arrest, having done nothing wrong, but they *had* been brought to an empty drilling ground surrounded by a few lines of legionaries keeping curious eyes away. The six of them seemed less unsettled by that than the presence of the Firstborn, though. Ivah was seated cross-legged atop a training dummy, silver eyes smiling as it looked down at them, while behind it my scribes stood with watchful eyes: Trokel looked uncertain about all this, but Fania was openly fascinated.

The officer on the scene, a tall Duni captain with a long scar across the throat, was only too happy to turn over the whole mess to me. As she promptly withdrew and pulled back the lines with her, I was left with three Firstborn and six legionaries of the Army of Callow. Andronike shuffled on my shoulder proudly, like a cat dragging back a dead mouse, those fucking talons. I resisted the urge to glare at the Eldest Sister in front of everyone, but it was a narrow thing. Still, looking at my soldiers I had to say the Sisters had been pretty blunt in making their point.

Two humans, two orcs and two goblins would make up the first people outside the Firstborn who could use the Night.

"At ease," I said, having seen tension rise as the silence lingered. "None of you are up for discipline."

The highest up was a sergeant, a Callowan woman with the Summerholm look about her.

"Pleased to hear that, ma'am," she crisply said, glancing at the others. "Am I to understand that everyone here can..."

She trailed off and I cocked an eyebrow.

"Any of you have a reliable trick yet?" I curiously asked.

It was a goblin who stepped forward, hesitant. Small, even by goblin standards, and with the wrinkles that began to accrue past fifteen – nearly halfway through their lifespan, for all but those of Matron lines. He put up his hand and I felt the pull on the Night a heartbeat before a small, flickering ball of black flame erupted above his open palm.

"I was out of matches," the goblin admitted. "So I cursed and then asked for..."

He glanced at Andronike, pressing a reverent knuckle to his forehead.

"Take and rise," he fervently said. "The Crows provide."

How many years did you gain just by becoming able to use the Night? Not so many by a human's reckoning, I thought, but for him the difference it would make was beyond words. One of the two orcs cleared his throat, the burn marks going down the left side of his face striking even though the helm covered part of them.

"Can't show it," he said, "but I see better in the dark now, Warlord. Almost like it's day."

I reached out through the Night and found his mark, the small but steady trickle being drawn from the sea. None of the others volunteered anything. Both humans were women and orcs men orcs were half-and-half, but I could not help but notice both goblins were male. Some part of me smile coldly at that, the Beast laughing deep in my bones. Soon enough the Matrons would hear about that, and I could only look forward at how the fear would be keeping them up at night. Night wouldn't care about their little matriarchal racket. I looked at the two goblins, one aging and the other who couldn't be older than nine, and the wonder I saw in those yellow eyes felt to me like a sound.

The one a sharper's fuse made, just after you lit it.

"A good start," I approved. "You will not be able to do much, at first, but the power can be grown."

"It can?"

The other human was the one to speak, a young dark-eyed Taghreb who then blushed at having spoken out of turn. I smiled.

"That is the foundational virtue of Night," I told her. "To prove yourself worthy is to rise."

I could see the burning curiosity in them at my words – and the deep *hunger*, in the yet silent female orc and the aging goblin – but I would not hold their hands through this. That was the other side of the coin: Night demanded that you win your own victories. Tossing the first few outside the Firstborn to gain the power into the deep end was not a great notion either, admittedly, but I didn't have the time to take on pupils. Not six and even less the greater number that would follow in the coming days. Fortunately, as the aging goblin had said 'the Crows provide'. I glanced at Ivah, who leaped down from the dummy and landed in the dust without a sound.

"This," I said, "is Ivah of the Losara, the Lord of Silent Steps."

A shuffle and salutes ensued, with varying degrees of crispness.

"There is no finer Mighty among the Firstborn," I said, "or any I trust more deeply. It is the duty of the Losara Sigil to keep oaths and hold stewardship of the Night – a duty that now extends to all of you."

I met its eyes and it offered a shallow bow.

"Honour was given," Ivah said.

"It was meant," I honestly said, and the soldiers looked a little lost so I clarified. "Ivah will see to your education in the Night. Orders will be given to your superior officers so you are removed from several of your regular duties so you might take lessons instead."

A sharp sensation of approval from Andronike, and of satisfaction as well. At my words, but also at me. *It's only fair*, I thought at her. They had chosen me as First Under the Night, a stranger to the Firstborn who had changed the ways of their people. Now it was their turn: let Ivah be the stranger bringing about change, working through the first apostles of the Night among the peoples of Calernia. It wasn't just lessons I was giving Ivah with that assignment: it was getting to shape traditions in the use of Night for all these people, traditions that would echo for decades and perhaps centuries to come. It was a lot of power to give someone, but how could I not trust Ivah? *Maybe tomorrow*, the Lord of Silent Steps had said as a god was slain and another made anew.

There were some deeds that made distrust seem obscene.

All seemed pleased at the news, not that an order coming from the Queen of Callow was something that left a lot room to refuse, but a closer look told me that the sergeant who'd been the first to break the silence was hesitating. I gestured for her to speak up.

"I don't want to overstep, Your Majesty," she carefully said, "but is it really alright? The House of Light..."

"It's nothing for you to worry about," I firmly told her.

She looked skeptical, though unwilling to contradict her own queen.

"The age is coming to an end, sergeant," I told her, the crow on my shoulder spreading her wings. "There is room enough on Calernia for both Light and Night. And if there isn't..."

Andronike took flight, cawing as the soldiers flinched away.

"I'll *make* it," I said, and spoke the words with cold certainty.

None of them seemed inclined to doubt me after that. I'd meant every word, anyhow. The House Insurgent already tolerated crows

being painted on the Army of Callow's banners, and they would make their peace with Night so long as it was sworn to respectable purposes. As for the priests back home, the so-called House Constant, they'd fall in line. I saw none of them here, with the world on the edge of the knife, and earned them precious little patience from me.

Or from any of the soldiers that'd be coming back home, I'd wager.

I left them in Ivah's safe hands, limping away from the grounds, and as my escort fell in behind me I considered whether or not I should wake Vivienne to tell her immediately when I was shaken out of my thoughts.

"Your Majesty, if I could have a word?"

I turned and the pin told me what the girl was at a glance, if not who: the painted skeletal hand of the adjunct secretariat. Too young to be anything more than a messenger, I thought, with her chubby cheeks and blond locks at least an inch past what regulations allowed. The secretariat wasn't part of the Army of Callow, though. Once upon a time they'd been under Hakram alone, though his departure had seen them passed off to Vivienne. She'd left Hakram's right hand man in command and intervened only to smooth differences between the phalanges and the Jacks – the spies sometimes got in each other's way – which I considered wise of her.

Much like me, the least thing she needed was more on her plate.

"Message?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Lord Hierophant asks that you attend him immediately," the girl said. "He is under the threefold wards."

I stared flatly at the messenger, who blushed under the scrutiny. It wasn't her fault, Masego had been the one to send her, but now I was morbidly curious.

"Assuming I'd been asleep at this hour like any halfway reasonable person would be," I said, "what would you have done?"

"Kicked this up to my lieutenant," the girl honestly replied.

I clapped her shoulder.

"You will go far in life," I told her just as honestly, which turned the blush incandescent.

The blond hair and faint accent painted a particular picture, thou

"Liessen?" I asked, taking back the hand.

"From Paltridge," she replied. "It's a little town near the border with Vale. But I had family in Liesse."

Her and half of Callow. It'd been the second-largest city in the kingdom and one of the wealthiest.

"Is that how you ended up with that bit of ironwork on?" I asked, glancing at the iron pin.

"I enrolled just before you led the army into the Wasteland," she proudly said, then deflated. "I, uh, didn't do well at the Laure training camp but I know Chantant and I'm good with numbers so the adjunct secretariat reached out."

She paused, a little breathless.

"I wanted to fight Praesi, not run messages," she admitted, "but it was better than going back to scribe work while the world's going to shit."

To my amusement, the blush returned with a vengeance when she realized that she'd just cursed in front of the Queen of Callow. Yeah, she was definitely new to this. Most of the phalanges that served as my guards were former legionaries, and all of them knew I could curse in twice as many languages and thrice as filthily as any of them. I cocked my head to the side, studying her.

"No regrets?"

"It hasn't been like I thought it'd be," she admitted. "We fought Praesi but not for long, and now they're on our side."

"There's been Praesi on our side from the start," I reminded her. "I first raised the Army from the Legions of Terror."

She shot me a surprised look.

"Those aren't *Praesi*," the girl told me. "They fight under the Sword and Crown. Everyone knows it's the High Lords we need to hang, Your Majesty."

When I was your age, I thought, saying that would have gotten you called a traitor in half the kingdom's taverns. I looked at the fair-haired girl who couldn't be older than seventeen, one of the children raised in the shadow of the battles I'd fought since becoming the Squire, and saw in her a seed of what Callow would become. A seed I'd washed Calernian fields in blood to water, that my father had died to grow. I smiled. Can you hear her talk, Father? It might have been just an inch, but we moved the world. We changed the story.

"Maybe one day," I said. "First we find out if the Confederation of Praes makes for a better neighbour than the Dread Empire did."

"I'll buy that when pigs fly," the girl muttered.

"You'd be surprised what wings can grow on," I drily replied, thinking of the first time I'd ever met Masego. "Thank you for the message..."

She straightened.

"Alice, Your Majesty," she told me.

"I might as well go see what my favourite madman wants, since I'm already up," I said. "You have a good night, Alice."

She saluted, the angle of it off by large enough a margin I pitied whoever had been her drill instructor, and I left her to her duties. The threefold wards mentioned in the message told me exactly where Zeze was at, since there was only one such set in the entire ring of camps. We'd ripped out the anchor stones from the Arsenal when we shut it down and Roland had led a team to spend almost five months repurposing them into the strongest movable defensive wards in the entire Grand Alliance. We kept all sorts of important assets in there, but the two that stood out were the Severance and the Autumn Crown.

Considering Masego had begun losing interest in the Severance not long after it was forged while Quartered Seasons had been his baby from the start, I could give a good guess as to which the two he'd be at.

Even in the middle of the night the place was heavily guarded, mostly Lycaonese foot with goblins spotters, but I didn't have to wait long before being escorted past the first layer of wards. I was both known and expected. The Autumn Crown was held in the deepest part of the depository, past the other two layers of wards – I felt my connection to Night weaken, and if the wards were actively turned on me I suspected it might be outright silenced – but the chamber in which it was kept wasn't all that impressive to look at. From the outside, it was just a large steel cube with seven rings of painted Mavian script wrapping around it.

The door was opened for me by a grizzled old Lycaonese warrior – Neustrian, by the look of the tabard – and I stepped through a threshold, the air pushing back against my movement as if were water. I blinked away the unpleasant sensation as the door closed behind me, leaving me to look at the glowing insides of the cube. Trismegistan runes I was more familiar with burned on what seemed like every spare inch of steel, from ceiling to floor, carved cleanly so that stepping on them would change nothing. The light they let out reminded me of embers, though the colours of it was...

colder. Hierophant was standing deeper in, before the Autumn Crown itself.

It was a pretty piece, as fae crowns tended to be. All copper and bronze, worked to look like a circle of roots, but those roots grew small branches and dead leaves that looked incredibly lifelike. Because they were, I realized after a moment. At some point, impossible for my eye to perceive, the metal turned to flora. We'd changed that crown, though, and it showed. Long, thin nails of iron had been hammered into it and jutted out like needles while a closer look revealed precise cuts into the roots and leaves. About a scalpel's length. A vivisector of miracles, Hierophant had called himself when he first came into his Name.

He'd lived up to the boast.

"Checking in on your work?"

Masego half-turned to look at me, as unsettling a change as the way he now wore his eye cloth: like me, covering only one eye. His own was not dead, still bright with the light of Summer's sun, but it felt as though we were mirroring each other. *If enough of us take wounds, we'll have half a dozen mirrors to go around.*

"Roland assured me it was all secured, but I wanted to see for myself," Hierophant said.

I hummed, limping closer. The sound of my staff against the steel uncomfortably like a blow.

"So is it?" I asked.

He nodded.

"It will work," Masego said. "When the Dead King is made to wear it, he will lose all power over the dead."

"Some might call that a fair trade, given what he'll get in exchange," I mused.

"He won't," Hierophant said, coldly satisfied.

For the Autumn Crown to be a gift – something that was not an attack, that could not be *refused* – it needed to be a boon. A boon with a price was allowed, but the gift still had to give Neshamah something. We didn't want to empower him, of course, but to an extent we had to so there'd been a fine line to walk. The conclusion had been that we should give him something he already held, as much as possible: immortality. The Autumn Crown, after Hierophant's cuts, now served the purpose of making whoever bore it a fixed point in Creation. He'd known how to do it because

he'd spent about a year studying that very thing, back in the day.

I'd been a fixed point as Sovereign of Winter, after all, though most people had simply believed it to be regeneration. In practice, my shape had been fixed and Winter's power simply filled the mould anew whenever part was damaged.

The Dead King would gain much the same benefit, though for him the real prize would be that we were pretty sure his soul would receive much the same treatment. Should it cut or damaged or anything else at all it would form anew, whole again. Given that the Hidden Horror's great fear had always been the way he was finite, that every personal loss for him was permanent, the property would make the Autumn Crown enough of a gift that it could not simply be fought off like a curse. Even if the boon came at the price of losing all power over the dead, ending his control over all his armies.

We'd wanted to kill his magic entirely – Masego most of all, for obvious reasons – but we'd been unable to get that right in time. This would have to do. Besides, even if he still had most of his magic we could imprison him in the Twilight Ways if the right person watched over him. Unless, of course, the Ways were broken for good and all my plans were ashes. He didn't seem interested in volunteering answers and it took me a moment to get the stomach to ask, but I got it out.

"What did you find?" I asked, licking my lips.

"The Ways were destroyed over the surface broadly corresponding to the Kingdom of the Dead," he said.

"That's... good, relatively speaking," I ventured. "Is the break temporary or-"

"Permanent," Masego bluntly said. "He was... thorough."

"So the Ways will be dead over the Kingdom of the Dead," I mused. "Yeah, there's enough symmetry there I could see fate lending a hand to make it stick."

"It's not that simple, Catherine," he said. "Mortal hands created Twilight, it is imperfect in ways a realm like Arcadia is not. More than that, it is *young*."

"Fragile," I quietly said. "You meant it's fragile."

He nodded. I grit my teeth.

"How bad?"

"I cannot be sure," Hierophant, "not without further study, but I believe the destruction will ripple out. Like cracks on a sheet of ice."

"Stop dancing around it," I said. "What are we losing?"

He hesitated.

"Most of it," Masego said. "Between seven to nine tenths."

I sucked in a breath.

"You're sure?" I asked.

"Not immediately," he specified. "But over the next decade, I believe most of the Twilight Ways will collapse. Only anchored points and their surroundings will be wholly unaffected."

My eye narrowed.

"The gates," I said.

"And Liesse, which is the heart of the realm," he added. "It seems likely there will be other stable pockets I do not know of, spared collapse by happenstance or other reasons, but the only reliable travel through what will remain of Twilight will be from gate to gate."

I breathed out, feeling out his words with my Name. There was a shape there, I saw with dread. Twilight broken, like its crown, ruined shards of it intertwining with Creation wherever they fell. There would still be other paths than the gates, but few save Named would ever find them and they would be terrifyingly dangerous to tread. For all others who would travel under the twilight sky, there would only be the roads between gates. I passed a hand through my hair, frustrated. That a fucking ritual could undo Tariq's-

"Ah," I muttered, the piece falling into place.

Masego cocked an eyebrow.

"We did this to ourselves," I sighed. "At least in part."

"It does seem likely the Dead King imitated Akua's ritual out in the Wasteland, after he knew it possible," the dark-skinned mage agreed.

"Sure," I shrugged, "but that's not the part I mean. When we first made the Twilight Ways, the Grey Pilgrim scarified himself to make them. That's a heavy weight, Zeze. It'd take more than just a ritual, however good, to undo that."

"But you resurrected him," Masego hazarded, looking genuinely interested. "Which changes the balance of the phenomenon."

"That weakened it, but it might have stuck anyway," I mused. "He *thought* he was going to die for good and that matters. He killed the Saint for it, too, and she was probably his closest friend. That's more weight. No, what actually fucked us was Hainaut."

"Where he sacrificed himself again," Masego noted.

"Fate is blind, but also fair in her own way," I told him. "She doesn't play favourites: we don't get to make Tariq's sacrifice count *twice*."

The moment he'd called down that star, the Ways had become fragile. The Dead King wasn't all powerful, of course, and it seemed like he'd had to rely on second order effects to do most of the heavy lifting when wrecking the realm. Wouldn't be perfect or instantaneous either. But it'd only become possible at all because of Hainaut and the second time the Peregrine spent his life for the greater good. I grimaced. No good deed went unpunished, huh?

"It hurts us," I admitted, "but we're not knocked out of the war. We'll start to feel the larger consequences after either we've won or we're all dead."

"It should still be possible to retreat through Arcadia after the siege is ended," Masego nodded.

Only we can't drink the water from Arcadia the way we could Twilight's, I thought, and lack of water would kill us even faster than starvation. There was no need to burden him with that knowledge right now, though. It was not in his power to solve.

"I am sorry I could not offer better news," he said.

"I'd rather thank you for them not being worse," I replied, "but either way it's no fault of yours."

He studied me for a moment.

"You look tired," Zeze said. "Get some sleep."

"Back at you," I snorted.

I turned away from the crown, making for the door.

"Come on," I called out. "I bet Indrani's still up. She'll want to switch tents if you're going to bed, so you might as well pick her up on the way."

I put on a smile that was a tad forced, feeling tired in ways that had little to do with the hour. Maybe it'd all look a little

less bleak with a few more hours of sleep into me, I thought, but then maybe it wouldn't.

Gods knew I wouldn't hold my breath.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Linnus42

Fate Says No Double Jeopardy on Heroic Sacrifices.
Only get to sing that story once.

Night in the hands of non Drow. Interesting I am not not sure any of them will get strong enough to matter much given how fast this siege has to go but the ability to spread out more troops who can see ambushes in the night and operate in the dark that aren't Named is quite useful.

Cat I assume will wander around and bump into someone for another conversation. Viv has popped up more then once, Indrani, Masego, Ivah, Arthur, Christophe, Cordelia and Augur...so a convo with Hakram and Akua seems in order and maybe another with Hanno. Deep cut would be Killian lol.

Insanenoodlyguy

they are about to potentially be able to kill massive amounts of people, or take from their own comrades as they fall. This is actually prime conditions to get some people strong enough to make a difference. And decent odds of the first Name that uses night.

Linnus42

Sure but you have to remember Cat says they need to make major progress in 8 days. And they have 2-3 months max to finish this, so I doubt any of the new Drow climb the tree quick enough to be super relevant at the end. Doesn't help none of these characters are really relevant unless we see a human or goblin or orc we already know using Night say Killian, Aisha, etc...

shikkarasu

I absolutely love the idea of declaring these 6 'new Drow'. Like how being a Dwarf had remarkably little to do with genetics in Discworld.

Cpt. Obvious

The story has become so massive I have a hard time remembering everything, but weren't there some rules added regarding who the Drow were allowed to "harvest" night from? That they can harvest enemies they kill is s given. But I'm uncertain about the rules regarding fallen sigil mates. I'm pretty certain Sve-Noc no longer allows Mighty to kill and harvest from their own guild indiscriminately. But what about those killed by the enemies?

Sir Nil

On one hand, the new Night wielders are unlikely to gain any powerful abilities during this battle.

On the other hand, if they win and survive, this is pretty much the perfect levelling opportunity.

ruduen

It really depends. Remember, to Night, proving oneself worthy is to rise. A battle like this is certainly quite an opportunity to prove oneself worthy.

In addition, at this time, if Night is equivalent to Light... Well, it's good to think about whether that power is now an investment from the Gods Below anymore, or if it's entirely within the hands of the crows. The sudden gift of a known but previously ungranted power would be quite a bit of name-bait if it was Light. And given the recent changes in the Night, combined with Cat's precedent as a Night-wielding Named...

This is a danger, but also quite an opportunity. Not one Cat (or anybody) could visualize right now if Night primarily operates under villain stories, but when that sword snaps...

[AviKav](#)

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2021/11/09/chapter-48-root/>

> I watched the faith, the earnest belief of millions of drow swelling the godhead of Sve Noc, and let out a convulsive laugh. After all these years, all the sacrifices and the despair and the darkness, the two sisters had found the end of their winding road: they'd slipped the noose. The debt of the Firstborn would be wiped clean, the destruction they'd staved off with a loan and then Winter's flesh at last gone for ~~food~~ good. They were no longer finite, their godhead a living and breathing truth, and so what did a few measly years mean for them to pay? Faith fed Night, fed its twin goddesses, and like a beacon in the dark their power filled the sky above us.

> Sve Noc paid the old debt of the Twilight Sages, returned the years borrowed, and for them it was no different than a sigh. Time meant nothing to the immortal.

[Liliet](#)

I think Night is under the command of the crows, but is Name-bait anyway. Any power is, from political to stolen from fae.

dadycool

And so it begins. Darkness spreads and Night grips ever more mortals in its talons.

It's a shame about the Twilight Ways, though. It really seemed like a big step towards the Age of Order, but I'm sure in time we'll come to see this as for the best, somehow.

LarsBlitzer

I'm fairly sure that Masego will come up with a way to create new Twilight gates eventually, stabilizing the disruption DK started. Like he said, it'll take about a decade. It won't be quick, and it'll likely be very expensive, but reliable transport from point A to B, bypassing whatever dangers there are in the physical world and shortening travel time in the bargain? It'll be worth the cost.

KageLupus

From a long-term narrative perspective, I think the Twilight Ways had to be broken in the way that they were in this chapter. Cat's original plan for the Twilight Ways was to have it as a place she could lock down the Dead King. But then she immediately saw the tactical advantage that it provided and started using it for rapid troop deployments.

This was necessary for the fighting against the Dead King, but imagine the world in 20 years after the DK is defeated. The Twilight Ways aren't broken and DK being locked inside only really messes with a small area of the Ways, so why wouldn't you still use them for troop deployment? Warfare in that world is going to be **vicious** because it is so easy to take a swing at your enemies when you can move through the Ways. A journey that would take months only takes weeks instead, is much harder to scout or harass than if they were in Creation, and even if you know it is coming it is much harder to figure out exactly where the other army is going to reappear.

Breaking the Twilight Ways reduces their use for advanced warfare, but only after it was used to get to the final battle with the Dead King. It also puts the Heroes backs to the wall and turns this last fight into a potential "final stand"

situation. Which is probably a calculated risk on the DK's side since it puts him in a dangerous position storywise but also sets the stage for him just letting the Grand Alliance walk home the long way while dying of thirst.

[Liliet](#)

> Cat's original plan for the Twilight Ways was to have it as a place she could lock down the Dead King. But then she immediately saw the tactical advantage that it provided and started using it for rapid troop deployments.

The other way around actually. At least, she sold it to the heroes at Princes' Graveyard as "making a highway for our armies".

shikkarasu

"We're going to make a god."

But, Catherine, that's Hubr-

"Then we're going to kill that god and make a highway out of it's bones."

...I ...What?

I think I understand; The God's can't punish us for hubris if we keep doubling down. Any punishment the Heavens invent for us will be insufficient by the time it is applied.

Truly, the Lately Queen is wise beyond her years.

shikkarasu

We call this 'The Hubris Shield' strategy in my DnD group. Also WTFork happened to my italics? I swear I closed them after the incredulous 'what'.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Thank you WordPress.

Editing a comment is so 1990's.

JJR

"There would still be other paths than the gates, but few save Named would ever find them and they would be terrifyingly dangerous to tread. For all others who would travel under the twilit sky, there would only be the roads between gates."

It sounds to me like the twilight realm is going to become a bit dichotomous. There will be roads of light between gates and safe to use and paths of darkness that only the powerful would dare to tread. Both still twilight, but on opposite ends perhaps.

[Hargabga](#)

So where she'll stick Fixed King now? And with whom? Just like the best Catherine's plans, it went off the rails and burned green long before she got to implement it. I wonder how it'll tie into Neshamah's greater plan that somehow involves whatever Yara is after.

Darkening

Liesse is still gonna exist, so she might trap him there still somehow.

edrey

well, you could say its the twilight of the age of wonder, and the Dawn of the age of order, they would find a way just in time. i am sure.

Night is coming, the sacrament of struggle will change everything and cant help but think andronike as a cat. it really fit her.

Juff

Typo Thread:

by legionary > by a legionary
her like > herself like
claps > clasp
subtlety is passed > subtlety has passed
as Arcadian > as the Arcadian
and since > and had since
orcs men orcs > orcs
smile coldly > smiled coldly
forward at > forward to
and earned > which earned
which her > with her
picture, thou (missing stuff)
team to spend > team that had spent
which the two > which of the two
goblins spotters > goblin spotters
closer. The > closer, the
it cut > it be cut
scarified > sacrificed

Reader in the Night

What I'm more interested in is, rather than non-drow gaining Night, now that Night isn't a godhood, will drow be able to gain Names? Everything seems to indicate that the next generation of drow will be magic-capable again, or at least have a few magic-capable children born.

If the drow can get Names...

BargleNawdleZouss

Random tangential question: while all this is going on, what are non-combat Named such as Relentless Magistrate and Sculptor doing?

Konstantin von Karstein

I think it would depend on their abilities. The RM could stay in Salia to prevent infiltration, or do so in the camps.

ninegardens

I think this is the third chapter in a row where Tariq has shown up.

That's... fair. All the mentions made perfect sense in context, but it is an interesting sort of shadow being cast.

... Also VERY on character for Grey Pilgrim to still be having an impact this far after his death... mostly for the better, but always with that twinge of remorse.

[Liliet](#)

It's one thing I really like about Guide: characters who die don't *disappear*.

mamm0nn

Twilight breaks

Cat: Hm... Now we need a new infinite realm to imprison the Dead King in. *Grabs Wandering Bard's flacon.* This should do.

[sengachi](#)

Oh wow, I was thinking and chuckling about what Catherine's argument with a dark god (whose voice has been described as extremely unpleasant for mortals) must be like for her soldiers. But then to see that two of her older hands just don't even freaking care?!

HAHAHAHAHAHA

Someperson

Goblins gaining Night is every bit as beautiful as I hoped / expected.

Someperson

Welp that wasn't supposed to be a reply to anythin else but whatever

[onedollargum](#)

Tariq being able to cause Catherine problems even after he's died feels very on-brand for him.

nick012000

Well, it looks like the Dead King's just foiled Plan Inprison The Dead King In The Twilight Ways Forever. No Twilight Ways in Keter to inprison him in anymore. They'll need to find somewhere else to stash him if they're still planning on stashing him somewhere.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Maybe they can get in contact with a Choir and stash him in one of the Heavens. Then again, it seems like mortals don't get to invade the Heavens like they sometimes do the Hells. In any case I'd be surprised if my idea is even vaguely similar to what they go with.

Sykomantis

I'm betting on the Dead King being forced to teach magic to uppity brats in Cardinal for eternity. Truly a hellish existence

ninegardens

Didn't his magical textbooks just download his mind into your body by default?

Pretty sure I wouldn't trust him as a teacher.

Sykomantis

Yes but that's before he gets the crown. After he gets it and doesn't have to worry about dying or being killed, he probably wouldn't have a reason to do that anymore. Plus they could just make him teach from memory, no textbooks allowed.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I'm not sure that would be better.

All curriculum from the Dead Autumn King would need to be audited by Agnes & Masego prior to any students seeing it. At the least.

Daniel E

I appreciate that the Goblin's prayer uses Catherine's Squire-Aspects.

Crash

Well, since you mentioned.

Cat told the Drow to Struggle and Learn in this new chance they have gotten as well.

If you wanna be poetic I'm sure there's something to be said about the ruins of a people and Fall/Break. Seeking deeds for their goddesses and such. The worthy Take, the worthy Rise and all that.

Cat's Aspects are fun like that!

Xinci

The fixed point thing is highly useful...especially since Winter was always connected, across both time and space. This holds some rather serious potential implications on Neshemash's new path to apotheosis. At least in part, it means he may not need to be in conflict with them anymore.

*arcanavita*15

I like Cats talk with the person who was part of the phalanges, it really goes to show how much Callow has changed for the better even with all of the negatives her reign has brought that even if by only a bit she and her father's dream has been accomplished.

*arcanavita*15

Both of the Night wielding goblins are male which is just another nail in the coffin for the matrons, Cat really enjoyed that the Beast even got a laugh out of it.

RoflCat

So, we have Nightstalker and Cursespitter in the making?

An orc who fight in the night as well as a Mighty, but can also function in the day, and a goblin 'mage' who cast spells by cursing aloud.

I'm guessing one of the humans or the other goblin will become among the first 'priest' of Night, gaining favor by spreading faith of Night instead of through battles.

Darkening

Y'know, it's a small thing, but it's interesting seeing an orc continue to refer to Cat as Warlord when there's an actual Warlord running around these days. I guess she's still his Warlord even if his species has a new ruler.

[Liliet](#)

Orcs have not historically been a united people. There might have only been one The Warlord at a time, but there might well have been multiple variations on the Name running around, like all the Knights these days. There being a Warlord over there

while you're over here with your own Warlord is what Warlording is all about: no point if there isn't anyone to war with.

SpeckofStardust

3 things.

1. wont the dead from his hell still obey him even without magic enforcment?
2. Will he just become King without the Dead?
3. Why not just simply kill him?

ninegardens

Chuckling hats at people is easier than killing them. The story fu is less against you. Also, you can probably get away with "gifting" the hate to any ONE of his bodies, as opposed to having to find his "true" body (whatever that might mean) for the sake of murder.

[kaldurak](#)

You'd be trying to kill someone who has been dead for millennia.

Travis Michael Chin

1. I'd say rather than being obeyed, the dead currently are controlled. If the dead are released, the ones without fine control will probably just go feral (which I think is how soldier dead are usually designed), and the ones with souls will likely either be free to die, or free to do as they will. He'll still have loyal followers, of course, but he's not scary because of his followers.
2. The Risen King? Autumn is still a season where things go to die.
3. The story is much, much weaker for killing an ancient horror vs sealing it. I think they just don't have the capability.

Crash

Plus, Evil in a Can is a classic!

Chapter 54: Animus

"Men should always make grand plans. What better way is there to please the Gods than to make them laugh?"

– Louis Merovins, seventh First Prince of Procer

Ater had been deeply wounded by the siege that brought about the fall of the Tower.

Praes' capital had not been sacked – though the Clans had cheerfully helped themselves to all the riches in the camps of the High Lords outside the city – but the battle within its walls had arguably been more brutal than your average sack was. The destructive brawls between Named and harsh street-to-street fighting between Praesi defenders and my Army of Callow had been damaging enough, but then my father had unleashed the giant spiders and the High Lords had answered by emptying their arsenal of horrors to turn the tide. When I left Ater for Salia, the number floating around was about a quarter of the citizenry dead and large part of the city uninhabitable.

It wasn't a bad a butcher's bill as the Doom or the end of Thalassina, but it had still been a cruel day for innocents.

Still, like most of the many Praesi tragedies it had not come without attendant opportunities. Corpses were raised to lend a hand to the rebuilding, devils summoned to clear out the last spider nests, spellfire unleashed to clear the streets. That'd been only the small part, though, because the finest mages in the once-Empire had been tasked with raising flying fortresses for the war on Keter and given the forbidding of human sacrifice they'd gotten... inventive. With a clear path into the caverns under Ater, the Praesi had gone in and hemmed in the spiders with wards before sacrificing them by the thousands. It wasn't as good as humans would be, I was told, but quantity had a quality of its own.

The first wave of 'fortresses' had been chunks of Ater ripped from the ground, mostly towers and gatehouses. After that it'd gotten trickier, the mages having to gather the sacrificial power before moving it out of the city for a second ritual. There were, to my absolute lack of surprise, a bunch of mostly empty fortresses around Ater whose purpose was largely to wait around until someone would set them aflight. The War College had used them for war games occasionally, though most of the time they'd simply been used as fortified storehouses for whatever Dread Emperors had wanted to keep outside the city.

All in all, there were thirteen flying fortresses that the newly minted Confederation of Praes had brought to the siege. The three largest, the 'Old Mothers', were essentially massive flying

castles with full garrisons and mage contingents. After that we got the three the rank-and-file had called the 'Sisters', smaller castles with strong curtain walls that'd been built explicitly to be raised as flying fortresses. The last seven were nameless, cobbled together from the ruins of Ater. I'd used one in Salia when having my... polite disagreement with Cordelia and the heroes, and two more had been along, but the last four had been slower to follow.

That was because High Marshal Nim and the now-reinstated General Sacker had gotten together to think about the siege of Keter before beginning their march, and they'd come to a realization: about nine tenths of the traditional Legion arsenal was going to be useless when attacking the city.

The Crown of the Dead had a moat in the form of the gaping chasm, but that bloody thing was miles deep at least. Unlike a river moat or a pit a few feet deep, there was no way we could fill it. We weren't going to be starving out *undead*, either, which left siege weaponry as the way forward. Only those walls were thicker than any other city's on Calernia, because the Dead King had nothing but hands and time and enemies to prepare against, so while chipping away at them with catapults and trebuchets was technically possible it would be... difficult.

We had the range, it was true, but even *regular* city walls took long to crack even under concentrated fire. It would take months of bombardment, if it worked at all, and we didn't have months to spare. That was without bringing sorcery into the mix, since those walls were all warded to the Hells and they'd be defended by dead mages. No, if we wanted to take the Crown of the Dead before doom came calling then we'd need to storm the walls. More precisely, the gates: the four stone bridges across the chasm were the only ways in and out of Keter.

They were also, naturally, the most heavily defended parts of the ramparts.

Nim and Sacker had considered what an attack on those gates through four funnels with overlapping siege weaponry positions and waiting mage nests would be like and I'd felt their wince all the way from Salia. It'd be a fucking slaughter, exactly the kind of killing floor that Neshamah could use to erode our army into nothing. Their solution to that, instead of finding a way to force the gates quickly, had been to broaden the assault. Which was how I'd come to stand looking at the four constructs the Jacks told me legionaries had taken to calling the 'Ugly Cousins'.

When not in flight the things looked like some sort of botched stone corridor, but when they began to rise their purpose was suddenly clear: they were siege towers, the kind only Praesi could make. Only since the moat was so wide and deep, they'd

ended up looking like some sort of oblique, upwards-sloping hallway. I laid my palm against the stone of the one I stood close to, feeling the sorcery pulsing within even when it was grounded.

"I am told they take almost an hour to get up in the sky."

I'd heard Chancellor Alaya coming. I'd even heard her dismiss her guards when she got close, though it was only now that she'd addressed me directly I was bothering to turn and face her. She'd gotten older, that was the first thing I noticed. Her once perfect skin had gained some crow's feet, but it was more than that. Malicia had always been immaculate, perfectly put together even when it was absurd she should be, but that'd been the Name. Alaya of Satus, who was Chancellor of Praes but not Named, was just as mortal as the rest of us.

That meant dust stuck to her clothes now, that light didn't always offer her the most flattering of angles and the tailored green dress she wore was just that. Tailored. Not cut for her by the very hand of fate. She was still one of the most strikingly beautiful women I had ever met – more beautiful than Akua, even, honestly compelled me to admit – but it was no longer supernatural. She was beauty, now, not *the* beauty.

"We still have to keep them grounded until the assault," I replied. "We've got the power to spare to keep them in the sky, sure, but up there they wouldn't be under the protection of our wards."

And I had no doubt whatsoever that the Dead King would begin taking shots at them the moment he could.

"So they remain asleep until tomorrow," Chancellor Alaya said.

I grunted, agreeing but displeased about it. I'd told ordered Juniper yesterday to prepare for an assault today, and she had, but that was the Army of Callow. The Legions were able to prepare quickly enough to follow suit, but most other armies were not. For once it wasn't even Procer that was the worst foot dragger, since the despite Empress Basilia's best efforts the League armies were still a fucking mess. Their command structure was unified in name only, and apparently Bellerophon's generals took to instructions like cats to water. Tomorrow morning that was what I'd gotten back.

Frustrating, but going in half-cocked against Neshamah would cost us more than just time.

"So they will," I said. "I hear the Confederation will be taking the lead on the storming of the walls."

"We have the assets to make the attempt and High Marshal Nim believes it is sound tactics," she replied. "Besides, to be the first to bleed will wipe away some of the blemishes on our reputation."

Blemishes you put, I almost said, but bit my tongue. It was true, but what point was there in saying it?

"You don't think the assault will succeed," I noted.

An eyebrow was cocked at me.

"Do you?" she challenged.

"No," I admitted. "And it'll be a costly butcher's bill for the first to poke their head in."

"So my generals agreed," the chancellor said. "But someone must take that first step regardless."

I considered her from the corner of my eye.

"And I'm sure that it'll be just a coincidence that your auxiliaries take the front," I said.

The former private armies of the High Lords still had very dubious loyalty to the new regime, for all that their owners had agreed to the dissolution of the Dread Empire and the birth of the Confederation. Even if they were brought into the fold of the Legions of Terror, their loyalties would never be certain enough for the chancellor's tastes. Bloodying them by making them the first to try Keter's defences would thin their numbers to something easier for Alaya of Satus to handle.

"Unexpected talk, coming from the woman who brought back forlorn hopes to Callow," the dark-eyed woman mildly replied.

My jaw clenched.

"You wanted to talk," I said. "Not show me the fortresses, however impressive. So talk."

I was pretty sure I knew what this was about, but I saw no need to make it easy on her. The chancellor sighed.

"Your talks with the Procerans have the Council of Matrons up in arms," she said. "And they are not yet aware that treaties were signed: the talks alone were enough for them to threaten civil war."

Good on the Jacks for catching that, I thought approvingly. In the report I read while eating breakfast there'd been a note that observers from the Matrons had been hounding the chancellor for meetings over the last week.

"Tragic," I replied, entirely unsympathetic.

Her face tightened and I got a sliver of satisfaction from having gotten under her skin.

"It is not an empty threat, Your Excellency," Alaya said. "When tribes begin to migrate, they *will* fight to preserve their power."

"And they'll lose," I bluntly replied. "Which will only accelerate their decline. The smart ones will realize that and stay out of it, find other ways to keep their tribes under their thumb."

My bet was isolation. The tribes that lived in the Grey Eyries would close their borders and clamp down on internal trade to prevent word from spreading. It would only work in the short term, though. Sooner or later the seal would break, and then the Matrons would be facing the same dilemma: be less fucking awful or have the people they're awful to run out on them. Truly the thorniest moral conundrum of our age, with no obvious and easy solution.

"They will not begin with civil war," the chancellor warned. "First they will send out the Preservers."

"Right, their little killing squads," I snorted. "Good luck with that."

"They will begin by stirring incidents between the settled tribes and the locals, Your Excellency," Alaya said, "not attempting wholesale slaughter."

"And when we catch the first lot, Vivienne will have them drawn and quartered in a Laure public square before sending word of it to every ruler on Calernia," I patiently replied. "What you don't seem to understand, Chancellor, is that I'm not fucking afraid of the Matrons. Neither are Vivienne and a hardened soldier princes who live on the other side of the continent from the Eyries."

My gaze hardened as I met hers.

"If they step out of line," I coldly said, "they will be *stepped on*."

If the Council of Matrons needed me to bring down a mountain or two on the heads before the lesson sunk in that they did not own their entire race, then I'd bring down a three just to be sure the message was crystal clear.

"How lightly you think of civil war, when it will not be yours to settle," Alaya bitterly replied.

"Coming from *you*," I pleasantly replied, "that's a little rich."

And then I scoffed, because now she'd gotten me good and angry and for all her flaws the Chancellor of Praes was not a stupid woman. She wouldn't do it by accident.

"Now tell me what it is you actually want," I continued, "and figured that riling me up first would help you get."

Her face went blank, like a mask of clay, and I almost laughed. I wasn't seventeen anymore and she wasn't the only schemer I'd ever had to deal with. Cordelia had also made it a point of angering me when we first started talking, since it made me more impulsive. Akua had been the one to pick up on it first, but I'd not forgotten.

"A concession," Chancellor Alaya said. "So that I might split them in half before conflict erupts."

"I already threw you a bone," I replied. "No munitions to be made in Procer, it's in the treaties."

"Which as, Princess Vivienne pointed out, will allow Praes and the Tribes to keep control of these goods," the dark-eyed woman said, then paused. "Or it would, if a workshop was not being built where Liesse once stood whose purpose is to make goblin munitions."

I kept the grimace off my face. Even after the purges they'd suffered in Callow, the Eyes remained uncomfortably good at their jobs. While the knowledge of how to make munitions was strictly keep within the Grey Eyries and we hadn't gotten our hands on it, we had sappers that believed they were on the track of how to make them. They wouldn't be the first, since Akua had once told me the Sahelians were pretty sure devils were one of the ingredients, and Vivienne had agreed that this was very much worth funding. The Army of Callow would lose bite without the munitions and it was a bad position to be dependent on Praes for the providing of them.

Besides, if we did crack the recipe we would crack a monopoly along with it. Callow could make pretty coin, selling the stuff to Procer for use against the ratlings and the dead.

"That would break no treaty," I said.

"It corners the Matrons enough that they will likely attempt secession again," Chancellor Alaya said. "And though you have no sympathy for me, Your Excellency, it is not only my legacy that such a thing would threaten."

My fingers clenched.

"I'm getting tired of repeating myself," I bit out. "What do you want?"

"Are you familiar," she said, "with the term 'cartel'?"

I frowned.

"It's what you call it when merchants band together to fix the price for something," I said. "A consortium, only with full control on the goods they're selling."

"I would ask that all sales of goblin munitions beyond the Legions of Terror and the Army of Callow be handled entirely by a common trade company," Chancellor Alaya said, "whose profits would be shared among the owners."

So that was her angle, I thought. She'd throw parts of the ownerships at a few of the strongest Matrons so they'd get rich and continue backing her against other tribes, turning the goblins against each other instead of all the Tribes against her. A classic Malicia play, especially the part where her office would be one of the owners and would rake in gold as well with very little effort needed to be put in. And the worst part was, it was a good deal for Callow as well. Not only did it help stabilize Praes while it was trying to reform, if the only two existing sources of munitions agreed on a price when selling outside then we couldn't be played against one another. *And with both the chancellorship of Praes and the crown of Callow having a direct stake in the company, even other nations would be wary of trying to strong-arm the company.*

It'd make the trade even more profitable than we'd anticipated.

"I'll consider it," I said. "Vivienne will be handling that long after I abdicate, so she would need to agree as well."

But she would, I thought, and from the glint of triumph in Malicia's eyes – Alaya, I reminded myself, Alaya – she knew it as well. I was only refraining from telling her as much because I still hated her to the bone.

"You know," I said, "I'd wondered if anything would change when I saw you in person again."

If I'd hate you less or more, I meant. If I could still look at you and see anything but the reason he got himself killed.

"Did it?" Alaya asked, her indifference too airy to be true.

"No," I admitted with a soft laugh. "Not a goddamn thing. It's like we're still standing on those fucking steps with the Tower burning behind us."

I clenched my fingers around my staff until the knuckles turned white.

"It'll always be like that, I think," I said. "Some hatreds don't burn out."

The dark-skinned woman met my eye unflinchingly.

"Oh," she softly said, "but I understand exactly what you mean. It took two of us to kill him, after all."

And I wanted to break these perfect white teeth, so rip out her heart and let it fry under the sun, but I still remembered what it had felt like when the knife sunk into him. It was her that'd paved the road to that moment, I would believe that until the day I died, but I wouldn't deny that in the end it was my hand that'd held the blade. Even if she owned every step that had led us to that murder, it was my hand stained in red.

We were done here, I decided.

"I'll see you around, Alaya," I said, eye cold. "Don't die before I come to collect."

—

I'd voiced my opinion on war councils that got too large more than once and it seemed that others shared it, since there were relatively few of us around the table. Two for each power, more or less. Lord Yannu and Aquiline Osen for the Dominion, Rozala Malanza and Prince Otto for Procer, Empress Basilia and Nestor Ikaroi for the League, Chancellor Alaya and Hakram for Praes, General Rumena and Ivah for the Empire Ever Dark, myself and the Hellhound for Callow. Twelve people were a lot when you were trying to fit a group to a table in a tavern, but it was positively austere for the war council of a continental alliance. Once upon a time Hanno and Ishaq would have gotten seats as well, but that era was over. I was the Warden, now. There was no need of another voice to speak for Named.

It was a colourful assembly, fit for the stories that would one day be told of this siege. Almost like a painting, I thought.

Careful Yannu Marave looming tall and broad over slender, deadly Aquiline as dour-faced Otto sat excruciatingly careful not to even brush against First Princess Rozala's swelling pregnant belly regardless of the steel breastplate fitted to it. Empress Basilia and Secretary Nestor leaning close as if scheming, a plain-faced woman of warrior's build that had carved out an empire and the old, tattooed scholar trying to trap her inside it. Ever-beautiful Alaya of Satus, soberly dressed in green, and the Warlord at her side: a hand of steel and a hand of bone, neither half as dangerous as the mind behind Hakram Deadhand's calm eyes.

Ivah, a cold flame in the Night whose face was silver on purple, and stooped old Rumena in his obsidian ringmail who'd be able to kill most people in this room without even using a Secret. And to finish it all Juniper and I, the tall marshal in her Army's plain armour while I kept the Mantle of Woe pulled tight around me.

It was as worthy a company as any, I thought, to chart the course that would either save or bury Calernia. I was not the only one to feel the weight of that on our shoulders, and so there was none of the politicking and pleasantries that would usually accompany the presence of so many influential people in a room. Instead we sat in sparse silence, drinks of cool water being passed, and once everyone was ready the talks began. Rozala spoke up first.

"Reports from our outriders paint what we believe to be a picture of the Dead King's plans for this campaign," the First Princess of Procer said. "In every direction undead are gathering streams from the outskirts of the Kingdom of the Dead, forming into massed armies."

She paused.

"At the moment we have counted four such armies in the process of assembly," First Princess Rozala said. "One, to our northwest, is a mere forty miles away."

"Numbers?" I asked.

"Somewhere between thirty and fifty thousand," Prince Otto briskly replied. "A true army, not the rabble that was routed yesterday."

"They are gathering around a Crab," Rozala added. "Perhaps the only one left in the entire Kingdom of the Dead."

An uplifting thing to hear, until one realized that just meant all the rest were with the armies ravaging Procer. The massive fortress-constructs were rare and we'd thinned out the numbers over the course of the war, but not anywhere near a wipeout.

"I have something in mind to handle the Crab," I said, earning raised eyebrows. "Our trouble is that those armies need to be pinned down while we take a swing at Keter."

The Dead King's plan, as the First Princess had said, was hardly impossible to figure out. Neshamah was going to keep tossing those armies at our camp whenever we tried an assault on Keter and otherwise stay back. Why should he even try to kill us when he could wait us out instead? Every passing day got him closer to victory, as another mile of Procer was devoured and our army's strength waned from tiredness and growing hunger.

"The other three armies," Empress Basilia said, "are they fighting fit?"

"Not for days yet, perhaps as much as ten for the largest force," Rozala replied. "More importantly, all of them are at least two days of march away."

Considering undead did not need to rest and could walk through the night, closer to one in practice. It was still a significant distance in the sense that none of them could realistically arrive in time to reinforce another if it gave battle near our camp. As a general some part of me was hungry at the potential defeat in detail that the position represented, but that was thinking about this wrong. Sure we might clear them out through a series of pitched battles, but to accomplish that we'd have to abandon the protection of our camp for several days and weaken our forces for only a minor gain.

Beating those armies meant nothing, after all. The only thing that mattered was taking Keter itself and those undead hosts were just expendable distractions.

"So part of our force gives battle," Basilia said, "while the rest storms the walls."

Like most Helikean commanders, the empress had an aggressive bent to her tactics. It came from Helike usually being assured of having the better army when fighting with the League or Procer, which made it tempting for its generals to seek decisive battles so the war might be won hard and fast. It was the way she'd waged war to cow her enemies in the south and it'd worked out well for her, though if she tried the same tactics against professional soldiers like the Army or the Legions she was likely to get her teeth kicked in instead. It was not a coincidence that she'd preferred to make a deal with Stygia than try to beat the Spears on the field.

In this case, though, her instincts were spot on.

"Agreed," I said. "We should take the initiative to catch them in the field instead of letting them come to the camp."

"The camps are fortified," Prince Otto pointed out. "With walls and siege artillery positions."

"We can't afford to let the Crab get too close," Lord Yannu replied, shaking his head. "Its presence has the reek of a trap."

I grunted in approval, receiving a nod of appreciation from the Lord of Alava and returning it. Lord Yannu was a cold customer, but he probably the finest general in the Dominion. Juniper had considered him as much of a headache as Rozala Malanza, when the two of them had been pursuing her in Iserre.

"There's a reason the Dead King left that particular Crab behind," I added. "It can't be needed for army upkeep, not with Keter and its forges so close."

"It'll be meant for war," Hakram agreed, bone fingers clenching. "Best to break it before it gets anywhere near our wards. You have that in hand, then?"

I nodded.

"I've been keeping some surprises up my sleeves," I idly said.

I was a little flattered by the number of wary looks that got me.

"Then we must only choose the forces to send out into the field," Lady Aquiline said. "I would claim that honour for Levant."

The other Blood flicked a glance at her, then nodded.

"Our skirmishers will be of no use forcing a wall," Careful Yannu said. "The Dominion would best serve in battle."

"Levant's captains alone will not be enough to face fifty thousand," Prince Otto said.

Which was the upper bound of what our scouts believed to be gathering to the northwest, but it was not senseless to plan for the worst case. Lycaonese had been taught the hard way to never count on luck tangling with the Hidden Horror.

"Then the Clans will march with them," Hakram gravelled. "The Confederation's forces will be key to the assault, but my warriors will be of no use until the city's cracked open. I would take a third of number lead them out with the Dominion."

The Clans had sent a little over seventy thousand warriors, all of them fine if somewhat undisciplined foot, so he was proposing to add twenty-three thousand or so to the Dominion's remaining twenty-seven. About a match in numbers, I noted, though too light on cavalry for my tastes. Basilia seemed to agree.

"I would offer the kataphraktoi to round out the force," the Empress of Aenia said. "General Pallas has experience working with most of you, she can have the command."

And she'd officially returned to the fold of Helike, now that Basilia had caught up to her. There was a round of agreement around the table, from Rozala most of all. Between serving as outriders and yesterday's battle, her own horse was being run ragged. General Rumena caught my eye, but I shook my head.

"We want to keep the surprises up our sleeves as long as possible," I told it in Crepuscular.

Besides, if the assault went south we were likely to be hit hard in retaliation during the night. If that came to pass we would need the Firstborn at full strength to defend the camps. I received a nod and that was the end of that. The talks continued for another hour, details and plans being laid out, but the bare bones were there.

Tomorrow, the steel came out.

—

Happenstance had offered me one more night than I'd planned for, one last evening before I plunged into war, and I would not waste it. I had given my word and meant to keep it. There was never time, so it would have to be made. I got my hand on a couple of rabbits and put them to roast, sent one of the phalanges to get their hands on few bottles of aragh – not the good stuff but the rough, throat-burning fare that the rank and file drank. Then I sat in the dark and waited, until I heard a gait almost as odd as my own coming close. Hakram came out of the gloom and into the fire's light, slowly coming to sit by my side. I took out a spit, the rabbit still half raw and entirely without spices, and offered it up. He took it.

Silence hung in the air, thick enough to choke.

"So I hear you've fought another god in Serolen," Hakram suddenly said. "And here I thought you'd finally kicked the habit."

And just like that, the silence was dead. My shoulders loosened.

"If we're going to talk about that shitshow," I said, "you're cracking open the bottle first."

He laughed, taking a bite of his rabbit before groping blindly for the aragh.

"So hear me out," I began, "say you're a drow looking to become a god instead of your current gods, then the Dead King comes to offer you a hand. You know, just because he's such a good friend. What do you answer?"

The Warlord mulled on that.

"Pull the other one," he sagely answered.

"That sort of answer is why you ran out of hands, Hakram," I reproached. "But hey, at least you're smarter than someone who called themselves the fucking *All-Knowing*."

I got a laugh, a brutal crack about how he hoped they'd taught me how to dodge so I wouldn't run out of eyes like he had hands, and just like that I knew it was going to be a good night.

—
I went to bed smiling, even knowing what was ahead of me.

redfate

Man is Cat pulling the last drinks with friends before death trope?

Someperson

I dunno, I doubt Cat will die permanently given that she's the main character and also has an established pattern of defying death.

But as for Hakram, well he could die, and it'd be especially sad because he and Cat are actually starting to be friends again and because he has a whole future as the first orc Named in possibly literal ages and all of what that signifies.

Shit.

Dunno if EE would cut that many story threads short, though. Would be a bit of a departure from the deaths that have happened up until this point.

Ed

But is it really cutting them short? We are in the endrun here anything is possible.

billstewartmt

She often has last drinks with friends before battles.

Veyros

She often dies...

arcanavita15

Nice chapter, good to see that Cat's happy also with her getting to banter with Hakram. I love how everyone at the table are intimidated by Cat saying she has a couple of contingencies that along with the Alaya show how far she has developed as a schemer.

Mirror Night

Yeah I gotta say this reminds me of something I don't like. Why is it only the Black Women who must pay prices for War Crimes

cause they wronged Cat? Malicia needs to get killed by Cat and Akua should guard DK for all time cause they messed with Callow?

General Basilia was massacring civilians including women and children to badly float towers while working for Kairos....if its about settling grudges of old surely Hanno and Champ should get to run her through. But she is enjoying a rather free pass.

caoimhinh

Urgh, nor this shit again... being black has nothing to do with it.

1) They aren't paying for war crimes, they are paying for hurting Catherine on a personal level.

2) Basilia's actions during that siege where they used flying towers were under Kairos's orders, so the responsibility falls on him.

3) Hanno and Raphaella have no grudge towards Basilia.

There are also a lot of practicalities involved on why certain grudges can't be pursued, and those have been shown clearly during the various chapters, like how Cat didn't kill the Cataphracts that were killing the Army of Callow, and instead chose to break their hands, or why despite how much it hurt Callow during the Tenth Crusade, the Kingdom must still keep good relationship with Procer and Catherine even had to fight while minimizing Proceran casualties.

Catherine exacting her Long Price from Alaya and Akua is a different matter, and even then she is forced to postpone killing Alaya for years.

So maybe look at things beyond the characters' skin color, things will make sense if you go beyond seeing only skin-deep.

Mirror Night

You know what a certain famous trial after a certain world war said about just following orders?
She was a high ranking general not a foot soldier lol.

Sure it might not because they are Black Women but I see only Black Women paying any long price in this series.

Karios, Basilia, Black and the Calamities got to of their friends killed. Was Basilia a major player in that no but she was a factor so that seems rather personal to me.

Regret

Was every female main character's skin colour mentioned? I don't remember. Then again, I rarely remember single skin colour in written stories except for when it is tied to a specific location and/or culture (i.e. actually relevant properties of characters). But that's largely on my shitty memory.

In my subjective experience (where skin colour is mostly absent (I am aware that is problematic in real life, but I don't read to practice for real life, I read for entertainment)), I can tell you that in my perspective Cat is not acting absurd in specifically focussing on these two. It fits without skin colour, so Occam's razor says that is the most likely explanation.

Also, Cat hates herself at least as much as she hates Alaya for Black's death and she hates Black for putting her in that situation. For your assumptions to be consistent (that only Black women receive Cat's deepest hate) both Black and Cat have to be Black too, and Black has to be a woman.

[Liliet](#)

> Was every female main character's skin colour mentioned? I don't remember.

We know the ethnicities. Soninke are black, everyone else isn't.


The only named Soninke women in the cast are Alaya, the Sahelians including Adanna the Blessed Artificer who is Akua's cousin, and Abreha Mirembe.

Before Adanna showed up in the plot (and before Akua's explicit redemption arc in Praes) there was an even more awkward problem of every single black woman in the cast being Evil and also an awful person.

Abrakadabra

There is also the repentant magister. And there is Ime the chief spy WHO was not shown to be especially evil.

[Liliet](#)

True, Ime was just in service to Malicia and her goals


Nephele was not Soninke or part Soninke, that we know of. She was not black.

Insanenoodlyguy

Because the “personal” was on the other two instead. Who are both dead, incidentally, having paid that kind of long price you complain about not happening.

[sivarajan](#)

Meting out victor’s “justice” to some for trumped up “war crimes” charges while allying with others guilty of the same or even worse is perfectly in keeping with said “famous trial.”

Cpt. Obvious

Trying to apply anything from our world to a place as different as the world of the Guide is not going to work.

In Creation stories rule to the degree that the city state of Helike

Cpt. Obvious

[WP, go fuck yourself! This comment system is a Disgrace!]

The entire city state of Helike will flip-flop between Good and Evil depending on who is on the throne. And it’s not a gradual thing either. When Kairos murdered his father and claimed the throne it didn’t take years or even weeks before the people accepted him.

Under his father Helike was on the side of the Gods above, and so was the people. Yet the moment Kairos took the title of Tyrant they were suddenly on the side of the Gods below. And they cheered him in the streets.

My point is that with a Tyrant in Helike personal choice is pretty much not on the table for the population. The Tyrants commands will be followed enthusiastically no matter how evil they are.

Now if his father had issued those same orders then he’d had been met with refusal.

It’s hard to apply our morality to something like that.

zenanii

Nah, let’s just ignore all the world building, Cat’s complicated relationship with these characters, and the way the story has developed to lead us to this path to instead focus on what really matters.

'Ladi Williams

Lmfao...very apt answer.

I'm black. But it amazes me to no end the way people (mostly white) tend to lose all sense of reasoning and rational deduction when skin color comes in.

Very real and believable world building and politics has shown why some people cannot be touched right now...but no! It's easier to bliv EE is racist instead.

[Sugar Roll](#)

How about you judge someone not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Letouriste

I don't get how you managed to go so far in this story while understanding so little about it.

All your points have been answered by others but let me tell you something: i completely forgot they were black. That's how little their skin color matter in this story.

'Ladi Williams

Exactly! Me too. A few chapters ago when we were talking about making a live action of this book or not...when people were discussing casting and race came up, I was like what! Couldn't even remember the humans were of different skin colors till that came up and I was like oh yeah yeah...Amadeus was...cat is...lol.

Zachary A Sloan

While the person who started this thread was being ridiculous, how in the world did you forget that Soninke are fantasy west-African?

Abrakadabra

I forget about it too. I remember far more about the golden eyes of the highborn. That is a far more striking feature in my mind.

Konstantin von Karstein

With that logic, as a gay man I should be offended that the only gay couple on-screen was killed.

Except that one of them was a complex, well-developed character who wasn't reduced to his sexuality, and who died saving the life of his son.

In PGtE, characters aren't just they're orientation/skin colour/whatever. And sometimes people from minorities die, or

commit atrocities. Given EE's track record, I don't think there's any sexism where you think there is.

[Hargabga](#)

Let's also mention how one of those gays was a cruel evil warlock who is basically Dr. Mengele with magic and another a literal demon. Or how the most well known evil country is inhabited by fantasy African people. Let me rephrase that: an Evil Empire of people of heavily implied African descent is fought against by a Good Kingdom of Whites. Or how the most evil person in the series, the one whom the rest of the world gathers up to kill is fantasy Jewish! OMG, dogwhistle found, EE is literally a Nazi.

Snappy270

The dead king is Jewish? How? By being a necromancer ? Sacrificing a kingdom? Conquering a hell? Or the most accomplished mage ever ? Explain.

[Hargabga](#)

His ancient language is basically Hebrew. Keter, Neshamah, Sephirah, those all are Hebrew words. I hope for all gods you actually parsed the transparent satire in my post.

Snappy270

Duh just wondered if there was truth to such accusations, didn't know that about the language. Stuff like that just makes me smile (the use of real world languages rather than anti semitism)

Konstantin von Karstein

I assume it's sarcasm...

AbraKadabra

Yeah! And in those Alian movies the xenomorphs are all evil predators, And they are all black! Now I see the big picture! 🤔



ohJohn

I wasn't gonna engage, but then I noticed the irony of saying "why does this story hate Black women, they should kill this trans character instead" and so I figured I'd mention that

PatchworkKnight

I think it's less about them being black women as much as it is the unfortunate side effect of Praes being based on some African cultures (west African, iirc). Praes is going to naturally produce the most enmity with Callowans due to the geopolitics of their relationship. Combine that with the fact that EE has made a habit of putting many women in positions of power in the setting, and you have a recipe for black women being statistically more likely to earn a long price from Catherine.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about the situation, and I don't think there's a good way to avoid this situation without entirely rewriting the story to change Praes' cultural analogues or shoehorning additional enmities to try and even it out.

Mirror Night

Your analysis is essentially correct in my book and the only insightful response to my comment. I think it's more an accident than any real malice on the part of the author. Cat turning on Praes was always going to lead to this issue. I suppose you could have made Akua or Malicia Taghreb but does having it occur to Arab and West African Women only really make it better? Don't especially think so.

The other issue is I don't think Cat's hypocrisy on Long Prices is being played as a negative. Or to put it another way I don't think most of the Fandom thinks it is a bad thing she is hypocrite. Everyone else has to put aside grudges to make this system work (primarily the Heroes) but Cat does not. She gets to have her cake and eat it as well.

Insanenoodlyguy

And yet, believing you no malice aforethought and recognizing that it's far too late to change the characters current paths, you keep bringing this up. Which says to me your reason is very simple: You want to keep having this low hanging fruit of an argument. That's my insight.

Mirror Night

I don't like it and I believe in free speech that allows for me to say I don't like it. As for your insights if I cared about them I respond to your comments.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's not that you dislike it or should or should not dislike it, it's how you keep bringing it up. The why you continually exercise that free speech right you have in this particular instance (you don't have free speech

by the way, you have the terms and conditions of WordPress on this particular forum of conversation, though admittedly you still effectively have it for this purpose and I'm just being pedantic), is what I am commenting on.

Anyway, I apparently made you care about my insight, so I consider this discourse fruitful.

[Liliet](#)

I think Mirror Night is not wrong to comment on it every time. It remains accurate after all. And would take up a lot less bandwidth if people would stop dogpiling it with "well we didn't even remember these characters were black!!!" and "are you calling EE racist?!?!"

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh I absolutely with you on "Stop feeding this flame"

Zach

This sort of thing is basically the end result of most US liberals (and politically engaged people in the US in general) viewing politics as a form of self-expression. Since actual material change is out of the question (and not something that mainstream politics will ever support), all that's left is nonsense like policing media and defining yourself in terms of your opinions about said media. There is nothing beyond the culture war.

It's just kind of depressing and pathetic. People endlessly arguing about stuff as trivial as "whether a web serial is problematic" because, on some level, they realize that any actual meaningful political change is out of the question.

Sinead

I do agree thst the cultural analogues used for Praes as the source of the starting conflict does mean that there are issues that arise over time regarding who is the antagonist to be punished.

However, I do not think the story makes Cat's Long Price mentality a good thing.

I know I have a poor memory, but the only people I can think of that were given such an attitude were Akua and Alaya. Everyone else was politics dtiving it one way or another. The cavlary in Book 5 got just a broken finger because Cat

needed the actual buy in, while the Praesi Trueblood mages in Book 3 were executed as brutal politics surrounding the Doom. Cat may have some vindication in those acts, but it's not personal grudges.

My understanding of Akua is that Cat couldn't have just killed her in Book 3 in part because of Cat's oath to Akua, which has now turned into Akua being a better person than Cat. And Cat's own mentality led her to kill her own father.

Considering that the story is seeming to lean towards rehabilitative justice over punitive justice, I still hold out that we may yet see Cat lose control of this second Long Price as well.

No comment on the fandom reaction. Wasn't thrilled with the reaction around Malicia's response to Wolof for example.

caoimhinh

Looking at it accurately, the only one really paying a Long Price is Akua, as Catherine is planning to have her keep the Dead King prisoner for eternity.

Alaya is just going to get killed, and if you consider getting killed a Long Price then all of the other characters that have been killed have suffered the Long Price and thus it is not something that only happens to black women.

Also, you accuse Cat of being a hypocrite for not compromising to make the system work, yet the very fact that Alaya is alive right now and keeping a position of authority over Praes for the next 8 years is already proof that you are wrong, and Cat kept Alaya alive exactly because Alaya was needed to make the system work.

Nobody is asked to let go of their grudges, but everyone has to refrain from acting on their grudges because they need to work together to survive.

In fact, multiple times we have seen Catherine rein herself in, not acting on her grudges because of the greater good. This is a fact, and that mindset guided her strategies during the Tenth Crusade and was the prime guideline for the Princes' Graveyard: beating her opponents without killing them because despite their many differences and conflicts, they are needed.

This also applies to a more personal level too, as Catherine greatly hates the Valiant Champion, yet Cat hasn't killed her.

ohJohN

I think calling it an “accident” – with the implication of ‘bad but unintentional’ – is still a weird take.

One of the things I really enjoy about this story is how so much of the setting is based on the historical real world, but a lot of our modern expectations are subverted – the story starts soon after fantasy-Africa colonizes fantasy-England; color discrimination is only a big structural problem in fantasy-Africa, against greenskins; gender discrimination is only a big structural problem in the Tribes, against men.

So, sure, Akua and Alaya are Black women whom the protagonist holds particular enmity towards, and I understand how that could be harmful if handled poorly – though I think it’s mitigated pretty heavily by them being well-written, complicated, frequently-sympathetic, fully fleshed out characters following their own goals and incentives like everybody else.

But they’re also representative of irl historically shitty behavior that makes such harm a concern in the first place. Akua, a rich noble from the occupying empire, is granted governance over occupied territory for political reasons and genocides 100k civilians. Alaya is one of the most successful imperialists in Praes’s history, tacitly allowed that genocide, used Still Water herself, and started backsliding on the Reforms that had begun to raise an oppressed population above ‘expendable subhuman’ status.

(It’s also notable that Cat herself has darker skin because she’s half-Daoine, a fantasy-Native American/Irish people – both of which irl have, uh, historically not had great experiences with England and its colonies.)

I just think it misses the point to claim that it’s bad, even without “any real malice on the part of the author”, that these antagonists are Black. They’re not presented in a way that reinforces or encourages irl prejudice, and it seems like a generally anti-racist message to condemn them for the same sort of imperialism, oppression, and genocide that contributes to irl racism.

Sexism is handled similarly, and I get the sense that’s less contentious: Cat hates the Matrons because of their treatment of male goblins, yet it’s pretty obvious the lesson is not ‘women are bad’, but instead ‘gender discrimination is bad’.

(Analogously, it would seem strange – whatever other problems you have with Disney’s Aladdin – to complain ‘ugh, of course they made the villain an Arab guy 🙄’)

And it's not like Akua and Alaya are the only ones she's planning cruel ends for. DK and WB are definitely on that list – and DK's Long Price seems strictly worse than Akua's, as they're materially the same (stuck in the Ways together, forever, as enemies) except Akua would be entering willingly. The rest of that list is already dead, frequently at her hands.

As for Cat's "hypocrisy", I don't really see it. Cat absolutely does "put aside grudges to make this system work": she delayed Alaya's execution – who killed some of her closest friends, is partly responsible for the current existential threat to the continent, and is wanted dead by many other heads of state for various atrocities – for the sake of the war effort and the long-term stability of Praes.

I think it bears stressing that those two are responsible for exceptional atrocities: their uses of Still Water alone are likely among the highest-casualty mass death events in centuries (the only confirmed contender is the Contrition Crusade, which Cat is similarly, uh, not super jazzed about).

It's not hypocritical for Cat to focus on them: they've objectively done way more harm than Basilia, and they're responsible for the deaths of Cat's loved ones and subjects. She's not the Platonic ideal of morality, but her fierce loyalty to those she feels responsible for is not one of her faults.

AbraKadabra

Insightful comments you want? Here it is.
You are an asshole.

Why, you might ask? Because you are actively try to ruin others enjoyment of the story by dragging real world politics into it.

Q.E.D.

Your asshole status is confirmed and proven.
Congratulations.

fictionfan

What about goblins and orcs? surely their lives are also as valuable as humans?

All lives matter!
make love not war!

*arcanavita*15

I liked to see the Cat and Alaya scene and that just confirms that she hasn't changed much, and Cat is still going to murder

her. Cat casually finding out what she's doing and then dismissing most of her plans is just something that is really cool and contrasts their earlier relationship back when Cat was still the Squire.

SpeckofStardust

""
"So hear me out," I began, "say you're a drow looking to become a god instead of your current gods, then the Dead King comes to offer you a hand. You know, just because he's such a good friend. What do you answer?"

""
Bard is that you?
No that's not the answer to the question but my response to reading this.

Letouriste

The only right answer ;D

caoimhinh

A wholesome night before the storm

Megaprr

Time and time again I see this shit being brought up. No. This has nothing to do with race or sex. The guide has gotta be the most inclusive story I've ever read. By far. The explanation here is a simple one. Basilea has no serious, personal relationship with our protagonist. Alaya does, and so it's much more meaningful and impactful for her to take this role. Whether or not Basilea should be punished shouldn't even be up to Cat either. It's a foreign country. Stop trying to shoehorn earth issues into this. They have no place in this story given how clear EEs message has been of morality, competence, and other contrasting qualities being completely independent of race/sex/sexual orientation. Cat has had other non-black/women enemies too, and most have been hit with pretty terrible consequences too yet I don't see any complaints there. And if your problem is with positive representation of minorities, the main cast literally has everyone being a different race, and more than half are women.

'Ladi Williams

Representation of minorities and political correctness is slowly being the death of Hollywood... I don't see why every story has to include minority that has no right being a major cast in a story just to satisfy small minded people anyways...

Lol Wut

First of all, your comment is basically entirely irrelevant for a lot of reasons and also shows you have some deep biases you should probably address.

To actually respond to what you said...political correctness in Hollywood is something that comes from a long history of movie makers trying to appeal to the widest possible range of people without offending anyone. If YOU are offended that businesses that make their money on mass appeal aren't willing to alienate large portions of potential audience because you think it's unfair people judge other people for their actions/what they say/the media they produce then...good for you, I guess? It's pretty ridiculous but if you want to be offended about stupid stuff then by all means, continue being wrong

The idea that political correctness has 'ruined' Hollywood is pretty ridiculous. Very few 'classic' films would become less good if they didn't have the sort of minor offensive elements that political correctness usually deals with. Most of such things are pretty small, despite how offended people get at them. Much of what is called 'political correctness' by people attempting to argue against it is actually that they have a prejudice they don't wish to have to hide and take issue with people judging them for it. That's what the phrase means, adhering to the common socially acceptable opinions/vernacular as a veneer because your prejudices mean you don't actually believe it. Your post is an example of someone only partially doing that, though, so at least you're semi consistent

This brings us to your mention of minority representation. The idea that a minority needs to have "a right" to be written about/portrayed as part of a main character makes it pretty clear you devalue anyone who is not part of the dominant cultures you identify with. This is mostly not political correctness, although you could have just come out and said "I don't like seeing minorities represented in works because I think they're lesser than me" but didn't, presumably because you knew you would be judged more harshly for saying it explicitly rather than just implying it. Again, this is not something which has "ruined Hollywood." Very few scripts really and fully address the issues of discrimination, societal pressure and the various other impacts of being part of a minority group. This is largely because most people don't like having to confront the realities of societal inequality when they're trying to enjoy themselves. This can itself be problematic, but in many cases scripts are written as if in a somewhat idealised version of reality where these things are only somewhat an issue if they exist at all, and thus having a diverse cast doesn't really affect anything negatively for you unless you have a prejudice against said type of person.

Forced diversity can be problematic if the writers don't know how to write diverse characters, but that's a writing flaw not a flaw in the idea of diverse casting. Stop accepting mediocre writers who can only effectively write very narrow types of people or put them on a more capable writing team.

Also, I'm not sure what you meant by those who want diversity being 'close minded' people. Studies have shown that having more diverse role models actually tends to increase one's openmindedness, empathy and creativity, so those who consume quality works with diverse casts and don't immediately engage in hateful kneejerk reactions reap only benefits from it.

If you don't want to practice moderation in your language or see minorities existing, that's your right. It's not your right to impose those wishes onto anyone else. You are entirely free to limit your contact with the world/ consumption of media to ensure you aren't exposed to such things, you will miss out on a lot of very good stuff but that's a choice you have to make. You are allowed to act in whatever manner you see fit provided you aren't inflicting harm on other people, there's no law to stop you being an ass. It's the rest of the world's right to judge, exclude and mock you for it if you act ridiculously, spread false ideas, and are so insecure you can't handle the idea that maybe, just maybe, people who aren't like you are equally as worthy of existence and representation. If you want to continue engaging with the world as it is, rather than being a relic of past myopic views and antiquated social structures, then I would suggest you take some time to genuinely learn about the issues involved with an open mind. Because this sort of toxic thinking damages you before it damages anyone else.

Or you could just be a hatemongering troll, lol. Because seriously, who reads a fantasy story about a mixed race, bisexual, powerful woman if they are genuinely against any form of representation. There are tons of trashy, self insert, white male power fantasy stories that suit such views far better

Abrakadabra

Longwinded bullshit.

DD

While I'm not at all convinced there's enough pattern in this story to justify the argument raised above, your own comment betrays itself. Saying "minority that has no right being a major cast in a story"? That is a concept that only makes sense if we assume that any deviation from the real-world majority (in whatever place you live) must be justified.

But if people who happen to be cis, het, white, abled, et cetera automatically have "right being a major cast", and everyone else doesn't have it in the same automatic way? Yeah, that's a problem. One that people who object to inclusive representation in media usually haven't had to experience, and therefore find it easy to ignore or deny.

'Ladi Williams

Thank you. That's what I mean by political correctness and minority representation is slowly killing Hollywood.

masterofbones

The "downside" of accurate representation is that minorities get villain roles just like everyone else.

This naturally leads to certain types of people complaining that the story is racist/sexist/whatever.

This in turn leads to the modern trend, where minorities in stories aren't allowed to have flaws or be weaker than any male/white character in any way, meaning that only white men are allowed to have actual personalities.

'Ladi Williams

Thank you very much.

Minorities and political correctness forces script writers to include casts that probably won't have been included or have no bearing on the plot and story line just to ensure "inclusion".

No single major movie can be about something anymore...has to include whites...blacks...asians...aliens...and the alphabet soup whether it has a bearing on the movie or not.

Luckily EE does not give a damn...and has just written a damn good story

BargleNawdleZouss

Pardon me if I'm being overly detail-oriented, but I would like a roster of all the Named present at the siege of Keter. I'm hoping that some of the ones who've been mentioned but not actually appeared "on stage" are shown in action, such as the Stained Sister.

'Ladi Williams

I definitely do not know all of them...add yours to this till we build a comprehensive list.

1. Cat 2. Hanno. 3 Mirror Knight 4. Archer 5. Vivienne 6. Hakram 7. Masego 8. Barrow Sword 9. Bitter Blacksmith 10.

Blessed Artificer 11. Rogue Sorcerer 12. Akua? 13. Concocter...
That's all I know of definitely

ninegardens

... Ranger (!)
Kingfisher prince
The OTHER bitter blacksmith (?)
Silver Huntress?

...
Anyone else?

BargleNawdleZouss

Here's a list of Heroes and Villains whom I believe are likely in the siege camp. I am not including non-combat Names such as the Forgetful Librarian, Sculptor, or the Doddering Sage, who almost certainly would not be part of the armies. Nor have I included Akua Sahelian or Hye Su the Ranger, as the former is not Named and the latter is not present...yet(?).

Some of these are guesses, as the characters have been mentioned but not appeared "on stage"; I'm guessing it's likely that if alive, they'll be present at the final battle. Please do mention other characters I missed, or those that have been killed.

VILLAINS

- 1 Warden Catherine Foundling
- 2 Warlord Hakram of the Howling Wolves
- 3 Archer Indrani
- 4 Princess Vivienne Dartwick
- 5 Hierophant Masego
- 6 Barrow Sword Ishaq
- 7 Red Knight
- 8 Harrowed Witch Aspasia
- 9 Pilfering Dicer
- 10 Hunted Magician
- 11 Concocter Constanza
- 12 Bitter Blacksmith #2 Helmut Bauerlein
- 13 Headhunter
- 14 Royal Conjuror
- 15 Black Knight Nim Mardottir
- 16 Skinchanger
- 17 Grave Binder
- 18 Affable Burglar
- 19 The Marauder

HEROES

- 1 White Knight Hanno of Arwad
- 2 Witch of the Woods Antigone

- 3 Rogue Sorcerer Roland de Beaumarais
- 4 Silver Huntress Alexis
- 5 Mirror Knight Christophe de Pavanie
- 6 Kingfisher Prince Frederic Goethal
- 7 Blade of Mercy Antoine de Lange
- 8 Knight Errant Arthur Foundling
- 9 Apprentice Sapan
- 10 Blessed Artificer Adanna of Smyrna
- 11 Bitter Blacksmith #1 Helmgard Bauerlein
- 12 Augur Agnes Hasenbach
- 13 Vagrant Spear Sidonia of Alava
- 14 Painted Knife Kallia
- 15 Valiant Champion Rafaela
- 16 Page Gaetan Rocroy
- 17 Myrmidon
- 18 Bloody Sword
- 19 Forsworn Healer
- 20 Silent Guardian
- 21 Stained Sister
- 22 Grizzled Fantassin
- 23 Forlorn Paladin
- 24 Swaggering Duellist
- 25 Daring Pyromancer
- 26 Stalwart Apostle
- 27 Wise Astrologer

Snappy270

Wasnt there a duelist that was sent to protect cordelia during the first stage of the war. A Villan I think.

And the Posioner that was part of the band of 5 in Mercantis, I know she probably isn't combative but could have stuff in her options that could help. Also the relentless magistrate no idea where they went too.

BargleNawdleZouss

I didn't include Poisoner or Relentless Magistrate; Poisoner might have something to contribute in a military scenario, but Magistrate would not.

As for the Duellist, see #24 above in the Heroes list; please let me know if he's actually a Villain.

Can you think of anyone I left out who'd be combat-ready or combat-adjacent?

Snappy270

Sinister physician ? Was at the arsenal as a doctor. So could help out and protect the injured.

Merry balladeer ? Lots of bands of 5's have bardish roles to help troops act.

And swaggering duelist is a hero.

KiltedBastich

The Princess is a Hero, not a Villain. That was explicitly addressed between Vivienne and Cat, and they concluded it changed nothing between them. That conversation wouldn't have been necessary at all were she a Villain.

It makes sense, too. She earned her name by following a Role of being a leader and (literal) shining example to follow.

BargleNawdleZouss

Also, I'm surprised we haven't yet seen Catherine debrief/toy with Lady Abigail the Fox! 😊

Juff

Typo Thread:

I left Ater > I'd left Ater
large part > large parts
a bad a > as bad a
honestly compelled > honesty compelled
was beauty > was a beauty
told ordered > ordered
the despite > despite
morning that > morning – that
a hardened > the hardened
the heads > their heads
down a three > down three
strictly keep > strictly kept
so rip > to rip
sat excruciatingly > sat, excruciatingly
he was probably
luck tangling > luck when tangling
of number > of our number
steel came > steel would come
on few > on a few
be smiling > bed smiling

Joe Nuts

Rumena in his obsidian > Rumena in its obsidian

Tzur Almog

What happened to General Nekheb, the dragon general? Did he die or just go into hiding?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Nekheb spends a very large amount of time sleeping, and is only vaguely beholden to mortals. They're probably leaving Nekheb to snooze for fear that the dragon would simply murder a few dozen people and then migrate to a safer continent or something.

[AviKav](#)

> They wouldn't be the first, since Akua had once told me the Sahelians were pretty sure devils were one of the ingredients,

I entirely forgot that it wasn't just demons

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/05/11/chapter-12-cambre/>

> "You believe they've never dabbled in diabolism?" she said. "My dear, the Sahelians have known for decades that one of the primary ingredients in munitions is powdered devil. Our alchemists never managed to reproduce the process involved, but it is a certainty. Now, consider that goblinfire burns all things born of Creation. What do you think *that* recipe involves?"

>

> My heart clenched.

>

> "You can't be serious," I said. "They're using demons? How would that even work?"

[AviKav](#)

> "Oh," she softly said, "but I understand exactly what you mean. It took two of us to kill him, after all."

> [...] It was her that'd paved the road to that moment, I would believe that until the day I died, but I wouldn't deny that in the end it was my hand that'd held the blade. Even if she owned every step that had led us to that murder, it was my hand stained in red.

I just realized

– Malicia's survivability

– Catherine's knife

Their themes. He choose them

To their horror

fictionfan

Good god. Its a fictional story set in a world made up in EE's head. EE has the right to put the story in any way she wants. She kills off a character or redeems it. its up to her.

All this idiocy about "oh no a Black/white/hispanic/trans" or whatever is your personal b is just that. Idiotic.

Enjoy the story which is going amazing. If you feel have reached this far in the story line and are still 'offended' that a certain character, who may or may not be black, died; stop right here and don't read further.

Every couple of chapters we got some twits who come out with this again and again.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

This story has gotten some weird criticisms from time to time, ones that I agree aren't really worthwhile. However, your "love it or leave it" attitude is counterproductive.

Firstly, it is counterproductive in the sense that the people here who come up with these weird criticisms obviously aren't going to be placated by your openly hostile tone, so that hostility doesn't accomplish anything.

Secondly, it is counterproductive in the sense that people can and should discuss negative aspects of a work. EE is already great, but encountering reasonable criticism will result in further improvement.

In conclusion, if you like the story, you should avoid actively bullying people into avoiding reading it.

Abrakadabra

Why should they be placated? Why should be their bullshit addressed at all? Bullshit should be swept off the table, swiftly and decisively, not being analized while everyone is forced to smell the stink!
Stop humoring these people, that is the correct answer in my book.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

By "placated" I mean that they'll stop. My point with that was that your tactic to drive them off is completely ineffective and might even make it worse by giving trolls a target with which to sustain their interest, further clogging the comments with nonsense the rest of us have to wade through if we want to interact with each other. And like I said earlier, if you manage to drive anyone off (highly unlikely, of course) it won't necessarily be the people you want to.

Also: without analysis, it is not always clear what is or is not bullshit. Your personal gut reaction carries no authority whatsoever— it is well within your capacity to take exception to something you shouldn't, as we all do. I don't even disagree that the previous arguments we're

talking about were bullshit, but your attitude about them makes it abundantly clear that you don't understand WHY they're bullshit. The "why" of it is rather important.

The bottom line here, to me, is twofold: you're being unnecessarily aggressive, and I don't respect that approach in a context like this; and EE has, on one occasion, stepped into the comments to tell someone off for giving bad feedback. Ergo, he demonstrably does not need your salty self to defend him and his work.

'Ladi Williams

I find the way you started your response and the tone generally very offensive... "the universe doesn't like that"
If I had issues with anyone's sexuality or race, I wouldn't rate The Guide as one of my best books of all time.
That said, the comment was in response to the one above talking about positive representation...that shit kills good stories...just let the story be...don't include people and ideas that aren't needed just for positive representation.
If a story is about a black bisexual cripple...let it be about that...but don't include a black bisexual cripple just bcos it would appeal to a wider audience and it's in vogue to do so...
That is my point. Understand?

KiltedBastich

You keep missing the point. Any random person you meet might be a black bisexual cripple, or an Asian trans person, or a genderfluid biracial person, or ****anything at all****.

So why shouldn't some random character in a work of fiction also have the possibility of being anything at all? It doesn't detract from the work of fiction, ****it makes it more like reality****.

The only way, the **ONLY WAY**, for this not to be true, is if you are starting from the assumed position that everyone should be cis/het/white and that being otherwise makes them unusual, noteworthy, or out of place. That learning they are just who they are is somehow an imposition on you.

Why do you believe that a random character in a work of fiction being other than cis/white/het "kills good stories"? Does it offend you that random strangers in real life are not cis/white/het?

If the only time that a character can be a black bisexual cripple is if it's somehow important to the character, that's ****literally**** tokenism. It's saying that ordinary people are ****not**** supposed to be black bisexual cripples.

This is implicit bigotry in action, even if you aren't aware of it in yourself. Your unspoken assumptions are that ordinary random people are supposed to be cis/white/het, instead of, well, whoever they actually are. You can't make that be true in reality, but you get upset when it's not true in fiction. Why? Why should random background characters only be, quote, "normal", unquote? Why isn't it perfectly reasonable for random background characters to be any damn thing at all?

That's something in yourself you should take a long hard look at, because it's frankly a deeply unattractive way of thinking.

Abrakadabra

Shaddap.

[vuthuha912](#)

Ha! That is rich coming from you Alaya. You are the one who he chose every single time. He gave you your throne, he killed your enemies, he is the one that keep your entire reign from falling apart and he died to save your life. What? Would any of your decrees or policy be enforce without him, the Calamities and the military standing right behind you? The moment he left, the entire thing collapsed. Nim was following his philosophy. Cat was someone meant to protect you for him once he died. Fuck it. You have everything and you fucked it up. You are the reason he is dead. Everything you did push him further down the road. Cat would never killed him if he did not step in to save your life. He wouldn't be in Procer if he didn't want to buy you more time. He wouldn't even adopt Cat if he didn't care for what happen to you after he died. In his mind, for the longest time, a better Praes and Alaya are the same thing so he did everything for you. The moment he realized you were under the curse of the Dread Empire, he went to rescue you, sacrificing everything to save you.

No Cat was just someone at the right time, at the right place. The root of everything about him has always been you ruling Praes. You don't get to complain when you are living on the time he borrowed.

Interlude: Reputation

"Reputation is in the hand of others, but honour only in yours."

– Levantine saying

Moro Ifriqui squinted through the Baalite eye at the horizon, then put it down to pat the neck of his Segovian shortmane. A beautiful beast, though he had never named her, and from a breed that the Brigand's Blood had been riding for more than a century. The Segovians were Procerans, but they were also old allies against the princes Orense. They had long traded fine horses and steel to Vaccei at generous prices so that their common enemy would continue to suffer raids at the southern border.

"Anything?" Siraj asked.

Moro's younger brother looked wary, as he often did these days. It had not yet strayed into cowardice so he had not spoken of it, but he would have to if the men noticed. The heir to Vaccei felt for his brother, who only wanted to return to his wife and daughters, but the Brigand's Blood could not show weakness. Theirs were a hard people, and those who ruled over them must be harder still.

"Not yet," Moro said. "The dead send no vanguard."

None that he could see, anyhow. The poison clouds obscured much of the view.

"Would that Yannu Marave did the same," Siraj sighed.

Moro sent his brother a sharp look and the younger man – only by two years, but younger still – hurriedly straightened. None of the riders come with them had been close enough to hear, but it had been a risk.

"There will be honour to be found in the shield wall, vanguard or not," Moro evenly said.

"I await it eagerly," Siraj replied just as evenly. "Mayhaps I will even take a Revenant's head, tug honour my way instead of yours for once."

Moro nodded, satisfied, and guided his horse closer to his brother's.

"Mother will have you commanding the archers," he murmured. "You will hold them in your arms again, Siraj."

The younger man grimaced, twisting his face paint: umber brown and basil green, the Vengeful Brigand's own colours.

"It is not the dead that worry me," Siraj said, leaning closer and lowering his voice. "What Mother plans..."

Moro's jaw tightened.

"It is too late to hesitate," he replied. "The order has already been given."

A small cut and a quick poison. In the chaos of the fight neither be noticed. *It is necessary*, Moro reminded himself. *For our Blood, for our family*. It was a grim business, but grim was the business of the Brigand's Blood. Doing anything it took was how they'd survived without bending to Tartessos or Malaga when both were stronger. Poison, night ambushes, killings without honour. Sometimes even bargains with dark powers. Mother had never admitted outright, but she'd hinted enough he was sure the rumours about having paid the Marauder to kill Aquiline Osen's older brother were true.

"If we're caught, it is the end of us," Siraj murmured.

"If we do nothing," Moro tiredly said, "it is the end of us as well. Or do you think the Osen will end our blood feud after they claim the Tattered Throne with the Tanja?"

Siraj grimaced again, a silent concession. Razin Tanja was no enemy, but neither was he a friend. And with him so obviously taken with his betrothed, the old Ifriqui game of playing Malaga against Tartessos would find no purchase.

"Stay out of it and keep your silence, brother," Moro said, leaning close. "I'll do what needs to be done so you can go home to your family."

"You're my family too, Moro," Siraj softly replied.

Part of him ached to pull his brother close, to let him know it would be all right, but he knew he could not. Eyes were watching. *Eyes like poison, heart like stone*, the Anthem of Smoke went. *By his hand a thousand graves sown*. Honour to the Blood, Moro reminded himself. He was a son of Vaccei, and there weakness was death.

"Then listen to me," he replied.

Shaking his head, he carefully returned the Baalite eye to its leather sheath before glancing at his brother.

"Return to Mother," Moro ordered. "Tell her the dead advance without vanguard and I am riding to report this to Lord Marave personally as a courtesy."

She would know what it meant. He was, after all, following Itima Ifriqui's plan.

—

Yannu hated the smell here.

Even after the Lanterns burned the poison out of the air, even through the cloth mask, the Lord of Alava could smell a residual stench in the air. One not unlike the smell near the hill mines, the kind that stayed against the roof of your mouth and tasted of blood. He glanced at Rima, seeing that under the cloth she was scowling as well. Of all his cousins he had long liked Rima best, ever since they were children playing together in the grass. Though a Marave in name she was too far from the main line to be considered as his successor, but he had brought her up as much as he could when he came lord of Alava. She was the captain of his sworn swords, now, and the many scars she'd taken guarding his back had proved his trust to be without error.

"Do you remember," the Lord of Alava said, "the first time we ever saw the mines?"

Rima's scowl deepened, pulling at the scar that went through her left eyebrow. The red of it was just a shade different than the red of the Marave colours, though she was careful never to paint the ashen stipes close so it would not stand out.

"I remember thinking they were foul as Below's asshole," Rima said, "and that only a devil would send anyone in those pits."

"That makes me a devil, then," Yannu grunted.

"We are what we are," Rima shrugged, unconcerned.

He'd hated those mines too, as a boy. The sight of men and women going down into the pits to break their bodies breaking stone so ore could be ripped out of the earth had disgusted him. Yannu had never thought to inherit Alava as a boy, for though his great-aunt Sintra had named his father heir he had an older sister. But he had thought that when she became Lady of Alava he might speak to her of the mines and quarries. Of closing them, perhaps. Then a wound gone bad during an honour war with Malaga had taken her a year before his father fell to old age and Yannu Marava, Lord of Alava, had learned a bitter lesson.

His lands were known for orchards and cattle, but they alone were not enough for Alava to stand. Malaga had cattle herds as well and Levante's orchards almost as fine. It was the wealth hidden in the hills, the ores and the stone, that kept Alava's warriors in steel and the people fed through cattle-fevers and lean seasons. Mines and quarries were his blood's backbone, and to close them would be as breaking his own back. He had done what he could, sending prisoners to work instead of men of honour, but never closed a single one. The memory of that added an intimacy to his distaste for the scent, though the smell was not the only thing lately that had left a foul taste in the mouth.

He glanced to the east, where the banners of Tartessos and Malaga were raised together. The eastern flank of the column was shared

by the warriors of the Slayer and Binder's blood. Rima followed his gaze without difficulty – she was even taller than him, though slimmer in build.

"The banners are nothing," his cousin said. "A gesture. It's the shield wall that worries me, Yannu. No one else has blended companies in our lifetime."

"They do the same with their skirmishers," Yannu grimly said.

Before going east into Praes, the betrothed pair had kept their captains separate. Malaga's warriors under Malagan captains, Tartessos' under their own. No longer. Warriors of both lands served under captains of either. Though Razin Tanja had claimed the measure had come from the losses in the Wasteland, that it had been simpler to blend companies than be forced to disband some by insistence on keeping sworn warriors separate, Yannu knew it to be an excuse. The two youngbloods were tightening their alliance, getting their warriors used to fighting as one host.

And so those banners raised together to the east were one of the most dangerous things Yannu Marave had ever seen.

"You could have split them," Rima said. "You have the right."

He did. Lord Yannu Marave held command over all captains of the Dominion in this battle, twenty-seven thousand warriors marching in a loose column across the great dusty plains around Keter. Land that men called the Ossuary, after the many armies had had died here only to rise again as a host of bones.

"It would have been a mistake," Careful Yannu said. "I do not hold the only command on the field, Rima. The Warlord and General Pallas would have seen through my reasons and word spread. That is more dangerous to us than leaving them together."

Too many people already had eyes on the Dominion. Yannu had been pleased of Rozala Malanza's coronation as First Princess, for their years of sharing a front had ensured he was closest to her of the Blood much as Itima Ifriqui had once been closest to First Prince Cordelia, but it was clear she had no intention to involve Procer in Levant's affairs after the war. It was the League that troubled him, for Empress Basilia was already making advances. She wanted the League of Free Cities to fill the void the Thalassocracy had left as the Dominion's closest ally and sign defence pacts against the Principate.

For such pacts to be signed there needed to be someone seated on the Tattered Throne, and that meant Basilia Katopodis had to gain in securing a quick succession should she be given an opening – and it would not be the Champion's Blood she backed, if it came to that.

Yannu would have liked to bargain with Callow, but he could not. The Black Queen was said to be fond of Razin and Aquiline, even rumoured to call them 'her lordlings' in council. She had even ensured they stood for Levant at the talks with the Dread Empire, an honour that had once belonged only to those of the Pilgrim's Blood. If she was brought in, where her favour would lie was clear as springwater. No, Yannu must keep other powers out of the matter at all costs: the only one likely to aid his cause had no hunger for getting involved. And that meant giving no excuse for the rest to involve themselves.

An excuse like weakening the Dominion's fighting strength because of internal matters.

"They did not fight me when I sought the command, Rima," Yannu continued. "That says much."

It meant neither Razin Tanja nor Aquiline had thought it worth a quarrel to have either of their names attached to a great battle against the dead instead of his. Worse, Yannu found he did not disagree with their decision.

The two of them had accolades enough to their name they did not need to take risks to earn more. They'd fought well before and during the great offensive in Hainaut, ending in the battle at the capital where Lord Razin – the weakest reputation of the two – was said to have faced a Scourge and lived. Since then the Black Queen had dragged them east into her campaign to settle Praes, where it was said they had fought with distinction at the Battle of Kala. After they had stood for Levant at the Tower's fall and the talks that followed, speaking for all of the Dominion as neither the Champion's or the Brigand's Blood ever had.

Most unsettling, though, was the distant amiability with the Barrow Sword. They'd pushed hard for the Bestowed to be given a chance to earn a place in the Rolls in the service of the Dominion, which looked to Careful Yannu like an alliance in the making.

"They're looking past the battles here," Rima grunted in agreement. "The boy, that. Aquiline's a fine killer but she thinks in blood and prize heads. Tanja's as clever as his father was."

And nowhere as proud, Yannu thought, which made him more dangerous. As Rima had grasped, they were preparing for the days after Keter, he understood, for what would come after the war. When the captains and their warriors returned home and the truce birthed by Cordelia Hasenbach came at an end. There would be blood, that much was certain, for the Tattered Throne stood without any Isbili left to claim it for the first time since the founding of the Dominion, coming with it the prize of rule over

Levante: the largest, wealthiest city in all of Levant. Yannu knew it would come to war, for the heads of two great lines of the Blood were set to wed and with the Isbili dust there could be no better bid for the Tattered Throne than such an alliance.

And he had no intention of letting them make of the Dominion their kingdom.

There was noise behind him, so Yannu reined in his horse and glanced at Rima. She snorted and went to have a look, leaving the Lord of Alava to stare at the western flank of the marching column. There his own warriors and Vaccei's marched, distanced and under their own captains. Further west the great glittering snake that was the Clans under the Warlord was keeping up with his own host, while the thick of cataphracts under General Pallas screened the sides of both armies as they advanced. Rima returned quick enough he did not have time to grow bored by the sight.

"Moro Ifriqui's back from the scouting trip," she said. "Coming to report in person."

"Not necessary," Yannu frowned.

"The report, the man or the entire lot of them?" Rima drily replied.

He did not answer. Like most Alavans his cousin cared little for the Ifriqui, even less so now that his talks with them had come to nothing. His attempts to bind the Champion's Blood to the Brigand's in answer had been frustratingly unsuccessful. Yannu himself kept only to men, a preference shared by none of Itima's sons – the oldest of which, Moro, was over a decade younger than him anyhow – and though both lines had other kin the ages did not align. Itima's eldest granddaughter was three years old too young for any of his nephews, and though her youngest son was still unwed he was in his twenties while Yannu's oldest niece was twelve.

Matches further from the main line could be made, but to what purpose? They could not bind an alliance or hope to eclipse the prestige of a wedding between the Lady of Tartessos and the Lord of Malaga. That left their alliance one of circumstance, held together only by common enemies.

"They are allies still," the Lord of Alava finally said. "And have reason to remain so."

Itima and Aquiline hated each other like poison over the matter of the deaths of the Osenas' brothers, so the Lady of Vaccei had much to fear from her enemy's ascension. Yannu himself had slain Akil Tanja in an honour duel, which would make Razin his enemy until death, though that was not the reason he opposed the youths.

"They're Ifriqui," Rima scathingly said. "They have no cause, not like you do. It's not hunger or fear that sets you against the married banners."

Yannu had no intention of seeking the Tattered Throne for himself or the Champion's Blood. He would prefer it if neither Itima nor her sons sat it either, though he might not get that choice. His preference would be for the Painted Knife or the Valiant Champion to be raised to rule of Levante as a reward, though he knew Rafaella would not be a popular choice. Though the Valiant Champion had gone as far as eschewing face paint to distance herself from the Marave even after Yannu had executed everyone involved in the betrayal, she was still a Champion. It would be seen by other lines as Yannu reaching for the Tattered Throne through a cheap trick. In truth, Yannu did not much care who sat the throne so long as it was neither of the betrothed.

They would be too strong, that was made their claim unacceptable. Malaga was second in wealth only to Levante due to its canal while Tartessos controlled the access to the Brocelian Forest and its treasures. If they gained Levante and through it mastery of the Gulf trade, they would hold the entire Dominion by the throat.

It was even worse than it looked, he had realized over the year of war. Alava traded the ore and stone of its hills to Levante for grain from its fertile fields, while Vaccei traditionally imported cattle and steel from Malaga and Levante. If the Tattered Throne fell into the hands of the betrothed, they would not need war to bring the rest of Levant to heel whenever they wished: they could simply close their doors and let their foes wither on the vine. The Majilis would grow meaningless, no longer a council of equals guided by the Holy Seljun but instead a court with a king and queen ruling over it. It would be the end of the Dominion, the dream sung of in the Anthem of Smoke.

Let neither queen nor prince rule over our dominion, the Grey Pilgrim's daughter and successor had pleaded, and for that plea Yannu would go to war. He was not certain, however, that he could *win* that war.

Though the alliance of Tartessos and Malaga was surrounded, to the north by Vaccei and to the south by his own Alava, it had strong bones. Malaga was wealthy and the home of the binders while Tartessos strengthened its forces with free captains and adventurers that tried their luck in the Brocelian. Even if Itima Ifriqui could be counted on to stand against them – which she could not, the Brigand's Blood were snakes and Itima the most cold-blooded of the nest – it promised to be a long, brutal slog of a war. The kind that broke realms. Better to kill one of the betrothed and snuff out the alliance before it took flight, Yannu had thought, and Itima had unsurprisingly agreed when he brought

her into the plot. She'd already killed enough Osenas not to balk at one more.

But, after Moro was brought forward and discarded the excuse of the report to carry a message from his mother, Yannu's heart clenched with the cold fear that he might have made a mistake.

"This is driveI," the Lord of Alava flatly said.

Moro Ifriqui, eldest child to Lady Itima and heir to Vaccei, had a hard face that life had seen fit to further scar. The redness of them was striking against his brown and green face paint, as another stripe of colour.

"We must act now, Lord Yannu," Moro said, speaking his mother's words with his own mouth. "They will wed when Keter falls and killing them when victory is won will only draw more attention."

They were not yet married, Yannu thought, precisely to discourage knives being sent after them. Aquiline likely meant it a deed of honour, not beginning the fight when the Grand Alliance bound them all still, but Lord Akil's son had grown canny as his father. He had done it so that any attack on them would be seen as so thoroughly unprovoked it would draw the ire from all the world. And that was the very trap Itima was stepping into now.

"Neither can be killed while we war against the dead," Yannu said. "There will be trouble when we kill Tanja after the victory, but it will only be a stain on our reputation. To kill him *now* would be betraying the Grand Alliance."

"Only," Moro Ifriqui said, "if we get caught. We have men who-"

"Enough," the Lord of Alava harshly replied. "I have refused, Moro. There will be no arrow loosed."

The heir to Vaccei shrugged.

"That choice is no longer in your hands," he said.

Yannu considered killing him, then and there. The Ifriqui had come with only a small escort of riders and Yannu's own sworn swords were closer and better armed. None were close enough to overhear them speaking, which meant none would be close enough to stop him from slaying the other man should he strike first. It would cause much trouble and solve little, the Lord of Alava decided after a moment. Anger was not enough of a reason to kill.

"Should I warn them," Lord Yannu said, "your entire line could be ended today."

"You won't," Moro replied, appearing unworried. "If you try to bury us, we'll drag you into the grave with us. And it won't even

matter if it's true: they'll use it to get rid of you regardless."

That was, the lord grimly thought, likely true. He had slain Akil Tanja in an honour duel, and though his son had forsworn vengeance that did not mean there was no enmity between them.

"We're in the same boat, Lord Yannu," Moro smiled. "So let's not fight, else we'll both end up in the water."

"This is not what we agreed," Yannu insisted.

And, to his shame, his eyes drifted to the side. Past the column of warriors, up in the sky where a lone silhouette flew in lazy circles. The Warden, on her black-feathered mount.

"She has greater worries than us," Moro said, following his gaze.

"Pray that she does," he replied.

It was a dismissal and the younger man heeded it. Too many risks, Careful Yannu thought, as he watched Moro's back and Rima returned to his side.

He would have to act.

—

Map of the Kingdom of the Dead had remained largely the same over the last three centuries, though few of them extended far to the north of Keter itself. The most comprehensive extended all the way to the shores of the lake some called the Chalice and the outskirts of what was now known as the Duskwood, but rare were the maps that went any further. Mostly Ashuran ones, as the Thalassocracy's sailing ships sometimes circled the north of Calernia and their captains were particular about chart-making. The heartlands of the Kingdom of the Dead, though, were as much known territory as any land that was death on all who tread it could be.

It was why Hakram had several fine maps of the large plains surrounding Keter, the so-called 'Ossuary', coming from different nations.

He had halted to consult them atop a low hill, in particular an Arlesite map from the Ninth Crusade that bucked the reputation of Proceran maps being horribly unreliable by proving to be by far the most accurate of the lot. An hour past they'd marched across a long-dry riverbed that had been marked on it and no other parchment, which had only reinforced Hakram's trust in the mapmaker's work. The northwest of Keter had been fertile lands, once upon a time, and there were still traces of that. Dry

riverbeds now only ever filled by rain were one, but there'd been more than grass and fields here during the days of Sephirah.

"That," the Warlord muttered, "could be trouble."

Sigvin leaned over his shoulder, peering at the parchment. She wore good chain mail that went up to her neck, hiding her ritual scars, and there was an axe at her hip. Unlike a warrior, though she had no shield. As a shaman, she was not to join the shield wall.

"What does the symbol mean?" she asked.

"Ruins," Hakram said. "The remnants of a city."

She looked understandably skeptical. Poison clouds obscured sight over long distances on the Ossuary, but a city so close to Keter would have been noticed. Troke Snaketooth, standing to the side of them and listening closely, looked as if he had an inkling.

"How old?" the chief of the Blackspears asked.

"Old enough there's no one left that speaks the language," Hakram replied. "There's almost nothing left and what remains is largely buried. I doubt anyone who notice the ruins without walking over them."

"And yet they are to be trouble," Oghuz the Lamé said, frowning.

The chief of the Red Shields had come out in warrior's mail, though he was unlikely to fight in the shield wall. Juniper's father was yet an able champion, though, and might choose a worthy fight to step into so that his clan would continue to hold his name in high regard.

"General Pallas sent word the dead are marching our way," the Warlord said. "At our current pace, in two hours we will clash over the ruins or close."

Hakram spat to the side, into the dust.

"The Hidden Horror does not deal in coincidences," he told them

Word would have to be sent. General Pallas and Lord Yannu should be told, he thought, but his eyes moved to the sky to the third in need of telling. A cloud of green hid away Catherine's distant silhouette but she was out there. Had been since dawn when they set out to march. The ruins were not from any of the thirteen great cities of ancient Sephirah, Hakram knew as much from their walk through the shards in Arcadia, but there had been other cities and towns in the kingdom – and there was no telling what the Dead King might have hidden in their ruins, buried under ash and dust.

And what the Warlord could not sniff out, the Warden might.

It would take more than a shout to reach her, but fortunately, Hakram had the means at hand. His gaze swept down the hill, where his warband had halted to wait for him while the rest of the warriors continued in the column led by Dag Clawtoe. A ring had formed, warriors leaning close as two people struggled, and the Warlord almost sighed. Hidir Bearkiller, a champion nearly seven feet tall with muscles like tree trunks whose favourite thing to do while drunk was be thrown into a pit with a steppe razor bear and kill it with his bare hands, yelped in pain cursed as Archer caught his thumb and began to bend it back. He gave in after there was an ominous crack, to the cheers of half the onlookers as Indrani beat her fourth consecutive challenger to the finger-game.

None of them had believed a human would have the strength to beat an orc at it, Named or not, which was why Hakram was now owed several bottles of Sleeping Bonesaragh no younger than five years.

"She is a menace," Oghuz complimented.

Juniper's father looked genuinely impressed. It was only a game, but the sight of Indrani twisting the arms of warriors with at least a foot on her repeatedly had made an impression.

"So far only to my champions," the Warlord drily replied.

He had assembled a warband of champions from all the clans as his retinue, since it would have been an insult to keep relying on the Howling Wolves and the Red Shields forever – if not to them, then to all his other followers. They were not as well trained as a Howling Wolves warband, even after regular drills, but the warriors had markedly improved. The heavy armour bought from Praes and reforged by clan blacksmiths had only made his warband of a thousand fiercer, though apparently only so that Archer might better maul them.

The devil in question was headed his way, strutting triumphantly after having clapped Hidir's back with affection, and Hakram rolled his eyes at her.

"Aren't you supposed to be with the Levantines?" he asked.

All the Blood had retinues to protect them, but there were enemies sworn swords could little again. Worry had been that the Hawk might try to bag one of the great lords of Levant during or after the battle, Archer had been brought along as much to keep the Blood alive as to face the Scourge. Losing any of them would be a hard blow to the Dominion morale, on top of a headache to sort out – neither Razin Tanja nor Aquiline Osenia had clear successors to their title.

"They're all over anyways, except for the lovebirds," Indrani easily replied. "Better to be out here where I can watch over the entire lot at once."

There was some sense in that. There was no telling when or from where the Hawk would loose its arrow, so taking the Scourge out before it shot was unlikely. Better for Archer to take a defensive posture and aim for the arrow instead of the Revenant. It was still, Hakram thought, a decision she would never have thought to make a few years ago. *You're changing*, he thought. It was a bittersweet thing, for it to happen only after he had left. The Warlord cut through the thought.

"I need you to send a message," Hakram said.

Indrani pointed upwards, cocking an eyebrow. He nodded.

"You know I'm always game for an excuse to shoot at Cat," Archer cheerfully said. "What do you need to say?"

Sigvin shot her a warm look, charmed by the romance of it. The mage from the Split Tree Clan had not met enough humans to know that violence did not usually take much of a role in their courting. Mind you, Hakram was not entirely sure she was wrong in this case.

"I'll write it down," the Warlord replied. "Wait for me."

"Sure, sure," Indrani dismissed, then slid a sly look at Sigvin. "So, Siggy, I hear tell you've been riding the Deadhand."

"I have," Sigvin nodded, then flashed a grin. "There are worse ways to pass the time."

Indrani laughed. He should, Hakram only now realized, never have allowed those two to meet. A tactical mistake of some weight had been made. One obvious enough even Troke shot him a sympathetic look.

"So *is* he any good?" Archer asked. "'cause Tordis said so back in Callow, but she was sweet on him I think and when a girl's sweet she-"

Hakram tactically retreated in search of ink and parchment before he could hear more. The quicker he was rid of Archer the better.

—

General Pallas whistled loudly, her escort smoothly coming to a halt around her as they joined with the riders that had been awaiting her. The word from the outriders had been interesting enough that she had decided to come in person even as word was sent to the other commanders. Her kataphraktoi had told it true, she saw with her own eyes. The dead had ceased their march.

Across the plains an army of the dead stood in silence, arrayed in a firm battle line with a reserve at the back and constructs to the side where a living host would place cavalry.

Behind them all, looming tall as a mountain, the Crab belched out smoke that filled the sky,

"They do not advance when provoked?" Pallas asked, turning towards Captain Dion.

The young man led the outriders, and had been the one to first send word.

"Not even when we enter bow range," Captain Dion confirmed.

It seemed, General Pallas thought, that the dead had chosen where they would give battle. In the distance behind her, she saw the trail of dust from the advancing columns of the orcs and the Levantines. Less than an hour away now. The Warlord had not mentioned what the ancient city said to be buried near here was called, if Deadhand knew at all.

"A simple name, then," Pallas mused. "The Battle of the Ruins should do nicely."

hue hue

Thanks for the work. Now place your bets, who is the dark power that the brigand blood deals with?

Santos

Villains

Levir

I think that was the Marauder

Someperson

My bet is it's just the occasional devil.

ohJohn

I, uh, think these consecutive sentences might be related:
"Sometimes even **bargains with dark powers**. Mother had never admitted outright, but she'd hinted enough he was sure the rumours about **having paid the Marauder to kill Aquiline Osen's older brother** were true."

nimelennar

Hmm. I wonder whose plot this is.

The Dead King's? It seems too petty for him, even if it effectively weakens the army facing him.

The Bard's? It doesn't involve enough names for it to be subject to her influence.

A leftover plot by Alaya? You'd think she'd warn her new allies about it.

Or maybe it's actually just what it appears to be: a petty grudge between the Slayer's Blood and the Brigand's. If that's the case, how stupid to prioritize your preferences of who is to rule the Dominion over its very survival.

Raved Thrad

If this were *Worm* I'd say it was a Coil plot, but since this is PGtE I'd have to go with Wandering Bard fuckery. 😊

WuseMajor

Yannu laid it all out pretty well, I think. He wanted to kill the boy after the fight, but before the marriage so they couldn't come back and be King and Queen over the whole region, because, even if they didn't take the throne, they'd have an insurmountable economic advantage.

Ifriqui agrees with that, but thinks it'll be safer and easier to hide if they do it now, in the middle of combat.

I wouldn't call it a "petty" grudge in this case.

caoimhinh

Nah, it is definitely petty.

They are letting ambition make them idiots. Yannu straight-up admitted that the coming war would be the kind that could break Levant as a nation, and he will still fight it. Meaning he would rather see Levant in ruins than let Aquiline and Razin rule it.

Putting their own personal convenience and ambitions over the well-being of the whole nation is something extremely petty.

Scmrph

It's not that petty when you consider his motivations, which is essentially to preserve Levant as a federation instead of a monarchy. Even though Brutus loved Caesar as a brother, he loved the Republic more and so we had the Ides of March.

That didnt end very well and neither will this, but the motivation is hardly petty.

nimelennar

Sure, charting the future of the rulership of your nation isn't petty, but prioritizing that above the existence of life on your continent sure is.

SuitorShooter

It's not just convenience and ambition. Marave have Blood Feud with the Tanja, so he has every reason to believe that if Tanja and Ossena rule Levant together as a king and queen, totally unchecked, they can and will destroy the Marave.

The Ignorant Student

It's not that crazy when you think about it. As much as we see this as a climactic battle for the ages, this is a world where (historically speaking) the good guys win literally every time. Imagine if during WWII we could point back to a thousand years of Hitlers pulling the same shit and being stuck down in our darkest hour by literal divine intervention? Hell, I'm ninety percent sure that somewhere out there is official White House correspondence or something that straight up says "let Hitler and Stalin fight it out because whoever wins, the longer this goes on, the more fascists and socialists are dead." And then at the end of WWII, there was literally a race to Berlin because whoever got there first could basically say "this is ours now" which is literally what happened when the Soviets got there.

Mirror Night

Knife is Brigand Blood right? She could be inline for a promotion or Barrow might not have to work hard at taking over some land lol.

Still seems wild to gamble on assassinations at this point.

I assume something bad is buried in those ruins.

Levir

Knife, like Spear, is not of the major lineages.

Linnus42

I am aware I am asking what part of the country she comes from. Its easier as a minor house to take over part of the country you are actually from. Painted Knife seemed to have a

decent mind for politics she wouldn't be bad at being a Major Lady as far as I can tell.

[ErraticErrata](#)

The Painted Knife is originally from Levante and has no affiliation to any of the major lines of the Blood.

Mirror Night

Not a bad choice to sit on the Throne seems to not be bad at politics from what little we got and a neutral option. Thanks for the answer

caoimhinh

EE, would you mind refreshing my memory?

What's the betrayal that was mentioned in this part: "the Valiant Champion had gone as far as eschewing face paint to distance herself from the Marave even after Yannu had executed everyone involved in the betrayal"

Konstantin von Karstein

I don't think it was ever mentioned. From context, I imagine that some of the Champion's Bloid tried to have Raphaella killed. Probably because she wasn't of their line, or refused to ally with them.

Snappy270

That rings a bell. she their namesake without being of them. Did they try to marry her then got pissy and kill, her driving her out of Levant were hanno picked her up.

edrey

Well, Cat would have notice the attack with her story vision right? So i assume the brigand blood would be used as fodder in the ruins

[ftaku](#)

Are any involved in this tale of deception even Named or just descendents? I don't think her story vision would help. Hopefully her political savvy means she has prepared

TrustiestRaptor

I don't think there are named involved in the plot itself, but that doesn't necessarily preclude Cat from following story threads. Because there are definitely named involved in what is about to be the Battle of the Ruins, and I'd wager

that there are a fair few stories about battles that begin with betrayals on one side leading to defeat. Assuming she can pick up on those threads, that is.

Cap'n Smurfy

None of the Levantines involved are Named, I don't think she can foresee this with story powers.

Insanenoodlyguy

She might have started too when the battle was given a name of ominous foreshadowing though.

RoflCat

Her domain is over Named, none of these Bloods are.

The best case scenario for Catherine to see this plot coming would be if this backstabbing becomes some kind of pivot for a Named.

Darkening

Yeah, I could see Barrow Sword intervening to prevent the assassination or something at least.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not even an at least, that's a good guess. It's the "this guy you aren't sure you can trust us advancing on you with a weapon, but then he aims past you to take out the threat about to strike." Kind of strike. And seeing one of those coming cat could do, and have placed him accordingly.

Though I think as soon as this battle just got named "Battle of Ruins" that anything she missed she can now see. There's entirely too many ways that name can be an accurate assessment not to have several pivots available. There has to be a lot of threads in the stats uncoiling now.

BargleNawdleZouss

Regarding the epigraph at the start of this chapter, I wonder if ErraticErrata is a fan of multiple Hugo Award winner Lois McMaster Bujold and her Vorkosigan Saga series? From book #13, "A Civil Campaign":

Count Aral Vorkosigan to his son Miles [the protagonist of most of the series]:

"Reputation is what other people know about you. Honor is what you know about yourself."

And then one line later, "The friction tends to arise when the two are not the same..."

Frivolous

Might have been devised independently but I remember that adage from A Civil Campaign, too.

caoimhinh

Interestingly, this is an important thing regarding the Blood, because so far we have seen very little of Honor in them, and instead a great obsession with reputation and fame.

Razin was right when he saw that they had lost their way.

Frivolous

Agree, caoimhinh. They're misusing the word honor.

[Kletanio](#)

Keep in mind that this is entirely consistent with older, less modern senses of the word "Honor". Honorable actions to a chivalric knight often feel insanely alien to us, because "following the orders of your liege lord, even if you disapproved" doesn't feel right anymore.

The Levantines are having a revolution as to what the word "honor" even means.

shikkarasu

Well put. This is why I can't really blame Yannu. He and the Lordlings are both standing up for what they think is right. Yannu is even sane enough to wait until after the war is over before murdering anyone.

The Brigands, however, are f***ing insane if they think they can get away with this with Catherine in the vicinity. She might not have Name Sight on them, but she knows a Praesi double cross when she sees one and she has been revenge blue-balled over the Night of Knives for a while now. Crushing one of the Dominion's equivalents of a High Lord in retaliation for a mid-war assassination would be very cathartic, I imagine.

caoimhinh

Emm... no, that's not the definition of honor, even by ancient standards.

Albeit to be fair, disobeying your lord or rebelling against them was considered dishonorable, honor is not simple obedience.

It differs a bit from culture to culture, but when they spoke of Honor, as in a code of honor, it was not about obeying orders, it was about living by a code or a set of rules.

The chivalry of the knights distinguished them from common soldiers (who would be the ones you described, people simply obeying orders even if they disagreed), a knight had a code of conduct and a way of life, taking vows for the protection of people and upholding of the law, as well as living with strong morals.

Now, in regards to the behaviors of ancient warriors and the way to keep to that honor, there are indeed things that may be alien for modern people, like Samurai taking their own lives through Seppuku or Hara-kiri being considered more honorable than being executed, or to follow their lord to the afterlife.

The thing here is, Honour was originally something that the Levantines was a set of conducts and behaviors through which they lived, and this is evidenced by the epigraph that show us the way ancient Levantines saw Honor. At some point in their history, they lost their way. Razin didn't invent a new definition of Honor for his people, but rather realized that the thing they were doing was not what their ancestors had wanted.

ninegardens

Feels like the obvious thing to do would be for the Blood to talk about what is to happen after the war BEFORE assassinating each other on the battlefield.

Like... Yannu and Brigand are being problems here, but the Betrothed really SHOULD maybe talk about "No, we don't want to rule the kingdom, we are willing to back [NAME HERE], if that'll keep you off our backs".

I feel like an honour bound society like the blood SHOULD be able to manage that.

Ughhhh...

ALSO, this is the 4th chapter (in a row?) mentioning the absence of the pilgrim... and I can't help but wonder if a couple of the previous reminders were partly in place to serve as foreshadowing for the conflict here.

Mirror Night

Would you really believe the Lovebirds if they said that? I don't think the other houses would agree unless they cancel the wedding or one of them abdicates. Lining up some strategic marriages might also be logical....but I think Yannu is right you need someone like Champ or Knife on the throne.

ninegardens

In a society based on great big honour?

YES! Them explicitly and publically saying "We intended to support the painted knives bid for the tattered throne, or, if she is dead, we will support the Valiant champion, OR if both are dead, we will agree to not make a bid for the throne from either of our kingdoms".

Yes, I would believe it. I would expect them to honour that.

Mirror Night

I mean sure if they stated they would support a neutral option like Painted Knife or Valiant Champion then yes I believe them. But they have not done that or suggested that as an option while they integrate their two houses more closely together....so an outside observer looking at them and the overall consolidation outside of Praes is not wrong in thinking they plan to seize absolute power.

Insanenoodlyguy

It wouldn't matter. Yannu muses on it here. The economic powerhouse they become alone means they'll have the most weight. They can shut down the rest if they want to, too big a threat to refuse. Even if they never take advantage of that, who's to say their children won't? That's what Yannu is thinking and he has a point, though he is going about it a terrible way. Levantine names have been grooved into this being a workable system but they have all broadened and interacted with other trends and opinions and ages old trends are pivoting here. You could not pick a worse time to try and keep an old system going then when a young couple with purpose is going to break it and there's named and name opportunities everywhere. Yannu would have found it incredibly difficult to do this when he wanted anyway but it's doomed to go pear shaped now, even without Cat.

[Hydrargentium](#)

Heh. If we're being constantly reminded about the Pilgrim's death, the rule of Chekov suggests that that is going to be important soon. If this really wants to be an "oh sh*t" kind of thing, then that'll mean we'll be seeing a new Revenant on the field soon....

Hg

caoimhinh

Hmm, but Tariq's body was turned to ash, so there's no way for him to be a Revenant, though the Dead King might have an ancient Grey Pilgrim as a Revenant.

You know what would be a true "Oh, shit" moment for those of the Blood?

If Razin became a Grey Pilgrim.

That would really consolidate the lovebirds' power block into something unassailable, as it would be the closest there can be to a successor to the Isbili line.

ninegardens

I mean, Razin as Pilgrim would be cute, but he just doesn't match the set up of the name... like... at all.

caoimhinh

As a healer who is obsessed with making sacrifices for the greater good? No, he doesn't fit that setup.

But Razin doesn't need to be like Tariq to be a Grey Pilgrim.

Keep in mind that different people can have the same Name and live in completely different ways, because while the Name is the same, the Role is different.

Besides, the original Grey Pilgrim wasn't like Tariq at all.

The first Pilgrim was a rebel that fought off the invasion of Procer and founded a nation. Things that Tariq had no intention of doing, as he supported Procer's invasion of Callow under the guise of Crusade (and admitted to Catherine he wouldn't stop them from it because of politics) and he actively avoided ever governing Levant despite all the people actively asking him to do so. Heck, the original Grey Pilgrim nearly got killed by the Choir of Mercy, while Tariq was their favorite friend.

Razin is the first of the Blood in a long time to realize the errors in their ways, the one who saw that they needed to change, that they needed a revolution in the way they see Honor and in the way they make decisions as a nation, and he is following his love and marrying her disregarding the politics involved, which is something even Tariq didn't dare to do.

Razin is also an anomaly among his bloodline, as he doesn't have the gift for magic that is cultivated among the Blood of the Binder, and it was implied by his father that the candidates for succeeding as Lord of Malaga are

chosen for having the Gift, so Razin is breaking tradition by default.

So, Razin has the will and even the story of bringing a great positive change to his nation on his side. I think he fits for it.

Snappy270

Yeah they also mentioned no one of the grey pilgrim's line left to take levante. That screams new grey pilgrim coming in Levants time of need. But who?

erebus42

I dunno, I was actually under the impression that Tariq had sacrificed the Name itself along with his bloodline to fuel his final act. Granted I may be mistaken.

caoimhinh

The thing is, the Dominion isn't actually an Honor-bound society, they have deviated from that path and only care about fame.

That's what the epigraph is pointing out, the Blood talks a lot about Honor, but they rarely abide by it, and instead live and die for their reputation.

BargleNawdleZouss

From Ninegardens:

ALSO, this is the 4th chapter (in a row?) mentioning the absence of the pilgrim... and I can't help but wonder if a couple of the previous reminders were partly in place to serve as foreshadowing for the conflict here.

—

Okay, I'm making a wild-ass guess here: Knight Errant Arthur Foundling, led by his new sword Peregrine, shows up in the nick of time to save the lives of Razin Tanja & Aquiline Osen. Even odds if he then helps to expose the plot, or (hopefully) heal the breach between the remaining four major lines.

caoimhinh

I just remembered that the Dominion has this idea where a duel to the death between two commanders is an acceptable way to decide which battle plan they are going to use in the coming battle. That's how Yannu killed Razin's father.

So the Blood really *are* stupid enough to think that it's fine to kill one of their own top brass people before a big battle.

Frivolous

I'd be a little surprised if Catherine hasn't anticipated this little problem.

For instance, having invisible drow spies watching and listening to all the major players.

Then again, all the major players in this conspiracy are regular people, un-Named. So it might just have occurred in Catherine's blind spot. Though I kinda doubt it. Assassination was an obvious response to anyone who understands Dominion politics in general and the Brigand's Blood in particular.

Mirror Night

Is it obvious? Perhaps is it obvious they do it right now...that seems far less likely. Not sure Cat really has too many troops to spare prevent internal assassinations right now.

Frivolous

Sve Noc had enough drow to watch Christophe and the Langevin princess, and to watch Cordelia and Rozala, and that was when they weren't marching on Keter in a multi-state alliance.

ninegardens

I mean... Cat is dealing with like... a dozen other problems and threats... and has notably spent the last few days checking in on all the stories attached to the *named* in her campsite.

Insanenoodlyguy

We also have to consider providence. This might be a complete blind spot (I don't think so but let's assume) and it wouldn't matter. There are so many named hanging around that the odds are decent of somebody just wandering blind into this. Say Barrow Sword is there to discuss some point of the new rolls or Valiant Champion is just going over to tempt them to get smashed with her and oh hey wait that guy is definitely an assassin, well that isn't going to fly, and then we got a dead assassin and one of those b-plots a named has to juggle while also dealing with the battle of the ruins (which increases their survival chances till the story is resolved so bonus that.)

[laguz24](#)

Careful Yannu should be renamed common sense Yannu. Since he is the only one who seems to have amongst his little conspiracy. This also proves that backstabbing disorder is universal.

[Tohron](#)

I've got a feeling this ends with Yannu taking a blade/arrow for Razin and dying. Hopefully that would be enough to set the stage for them figuring out how to end all the feuding.

Juff

Typo Thread:

neither be > neither would be
he came > he became
had had > that had
word spread > word would spread
had to gain > had something to gain
involved themselves > involve themselves
name they > name; they
Most unsettling (extra space)
boy, that. > boy, that is.
thick of cataphracts (missing noun)
old too > old, too
Map of the > Maps of the
anyone who notice > anyone would notice
he told them (missing fullstop)
pain cursed > pain
Bonesaragh > Bones aragh
little again > do little against
Worry had been > Worried that

Frivolous

Hello, there is one part that puzzles me:

Though the Valiant Champion had gone as far as eschewing face paint to distance herself from the Marave even after Yannu had executed everyone involved in the betrayal, she was still a Champion.

What does this mean? What betrayal?

agumentic

Rafaella is not actually a part of the Marave family, and it was mentioned that her ascension to Valiant Champion has been violent. It looks like either during or perhaps soon after it some of the original line tried to bury her so some nobody couldn't claim the Name of their progenitor.

caoimhinh

Ooohhhh, now that makes sense.

I was wondering about that myself.

braxen1

I'm not sure, but it's been mentioned a few times that Rafaela doesn't wear face paint, which is unusual for Dominion warriors. It probably has something to do with her backstory since she has the Champion name, but is not part of Yannu's bloodline.

As a complete guess I would say someone from the Champion's bloodline saw her as 'stealing' the name from the more worthy bloodline members and tried to kill her or her family. But she lived and Yannu had everyone killed.

It's possible I forgot her backstory or its a reference from a Patreon chapter, which I have not read.

KiltedBastich

I'm guessing that Yannu and Ifriqui don't know that the literal last request of the Grey Pilgrim to the Black Queen was that she watch over the two lovebirds. If they did know, they would understand how utterly and completely ruinous and suicidal this assassination plan of theirs is.

ninegardens

Aside from the danger aspect, I wonder if the "Pilgrims last request" in itself would be enough to stay their hand. Pilgrim was kind of a big deal... but I suspect that politics is still politics.

Insanenoodlyguy

Easy to rationalize if you want to "oh he said that then, but look at what they are becoming now. He'd understand."

Sykomantis

So my guess is there's a Crab buried under the ruins.

Someperson

So I'm betting Ifriqui does something rash to try and kill Osen and it goes spectacularly badly in the near future, and that after the war Yannu is poised to make his move but then the dynamic duo offer some kind of concession that mostly smooths things over.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, if Yannu wants any chance of surviving this he has to actively contribute now. It might be in a subtle way, but he has already realized if he doesn't act he stays in this wagon, which is about to catch fire while careening off a cliff.

Someperson

Hm, yeah, I wouldn't be terribly surprised if Yannu made some kind of contribution to Ifriqui's plan failing.

spencer

Whats Abigail up to now? We haven't had her perspective in a while.

letouriste

I'm dying to know 😊

Interlude: Honour

"It is indeed true, Chancellor, that the greatest possible victory is over yourself. My magical doubles proved to be the worthiest of my opponents by far."

– Dread Empress Gemini (possibly Gemini II, never conclusively proved not one of the doubles)

Razin Tanja watched the distant line of the horizon, sitting the saddle, and wondered about the nature of change. How it was embraced and how it was fought, how it was cursed and how it was sought. It was not, he had come to think, a matter of people being good or bad. Sometimes bad men fought for good causes, necessary causes. Sometimes good women did terrible things, because they did not think of them as being terrible at all.

It was, Razin thought, like standing in a tower. If the inside of it was all you had ever known, the world was divided by the levels of it. You'd think in terms of top and bottom, of stairs and doors, and never consider there could be anything else at all. Only if you'd stepped outside of it, even once, suddenly it would all seem so silly. What did a level or another matter, when you had seen a mountain or the sea?

But then who could conceive of a mountain or the sea, when all they had ever seen was the inside of a tower?

No, it was not about good and bad. It was about whether you had gotten a glimpse of the world outside the tower or not, and what that glimpse did to you. For Razin that journey had begun a bridge outside the city of Sarcella, when the great monster of their age had told him to learn from his mistakes or die in a ditch. It had ended when he'd looked at a woman he'd already been

half in love with about to fight Yannu Marave to the death in his honour and seen nothing but futility.

A shameful, ugly waste that somehow everyone around him insisted was honour.

"But it was just blood," Razin murmured.

But that was Levant, wasn't it? Blood and honour, two sides of the same coin. The glory and the slaughter, so deeply intertwined they might as well be the same thing. And so Razin would not think in terms of good and bad, today. That was not the bone of it, the vein. It was about the tower, and how many people had stepped outside of it. Been dragged outside of it by this war.

About how far people would be willing to go, to go back in and close the door behind them.

—

There was a trap here, Hakram Deadhand thought, even if he was yet blind to it.

The Warlord was not a general in the way of others he knew and had known, more Nauk than Juniper, but he was a graduate of the War College and had fought in campaigns that would be studied for centuries to come. To his practiced eye the battle line of the enemy was a recipe for a rout, or at least severe defeat since the dead did not flee even when beaten. Keter's centre was weak a weak half circle, only six lines of skeletons deep, and the sheer weight of a charge from Levantine heavy foot – Alava's was particularly strong, entire companies heavily armed with plate and hammers – should plow right through.

The enemy had thickened its flanks instead, as much as thirty of the forty-five thousand it numbered split between the two. The rest, four thousand or some, was held in reserve behind the curved centre. Hakram was not as well-read as some in matters of tactics, but the formation smacked to him of the tactics of the Iron Prince at the Battle of Aisne, the overwhelming Lycaonese victory that had won Cordelia Hasenbach the throne. On that field Klaus Papenheim had drawn in a larger coalition of southerners deep past his flanks by letting his centre give ground before halting the retreat and falling around the flanks for an encirclement.

When he told Troke as much, the chief of the Blackspears spat to the side with a skeptical look.

"Won't work here," Troke Snaketooth replied. "The Dominion will keep charging and even if the undead send in their reserve it'll be torn through."

Which would leave the two strong flanks of the enemy army split and prone to being encircled in turn, a defeat in the making.

"So it's bait," the Warlord gravelled.

Hakram was not surprised. He had asked General Pallas to take a closer look at the grounds near the enemy and her riders had found that behind the battle line there were hints of the long-buried city that had once stood here. The thick of the ruins behind the curve of the enemy formation, within the hollow of the half circle. The general the Dead King had sent to command here must want their own centre to collapse, Hakram thought, for the Levantines to continue charging forward right into some sort of nasty trap that would shatter them and turn the battle around in a single stroke.

He'd written as much to Catherine, which was why he had been baffled when he had learned that she'd sensed a few undead under the ground where the city would be but no gathered power whatsoever. As far as she could tell, there weren't even any constructs: just a handful of Bones. Hakram began trading messengers back and forth with Lord Yannu and General Pallas in the wake of that, their armies slowed to a halt far enough the enemy would not be able to steal a march on them. Not that they seemed willing to leave the 'defensive' position they'd taken.

"If we march away," General Pallas suggested, "they might follow us away from their position."

It was a sensible enough thought and the Grand Alliance attempted it, but the enemy did not move to follow. It only made the trap more obvious, but the enemy general knew the same thing they did: they could not afford to leave without fighting that army. If they pulled back too far there would be nothing to stop the dead from going around them and striking at the camps from behind while they were trying to storm the walls of Keter, a recipe for slaughter. And there was no doubt at all that the dead would march faster, because unlike the living they did not tire and standing in the sun wearing armour for hours would not exhaust them.

So the army turned back, taking its old position after having burned a little over an hour.

"Our purpose is to keep their army here," Hakram told the others. "We can achieve it simply by standing here and facing them without actually waging a battle."

Only, as Careful Yannu sent back in message, it wasn't that simple. If they stayed too late, they would be stuck out in the Ossuary away from reinforcements in the dark, having no idea about the state of the coalition army that'd tried to storm Keter. Given that Proceran outriders had made it clear that there

were still other armies of the dead gathering out in the plains, they would be running the risk of Keter throwing all those half-assembled forces at them from the sides while the army in front of them attacked them in the dark. That was potentially disastrous.

"We fight," Lord Yannu sent.

"We fight," General Pallas agreed.

"We fight," the Warlord conceded.

There was no other way but to give battle, so all that was left was to find a way to do it without giving the Dead King what he wanted.

—

The wait was getting to them all.

Ishaq had chosen his band with care, knowing that he might never get an opportunity like this again, and he was still pleased with the plan he had decided on. It was a simple thing, as most functional plans tended to be. The Grave Binder to find the Scourge and reach them, the Vagrant Spear to close the distance, the Stained Sister to hold them down, himself for the killing blow and the Harrowed Witch to handle their retreat. Lord Hanno had been generous in releasing the two heroines to his service for the battle, seemingly uncaring that the deed of killing a Scourge today would see Ishaq added to the Rolls. The once-Knight appeared interested only in the end of one of the Dead King's finest Revenants, indifferent to all other consequences.

A hard man to grasp, Hanno of Arwad. He acted weak where he should be strong, acted strongly where he should give. The Barrow Sword had refined his understanding in Salia, when he'd crossed swords with the Ashuran, but even now he was often unsure whether the hero was being clever or not. This band, for one. Ishaq had fought at the side of Sidonia and Aspasia before, facing the Drake together in Hainaut, and knew them well enough. So he'd anticipated that Sidonia would hold the Grave Binder in contempt, for the man in tattered robes was visibly rotting from a barrow-curse. A contempt that would be returned in kind, as Idris saw her as a hound of the Blood.

But he had not thought, however, that the Stained Sister would be as oil and water with the Harrowed Witch. Both Procerans were survivors of the Dead King's advance, but neither cared for the way the other had survived. Aspasia had only disdain for the Sister staying among the living only because she had been buried among so many corpses the dead had forgot her, while the old heroine had not been shy in castigating the Witch over the sacrifice of her own brother to power an illusion that would let

her flee unseen. Ishaq had twice been forced to demand silence as the bickering escalated towards thrown hands, wondering all the while if somewhere Hanno of Arwad might not be laughing at him.

Now all stood in sullen silence among the throng of Alavan armsmen, their faces hidden by simple soldier's cloaks. Warriors gave them a wide berth, as much out of respect for Bestowed as the stink that came from Idris' rotting flesh. It really was an awful smell, Ishaq thought to himself. The Grave Binder had told him that being ever dying deepened his hold over death, but even Idris admitted that the barrow had exacted from him a deep price for the rings that taught him his learning.

"I hope people will stop marching all around soon," the Harrowed Witch muttered, breaking half an hour of silence. "I'm getting a headache watching them."

"How little it takes to-" the Stained Sister began, hands folding into the sleeves her red-stained garments, but Ishaq's hard look put a stop to that.

Like children, sometimes. As if just standing in the vicinity of each other was enough to drive each other mad.

"The hosts are getting in formation," Sidonia told them, sounding distracted as she spoke.

The Vagrant Spear was looking at the same 'marching around' that Aspasia had complained of. Ishaq was no captain of warbands himself, but he too could see that Careful Yannu and the Warlord had been moving around their armies in preparation of the battle. The Clans had split in two, taking the flanks, while Levant tightened the centre. Why he was not sure, and it was not his trouble to bother with. The Barrow Sword had come here to hunt.

"Movement?" he asked Idris.

The Grave Binder was picking at his wrist, gazing off in the distance, but when addressed returned to the present. The Bestowed's fingers went to the glittering bronze rings on his left hand, a small shiver of power touching the air.

"Four Revenants in the army," Idris said. "In pairs. And the two out in the field haven't moved for the last hour."

"Could be the Hawk and an escort," Sidonia facing Ishaq directly and refusing to acknowledge the other man's existence.

It was a grim source of amusement to the Barrow Sword that though he too had stolen from a barrow, a few hard fights back-to-back had seen this offence to honour forgiven while Idris would be scorned to the grave and likely even beyond. Sidonia was not from a noble line, not having any of the Spear's blood even though she

had inherited the Bestowal, but she had been welcomed warmly by the greats of the Dominion and so eagerly adopted their hypocrisies. Idris had done little that those of the Brigand's Blood had not surpassed in horror a dozen times over, but a darkened Bestowal and enmity with the Binder's Blood meant he must be deserving of death.

That would change, after the war. Ishaq would see to it. And that change would begin with his being the first villain to ever added to the Rolls.

"It could also be bait," the Barrow Sword replied. "We wait."

Some dissatisfaction at that, but none challenged him. He was representative for the champions of Below, though the title in his hands did not command the same respect as it had in the Black Queen's. No matter. Soon the Scourges would reveal themselves, trying to snatch some great name's life, and then his time would come.

Like all Bestowed before him, Ishaq would write his entry in the Rolls blood-red.

—

Aquiline Osená shaded her eyes with her hand, peering at the enemy as the sun pounded down on her helm.

By habit she glanced through the ranks for a head worth taking, some great captain or Revenant, but much as she hated to admit it the days where she could wade into the thick of the slaughter were past. She was only twenty-two, young enough that there should still be many years for her to slay great names and bring back their skulls to the Silent Shrine, but as Razin kept saying if either of them died then all hope of change for the Dominion would die with them. It was still frustrating to hear, and if he had not been clever enough to save that kind of talk for when they were naked and sated she might have quarrelled with him for it.

The Grim Binder's Blood made for canny men, it was known.

No, now her eyes were meant for different prizes. As the years passed she had become the leading captain of their host, her betrothed taking a step back and to instead hold command of reserves or the camp. Razin was not without talent as war captain, Aquiline believed, but she would not deny he did not have the knack for it that some were born with — like Abigail the Fox or Rozala Malanza. Yet in the Dominion none were held as Yannu Marave's equal when it came to leading warriors, which was part of why Razin had stepped back. *If it comes to war, Razin had said, it will be you that leads our captains. Best you and they get used to it.*

He really was sweet, Aquiline thought, still pleased at the memory. She toyed with a strand of hair, smiling, but was brought out of the reverie by a cleared throat. Captain Elvera was looking at her, worn face pulling into a cheeky grin.

"Not even wed and already losing your head," the old captain said, shaking her head. "What would your father say?"

"That at least I had the sense never to fuck a Proceran," Aquiline replied, entirely unashamed.

"I just taught him how to handle an axe," Elvera lied.

The Lady of Tartessos still found it wildly entertaining that Elvera had slept with one of spymasters of Procer back when they were young. She'd also been relieved it wasn't the dead traitor or the one that looked like a skeleton with dry skin hung on it, since it would have called her old teacher's tastes into question. In the distance a deep horn sounded – deeper even than those of the Army of Callow, which Aquiline knew well – and the sound called them back to order. Her eyes returned to the enemy's ranks, still find the same conclusion laying there to be found.

"If we charged we'd tear right through them," Aquiline Osená stated. "Their centre is thin and thin on shields."

"Which their captain wants of us," Elvera agreed. "That formation is too odd for it to be otherwise."

By the count of the outriders, the dead numbered over forty thousand. Likely closer to forty-five, the kataphraktoi had claimed, but they could not be sure given the way the enemy kept some of its troops hidden at the back. That meant the numbers of the Grand Alliance were higher: fifty-three thousand had set out with down and marched to this field, all in all. Twenty-seven thousand for the Dominion, twenty-three thousand orcs and three thousand kataphraktoi under General Pallas. It was rare for the dead to fight when their numbers were the lesser, given that Bones were hardly better than even Proceran levies as soldiers, but rarer still for the dead to stand on the defence.

And that was what Aquiline's eyes were telling her: the dead were still preparing to defend, not attack.

"I can't see the sense in it," Aquiline admitted.

"A trap of some sort," Elvera replied. "It's why Careful Yannu sent orders that we are to hold the centre but not break through."

"He didn't thin our numbers, though," the Lady of Tartessos replied, frowning. "Which he means he's worried about *them* breaking through *us*."

There could not be many reasons for that. Both their gazes moved to the Crab as their thoughts flowed down the same path. The monster was gargantuan, as were all of its kind, but this one was not like the others Aquiline had glimpsed. It was not a city on great spindly legs, workshops and smithies and dens of sorcery protected by walls, but instead entirely a creature of war. The mountain of death belched trails of smoke from great bonfires that looked like a thousand eyes, the air wavering from the heat around it, and from all sides extruded paired and massive folded tusks of steel. Aquiline could see in her mind's eye how they would unfold, turning into cutting lines that would carve through a man's height across the length of half a mile as the monster advanced.

"We have our own monster, my lady," Elvera finally said, nodding upwards. "And if it comes to a scrap, I'll bet on ours."

Aquiline refrained from looking up, looking for the silhouette of the crow and her rider. It would have felt childish, like a child tugging at her mother's skirt. A feeling she resented all the more for knowing the Warden was not much older than her. Not that one would know, from the way she carried herself: halfway between a sage and a lunatic, but ever a step ahead of her foes.

"She said she would handle it, so she will," Aquiline simply said.

Her worries had to be on the ground, where steel would clash. The orders had come from Careful Yannu and the Grand Alliance army had at last finished taking a formation of its own. The captains of the Dominion had taken the centre, Aquiline's own armsmen and those of Malaga in the middle while Alava stood on one side and Vaccei the other. The Clans had agreed to hold the flanks, Warlord Hakram taking the left flank while an orc by the name of Troke Snaketooth took the right. General Pallas' kataphraktoi were being kept in reserve at the back, along with eight thousand mixed foot from the Clans and the Dominion – the four thousand Levantines there under Razin's command, while Oghuz the Lamé held it the orcs.

It was a large reserve, but Aquiline approved of the caution. There was something afoot. In the distance the deep horns of the Clans sounded once more, soon after answered by the beat of Levantine war-drums. Aquiline breathed out, rolling her shoulders, and straightened her back. Her sword left the sheath easy as a breath and she raised the steel until it gleamed in the sun's light.

"*Forward*," Aquiline Osená shouted, and across the dusty plain warriors began to march.

The Warlord was not in the thick of it when the lines collided.

For now he was still of more use behind, watching the greater currents of the battle. Time for the axe-song would come soon enough. Instead he watched as the shield wall of his flank collided with that of the dead, his warriors smashing through the dead with axe and sword. Orc were larger than human, heavier, and found it easier to land the kind of blows that shattered skeletons. The other side of that, which became visible soon enough, was that the Clans lacked the discipline of the Army of Callow. The line became uneven in moments, finer warriors digging deeper into enemy lines, and the disorders gave room for the dead to bite.

They would kill more of the enemy, Hakram thought, but more would die as well.

"The centre's doing well," Sigvin opined. "The Levantines aren't pushing further than they should."

They *had* pushed back the enemy some, the Warlord saw, but not much and their captains were holding back the men. It had blunted the head of the half circle but little more than that. Lord Yannu's plan had been simple enough: since they were certain that what the dead had planned laid in the ruins, then to avoid the trap all they must do was avoid taking those grounds. The enemy centre would shatter itself on the Grand Alliance's, and then the majority of the Dominion army could swing around to take from the side the flanks that Hakram's warriors would have nailed down. And, in case a mistake had been made, a large reserve was being kept back.

Mitigated risk, Hakram had thought when he first heard it. A plan worthy of a man called Careful Yannu.

Movement drew his attention to the side. He and Troke had ordered their shield walls to be ten men deep, to stretch the line and prevent easy encirclement by the larger undead flanks, but it wasn't the Bones that were worrying him. Against these, Hakram would send his warriors all day without a second thought. It was the constructs, which had been waiting patiently to the sides as the shield walls impacted and the troops committed to the clash. And now, the Warlord saw, they were beginning to move.

"Fuck," Sigvin whispered, "but ghouls are quick."

"Keter uses them as replacement for cavalry," Hakram replied, eyes following the same curve as hers.

Thousands of flesh abominations ran on four legs, circling around the orcish shield wall to hit it from the side, but Hakram's chiefs had been warned. They back lines pulled away and formed another shield wall facing the ghouls. It was the larger

constructs that drew his eye, though. Beorns and Tusks, great bears with bellyfuls of dead and boar-like abominations instead filled with *rocks*. The enemy seemed to lack drakes, save for a few circling above as watchers, and there had been no swarm unleashed. There were no insects to kill and raise, out in the Ossuary: all life had been snuffed out centuries ago.

"There they go," the Warlord grimly said as the larger constructs began to move.

The enemy's plan became obvious soon enough. The ghouls were keeping the new, thin shield wall pinned while Beorns circled around towards it. Though Hakram's warriors were holding the ghouls at bay handily, returning the favour in kind when throats were torn out by fang, the line was not steady. The Beorns would blow holes into it and then pour out skeletons in the holes. As for the Tusks, they slowly began to advance but their destination was not yet clear.

"Are you sure we can trust them?" Sigvin suddenly asked.

"Against the dead? Always," the Warlord replied.

On Troke's flank, the assembled shamans of the Clans unleashed their sorceries onto the approaching Beorns. Waves of fire and frost, withering curses that turned flesh to stone or exploded in waves of bronze sorcery. But there were only so many mages among Hakram's kind, not enough for both flanks. So the Warlord had bargained for reinforcements: as the great abominations approached the line, small bands darted out of the orcish shield wall. A heartbeat later blinding flares burst as the lodges of Lanterns did what they did best: savage giant monsters with the most warlike applications of Light on all of Calernia.

Blinding beams and pale fire, spears and axes and javelins. The priests of Levant, singing the same war hymns they had for centuries, tore wildly into the Dead King's monsters.

"Good priests," Sigvin reluctantly conceded.

Hakram did not answer, eyes on the Tusks. They had yet to charge, still moving around without clear purpose. Held back for now? It would make sense. There were no better constructs in the arsenal of Keter to shatter shield walls, best to use them when they would strike the hardest. But that meant his use as a watcher had come to an end. The tall orc reached for his helm, pulling down on his head and tightening the clasp. The shamaness sent him a bright look.

"Into the fight?" she eagerly asked.

"It's time," the Warlord agreed. "I'll lead my warband to-"

Hakram did not finish the sentence and came close to never finish anything ever again. The arrow had fallen down in utter silence, grey and unseen, only for the middle of the shaft to be hit by another arrow five feet away from his throat. He went very still, for a moment, but no other arrow came.

"I owe Indrani a drink," Hakram Deadhand said, and reached for his axe.

—

There was no hiding where the arrow had come from.

"I have them," the Grave Binder said.

Ishaq drew Pinon, the blade keening eagerly.

"We move," he ordered.

Sidonia laughed, Aspasia moaned and the Stained Sister's face hardened. With the collision of the lines they had been forced back behind the Alavan shield wall, but now they passed through it and into the thick of the dead. Ishaq and Sidonia took the lead, the Barrow Sword smashing through the shield raised in his way while the Vagrant Spear deftly leapt over another and scattered the dead into bones with a burst of Light. The two of them kept making room, clearing the dead in a storm as the rest of their band crossed the shield wall and it closed behind them. They had been quick, but they were fighting a sea and within moments the dead were pressing against them.

"*Idris*," Ishaq called out.

"Eyes, ears, tongue," the Grave Binder hurriedly chanted in Lunara. "I who hold dominion over the dead claim my tax: let none with eyes behold me."

There were many among Bestowed who thought Idris worthy of mockery, for like other sorcerers of the Dominion his magic could not destroy swaths of foes like that of Praesi and Callowan mages. He was a maker of curses and a necromancer, which had only earned him further mockery as his skill proved inferior to the Dead King's and he failed to steal control of undead from the Hidden Horror. That was missing, Ishaq had found, the true strength of his Bestowal. His mastery over death was not simple necromancy, it was a deeper power — and that truth was expressed by the way Idris, alone of all the sorcerers of Calernia, could wave curses that affected even undead.

Such as hiding from their eyes a band of five Bestowed as they snuck through an entire army of the dead.

The Barrow Sword had known from the beginning that fighting his way to the Scourges when they hid in the middle of an army would see his band spent by the time the clash began, so he'd ensured they wouldn't need to fight at all. The Bestowed wove their way through the packed ranks of the enemy, elbowing skeletons and ducking the shadow of great abominations as they heeded Ishaq's order not to destroy even a single one – lest the Dead King be able to find them through the destruction. They hurried as much as they could, the sensation of moving unseen oddly empowering after the Barrow Sword grew used to the vulnerability, and the Grave Binder guided them straight to the Revenants.

"The three Revenants are clustered together," Idris whispered.

"What happened to the fourth?" Ishaq frowned.

"Suddenly destroyed while it was trying to join the others," the Grave Binder replied.

The Barrow Sword traded a look with Sidonia.

"The Lady's in fine form today," she cheerfully said, openly pleased.

Was she ever not? Ishaq still remembered her methodically taking the Red Knight apart with knives, making a show of a woman capable of cracking stone walls with her bare hands. He knew well he would have lost that fight in her place, one of the many reasons it paid to remain on good terms with the Woe. The Warden required so little of her allies that Ishaq was frequently baffled she did not have more villains in her service – refraining from excesses was a cheap price for her friendship. Keeping to her rules had seen a cordial truce brokered between him and the rising force in Levant as reward.

The Black Queen hadn't been subtle about making them work together, but then why bother when she had the authority to do as she wished? He'd have that too, one day. The power to give an order going against centuries of custom and rightly expected to be obeyed. Some mornings he woke up so hungry for it his belly ached.

"There," Idris suddenly said. "Behind the beorn. Get ready."

"Sidonia," Ishaq called out.

"Honour the Blood," the Vagrant Spear shouted back, leaping atop the massive bear.

She was gone in a moment as the Barrow Sword went around, Aspasia and the Stained Sister following closely. The Grave Binder was further behind, already whispering his next spell. Idris' curses could not fool Revenants, who the Dead King empowered beyond his

ability to trick, but he would keep all other undead away from them for as long as he could. They had until the Grave Binder faltered to make their kill and ready themselves for retreat. Ishaq turned the corner a moment later, watching as Sidonia struck at their enemies in the flash of Light, and counted three.

In the back, the Hawk was fleeing.

In front of them, two identical silhouettes in armour stood. Iron from head to toe, the helms shaped like the heads of wolfhounds. The Wolfhound, then, and a fake. The strongest defence of the Scourges, covering the Hawk's retreat. Ishaq rolled his shoulder, Pinon singing as she cut through the air. The Hawk was for the Archer to handle anyhow, he would make do with this one.

"Honour to *me*," Ishaq the Barrow Sword grinned, and stepped into the fight.

—

Yannu had taken the time to consider how he would do it, if he were Itima Ifriqui, and decided it would be a man from Tartessos.

Though the Lady of Vaccei was taking a black gamble by attempting Razin Tanja's assassination during a battle, she was a fool. She was, he had mused, simply used to getting her way. How many dozens of times had she rid herself of foes using the cover an honour war or a hunting day? How many had she poisoned and ordered slain in the night? Itima Ifriqui had killed Blood before and gotten away with it. Her failure was that she had not grasped the danger courted by breaking the treaties of the Grand Alliance. Razin's death would not be pursued by a few spies or a single Bestowed: the Warden herself would look into such a killing.

And there was no telling how far Catherine Foundling was able to reach for answers.

Still, Itima would know that if she were blamed for Lord Razin's death she would be facing the bitter vengeance of a widowed Aquiline Osená and a furious Binder's Blood, whose armies would both come for Vaccei to scour it as harshly as the Principate once had. So Itima must set Tartessos against Malaga in the aftermath, and there was opportunity for that. Several captains in Osená service had been bitterly disappointed by Aquiline's betrothal, having hoped to win her hand through honour, and there were even more who had lost kin fighting against the Malagans over the rich lands between the two cities. A grudge would not be too difficult to forge as a reason for the killing.

As the two betrothed kept their warriors in blended companies, finding a hand to do the deed was as easy as finding a Tartessos warrior foolish enough to think they might get away with it and

greedy enough to believe the riches promised would be given. No doubt Itima had given out some gold as proof she would pay the whole, using the coin to tie the killer to whichever Tartessos man she wanted blamed for the deed. Yannu's first trouble was that there could be no telling who it was that the Bandit's Blood had bent to their purpose. It could be any of hundreds, and Razin's command in the reserves meant he was near too many warriors to count.

Yannu's second trouble was that he did not want Itima Ifriqui to be caught.

The Lord of Malaga had no doubt she would follow through on the threat Moro had carried, that she would drag him down as well if she was to be killed. And even if she was not, recklessly as she was acting Itima was still his only ally in checking the rise of his enemies. She must then be stopped without being outed, else it all come down on both their heads. Fortunately, though there could be many assassins there was only one life they were after. There lay Yannu's opportunity, and the way he could yet turn this to his advantage.

"I need you by Razin Tanja's side," Yannu told his cousin.

Rima blinked in dismay.

"Now?" she replied. "Yannu, we're fighting a battle."

Only half true. The two of them were well behind the lines, with his sworn swords, and not likely to fight until the enemy centre was broken and the Clans were to be reinforced.

"Now," he agreed. "Itima's being rash. She wants to kill Razin Tanja."

His cousin let out a low whistle.

"That's going to get a *lot* of people killed," Rima said, sounding impressed in the worst way.

"Too many," Yannu agreed. "So I'm sending you to him, as a veteran to help him decide when to send in the reserves."

"But not to kill him," she tried.

"Keep him alive at all costs," the Lord of Alava replied. "I believe Itima'll be using a Tartessos man to do the deed, so watch them closely."

"So I'm to constantly keep my hand on my sword for an hour or two around a gaggle of jumpy Tanja armsmen," Rima grimaced. "There's a pleasant fucking time in the making."

"Yes," Yannu said, unapologetic. "But most important is that when the assassin is revealed, you must see them killed."

Silencing the hand being used was crucial. With no tongue left to wag and no dead Tanja to prompt a deeper look by the likes of the Warden, the only trail left to follow would be the one Itima was sure to have laid pointing towards Tartessos. Rima might even win the Champion's Blood some honour by saving Razin's life, if she was quick enough.

"And when the armsmen ask why I looked at every Tartessos man twice all afternoon just before an assassin tried his luck?" Rima asked.

"I will settle that," the Lord of Alava said. "Simply tell them I had heard there might be an attempt and sent you to make sure he would live."

He'd have to create a believable way as to how he might have caught out a treacherous Tartessos captain, but it should not be impossible. Especially with Lady Itima's help, which she would be forced to give him if she did not want to get caught out having had a hand in any of this. Rima slowly nodded.

"You're sure?" she quietly asked.

"We still need the Brigand's Blood," Yannu admitted. "If we lose Vaccei, it is finished."

Alava could not win alone. It could fight, and might even follow him into that fight to the bitter end, but that the end would be bitter there was no doubt. That meant Itima Ifriqui must live through her blunder, even if he had to cross her to see it done.

"Then it's done," Rima said, clasping his arm.

Yannu clasped it back, pulling her close before releasing her. He was not pleased to send her away, but there was no one else he would trust this time. She had trained her right hand to serve as captain of his sworn swords in her absence, should it come to a fight, knowing she might be sent away on duties such as this. As she left his sight, vanishing into the crowd of armed men, the Lord of Alava turned back to the unfolding battle. It was, to his eye, going well. The enemy centre was teetering on the brink of collapse, having spent itself on his people's shield wall, and though the dead were mounting among the Clans they were holding strong.

The shield wall on the right flank was bending after having been thinned by the Beorns that had survived the sorcery of the orcs, but it looked in no danger of collapse. On both sides the ghouls were being thinned and it looked as if the Warlord had rallied warriors to go on the attack against them. *He's to curve around*

the shield wall after, Yannu saw. Using on the dead the very same manoeuvre they had wanted to use on him. The Bestowed's very presence seemed to light a flame in the orcs, he saw, and not only the well-armoured ones he used as his sworn swords.

Wherever the Warlord stood vigor seemed to bleed back into tiring warriors, and they chewed up the dead like a closing maw.

It was worth keeping in- Yannu threw himself down from his horse, his armsmen closing around him with shields raised, but as he landed in the dust and his mount whinnied he saw there had been no need. The arrow he had glimpsed mere feet away from him had been shot out by another, taken in flight.

"Archer," one of his sworn swords said, and there were murmurs of agreement.

That and respect. The shot that might have killed Yannu had been madness, but it was madder still to have shot *it*. The Lord of Alava declined help to climb back the saddle, more bruised in pride than body, and returned to watching the battle. The centre was slightly further forward than he would prefer, but it had been too much to expect a fighting line to be too strictly observed. He was more concerned by the Tusks that still waited behind the enemy's flanks, not yet engaged even though on both sides the orcs were no longer losing grounds. When were they to strike, if not now? An instinct born of long experience had his eyes straying back to the centre, and there he saw it.

Just a moment too late.

The ground collapsed. The entire hollow he had been so wary of, the ruins under ground, had been nothing but a great sand trap. As the handful of dead the Warden had senses below brought down some pillar or another the entire cavern collapsed, turning into a massive pit. A few hundred of the warriors too far forward fell along with the entire enemy centre, though unlike the undead they would not be getting back up from that fall. And now he understood the trap the Enemy had laid, at long last. It'd been too obvious from the start, but that had been the trick: Yannu had never been meant to walk into the collapsing grounds.

He had been meant to keep his army in the wring place because of it.

Already he saw it laid out before him. Two flanks, the orcs holding but slowly losing to the dead on both. His centre, the Dominion forces, had been meant to reinforce the Clans by attacking the flanks once the enemy centre was broken. They would have gone both through the freed centre and through the back, preparing to encircle with the orc warriors as the anchor. Only now half the path was a pit Yannu's warriors could not march through, and the back path meant circling all the way around the

orc shield lines while most of the Dominion army was facing the wrong way.

And he couldn't even do that, Yannu Marave realized, because behind him the reserves had yet to be committed and they were still in the way.

On the other side of the pit, the enemy reserve – which had stood right outside the edge of the fall – began to advance. On the flanks the Tusks turned as one, facing the shield walls of the Clans, and began to charge.

And over the entire army, for the first time since the battle had begun the Crab took a step forward.

—

"Hold," Aquiline Osená shouted. "*Hold.*"

The shield wall wavered despite her screams, despite the way she had left the saddle and gone to stand with her warriors. And though Aquiline kept a face of calm, she was glad that the paint she wore from head to toe hid the sheen of her sweat. The fear that was seizing the shield wall was in her blood too, ice pooling in the belly. What else was she to feel, watching the Crab walking towards them one sickening step at a time? The great abomination's spindly legs, as repulsive as the scuttling legs of some vermin for all that they were taller than towers, crossed the great pit with ease. All over the carapace of stone and bone the fire-eyes burned, spewing out ever-longer tongues of flame that kept burning on the ground after falling in droplets.

When the Crab got close enough, dozens would be incinerated in a heartbeat with every plume of liquid fire.

Yet it was not the fire that had her warriors inching back, bending away from the sharply inclined pit where hundreds of their comrades had fallen to their death mere moments ago. It was the husks of steel, the strident grinding sound they made as they unfolded and slammed down. The Crab was only halfway through the pit, but already the razor-length hung in the air before the shield wall. At head-height. What shield could possibly hope to turn back such a massive blade? It would pass through the shield wall like a knife through butter, making mist of men. Three hundred feet. Two hundred feet. One hundred feet.

"Hold," Aquiline shouted again, but her voice wavered.

Her weight was leaning back as well, her body eager to flee even if her heart still hesitated. What had once been the enemy's centre was digging itself out of the ash and dust, the dead crawling out as they began to climb the slope towards her warriors, but worse than them was the enemy's reserve. It was

proceeding down the slope of the pit in good order, staying in formation as it moved. *The broken centre to hold us, the reserve to break us*, she thought. All the while the dead tried to break the flanks and collapse the entire army. Dread seized her heart. A defeat, it would be a catastrophic- the sun was bottled out by the beat of great wings.

Her shield wall split, like fish around a shark, and a form leapt down from her mount. The crow-horse let out an eerie cry before flying away, leaving the Warden standing alone in an empty circle of warriors. The Mantle of Woe flapped at her back, the many colours of the foes defeated by the Black Queen of Callow a warning against any who would defy her, while her dreadful staff of dead wood dimmed the sight of any who beheld it – as if stealing the light of the world from your eyes. Catherine Foundling cracked her neck, and the Lady of Tartessos did not begrudge the three dozen warriors who widened the circle by taking a wary step back.

But Aquiline Osenia was Blood, and Blood did not flinch. She stepped into the circle, coming to stand by the Black Queen as no other dared. A coolly amused brown eye found her before flicking away.

"Aquiline," the Warden greeted her. "Clever little plan Keter cooked up against us, isn't it?"

"The Enemy's wiles run deep," the Lady of Tartessos replied, forcing calm.

Catherine Foundling was dangerous as a sword was dangerous: not to be feared, save when turned against you. Aquiline had learned much from her and the Army of Callow, enough to be grateful even knowing it was a boon the Grey Pilgrim had bargained for. But the fear would never entirely go away. The Warden was a graveyard made into a woman, her ghosts so many a second kingdom could be made of them for her to rule.

"Ours too," Catherine Foundling grinned, all teeth and malice. "And the Dead King will need to do better than *this* if he wants to get the drop on me."

The air cooled, the sun's warmth chased away, and Aquiline realized with a start that behind them the Black Queen's shadow had grown. Lengthened, broadened, until it was as a sea. Her warriors fled the spread of it, and not a moment too soon. From the shadow a massive hairy leg began to emerge, then another, as if some gargantuan creature was climbing out of the darkness.

"Ashen Gods," Aquiline croaked. "What is this?"

"An old tyrant," the Warden said, "ridden by a new god."

Roiling darkness in a gargantuan spider's shape, dripping rivulets of Night, rose to cast a shadow over them both.

"Keep your shield wall steady, Aquiline Osená," the smiling madwoman ordered. "I'll handle the rest."

—

The Tusk passed through the shield wall like it wasn't even there, turning orcs and steel alike to crumpled paste without even slowing. Light lashed out at the thick hide in a hook but though it burned through the flesh it scrabbled harmlessly against the stones below. They were just bloody stones, Hakram irritably thought. Nothing for Above to take offence to, so Light was about as useful against it as it would be against a real rock: not at all, unless a great deal of it was used. Skeletons in bronze and iron poured in the gap the Tusk had torn as it shook, turning around for another pass, but there would be none of that.

"Spears," the Warlord shouted.

They were moving before he even gave the order, **Lead** pulsing with his heartbeat and whispering through their veins. It kept his warriors up, quickened them, strengthened them. And it left them exhausted to the point of collapse when he left. Nothing was without a price. Two dozen spears tore into the Tusk from the sides, scraping against stone as they found purchase and the screaming monster tried to shake them off. It would not. Hakram's axe bit in the back of the beast and he used it to hoist himself up on its back, crawling through filth and rotten leather.

"I broke the gates of Okoro," Hakram Deadhand recited.

He struck. The beast screamed.

"My name echoing three rivers," he said.

And he struck. The beast's knees bent.

"And though I died an age ago," he sang through bared fangs.

And he struck again, through bone and flesh, until his axe touched stone and stone cracked.

"*I live still through your shivers,*" the Warlord snarled, striking one last time with the might of his name in his hand

The stone split under his axe like dead wood, the Tusk's hoarse scream ending abruptly as half its body was carved straight through. Hoarse shouts of approvals, almost howls, and Hakram slid down from the felled beast. He raised his hand in an unspoken order and Dag saw to it, leading champions into the breach to close it and restore the shield wall. It was like

holding together a dike, the Warlord thought. Every holed he plugged was followed by another erupting. And still his flank was doing better than Troke's, which had been so close to collapse that General Pallas had led all her kataphraktoi into a charge to stem the disaster.

Razin Tanja and Oghuz had led the foot behind them, as much because Troke needed the reinforcements as to get out of the way of the troops Yannu was shifting to support Hakram's shield wall. Already the right edge of the wall was bolstered with Alava armsmen, but the rest would be here late. So fucking late. Hakram's warriors were fighting like devils, but even with his aspect burning in his belly like a piece of coal he was not sure it would be enough. At least, though he was not the only one buried neck deep in a nightmare.

In the depths of the pit, Night warred with liquid fire and howling sorceries. Tenebrous, stolen from the ruins of Ater and granted to a lesser god as a mount, was fighting against the Crab as Catherine flew on her mount's back and hammered at the great monster's back with burning black flames. The heat of the fires was so great he could feel it on the wind even from a mile away and bursts of lightning blinded the unwary, but the smaller spider had cracked open the carapace of the larger Crab and it looked like it was trying to devour what its mandibles tore into.

Hakram was not sure what struck more horror in him: the chorus of screams that came from the Crab, or the demented screeches – which somehow echoed of a crow's caws – coming from Tenebrous. Either way, he did not envy the Dominion shield wall left behind to hold the centre. They were close enough that eardrums must be bursting from the noise.

Setting aside the thought, the Warlord returned to the fray. His battle was here, holding back the sea lapping as his wall of shields, and he had no time to spare for anyone else. It was all a whirlwind of blood and screams, steel flashing as the dead ripped out shields and threw themselves at warriors. The crawled under, ripping at flesh, ghouls leapt above shields and tore into formations. The Warlord went where the line broke, where strength sagged, and breach by breach his warband dwindled to nothing. Dead or sent to plug holes, none of the faces around him the same he had begun fighting with.

But his mind was cool, clear. His body was dripping with sweat, muscles aching and his limbs itching where they had been cut, but so long as his mind knew clarity he could make himself move. Another cut, another backhand breaking a skull, another ghouls taken by the neck and *crushed*. There were always more enemies, and it was with utter surprise that Hakram suddenly stood with no one before him. He turned, seeing only awe in the eyes of the warriors behind him, and found he stood alone in a ring of death.

"Report," Hakram Deadhand croaked, his voice raw from songs he did not remember singing.

"The Dominion has come, Warlord," a woman with the colours of the Graven Bones on her mangled shield said. "We stand."

The Warlord looked around. How many had died? *Too many*, he thought. Thousands on his flank alone. But wherever his gaze went he saw the dead losing ground, fresh Levantine armymen tearing into them.

"Let Levant handle the rest," he said. "Pull back in good order."

The Clans had done enough bleeding for the day. From the corner of his eye he noted that the shield wall left to hold the edge of the pit had pulled back and sneered. They had not even held back that paltry amount of dead, while his own faced the sea and won?

"What happened in the centre?" he asked.

"Aquiline Osenia was hit by an arrow," the same woman told him. "They say she had to be pulled back and may die."

Hakram grimaced. Well, she wouldn't be the only one today.

—

Merciless Gods but the Wolfhound could take a beating.

The other Revenant had died in moments, fending off Sidonia's assault but falling to a single blow of the Stained Sister. Barehanded, she crumpled the helmet and the head behind it. Pinon did not like the taste of her in the air, Ishaq had noticed, which meant it was likely true the Choir of Endurance had taken an interest. Regardless, that aspect of the Sisters' that lent her such brute strength was proving well worth her attitude. If only the Scourge had proved as easy a prey as the other.

A simple iron shield should not have been able to take a blow from the Barrow Sword's blade without a scar, but not a single one of them had yet to leave a mark on anything the Wolfhound wore. Ishaq had been told that the Scourge had the finest defence of all in the Dead King's service, but he had not expected to be dealing with the Keter's answer to the fucking Mirror Knight. At least, unlike Christophe de Pavanie, the Wolfhound did not strike as hard as he defended. That would have made this fight impossible instead of merely unlikely.

And Ishaq always trusted his luck to get him through unlikely, for good or ill.

"**Pierce**," the Vagrant Spear snarled, lunging forward.

Slower than before, though. It was her third time using the aspect, and like the last two it skidded across the side of the iron shield. Ishaq had stepped to the side as Sidonia struck and he moved to flank the Wolfhound, but the Scourge calmly took a step back and kept his sword high. Ready for a parry. The both of them continued circling each other as Sidonia panted loudly, the Stained Sister coming up to take her place. The old woman in the stained priestess garb moved like the wind and leap, but not so quick that her attempt to smash down the shield with both hands was not taken on instead. Ishaq risked a strike, a quick lunge near the neck – he was getting frustrated at never having pierced deep enough for Pinon to drink of the soul – but the parry was waiting.

The surprise came when he saw the Harrowed Witch sent her brother's ghost trailing behind the Sister and the specter threw himself at the Wolfhound's legs.

"Go," the Barrow Sword hissed. "Everyone."

The Grave Binder was looking unsteady on his feet, which meant they were running out of time to finish this. From the corner of his eye Ishaq saw movement, an arrow, but the Archer once more shot it out of the air before it could get anywhere close. Three more shots followed in quick succession, the Hawk being forced on the run by her opponent for what had to be the fifth time since the fight had begun. Ishaq put it out of his mind, trusting the Archer to cover him, and struck at the Wolfhound's back. The iron armour held but the blow broke the Scourge's poise, allowing Sidonia to slap away his shield and the Sister to land a hard blow on his helmet. It bent, ever so slightly, but the Wolfhound himself was slammed down into the dust.

The Barrow Sword, eyes wild, stabbed through the eye and to his triumph felt *flesh*.

"**Drink,**" he snarled.

Pinon was every thirsty, but with his aspect behind her pull it was more than soft pulls taken from the soul. The Revenant imprisoned soul ebbed, pulled into his sword, but Ishaq's eyes widened in utter surprise when he felt the slightest ripple. An *aspect*. A moment later he was flying, blown off his feet, and Sidonia had a cut across her face that bled red trails down her face paint. He landed on his back, letting out a pained gasp. Pinon did not leave his hand. She never did, unless he made the decision let her go.

Ishaq rose to his feet in time to see the Stained Sister take a shield smash in the face, breaking her nose. For all her strength, she was not a trained warrior. Not like he and Sidonia were. The Vagrant Spear quickly made the Mark of Mercy and struck, bare feet padding across the dust as she used her spear

to vault herself above the Wolfhound and strike at his neck from the back. But the shield was in the way, once more, as the Scourge calmly pivoted.

"Ishaq," the Grave Binder croaked out. "Not long now. *Hurry.*"

It was slipping out of his fingers, the Barrow Sword realized. It was all so very close, and he was going to end up with nothing because his aspects were a poor match for the Scourge's. Because too many of his band had been brought for the talent that would get them out or in the fight instead of help *during*. The rage, the indignation, burned in his belly like acid.

"No," he hissed, even as Sidonia burned another aspect to move quickly enough to avoid being skewered.

He took a step forward, then two.

"No," Ishaq repeated, even as the halo of Light forming around the Sainted Sister was snuffed out by mere closeness to the iron armour.

Close now, close enough the Wolfhound was keeping him in sight.

"No," the Barrow Sword bit out, as Aspasia's brother was carved through and dispersed.

The spectre would reform, but not for some time. It did not matter, because now Ishaq was on his enemy and there would be no quarter. He took the shield bash on the face head on, his helm of bronze ringing, and though his nose broke he grinned through the blood and caught the Wolfhound's shield arm. The Scourge began pulling away, its strength implacable, but Ishaq smashed his bloody head into the Revenant's helm and broke the effort. He smashed Pinon's pommel into the faceplate of the helm, rocking back his foe, and in the heartbeat that followed felt a blade slide into his guts.

"No," the Barrow Sword spat into the Scourge's face, spit red, and slammed his blade through the eyehole again.

Drink, he thought again, with all his greed and rage. The aspect bit deep, bit hard, and for a glorious instant the soul came loose. Only then there was that fucking ripple, and it was all going to – Ishaq felt a faint touch on his shoulder, light as feather. He could not look, could not move in this frozen moment, but if he turned he somehow knew he would see a crow.

The offer went unsaid, but it might as well have been screamed.

"I have sold more of me for lesser prizes," Ishaq laughed, and saw in his mind's eye a pair cold smiles under silver eyes. "Take all you want."

Night flooded through his veins, blazing ice, and he tossed it blindly at the Scourge's soul. The heartbeat passed, the ripple finished, and the Barrow Sword was once more thrown off his feet. He landed roughly, bleeding and pained and well on his way to death, but he was laughing. Because the Wolfhound took a staggering step, then another, and then on the third that *fucking helmet blew up in a burst of black flames*. Still laughing wildly, Ishaq pulled himself up.

"How does it go again?" he said, wiping tears. "Ah, yes."

The Barrow Sword raised his blade to the sky in a salute.

"Chno Sve Noc, my darlings," Ishaq grinned though his bloodied beard.

Behind them, in the distance, one colossal monster finished ripping apart another. A great Crab reputed in a storm of flame that blotted out the sky, glassing the ground, while a gargantuan spider wreathed in Night let out victorious screeches.

"Best we get out of the army before the Warden starts stepping on it," the Barrow Sword noted, smiling back in the face of the wary looks from the heroines. "Aspasie?"

"Oh Gods I would have left like an hour ago," the Harrow Witch replied, and her sorcery snapped into place.

The same trick that had let her survive the dead, Ishaq thought with satisfaction, should be enough to get the five of them out of the army unseen before he finished bleeding out. It would be a poor end to his first deed in the Rolls, the Barrow Sword mused, to die.

Even if he got back up afterwards.

—

Lady Itima Ifriqui blinked at the messenger.

"You're certain?" she carefully asked.

"Hundreds saw it, my lady," the man replied. "It was too deep a wound for it to be cauterized by a Lantern, she had to pull back to get a healer."

Itima's mind raced. Was this Yannu's doing? Cleaning up the other threat now that the battle was turning into a victory? It was not her that had given the order. It was Razin she had in her sights, having laid a trail to have a jealous Tartessos captain who wanted Aquiline's hand blamed for it, but it should not yet have been carried out. Perhaps it was the Enemy's work and not that of the Lord of Alava, she decided. The two of them slain in a single battle would be too obvious, certain to have the Warden taking a

closer look at the matter. The Gods were having a laugh at their expense, it seemed.

"Will she live?" the Lady of Vaccei bluntly asked.

The messenger hesitated, coming closer, and Itima frowned as she leant in. There were only armsmen around her, trusted Ifriqui men, but it paid to be careful. Still, it felt like theatre to – the knife moved in a blur but Itima was of the Brigand's Blood. She caught the wrist before it did more than scrape her cheek and she had a dagger sliding in the man's belly before a heartbeat had passed, twisting to make the assassin gasp in pain.

"You fool," she hissed. "You think you're the first to try? I'll keep you alive for *days* before you get the mercy of death."

"Honour," the man gasped, "to the Blood."

Her stomach tightened and she dropped the assassin, taking a step back and touching her cheek. A single cut. *Poison*.

"Healer," Lady Itima barked at her armsmen. "Get me a healer *now*."

Thirty men and women stood around her, the tabards over their coats of mail in the colours of the Vengeful Brigand's Blood. Loyal warriors, the finest in the service of the Ifriqui.

Not one of them moved.

Itima Ifriqui beheld the circle of steel around her which she had thought a shield a heartbeat ago but now recognized as a cage. She did not ask who, because there was only one man they would have betrayed her to: another Ifriqui. A spasm shuddered across her body, bringing her to her knees. A quick poison, Itima dimly thought. And almost painless.

Within thirty heartbeats she was dead.

—

The messenger whispered into Moro's ear and Razin watched as the man's scarred face convulsed with grief.

"Sad news?" the Lord of Malaga asked.

"It appears that my mother's heart gave, Lord Razin," Moro Ifriqui sadly said. "They think it was the hours in the heat wearing armour. Her health has been getting worse for years, but she insisted on taking the field today."

The way he said it, it almost sounded true. The woman who had murdered three of Aquiline's brothers was dead, the Lord of Malaga thought. A feud would be buried with her.

"She will have passed seeing us victorious, at least," Razin gently said. "Take comfort in that."

"There is no comfort to take in any of this, I think," Moro said, tone too raw to be a lie.

It was not, Razin reminded himself, about good and bad.

"Then why?" he asked.

Why come to me, why take my deal, why refuse to return to the tower and close the door behind you.

"I told my brother," Moro Ifriqui softly said, "that I get him home to his family."

Razin met the other man's eyes.

"We all want to go home, Razin Tanja," the man who was to be Lord of Vaccei said. "And not to fight another fucking war. So I'll do whatever's needed to get us there."

"Eyes like poison, heart like stone," Razin softly quoted.

Moro finished the verse from the Anthem of Smoke, changing only a word.

"By my hand a thousand graves sown," the Ifriqui murmured.

Silence held between them. Soon enough, a man that Itima Ifriqui had paid to kill Razin would try to do so. Rima Marave would silence him before he could speak. And when the coin was followed, it would be revealed that Careful Yannu had been the one to pay the assassin, that he had planned to kill an ally in the midst of a battle against the Dead King himself. But Razin would keep the secret, keep the Lord of Alava from being called a traitor by all of Calernia and the Valiant Champion's Blood from being dishonoured beyond repair.

He would do this so long as, when they all returned to Levant, Yannu Marave did not take up arms.

Razin Tanja watched the distant line of horizon, sitting the saddle, and wondered about the nature of change.

ruduen

Boost!

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

Ah, the satisfaction of knowing that some of them have actually learned. The world's not going to be the same place by the time everything is over.

And the crows seem to have learned better timing when it comes to making offers of power. There are plenty of villains who are going to have that in mind after that kind of impact.

[Liliet](#)

Reminded me of that one battle Cordelia won, by means of Sophie of Lyonis turning on her brother.

Unrecovered

Well of course they learned. Cat beat them with a stick until they either learned or died.

Also, those insane side character arcs! I expected this to be epic, but holy shit!..

[Liliet](#)

Hey, we now know Aquiline's age and she's actually younger than Cat! That's new. And a retcon I'm pretty sure.

CHNO SVE NOC HELL YEAH HELL YEAH HELL YEAH I KNEW TENEBROUS WAS TOO AWESOME TO NOT

Aquiline)=)=)= I hope she's fine!!!!!!

my god, Razin. Fucking cold, and also fucking awesome. Poor Yannu does not know what's about to hit him ;u;

dadycoool

Brings more weight to Cat calling the lovebirds her "Lordlings" if they're just kids to her.

Yup, it would be too much of a waste to just leave that massive creature lying around. Much better to turn her into Zombie the Great.

I think too many people, especially the powerful ones, like her for such a death to stick.

It's always fun for our protagonists to get their hands on a Sword of Damocles. Especially if they have no hesitation at all at using it.

[Liliet](#)

> Brings more weight to Cat calling the lovebirds her "Lordlings" if they're just kids to her.

I mean, she's 1-2 years older. That does not count when you're 20+.

The attitude is based on perceived maturity/experience gap, and it could have easily been the same with people actually older than her, which would have kept the same impact AND made it immensely funnier.

TENEBOUS!!!

ISiejek

Seems to me to likely be part of Razin's plan, he's the only one with a motive other than the dead king, and all of the dead kings lethal arrows have been stopped by archer this fight, it would be odd for her to have missed this specific one....

And obviously if it's his plot she won't die

[boballab](#)

Looks like Razin has learned his lessons from Cat well and is all grown up.

Soronel Haetir

Such a mess Levant is. I'm starting to think they'd be better off if all of the Blood were killed and entirely new leaders were found.

Konstantin von Karstein

Didn't you notice that the current Blood is trying to change that?

Ezario Gerion

But they are doing exactly that – of the old generation only Yannu is alive, now. All of the three other current heads are young adults, ready to accept the change.

[boballab](#)

It's because of what Razin was musing about. For all those years they stayed on their island in a 5 way tug of war. This was seen in the bonus chapters dealing with Tariq as a young man. Any time the Pilgrims blood became too strong they got killed off to maintain the balance and Tariq, who had been off the island fell in love with someone from another faction but that person never had left the Tower as Razin put it and

so that relationship failed and the 5 way dance continued. However with the destruction of the Pilgrims blood (where did that "Pilgrims Daughter" come from since Tariq stated that all of his blood would die when he used that power) and all those fighters now seeing the world there was no way things could stay the same, it was just a matter of time and how many died at that point. It was good that Razin realized it early enough, and how the other 2 faction leaders would react, to make the necessary plans.

Sinead

The Pilgrim's daughter that Yannu refers to would have been the successor of the first Grey Pilgrim, or the first of Blood and not Deed to sit on the Tattered Throne.

D

Minor correction: *Tariq* didn't say it would kill all of his Blood (though he certainly knew it).

The *narration* said that, which (given it happened in an Interlude) is a little ambiguous as to whether it's his thoughts or an omniscient narrator. Not that it reduces our certainty of its truth – if it was the Pilgrim's belief it was absolutely a justified one, and if it was omniscient-perspective that only makes it *more* reliable

Cpt. Obvious

Oh, and for anyone else who like me missed the obvious...

The sacrifice of the entire bloodline was why Tariq were able to call down the star as he had already made the sacrifice of his life to anchor the ways. Without the sacrifice of the bloodline the ways would probably not have survived Akua tearing it apart in Praes. Or they might have broken immediately. What's for sure is that the falling star wouldn't have been anywhere near as devastating without the greater sacrifice.

Now as to the morality of sacrificing an entire bloodline without giving them a say that's a ugly thing to dig into.

From what's been said in the story it appears that Tariq didn't have a lot of faith in it. The last ruler (I've forgotten what the were called) that he felt was worthy was his sister. Not only was she murdered but that plot involved their brother. Before he washed his hands and walked away he had found out that their brother had actively had a part in the murder, and had then acted to smear the reputation of the father of their sister's son in order to have him imprisoned and were seeking to have

him executed. All in order to crush the boy who inherited the throne.

So the Grey Pilgrim ended up killing his own brother.

Then he spends many years teaching his nephew how to rule and instilling a moral compass. Only to end up having to arrange a unfortunate death for the kid when he discovers that the money trail behind his mother's murder leads to a wealthy merchant in a neighboring nation and is planning to start a devastating war of extermination on the entire nation.

It's also been mentioned that he considered those of the bloodline that remained as mostly corrupt or even leaning towards the Gods below.

So he probably felt that it was a fair exchange. The lives of a bloodline that had gone corrupt for giving Calernia a fighting chance to survive this war against the Dead King.

nick012000

Yeah, it figures that the guy who eats the souls of the people he kills would be the first Named to get access to Night, aside from Cat.

I see that the Sisters have the dramatic timing for their divine intervention down, too.

[onedollargum](#)

Ishaq wants all the power that Cat has. Looks like he's getting a taste of each piece.

Someperson

I mean, what even is the point of making your very own dark reflection of an angelic choir if they can't give out eleventh-hour miracles for the villainous sorts?

For a reasonable price, of course.

Sir Nil

So that's how the Sisters planned on stepping on people.

dadycoool

With eight more, massive legs.

GluestickGenius

And the people will love it.

pyrohawk21

Causes, Ideals, Legacies. These are the things which the leaders of Calernia are crafting with their actions. And is there anything in all of existence harder to slay, for good or evil, than those?

Someperson

The f*ing Mirror Knight, probably 😊

Lictor Magnus

I didn't think about the fact that the dead king doesn't know what exactly went on in Praes. I don't think he knew he had to plan for a giant undead spider empress that most thought was a myth 😊.

[boballab](#)

You see that just shows that for all his age and supposed intellect, the Dead King just doesn't have any common sense because everyone else would have planned for some undead monstrosity when they fought Praes. It's not like they haven't done anything like it before, the only thing they are more famous for is raising Devils...hey if he didn't plan for Flying Fortresses and Giant Undead Monsters what are the odds...

Someperson

Next you're going to try telling me that Neshemah for some reason didn't plan for an army of sentient tigers. Old bones must be losing his touch.

KiltedBastich

Well now. Ishaq gains Night. Didn't see that coming, but his personal philosophy definitely fits the Tenets of Night extremely well. Struggle and rise indeed.

BargleNawdleZouss

I'm very glad my guess about Arthur saving the lovebirds was way off the mark. It is much more satisfying to see the Levantines handle this amongst themselves. Better yet, to show that they have LEARNED, as Tariq had hoped.

Well done as always, EE!

Krukova

Ishaq is low key my favorite character

ohJohN

He's been a gem ever since his introduction:

"hello, I hear you're the top villain, nothing personal but I'm gonna kill you now and take your place"

gets Night-slapped through two carts and a palisade

"good shot, Boss! drinks??"

[sengachi](#)

Sve Noc riding Tenebrous into combat was absolutely amazing, but I also love the cultural and political implications there. The new dark gods on the block *rode a Dread Emperor* into combat. In the Praesi philosophy of might makes right, that's got to be worth some major street cred and at least a few converts.

[Liliet](#)

* Dread Empress.

Giant trans spiders are valid and deserve our support uwu

GluestickGenius

Dread Empx.

We should not assume gender.

[Liliet](#)

I believe it was at first introduction explicitly specified that Tenebrous decided they were a giant *female* spider deep inside and proceeded to live the dream

erebus42

One could say that the late former tyrant lived the Trans, Furry dream.

[Liliet](#)

The truth.

D

The narrative has been magnificently inconsistent with the gendering of Tenebrous and as such I put it to you that the former Dread Emperor is indeed trans, but should be considered nonbinary until and unless Word of EE clarifies.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, the narrative is always from someone's perspective, and the lore specifies "giant female spider".

[sengachi](#)

Hey, now that Tenebrous is leashed, people can actually ask Sve Noc what DE Tenebrous' gender is! I'm sure plenty of Praesi historians would be interested in the answer.

[Liliet](#)

We do know the whole "female" thing was deliberately chosen, at least.

Someperson

Did Catherine accidentally invent Lolth as a lesser goddess under Sve Noc?

Sinead

I could see Tenebrous becoming the Praesi manifestation of Night, since there are not many crows in the desert.

Earl of Purple

Only if Tenebrous can get Secrets.

Which is a *terrifying* thought, really.

ninegardens

The the question is, did Aqualine actually get injured (totally possible), or did Razin and/or cat just deliberately arrange for rumours of her death to be greatly exaggerated, just in order to ensure no one ACTUALLY tried to go after her?

[boballab](#)

I think maybe they had Archer shoot her, no one else would be able to and trusted to hit a mark like that which would injure enough but not kill. Because of that it caused Itima to scramble and let someone past the guards without raising her suspicions.

Santiago A Duarte

They didn't need Itima to let anyone past her guards. Every one of them were traitors, she was dead as soon as she went near the battlefield.

[Etin Obaseki](#)

I don't think she got shot. The assassin just used that as pretext to get close to Itima.

Someperson

Well, that would at least go a ways to explaining why Razin wasn't apparently worried about it during the last bit of the chapter.

ohJohN

But Hakram noticed that the Levantine center was a mess, and one of his warriors reported that it was due to Aquiline being shot – she's either actually injured, or very publicly pretending to be.

Frivolous

Really happy to see aspects I didn't know before.

I'd guessed that Hakram had Lead even before this Interlude. It only made sense as he was the first Warlord in centuries. It made even more sense when I read the paragraph mentioning warriors gaining morale and strength in his presence.

It could have been Aid like Freddie but Lead seemed more likely for a villain.

Ishaq's Drink also makes sense. Sve Noc was clever to approach him, as he was to be the new villain leader in place of Catherine, and becoming his patrons would give them a wide avenue to influencing the villains of the Age of Order.

I think chances are very very good that many villains join the Night.

Very nice to see the Stained Sister and Grim Binder in action.

I'm guessing that killing the Crab gave Sve Noc a whole mountain of Night, considering how big and powerful it was. Theft-in-victory.

Note that in no way was Night defeated by Keterian magics in this Interlude. This confirms my guess that by reforging and refining Night, Masego and Akua had fixed all the exploits Keter had devised to hack Night.

I'm guessing the Stained Sister and Harrowed Witch are rivals the way Masego and Adanna are.

Archer is awesome. Hope Aquiline lives and not in a maimed way.

dadycool

I hadn't thought about how much Night Sve Noc would get from the Crab. Almost scary to think about.

Flubber

I think that Aquiline will live, but she will never be able to have children. She and Razin will rule a unified Levant together but it will not be the start of a monarchical dynasty, and so the Levantines will be more accepting of it.

Or maybe that goes against some theme that I have forgotten about.

Santiago A Duarte

That would be an oddly specific arrow wound, particularly given the power of Light, which they have plenty of lying around, including Named healers. The odds of an arrow not killing her but irreparably damaging her reproductive organs are...pretty much zero. I'm not sure it's even possible *prima facie* because of the Named healers around, it seems like a wound should be death or nothing for important people. It is so unlikely that I would instantly assume that they had Archer make that shot on purpose for some bizarre reason.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, they can always just adopt. Or pick a nibling.

erebus42

A foundling perhaps?

Someperson

I reckon it's especially likely that the Crows will be widely adopted by villains in the future seeing as the Liesse Accords will be banning the use of demons. Calling on Night however should be no different than calling on Light. If you are evil and want to get a bigger power in your court without pissing off the Warden then Night might be just the thing.

Sinead

I wonder if we may start seeing something rise akin to Devils for the side of Good in the sense of a limited functionality tool. Perhaps the Blessed Artificer is the one to work out such a thing.

So Good has Light and these lesser Light creatures while Villains have Night and Devils.

Earl of Purple

Spider beats crab. I love Tenebrous, glad we saw her again.

First time the Stained Sister and Grave Binder have shown up, too, though they have been mentioned. She broke Hakram's shoulder with that aspect.

dadycoool

I live for Sve Noc riding Tenebrous as a mount. Cat's influence cuts deep, apparently.

Mirror Night

Honestly, I lost a lot of respect for Ishaq that sort of arrogance and doing that BS only cause he wants a personal advancement marks him as pretty unfit for leading a squad much less all the Villains. That could have backfired massively. I suppose maybe the point is he is also part of the problem in Levant. And one must also question how much of a real reformer Razin is given this plotting. I mean I am fan of shades of grey but many were painting this guy has some sort of saint in the fandom which seems not the case.

'Ladi Williams

Point is no one is all good and all bad...
Ishaq had no choice but to risk it all if he really wanted to make a change to the way villains are treated back home...

Geno

I mean the alternative was obviously a war which would have ravaged at least part of their country. What's the life of one rather terrible person to prevent that

erebus42

Eh, total control is an illusion an even partial control is slippery at best. At the end of the day if you want to make meaningful change you have to take gambles every now and then. And while yes he did do it partly for his own benefit, he is still a force a reformation and change for Levant.

Someperson

Maybe you are right about Ishaq, but I dunno if a villainous leader without significant character defects is in the cards.

Lord Haart

Yeah I felt like this chapter was important for reminding us readers that Ishaq, for all his blustery gentility, is still very much on Below's roster. Doesn't *lead* his band of 5 so much as *use* them, but it's fitting.

Wonder

So that's where Tenebrous went.

Juff

Typo Thread:

begun a bridge > begun on a bridge
weak a weak > a weak
ruins behind > ruins lay behind
had only disdain > had disdain
sleeves her > sleeves of her
escort," Sidonia > escort," Sidonia said,
his being > him being
back and to instead > back to instead
still find > still finding
out with down > out
Which he means > Which means
held it the orcs. > held it for the orcs.
than human > than humans
They back > The back
never finish anything > never finishing anything
the passed > they passed
wave curses > weave curses
truced > truce
rightly expected > rightly expect
counted three > counted to three
cover an > cover of an
youmust seem > you must see
this two > this to
back the saddle > back on the saddle
senses below > sensed below
wring place > wrong place
botted > blotted
hestruck > he struck
name in his hand > name in his hand.
holed > hole
The crawled > They crawled
another ghouls > another ghoul
Sisters' > Sister's
leap, > leapt,
Witch sent > Witch had sent
every thirsty > ever thirsty
Revenant imprisoned > Revenant's imprisoned
neck form > neck from
int the > into the
as feather > as a feather
reputed > erupted
Harrow Witch > Harrowed Witch

Rmac

You are using the apostrophe incorrectly.
Plurals have it after the s
Sisters'
Doesn't get used for verbs.
Revenants imprisoned

Darkening

Hell yeah kaiju fight! Magitech robocrab vs eldritch spider! That was great lol.

Bad@games

Love me some Barrow Sword, and seeing Sve Noc ride Dread Empress Zombie into battle is great as well!

[daegone823](#)

Wait so the sister got her name by being buried under dead. I hate to ask as a long-time reader. I remember her being mentioned when Cat met the newly formed villain that could sense the undead(Sixth sense, I see dead people...then cleanse them with fire lol).

Harrowed witch ran and the sister did what?

DrPepp3

The sister was a nun who got buried under the corpses of the rest of her village, and the dead didn't notice her amongst all the bodies. She didn't give up on her faith despite this, so was blessed by the Choir of Endurance and earned the name Stained Sister.

Earl of Purple

The Stained Sister survived by luck and chance, part of a monastery the Dead King slaughtered. She survived, probably injured, in a pile of corpse and then (I'm guessing here) Endurance whispered in her ear and offered her a deal, which she took.

Harrowed Witch survived by sacrificing her brother to power an illusion that would hide her from the dead.

Lord Haart

I've always imagined that with Above, it's more of a blessing in response to faith already given. It's Below who do the whispering and promises.

Or to put it differently, Above tells you the price but not the reward, Below tells you the reward but not the (full) price.

[daegone823](#)

The Drow now have a spider, I repeat the drow now have a giant spider. I wonder how the Procerans priest plan to do anything to them now that they have a giant spider. How will they stop the spread of the night religion I can almost see them begrudgingly allowing temples to the night to emerge.

erebus42

Honestly I could definately see an interesting dynamic where towns have a single priest(ess) of Light and a single priest(ess) of Night serving and dispensing alternative (sometimes conflicting) wisdom and advice.

D

To build on that: perhaps not in Procer, but in Callow I could see it coming to pass that the the two traditionally share a place of worship. A timeshare chapel, with overlapping duties at dusk and dawn, when both may be consulted together.

Gynedroid

Ooof, this is a delight. I'd be terrified of Cat using so powerful a corpse in the Dead King's demesne, but I still have hope. Perhaps it's not possible to wrest control because the Crows are proper goddesses now; alternatively, Cat has a plan anyway, and it's a hopelessly obvious trap she set that Old Bones still has to spring, which would be a nice reversal on what he pulled with the army

[Liliet](#)

So far the control wrestling w/ Dead King has only ever gone one way, the living stealing stuff FROM him. I suspect there's a reason for that.

Darkening

We **still** haven't seen a payoff from the comment way back that Hakram's hand could be subverted by a sufficiently skilled necromancer. Considering how central to his identity his Deadhand is, something like that would probably have a decent story weight behind it if used at the proper moment.

[Liliet](#)

I mean for that vulnerability to remain to this day is kind of ridiculous, Hakram being Named and having been in vicinity of Masego for a long tiem and all.

We did actually see the payoff from that, when Akua took over Cat's soul bindings in Liesse II.

Xinci

Razin mentions change as a relative notion, I am quite curious mainly about the depth of his realization the relativity of the concept of the tower. Since in the end in their world, it is simply a differing series of towers, growing ever larger, until one gets to Creation as a whole. Even if you go outside the tower, you simply enter a larger one with some rules under similar paradigms. Which may use to observe cultural precedents/ adaptations such as honor systems to be multifaceted in how serve particular purposes; allowing reorientation in how they work within a culture by redefining how they are perceived to be of use. There's a myriad of ways such shifts may fail, especially for what is essentially a relatively disunited confederacy transferring to a monarchical system.

I wonder if the Grave Binder always dying (well rotting?) gives him power due to seeing or having those rings act as some kind of intermediary between his soul and his body/ the rest of the world. At a baseline we know the soul affects the body, but you are always dying regardless, so presumably the power of death there is more about the interaction as a whole.

Hm so Sve Noc got to just eat both a Crab and the Dead Kings counter to the Mirror Knight defense wise. I am sure useful secrets will come from that meal, plus they now have precedent perhaps for eventual followings in the Dominion.

As a sidenote, I must say that the Undeads battle tactics were superb, or rather the way the mechanics of the worlds supported the battle was. Rocks as a counter to light is honestly a very practical clever solution for dealing with situations with enemy Light users. It matters little if they burn away the outer layer if they get hit with construct full of a ton of rocks. Praes presumably didnt do such techniques due to the prohibitive cost and likely diminishing returns in making a monster with outer shells of rock, trying to form a basis for it with devils, etc. The Dead King is uniquely one of the few with the time, knowledge and resources to really make it a good counter.

Lord Haart

Now I want Catherine to counter by using necromantic constructs full of munitions a la book 1.

It'd be amazing for her to bring out Tenebrous for the final fight against the DK only to have him steal Tenebrous, jump on, and have Catherine blow them both sky high.

erebus42

Well now, they really pulled an uno reverse on Itima there. The Crows definitely got the divine intervention thing down, and I think it will be good in the long run that they have started seeding priests in the various other nations. Honestly, this is the first we've really seen of the Grave Binder but I already love his Story and his whole deal. Granted I've always had a soft spot for necromancers -especially underdog ones.

Sykomantis

So I was 3/4 right: there WAS a crab, they DID have a trap laid under the ruins, and the crab DID come into play after the trap was sprung. It's just that the trap and the crab weren't the same thing. Kudos to EE for subverting expectations.

Frivolous

Quote from above: he Lady of Tartessos still found it wildly entertaining that Elvera had slept with one of spymasters of Procer back when they were young. She'd also been relieved it wasn't the dead traitor or the one that looked like a skeleton with dry skin hung on it, since it would have called her old teacher's tastes into question.

Comment: I'm guessing the dead traitor mentioned was Balthazar Serigny of the Silver Letters.

Can't bring to mind who the one who looked like a skeleton might have been, though. Anyone knows or can guess?

Frivolous

How foolish of me. The one who looks like a skeleton must be Louis of Sartrons.

Frivolous

Yeah, it was Brother Simon that Elvera fucked.

Quote from Interlude: Candle:

"They refused to humour me before I ventured with a band into the Brocelian," Simon said, almost nostalgic. "It was a rather fascinating experience. I met this woman, you see, by the name of Elvera. And she knew a remarkable trick."

ByVectron!

Does Ishaq get to steal the "secrets" from the Wolfhound, now that he's a follower of The Sisters? That would be such an incredible boost for a Named!

D

I'm not certain, here, but I don't think he got anything. In the end he wasn't able to properly **Drink, and while he used Night for the "kill" he didn't stay to harvest any from the deaminated body. Of course, this assumes I correctly understood the rules and that they haven't changed in that respect since Night's reforging...**

ninegardens

Can't help but think that Ishaq picked his proposed team based on strategy, and meanwhile Hanno is sitting there nodding "Yup, yup, you've picked 4 people who hate each others guts, sure to cause lots of angst and drama, good... yup, and *you'll* have to lead and unite them... good, good... and you'll be up against absurd odds that don't really make sense... mmmm, yup, sure, I can see this coming together", and then he signs off on it, and all the while Ishaq has *absolutely no fricken idea* about the 15 layers of story fu Hanno was calculating while signing off on that team.

KiltedBastich

Now that I think about it, Ishaq definitely needs to up his game on story-fu, if he will be expected to be Hanno's counterpart for the villains. Yet another aspect of Cat's power that he will need to learn to use for himself, continuing the trend.

arcanavitael5

Razin is a cold mofo he's learned from Cat and Tariq that was inspired, I felt the head your own rebellion school of thought with that scheme.

[Hargabga](#)

This is so so good. A 3d checkmate by Cat's student, who herself plays 5D non-Euclidian chess with gods.

superkeaton

Ishaq is a true blue Elric-stand in. Power is power, no matter the patron, and it's better to have than to not.

BargleNawdleZouss

1. After Ishaq was blessed by the Sisters and sent the torrent of Night into the Wolfhound's soul, I am mildly disappointed that he did not imitate Catherine's Finger Snap Of Doom before blowing off the Scourge's head. 😊

2. TANGENT: I enjoyed seeing Aspasie the Harrowed Witch in action again. My question is, after the necromantic assistance she

provided Book 6, Chapter 19 (Spectral) in interrogating the soul of the Wicked Enchanter, did we ever see what favor she requested from Catherine in return?

AbraKadabra

Tenebrous is an it. Face it people. Not a she and Not a he anymore. It. And thats the truth.

Morgenstern

"That meant the numbers of the Grand Alliance were higher: fifty-three thousand had set out with dawn and marched to this field, all in all."

-> Quite sure that should mean: "set out with DAWN"

Chapter 55: Hail

"Nineteen: always help the treacherous lieutenant to kill your nemesis when asked. Even if it's a plot they'll likely stick the knife if it looks like you're winning."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Tenebrous smashed the last of the dead with unsettling glee, stomping about the undead army until there was no group larger than a dozen moving from the battlefield.

The dead did not rout, but the Dead King had decided to cut his losses and save some of the skeletons for battles to come and so the last two or three thousand scattered in every direction. The sight of it had the army cheering, the signs of victory become unarguable, but for all that that burst of enthusiasm there would be no pursuit. There was no cavalry left in any fit state to run down the enemy, and though Komena wanted to pursue the retreating bands I advised against it. There was no telling what manner of nastiness the Dead King might have waiting for her out there.

So Tenebrous returned to my shadow and the Battle of the Ruins, as General Pallas had suggested it be named, came to an end. It was a victory, but a costly one. From the first charge to the lines of the dead collapsing completely the battle had lasted barely three hours yet it was still one of the bloodier ones I'd fought over the last year.

Part of that was the nature of the armies involved. Orcs and Levantines tended to have inferior equipment to the Army of Callow, with its standard issue armour and weapons. Levantines were armed according to the wealth of the captain who led them in battle, an irregular arrangement, and the Clans were even worse. Equipment and training both varied wildly from clan to clan, though the larger ones all fielded a core of well-armed veterans as their main fighting force. On both sides, though, the average soldier didn't usually have a full suit of mail and plate was fairly rare. In a bloody, graceless brawl like the one fought today that meant casualties had begun to rack up as time passed.

The other side of the coin was Keter's forces, who in this case had boasted equipment parity at best but had the one advantage that undead could never lose: they weren't alive. Sure, the averages Bones was barely better than a Proceran levy in a fight but unlike that levy it would not tire or rout. It made Keteran armies a fucking pain to actually break, because they wouldn't run if they began to lose and they had an advantage the longer the battle continued. However unimpressive a skeleton wielding a bronze sword might be, when it was facing soldiers too tired to put up their shields in time it was going to start landing blows.

The Clans had been taught that hard lesson today. Holding the flanks against onslaughts all afternoon until Lord Yannu was able to swing around his forces to reinforce had been a bloody business and only gotten bloodier as the hours passed. Though Hakram had not yet put together a system to count casualties like the Army of Callow's, the rough estimate he'd gotten was that out of the twenty-three thousand warriors that'd sallied out only about fourteen thousand would be coming back. Almost ten thousand dead, a rough day for the orcs. The Levantines had walked away much more lightly wounded, down about four thousand warriors out of their twenty-seven. The worse off were still General Pallas' kataphraktoi, who'd had gotten themselves mauled keeping the right flank from collapsing. They'd almost half of their three thousand in furious charges,

It would be hours yet before we knew the real count of the butcher's bill, but there was no time to spend grieving. We needed to get moving, lest we be caught out in the plains come dark. First came the grim labour of taking care of the dead, warriors stripping their fallen comrades of arms and armour – we could not afford to waste any – before dragging them to make great piles. Mages and priests torched those until there was nothing left for the Dead King to use, mounds of bodies crackling bright as the afternoon crawled forward. We then left the field with what some might have called unseemly haste, but it would have been a mistake to linger.

There were still other armies out there, and the last thing we needed was to get stuck fighting them in the dark.

While I could have left the returning army in the dust, flying far ahead on Zombie's back, I led her into a landing instead and rode to speak with the victors of the day. Most cheerful of them all was the Barrow Sword, who had slain the Wolfhound and so fulfilled his end of the bargain with the Blood. He had earned a place in the Rolls. He'd also picked up another trick along the way.

"Night, huh," I mused, cocking my head to the side.

"So you *can* tell at a glance," Ishaq replied, stroking a beard matted with blood and dirt. "Useful."

"I'm still First Under the Night," I simply said.

That the Barrow Sword had taken the offer did not surprise me in the least, as Ishaq was brutally pragmatic even by Levantine standards, but that Sve Noc had extended it in the first place did. It had only been a matter of time before they began approaching villains, of course, but beginning with the representative for Below under the Truce and Terms was a bold statement. Maybe even more than that, I thought. The most powerful heroes all tended to have use of the Light, so granting Night to the most visible of the villains on Calernia – Neshamah and myself, anyway – was as good as slapping down a gauntlet. There was another merchant of miracles at the market, and this one a lot less squeamish than the Choirs.

If we were not at war and Calernia on the brink of annihilation, I suspected quite a few heroes would have answered that challenge sword in hand.

"I count myself in the finest company, then," the Barrow Sword grinned.

I snorted. He was in a gloatingly fine mood and I couldn't get myself to smack his fingers for it. Taking care of the Wolfhound had been solid work on his part: by itself the Revenant wasn't much trouble for our finer Named, but it was never by itself. It was always a meatshield for another altogether more dangerous Scourge, turning difficult opponents into outright lethal ones. It would have been even better if he'd gotten the Mantle, pain that she was for me to deal with, but I wouldn't look a dead Scourge in the mouth. I'd praised him enough during the report, though, so instead of reiterating and swelling his head I changed the subject.

"I hear there was a scuffle with the Blood during the battle," I idly said.

Curious dark eyes studied me.

"If Itima Ifriqui truly died of old age," the Barrow Sword said, "I will shave my beard and enter a monastery."

Yeah, hadn't bought that either. Someone had killed the old viper, though it was hard to tell who. None of the other Blood were kicking up a fuss though, not even her sons, so I was inclined to let sleeping dogs lie for now. It might be worth squeezing some answers out my ducklings later, but I wasn't inclined to get too involved if the boat wasn't rocking. Moro Ifriqui, though one-armed since the Graveyard, was popular with the Vaccei captains and on much better terms with the rest of the Blood. As far as I was concerned, Levant had traded up when he got put in charge – informally for now, until his kin Levant pushed through the same procedural trick that'd allowed Razin to become Lord of Malaga without returning there to be acclaimed.

"Not too much to be gained from digging," I mused. "The army's holding up well, which is the important part at the moment."

Ishaq was no fool, so he nodded in acknowledgement of my unspoken warning. He could have a look if he was curious, I'd tacitly told him, but only so far as it didn't endanger the readiness of the Dominion armies.

"I imagine my duties will be keeping me busy," the Barrow Sword replied.

"Good man," I pleasantly smiled.

I stayed long enough to get the tale of the fight told to me by the entire band of five, expanding on the simple report, and handed congratulations where they were deserved. Ishaq, cleverly enough, was unstinting in his praise of the Vagrant Spear and the Harrowed Witch. By doing so he was sharing the glory with a heroine in good odour with the Blood and by far the least threatening of the villains under the Terms, both strikes useful to him in the long term. He was shaping up nicely as my successor for representative, I decided. He'd been the right pick, for all that Indrani had needed to get her hands dirty to put him in place.

Speaking of Indrani, I found she was not in so fine a mood as the Barrow Sword.

"Couldn't land an arrow on the bastard," she told me, speaking of the Hawk. "It's unpleasantly good at running."

"You kept anyone important from getting shot," I reassured her. "Which was what I asked you, 'Drani, not a scalp."

"Aquiline got shot," she pointed out.

I rolled my eye.

"Not by the Hawk," I said. "That girl needs to start using a fucking shield or get better at ducking. If she gets killed by a skeleton, I may not be able to stop from laughing at her wake."

Which my finely-honed diplomatic instincts led me to suspect at least *some* Levantines might take offence to.

"You're all heart, Cat," Archer drily replied.

I shrugged. Aquiline would survive, the arrow had missed her lungs and they'd gotten her to a healer in time. The light armour preferred by the Slayer's Blood had its uses, I wouldn't argue otherwise after witnessing firsthand the skill of Levantine skirmishers during my Wasteland campaign, but it was ill-suited to the kind of battles the Dead King gave. She should order some good plate and get it over with before she picked up enough scars it'd ruin her paints. Gods knew today's wound was certain to leave one, mage healing or not. I left Indrani to her mood, which at least seemed to be inspiring her to scheme ways to handle the Hawk when they next met.

Hakram was easy enough to find, and though his chiefs were in a festive mood – a victory had been won today and everyone knew the Clans had done the heavy lifting – I knew that look on his face. It was the kind of calm deliberation he put on when he was trying not to openly disgruntled. I'd seen him put on shades of it more than once after Vivienne beat him at shatranj, though the shade of it today was rather more serious than that. I traded congratulations with a few chiefs, meeting Juniper's father for the first time in the process. Oghuz the Lamé was an impressive sort, all the more for being chief of a clan as powerful as the Red Shields when he needed a cane to walk.

Most orcs saw cripples as barely better than children, so he must still be a deft hand at duelling despite his age.

"I think she has your cheekbones," I told him.

"She does, the poor child," Oghuz mourned on behalf of his daughter. "At least she mostly inherited Istrid's looks aside from that."

"They make you look friendlier," I said, patting his shoulder. "Hakram's might as well be a razor blade."

The older orc looked rather charmed at that, to my surprise. I chatted with him longest of the chiefs, but he still left with the others when their Warlord implied he needed to speak with me privately. Then outright stated it, when the slower sorts failed to catch on. Eventually it was only the two of us, Hakram's face slumping into exhaustion as he met my gaze.

"Come to see how I'm holding up, I take it," the Warlord said.

The tone was a little pointed but was tired enough to fall short of being accusing.

"Something like that," I acknowledged.

I wouldn't deny that I had come as the Warden as much as I had come as a friend. Rare were the situations these days where I could afford to be only one of the two. He didn't look pleased by the reply, but I suspected he'd appreciated I had not tried to pretty it up.

"I will not falter, Catherine," Hakram said. "But will you begrudge me that I am bitter it was my people who bore the weight of the slaughter today?"

"It's why you agreed to take the flanks," I evenly replied. "Levant's twenty-seven thousand are all that's left of their armies. You have numbers they do not."

He'd brought almost thrice their number in warriors, and that hadn't even been the entire army he'd marched south to Ater. Mind you, orcs fielded a lot more warriors than most other nations since most of a clan except the young and the elderly would take up arms when there was plunder to be had. Considering how many women there were in orc warbands and their age – between twenty to forty – if the force brought to Keter was wiped out the consequences for the Steppes would be disastrous. Much worse than if the Dominion lost the entire army they'd sent to the Grand Alliance

"More died than was necessary," the Warlord growled. "We fell for the trap. I did not gainsay Yannu then and that is my guilt, but I will not forget we were left to stand alone for most of the battle."

"That's fair," I honestly replied. "I imagine General Pallas feels much the same. The course of the fight ended up going badly for both of you, so you have good reason to resent him."

So long as they didn't end up blaming Careful Yannu for malice that did not exist instead of a tactical mistake, I had no issue with some resentment existing. The Lord of Alava was a skilled general, but in this instance he'd not particularly impressed. To be honest, if it had been the Army of Callow dying on the flanks I'd likely be a great deal less gracious about this than Hakram was being.

"Pallas bled her men for us," Hakram conceded. "It was worth gratitude."

"She bled her men because if Troke's flank collapsed we were going to lose the battle," I said. "Pallas isn't exactly a bleeding heart."

She was, however, a talented tactician. She'd even correctly identified that with the Warlord holding the other flank together, it was Troke's that was in dire need of aid.

"Her reasons matter less than her actions," Hakram replied.

I shrugged. I wasn't going to argue the point if he wanted to toss thanks General Pallas' way, honestly. She was back under Helike and Empress Basilia these days, but I hadn't forgotten that Pallas and her soldiers had fought up north with the Grand Alliance years before anyone else from the League gave us the time of the day. Instead of arguing, I hummed and took a look at his Name to confirm the subtle difference I'd felt in him from the start.

"I see you picked up an aspect while you were at it," I said.

There he looked pleased.

"The traces of it were there, but it came together during the battle," Hakram said. "You can discern the word?"

"My sight's not that precise," I admitted. "Not right now, at least. I tend to see more deeply around pivots, when fate is thicker. But I can tell what it's about, more or less."

Active authority, in a local and direct sense. Not surprising for a career officer and my former right hand to pick up, especially after he'd stepped into large boots of his own by becoming the Warlord.

"**Lead**," Hakram said, not hesitating a moment.

I felt something in me unclench at the offered trust. For Named, aspects were cards best kept up your sleeves: keeping them hidden until they could be used to devastating effect was often the difference between winning or losing a fight.

"Try to use it," I suggested. "Let's see if I can help you feel out the limits."

It would have been a more politic use of my time to ride with the Blood instead for the rest of the way back, but part of me refused to think of that as the better use. We marched together the rest of way back, others flitting in and out but the two of us staying side by side until the camp was in sight.

—

"*Fuck me*," I said. "What the Hells happened to the floating siege towers?"

Vivienne looked grim. Given the wreckage I was looking at, she had good reason to. Keter was an island of stone surrounded by a

deep chasm that was broken by only four bridges, which were the natural path to take when trying to take the city. Because we weren't raging idiots, we expected that the Dead King would use them to funnel our armies into narrow killing zones for as long as possible and then collapse them the moment there was a risk of us actually taking one of the gates. We'd prepared for that eventuality – it was not happenstance that none of the three most powerful mages in the Grand Alliance had left the camp – but it'd always been understood that the gates were unlikely to fall to us.

That was why Praes had turned floating structures into great siege towers, so that we might broaden our assault.

"Two were sunk," the Princess replied.

I grimaced, but to be blunt I was not surprised.

"There's a reason we didn't fill them with troops from the start," I said.

Only enough to secure a beachhead on the walls, no more. Otherwise we risked pissing away a few thousand soldiers to exactly no gain whatsoever.

"Two touched the walls," Vivienne continued. "Masego kept most of Keter's counter-magic off them for long enough."

"That's impressive," I said, "but since I'm not looking at a wall flying our banners, I'm going to assume that *something* went horribly wrong."

"We still have one tower," she sighed, brushing back a strand of brown hair.

"I hope to Below you don't mean that one, Vivi," I replied, pointing forward.

The outer rampart of Keter had been, in a manner of speaking, breached. Someone had seen fit to smash the floating siege tower into said wall, hard enough that it had gotten embed into said wall. It looked, I thought, a little like a knife dropped into a bloc of butter and jutting out. Except for the part where it was all stone on both sides and several tons of it were involved. The 'bottom' of the tower was extending far enough out of the wall that it really should have snapped off or dragged the whole thing into the chasm by now, which meant the enchantments keeping the structure aloft still partially worked. It was an oddly disturbing sight.

Princess sighed again.

"The assault went well at first," she told me. "We pushed across two of the four bridges, and though Keter spared neither arrows nor sorcery we reached the gates. The siege towers were torched before they could cross, but the ladders and the rams got through."

"So when we started knocking at the gates, Keter dropped the bridges," I predicted.

She nodded.

"We sent heroes under the bridges first, to try to prevent that, but Pickler believes that there is no outside mechanism. The bridges were built from the start with foundations under the city of Keter that could be brought down," Vivienne said. "It was old work, regardless, and played out differently on the two bridges."

I could see one of the two from where we stood, the fortified camp surrounding Keter as a ring of flame from all the torches and bonfires lit in the night. The arch of stone was missing its forward half, leaving the gate of Keter to stand over a sheer cliff.

"The Witch should have been able to handle that," I said, nodding there.

"She did," Princess replied. "She held the stones aloft long enough for our forces to retreat through them. And on the other side Sahelian negated the Enemy's work."

I cocked a curious eyebrow.

"Only a section in the middle collapsed," Vivienne said, "splitting the army in two and stranding the vanguard. She filled the gap with ice."

I sniffed in disdain. Someone was cribbing from my tactics. I'd started that whole ice thing in Dormer, long before anyone else got famous for it.

"So we kept up one of the bridge assaults and landed two towers," I mused. "Still a solid enough offensive. I take it that's when it started going wrong?"

"The Tumult came out to duel Hierophant to keep him from protecting the towers," she replied. "And Keter counter-attacked with wyrms."

I blinked. Those were great snake-constructs that'd only rarely seen use out of Twilight's Pass, being the Dead King's equivalent of our Praesi floating siege towers. The massive snakes were armoured and had ladders inside, which the dead could climb after

the wyrms hooked themselves to the edge of the wall with steel and bone. What use could they have-

"He crammed his siege towers into our siege towers, like a snake forced into the maw of a larger one," I breathed out, putting it together.

It was both utterly wasteful of manpower, I thought, and brilliant in a twisted way.

"It kept us from landing a beachhead on the walls," Vivienne said, "and once he had us pinned, the Seelie came out."

Masego insisted that what that Scourge did was 'fascination', a form of enchantment, but it was pretty much mind control whatever he wanted to call it. So the Dead King had kept us contained to small tunnels with no real room to manoeuvre than then unleashed the fucking mind control fairy on the people inside. Yeah, I can see that turning nasty. Just for a bit, though. After that, it'd be sure to summon...

"The Blade of Mercy and Daring Pyromancer ran into her," Vivienne continued. "The Seelie got the Pyromancer, but the Blade cut the spell out of him and they set fire to the wyrm. It made her retreat, but ended up being something of a tactical mistake."

Setting fire to tightly enclosed spaces full of people who couldn't easily get out tended to be that.

"How bad?" I grimaced.

"Almost two thousand dead, more from the stampede and the smoke than the fire," Vivienne said, "and the dead got to the heart of the tower in the chaos."

"So that's how it got crashed," I frowned.

"No," Princess shook her head. "They tried to make them crash into *each other*."

Her description of what came after that was nightmarish. The Praesi mages controlling the other tower had seen the threat coming and tried to withdraw, but the wyrm inside had fought the movement. The soldiers inside panicked as the dead kept pouring in, meanwhile the other tower rose higher could it could be smashed down like a child banging rock down at another. Fortunately, the Black Knight had led a band through daring strike into the grounded tower to remove the wyrm using some acidic creation of the Concocter's that would dissolve it from the inside. It would have still failed, if Hanno and his own band had not stepped in to settle the other tower.

"How did they even get into it?" I frowned. "It should have been fully in flight by then."

"The Mirror Knight," Vivienne said.

"Sure, throwing him is the traditional opening gambit," I acknowledged. "But after he landed – wait, are *serious*?"

She nodded, lips twitching.

"They bound themselves to the Mirror Knight and had him thrown by a trebuchet, using him to pierce through the siege tower's walls," Princess said.

I paused.

"I know it's in poor taste to complain when they're on our side," I said, "but sometimes I do get a little irritated at how they keep getting away with this shit."

After that they'd fought their way through the dead and taken back control of the tower, holding it up long enough that the other one was able to get away. The turnaround was not to last, though, since the Tumult slipped past Masego and crippled the enchantments keeping the tower up. It began to crash.

"How'd they get out?" I asked, morbidly curious.

"For a very brief moment the falling tower and the one withdrawing were aligned, with only a gap of a dozen feet between where one ended and the other began," Vivienne said. "So they..."

"They jumped," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "They jumped out the falling tower into the other one, like assholes."

Vivienne's blue-grey eyes betrayed some amusement at my expense.

"He's not even really Named anymore, he's transitioning," I complained.

"I'll be sure to bring the matter up at the next war council," Princess replied, serenely smiling.

My lips twitched, and the two of us stood there in silence for a while. Staring at the dark silhouette of Keter in the distance. The humour slowly melted away.

"How many?" I asked.

"At least sixteen thousand dead," Vivienne softly replied. "And I hear your battle was closer than anticipated."

"Fourteen thousand dead or thereabouts," I said. "The enemy got clever with a sand trap and mauled our flanks. The Clans soaked up the worst of it."

At least thirty thousand dead between the battle and the storm, huh. I stood there and let myself grasp that, the sheer number of soldiers we'd gotten killed in a day. I had fought entire campaigns where I had lost fewer men than died today. And it was only going to get worse. None of us had truly expected this assault on the walls to work, deep down. It was a first probe, to see how heavily defended the Crown of the Dead was. Almost two hundred and fifty thousand soldiers had come here to break the end times before they could break us. Nine more attacks like this and we'd run out of men.

We hadn't even managed to set foot inside the fucking city.

"It'll look better tomorrow," Vivienne finally said.

"No it won't," I murmured.

A moment.

"No it won't," my friend admitted.

So we stood there in silence, sharing company, until fear had dulled enough we could crawl into our beds to sleep.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Darkening

If you wanna get technical about it Cat, *Masego* was the first one to make a bridge out of ice all the way back in summerholm to get out of a burning room.

[Liliet](#)

Akua wasn't there!

Okay, fine, she wasn't at Dormer either...

dadycool

Damn that Butcher's Bill. It sounds to me like they traded 30k soldiers of varying value for effectively a single Scourge. It's not exactly a BAD trade, considering it's a Scourge and all the

Notables on our side survived, but it's certainly not a good one either.

And lol at Mirror Knight, the Eternal Hammer.

Lord Haart

Also got a Crab, the only one there.

They should go ahead and destroy the two other bridges. Then Providence will give them some other way to cross.

[onedollargum](#)

First day's the hardest.

*arcanavita*15

"They jumped," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "They jumped out the falling tower into the other one, like assholes." This got me laughing so hard.

shikkarasu

I will never tire of Cat reacting to Heroic bands and their "Calculated Risks".

Bæring

"Fortunately, the Black Knight had led a band through daring strike into the grounded tower"

Do you mean the Red Knight or did i miss something?

ByVectron!

Unless something changed, the new Black Knight is an orc you may know as Marshall Nim.

Crash

an Ogre.

ByVectron!

Orc – ogre, gnome – goblin, Cat – dwarf: they're all nearly the same thing, right?

Crash

Look mate, there's like 4 named Ogres tops and only 2 of those have last names. Pretty sure Nim's the first Named one in Calernia. Let them have this, they need it very, very badly.):

Abrakadabra

No, they dont. What they need is to live in peace, and not fight other peoples wars.

Snappy270

This is rough.... I'm sure they will win eventually, but 30000 in one day. How are they celebrating a victory ? There was a time when that was Callow's entire army. If they killed another scourge and made an opening maybe

Mirror Night

Its times like this when I wonder how a lot of these countries even have enough troops to fight. The series have been having on and off wars for years now at this point. Quite frankly it shocking they even have the numbers to afford to lose 30K. I suppose demographics might not be the strong point for EE.

Snappy270

I mean it's the war or death for them. And EE do say that Levant only has 27000 left. Which makes sense from the 80000 they started with at the beginning of the crusade. Levant never resupplied their armies cause they couldn't being such a small nation. Procer has nothing left for several generations. Callow also hasn't truly recovered, but did steal an army.

While the new armies are relatively untouched, the league fought in princes graveyard and their own civil war neither that bad.

One day I will see a post from you not trying to nitpick EE

Magicturtle

What a weird thing to complain about...

Branwen

There's a bit in The Art of War where Sun Zi discusses being surrounded thus:

"Throw your soldiers into positions whence there is no escape, and they will prefer death to flight. If they will face death, there is nothing they may not achieve. Officers and men alike will put forth their uttermost strength.

Soldiers when in desperate straits lose the sense of fear. If there is no place of refuge, they will stand firm. If they are in hostile country, they will show a stubborn front. If there is no help for it, they will fight hard."

So the answer is probably that they celebrate a victory for the same reason they're willing to fight to the death in the first place. Every member of the army knows they're trapped, and they've no choice but to seize victory from the jaws of death. Mourning the dead can come later, once they've done their damnest to make sure they won't join them 😊

As an aside, I'm very curious for this reason if the Dead King doesn't have some further plot behind shattering the ways. It seems enormously risky to essentially trap your enemies in a fight to the death when breaking their morale is more than sufficient to win. Does he maybe plan on offering the troops a chance to flee after killing off enough of them? 😊

[Mincheriit](#)

They aren't fully celebrating. Some of the army that split off the repel undead armies are celebrating essentially surviving a clusterfuck of a fight, this is before they rejoin the main siege which I don't think is celebrating beside maybe some who had very close calls or the type of celebrating to distract from the dire situation.

Soronel Haetir

Sounds like it's about time for some of that Providence that Cat's always bitching about.

'Ladi Williams

You mean the one that allowed the use the mirror knight as a door opener on a door kilometers up in the air? or that allowed them jump from one tower falling to another that was floating?

wec

I greatly enjoy that all the major tactical uses of the Mirror Knight are slapstick comedy routines.

[Liliet](#)

At least he's no longer the only butt of the joke. I'm sure he appreciates that.

M0och123

I do love Cat's eternal irritation for Heroes succeeding by the thinnest of margins even when they are on her side.

Oof over 10% casualties on the first day is not what you want out of a siege. Definitely not a good trade, even with the addition of a scourge kill.

I should also note the plethora of typos is slightly concerning... hope EE is doing okay...

shikkarasu

EE is trying to make the finale satisfying, while also keeping it 'on schedule'. That has to be stressful, and must be eating into proofreading time for each chapter. This is surely the hardest part of this 6+ year long journey so far.

Speaking only for myself, I would be OK with EE taking a mid-book break to destress, go over the plan, and maybe build a 2-3 update buffer for sanity sake. I like to think 9/10 of us are patient and more concerned with EE's health than the update schedule.

Letouriste

I mean, most web novels worth reading only update once every weeks or month. EE is doing a crazy work schedule and still manage to produce such a good and entertaining story.

I think we would all be okay to wait several months without chapters if it bring us a good ending. Without even talking about mere weeks.

BargleNawdleZouss

Speaking only for myself, I will be fine if Book 7 deals with the fall of Keter and the defeat/final resolution of the Dead King, and THEN we get Book 8, which will show the foundation of Cardinal and the beginnings of the bittersweet Ever After. This, of course, means that there would be seven Books...and One.

Very Babylon 5, with the final season dealing with the aftermath. IYKYK! I've been imagining the Gods of Above and Below as the Vorlons and Shadows, respectively. 😊

shikkarasu

OK, I know EE has another series planned for post-guide, but this? Please? I would **Devour** an epilogue book of arbitrary length that is just Catherine & co. dealing with the politics of Proto-Cardinal, wrangling Transitionary and other greenhorn Named, and occasionally catching up with the Queen of Callow or Warlord and begging for stories of life or death struggle.

"It was a straightforward engagement, I don't want to bore you with the details."

"Hakram, I haven't stabbed anyone in 8 months or even made vague plans to. Tell me *everything*."

Zachary A Sloan

He should just mention the FF14 expansion and tell everyone to play it for a few weeks while he takes a break

Adrian_V

So who wants to bet the Herald will appear with not only the supplies but with reinforcements at some point?

Same with the Titan that Hanno contacted (the last Titan i think it was), i mean i bet he will do something at some point, could be is even related to the above (transporting the supplies and an extra army) or maybe he repairs the ways somehow.

BargleNawdleZouss

I'm anticipating that the climax will feature the Herald plus supplies and reinforcements; Kreios the Riddle-Maker; the elves finally get off their asses to contribute (partly as an effort to get rid of Hye Su the Ranger, who ALSO shows up); help from the Baalites and the Yan Tei; and even the gnomes make an appearance.

Crash

If Hye shows up she's likely to die immediately after to be honest. Archer is aiming for her Name and that requires both a massive pivot and a vacancy.

Possibly, she gets risen by the Dead King soon after that. Finally finishing their little side banter.

Abrakadabra

The elves Just escaping reality. Like literally, they Just transitioning into The feylands with their territory.

Juff

Typo Thread:

that that > that
averages Bones > average Bones
who'd had > who'd
They'd almost half (missing words)
my heat > my head
Neshamah and myself > after Neshamah and myself
out my ducklings > out of my ducklings
to openly > to look openly
to the Grand Alliance (missing fullstop)
the rest of way back (should remove to avoid repetition)
gotten embed > gotten embedded
bloc of butter > block of butter
than then > and then
I can see > I could see

could it could > so it could
through daring > in a daring
are serious > are you serious
council," Princess > council," the Princess

ohJohN

Not exactly a typo but:

"At least thirty thousand dead between the battle and the storm, huh. [...] **Almost two hundred and fifty thousand soldiers had come here** to break the end times before they could break us. **Nine more attacks like this** and we'd run out of men."

(30k dead) = <220k remaining
 $220k \div 30k = 7\frac{1}{3}$ more attacks like this before they run out

Technically, yeah, 9 similar engagements would bleed their forces dry (and then some!) but I'm guessing it was originally written as '300k soldiers had come' and the math was based off that, but later it was edited down to 250k after checking notes.

Besides: this is an excellent opportunity for "7 attacks and 1 (final, desperate stand by the few remaining companies)" 😎

ohJohN

oh whoops, WordPress ate some of my math, it was supposed to be:

(<250k soldiers initially) – (≥30k dead) = <220k remaining

Gynedroid

Aquiline got shot by a skeleton? Huh. I thought skeletons didn't use bows and arrows much, too difficult to maintain? Preferred spears/javelins

Then again, this close to Keter, it's probably easier to do so.

...Or it wasn't a skeleton...

Konstantin von Karstein

The undead on campaign don't use bows, either because they're Bones (so too dumb) or because it demands too much care to stay in a good state or need frequent replacements, which would mitigate the advantage conferred by simplified logistics. I imagine there's only Binds on the walls of Keter, and logistic obviously isn't a problem.

braxen1

You know Istrid being mentioned this chapter reminds me of another battle where people were poisoned by their own side.

Did we ever find out who killed most of the generals when they were fighting Akua in Laure?

It wasn't Cat and I remember a chapter where Alaya was saying it's too bad someone else killed Istrid.

It probably wasn't Akua since I think she would have said something about it at the start of her redemption arc.

Was it Amadeus? He could betray his loved subordinates for the sake of a plan, but Istrid was already 100% his.

Lord Haart

I don't recall if it was confirmed, but fairly sure it was the Matrons.

Cat was dismissive of their assassins but think they might bite her (or Above forbid Pickler) for that.

braxen1

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Kildare

Iirc it was hinted that it was the goblin matrons

Daniel E

I think we may actually see Christophe make a transition during the final battle. Mirror Knight no longer, he shall hence forth be known as Angry Bird.

Mary Gentle

It's not a complaint, exactly, because this was done very well, but I think I'd have liked the battlefield action in this

chapter, and then – next chapter – “back at the wall” done in real-time, from someone else’s point of view.

There may be a very good reason for having events back at the gates summarised, in terms of what we’re going to see there later on, though Cat’s or someone else’s eyes. Still . . . I wouldn’t want to see things done in summary just because *not* doing them in summary would make the book longer.

(Count me in as one of the ones who wouldn’t object if the author needed a break for a bit. OK, I’d whine, moan, and whimper twice a week when there wasn’t a new chapter, but that shouldn’t be construed as an actual complaint.)

ninegardens

I think by having it summarized, and indirect, we get to have a “Light” “fun” chapter, to offset the tense battle scene. If we had both battles live on screen, we would have had pure tension, so the “hearing it second hand” mainly serves to convert a tense battle into a chill catch up with friends...

Which I imagine will be VERY necessary for the tone and passing going forward.

Titan

This is actually the chapter I caught up on! Ages ago when the first chapter of this book was published, I wanted to really enjoy the books again so I reread all of it from the start! One of my favorite things to do was liking every single chapter 😊

This is by far my favorite work of fiction!

Thank you for working so so so hard I am going to become a Patreon to support you.

Keep writing! I look forward to the end of this series, and the start of the next.

I daydream about reading a series all about Cardinal and the new world order.



Adam

The quality of this entire story is ridiculous for a web novel. Typos exist but the quality of this story is astonishing. Thanks for letting previously broke people like myself read too. Subscribing/donating today.

Kojo

Hi Everyone, could someone provide me with the link to EE's other story. Thanks.

shikkarasu

<https://palelights613694448.wordpress.com/2021/02/25/chapter-1/>

Rabblrouser

That after action report managed to be hilarious and depressing in such short order.

Chapter 56: Brink

"Note: while curiosity did kill the cat, the effect only ensued when it was so strongly imprinted in the mind as to overwrite motor functions. Human experiments reproduced the results, leaving what would set cats apart unclear."

– Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

The Grand Alliance taken a swing in the face, but we'd get over it. That was the way these things went, really. You rolled with the black eye, threw sand in the other guy's face come next round and stabbed them good in the belly while they were blinded. I told Vivienne as much when we discussed what should follow our 'victories' over breakfast. Her milkmaid braid was undone, falling down her back, and she started blearily at me over porridge she insisted on touching up with honey for some godforsaken reason.

"Have you considered," Princess said, "that the unreasonable number of brawls you've been in might be making your metaphors baffling to anyone remotely normal?"

Indrani, seated between us, finished scarfing down her sausage and licked her fingers before shaking her head at Vivienne.

"Nah, her stuff is always easy to get," Archer said. "You're off on that one."

My successor cocked an eyebrow at me as I winced. Ah, 'Drani. Even when trying to help, she ended up verbally socking me in the stomach like usual. It was a fair point that if Archer and I were on the same wavelength, there might be a little too much brawl in my metaphors.

"No, Vivienne is entirely correct," Hierophant absent-mindedly said. "When Catherine gets started it sometimes turns into rather mystifying jargon."

I grinned, cocking an eyebrow at Princess, whose turn it was to wince. Yeah, *Masego* was agreeing with her. I wasn't the only one with a would-be helper tying stones around my feet. Hierophant's notion of commonly understandable conversation was about three years if magical study removed from any halfway reasonable expectation. *Draw*, Vivienne mouthed at me, and I inclined my head. I could have tried for the win, but if Indrani caught on to what I was doing she was most definitely enough of a wench to go out of her way to sink my chances.

"Look, my perfectly serviceable metaphors aside the situation's not that bad," I said, allowing myself more frankness than I would in a war council. "The hourglass is emptying when it comes to supply, sure, but none of us actually expected our first shot at the walls to win us Keter."

"I did expect us to land on the walls, however," Masego noted. "Which we did not."

I sighed, not arguing the point because he wasn't wrong. Sixteen thousand dead without a single foot being set atop the walls of Keter was not great for morale. The reports from the phalanges and the Jacks I'd read over while drinking my tea had been pretty clear about that: even the Army of Callow's spirit had been bruised by yesterday's battles. It was unsurprisingly worst of all the Grand Alliance in the Proceran forces, which still sported a number of levies. The conscripts had been hardened by the years of fighting, but they'd never be as steady as career soldiers.

"Like I said, we took a swing in the face," I told him. "But we have a better idea of Keter's defences now and the next assault we'll mount *will* punch through the defences."

While the Confederation of Praes did not have a Warlock it did have an informal leading mage, Lady Nahiza Serrif. She'd been set to the task of overseeing the Praesi mages during the battle, backing up Masego's defensive spellcasting to shut down Keteran ritual, but she'd had another duty and she'd discharged it successfully: we now had an estimate of what Legion doctrine called the 'spellfire volume' of the Dead King's forces. As laid out by now-general Grem One-Eye's *Considerations*, spellfire volume was the total amount of sorcery than an opposing force was capable of mustering at once.

It didn't necessarily translate into superior strength in practice, since for example a smaller cadre of casters capable of High Arcana might well overpower a significantly larger group of less-trained mages that could technically deploy more sorcery.

What it did give us, though, was an estimate of the enemy's maximum strike capacity and how much of our own mages we should keep in reserve to defend. In this case, the answer was looking to be a little over two thirds of our casters. That was still a lot of strength loose for us to deploy, which meant a lot of the plans we'd been keeping back were now looking to be viable.

Committing the greater Praesi fortresses, for one, but also Chancellor Alaya's battlefield applications of Still Water. And since we could deploy these with an expectation that we wouldn't just be throwing away irreplaceable assets, it meant we could start using our trump cards to make openings for them. No, yesterday had been a black eye but it'd not been a total loss.

"And when's that going to be?" Indrani asked, curious. "We're going to be with the besieging force this time, yeah?"

"We are," I confirmed. "We'll have to discuss in council who takes their turn sallying out to keep our back clean, but I'm pretty sure it's going to be the League with some Proceran reinforcements."

Even after the Principate had spent years being ravaged, it still had by far the largest cavalry contingent of all the nations of the Grand Alliance. After the casualties her cataphracts had taken at the Battle of the Ruins to keep Chief Troke's flank from collapsing, Basilia was sure to want to use someone else's cavalry on the field.

"Nice," Archer said. "Been talking with Alexis about a trick we could use on a Scourge, it'd be interesting to try out. Doesn't tell me when we're taking our crack at it, though."

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "Not for a few days at least. We need to see to our wounded and let the soldiers rest for a bit."

Much as I disliked waiting, given the dire state of our supplies, you couldn't repeatedly send armies into the meat grinders and expect them not to break. We'd prepare for the assault and get it going as soon as morale had solidified.

"Good," Masego said. "I have begun studying the damage the fallen tower made to Keter's wards when it fell through the wall, but it is a difficult matter and enemy interference complicates it further. Time will help."

"Doesn't it always?" I easily replied.

It was the most precious resource, when making war, and always the scarcest. I left that breakfast in a better mood, some of the gloom for last night shed now that I some sleep in my body and a semblance of a path forward. I spent two days conferring with Named and generals, laying out the skeleton of the assault to

come, and Hierophant even tossed some good news our way. The fallen tower, while it might not have destroyed the wards that made it unfeasible to reduce the walls of Keter by sorcery, had weakened several sections of them. That knowledge allowed me to add some flesh to the bones of the plan, Juniper further refining it.

And then we had trouble.

—

It had now been five days since the Battle of the Ruins, and it'd gotten bad enough that we'd had to call a war council over it. It drew raised eyebrows when I brought General Abigail instead of Juniper as my second, but everyone there had concerns great enough it didn't even end up warranting a spoken question.

"If we were not stranded," First Princess Rozala Malanza frankly said, "half my army would have deserted by now."

I winced. The Jacks had told me it was bad, but not quite *that* bad.

"I've had conversations with the Stygians and the Penthesians that bordered on threats to walk," Empress Basilia admitted. "And if they *do* walk, others will follow."

"It's not the nobles we have to worry about, it's the rank and file," I flatly stated. "We can hang a few aristocrats and the rest will fall in line, but we can't hang an army into being fighting fit."

"Threat of death will do little," Chancellor Alaya agreed, "when most of the Grand Alliance's soldiery is now convinced it is going to die anyway."

Which they were, and Gods forgive me but I couldn't even blame them. Our supply situation had been known for some time by select officers – inevitable, since we were already rationing and there were now about two weeks of food left – but we'd kept a lid on the real sucker punch: the dwarves weren't going to be supplying us with anything. The deal with the Herald of the Deeps had fallen through and his replacement, Lady Sybella, was perfectly willing to leave us to die until we bent to the even steeper terms she'd offered. Soldiers weren't always the most learned of people, but most of them could do simple mathematics.

There were two weeks of food left, none more around or coming, and it had taken more than two weeks to get to Keter through the Twilight Ways. Which were, anyhow, shattered.

The realization that even if by some miracle Keter was taken quickly enough everyone the Grand Alliance had brought north was

likely to starve to death in the aftermath had been a knockout blow in the wake of the black eye caused by our first failed offensive. Morale had cratered, and even in the Army of Callow some soldiers had refused to leave their tents and attend their duties. We'd come down hard on those, hard enough that it'd not spread, but it was all balancing on a knife's edge. The Legions had held up about the same, but the less disciplined armies had not. Most of Procer's fantassins were no longer taking orders and Hakram was so busy cracking heads to keep the Clans in line he almost hadn't been able to come today.

Of all forces only the Lycaonese had been unaffected, instead throwing a feast they'd called a 'wake' where they got drunk and spoke each other's eulogies before declaring themselves already dead and sworn to fight Keter to the last. Even Cordelia had gotten proper sloshed, I'd heard, which I was rather sad to have missed.

"Our captains are petitioning to know of the terms the Kingdom Under asked and why they have been refused," Lord Yannu told us. "That part, at least, appears to remain unknown."

"Have any of you learned where the leak came from?" Rozala asked.

I grimaced.

"I have," I admitted. "The phalanges found the source."

That had the entire room's eyes swivelling towards me, save for one pair. General Abigail Tanner stood like a woman headed for gallows with her name written on the rope, the perpetual dark rings around her eyes standing out even more starkly for her bleak expression. With those watery blue eyes and that frazzled hair she looked like she hadn't had a good night's sleep in a year, which might well be the truth. I flicked a glance at her, nodding. She cleared her throat.

"It was the Third Army," General Abigail said. "I have standing orders for my Supply Tribune to underreport our stocks in food and goblin munitions, which made it stand out more obviously when it was on record we were a week away from running empty and we still didn't get sent anything."

It was very much against regulations to do what she'd just described, the underreporting so the Third would be sent extra stocks, but she wasn't the only one who worked her numbers along those lines. The adjunct secretariat had dug deep and found she and her officers weren't skimming, just using the extra stocks as a reserve in case supply was shaken, so she'd gotten off light. Some docked pay, a reduction of her pension and Juniper had pretty brutally chewed out. She'd blushed red enough at the screaming it had shown even on those sunburnt cheek, but the pension reduction had actually brought tears to her eyes.

That was the internal discipline of the Army of Callow, though. The problem that'd begun in her backyard had ended up much larger than that.

"How did it spread from there, general?" Razin evenly asked.

I replied in her stead.

"Her Supply Tribune's subordinates began asking questions and they found out that no space had been cleared in our camps for the arrival of fresh supplies," I said. "It was a small leap from there, and the shock of the realization was enough that several got drunk and loosened their tongues. From there, it was the simple spread of soldier's gossip."

It was unsurprising it'd spread across camps. The Grand Alliance armies were encamped close to one another and shared common walls, turning the fortified ring into something like a city of tents. With soldiers having little to do but gossip given the general idleness of a siege between assaults, the moment rumours began to spread it was a given they'd take like wildfire.

"It was my officers, so it's my fault," General Abigail said. "Can't take that back, but I offer you my apologies and my resignation."

Her tone had gotten, I thought, slightly hopeful by the end of the sentence. Though I would have liked to simply refuse her offer, it wasn't that simple. I didn't entirely have the leverage to make that decision alone, not when it was the Army of Callow that'd leaked the secret that got us into this mess. If the rest of the Grand Alliance wanted her resignation, I'd have to give it.

"It would change nothing," First Princess Rozala said. "The cat is already out of the bag."

"It might make things worse, truly" Empress Basilia noted. "Turn her into a figurehead for the resentment to gather behind."

Yannu was less convinced.

"Is she to escape punishment, then?" he pushed.

Razin shot me a shrew look.

"Has the Army of Callow already dealt out discipline?" the Lord of Malaga asked.

"It has," I said. "No demotion, but docked pay and pension as well as some other disciplinary measures."

An argument could be made that under some regulations she should be whipped, but I wasn't sure I wanted to go there. It'd make the

Third Army boiling mad if Abigail the Fox was whipped in front of our assembled soldiery.

"She should be punished for failure of command, not the mistakes of her men," Prince Otto bluntly said. "That is her crime. Going any further would be unjust."

The general's face fell and I suppressed a smile. *You're not getting out of command that easily, Tanner.* Yannu Marave remained displeased and Rozala actually seemed like she was leaning his way in practice, whatever her words, so I threw them a bone by having her added to the latrine-digging duty rotation for a week. Neither of them were actually out of blood so they were satisfied with the light humiliation, though they really should have figured out that it would only make her more popular with her men. Soldiers liked seeing generals get their hands dirty. Being born a noble came with some blind spots, I mused.

It wasn't like a brewer's daughter would be all that concerned with her lordly dignity.

Crestfallen, General Abigail retreated behind me and we moved on to the thick of the meeting. What the Hells were meant to do about any of this.

"We should make the price asked by the dwarves public," Empress Basilia suggested. "The anger should turn sentiment around."

"That's a risk," I grunted.

Rozala agreed.

"If despair wins over anger, we might well be forced to agreed to the terms of the Kingdom Under by our own armies," the First Princess said.

Yannu and Razin backed her on that, the Lord of Alava frankly stating that most the Dominion captains would not hesitate to clamour for the bargain to be struck since Levant was ceding no territory.

"Should part of our army agree while another does not, the discord could get out of hand," Chancellor Alaya said. "We cannot afford to be fighting each other instead of the dead."

The problem was that no one really had a solution. Our soldiers were rebellious because, well, we were in a fucking terrible situation. If the dwarves hung us out to dry, we were all going to die whether or not we took Keter. Or even worse, some of the most powerful nobles would make it out while everyone else died. That thought would be like tossing a lit match at oil, if it spread widely enough.

"We need to secure our supplies with reliable soldiers," Hakram said. "Else we risk of deserters attempting to grab food and take their chances with the Ossuary."

"Wise," Empress Basilia said. "Though that is only a temporary salve. We need a way to turn morale around."

And there were some ideas, so we broke up and set about trying them. First was Rozala's own notion of spreading rumours of our own to flip sentiment: namely that we intended to invade the Serenity once Keter was taken, which was farmland bearing plentiful food. It worked some, but it was an obvious ploy and our soldiers weren't dumb. There was no guarantee the Serenity would have reserves, that we would be able to reach it and to be honest a lot of the rank and file were wary at the prospect of eating anything that'd been grown in a Hell. It wasn't enough. Another day passed and the mutters of mutiny only grew.

Mali – Chancellor Alaya's suggestion was slyer and ended up more successful. A production was made of supplies being brought into the camp from outside even as word was spread that an accord might have been reached with the Kingdom Under. It was pure sleight of hand, the supplies in question coming from one of the larger flying fortresses and having been smuggled out during the night so they could be brought back when everybody was watching. It wouldn't tide us over forever, I thought, but it might be enough to muster our armies for another assault. Or it would have been, if the news did not then come from further south.

The devils were gone.

The Praesi had seized and suborned the gates before unleashing seven days' worth of devils on the dead, the main reason we were not drowning in armies as we besieged Keter, but the Dead King had not sat idle. The bindings on the devils had somehow been twisted and they were made to turn on each other, destroying themselves in an orgy of violence. They'd still emptied the southern Kingdom of the Dead of troops so it seemed like only a minor defeat, until one realized what it meant: there was no army left in the way of any deserters wanting to run south to Procer.

That night there were five attempts made on the supply stores, and though none succeeded it soured sentiment. We hanged all who attempted it publicly – two Proceran fantassin crews, a Levantine captain, Penthesians and to my distaste a tenth of legionaries from my own First Army – but however necessary the gesture it only darkened the mood further. We held council again, and this time when Basilia pushed to have the terms of the dwarven deal made public most of the people around the table were in agreement. It was Alaya and I who were the standouts again, sharing the same fear: it was going to give a lot of angry people a reason to get angry at each other.

To Basilia's honour, she was right about the League's reaction. Outrage at the demand of Penthes being ceded to the Kingdom Under was so great that there were demands made that the Grand Alliance declare war on the dwarves as well – never mind that the League was not part of the Grand Alliance, or that if the dwarves didn't feed us we were all going to fucking die. I was even forced to admit that I'd been wrong to fear the worst, at least in the immediate, since it didn't lead armies to brawl. What it did do, though, was give a halfway decent excuse for everyone wanting to sit out the battles to do it.

Proceran fantassins and levies did it by the hundreds, refusing to take up arms until the terms were accepted, while both the Blood and Chancellor Alaya began to receive petitions to accept the terms even if the rest of their allies did not. Some of the High Lords began to imply that the Praesi auxiliaries, which had until recently been household troops, might be inclined to start following their lead again should the Chancellor not do what was necessary to get them out of this mess. Tensions began to slowly rise across the camps and another council was urgently called.

"We lean on priests and heroes to shame the disobedient into line," I flatly told them. "As for the High Lords, I'll take care of it."

I retreated into my tent and slipped into the dreams of those Alaya had said were most aggressive, inflicting on them terrifying nightmares. Fear did its work: the next morning, much chastened nobles came to reiterate their absolute support for the Chancellor and her wise reign. The other half of that, unfortunately, did not work as well. Some of the priests balked at being given orders by earthly powers, outright refusing to preach as they were told, and though Hanno convinced half the mercenaries to live up to their contract the rest chased him out. It was similarly mixed results with the levies.

The Brabantines that'd wanted to make him into a price rose up, but some of those conscripts had never so much as seen his face until Salia and they were not willing to put blind trust into a stranger. Not even one who was the Sword of Judgement.

"A successful assault on the walls would turn sentiment around," the Warlord said.

"If we could talk them into that, we wouldn't be struggling so hard in the first place," I bit out.

Even the Army of Callow was balking, which was like a thorn in my throat: every time I tried to swallow, it bit a little deeper.

"Hard measures have become necessary," Empress Basilia said.

And we all knew what she meant by that. All of us had still-reliable troops, soldiers that would obey the order to purge the disobedient if it was given. It would be a death blow to morale to bloody our soldiers into lining up for an assault, but with morale already fucked it was starting to look like the least lethal of the poisons to drink to go through with it. Reluctant agreement began to bloom across the table, but the thorn in my throat had not stung so keenly that I'd accept this. Not against soldiers that'd followed me since I was a girl, that had served unflinching through one nightmare after another until we reached the walls of Keter. I did not agree, and brusquely left the council. Juniper followed closely behind, and when we were out of the tent she took my arm. We stood there a moment, our gazes meeting as her hand stayed on me, and a knot of emotions seized her face. Shame and gratitude, anger and pride.

"Warlord," she finally said, tone thick.

Gratitude won out. We both knew it was the same soldiers whose butchery had been discussed that had put me on the throne and kept me there, and I was almost insulted that she had thought I would forget it. That I would meekly bend my neck to this.

"They won't do it without me," I tiredly replied, passing a hand through my hair. "But we can't do nothing, Juniper. Time is running out."

It had not been eight days since the Battle of the Ruins, and we both knew that the closer we got to empty stores the more violently desperate our soldiers would become.

"An assault means losses," Juniper murmured. "That means our stores last longer."

We both knew that an assault where the entire force did not participate was just throwing lives away, but that was exactly what she was proposing: getting people killed. I pulled away, feeling my bad leg throbbing. I needed to be alone. I worried at the thought like a dog gnawing at a bone, but I saw no way out. So I sat in my tent alone, a bottle of aragh open as I leaned back in my seat with my eye closed. Trying to think of something, anything, that wasn't just some variation of a butcher's knife.

The soft sound of someone entering my tent reached my ears, but I did not open my eye.

"I'm not in the mood," I called out.

"You are in one," Hakram gravelled. "Which is why you're drinking alone."

"I don't want to talk," I told him, leaning forward as my eye fluttered open. "There's been enough of that."

He looked, I saw, about as tired as I felt. Ignoring me, he sat on the other side of my desk and grabbed the bottle. He poured himself a cup so full it nearly overflowed before draining it all in one swallow.

"I don't feel much like talking either," the Warlord admitted. "It's why I'm here. For the silence."

I stared at him, unblinking, for a long time. Then I nodded. We had known a great many comfortable silences, the two of us. This would not be one of them, given the dark bent of our thoughts, but maybe it'd be more comfortable here with each other than it would have been alone. So we stayed there and we drank, an hour passing and then another. It was me who spoke, when the bottle was empty and my belly too warm.

"I thought I was done with hard measures," I murmured. "Past them. But we're never really *done* with horror, are we?"

Hakram did not answer for a long while.

"I used to wonder," he said, "if it was something we stepped into, or something we brought with us."

And now we know, I thought. We parted ways come dark, but I could not sleep. I felt restless, for all that there was nothing to spend my energies against. So instead I found my steps leading me to the tallest watchtower of our camp, watching over the campfires spread all around me. I stood at the edge of the drop, alone and veiled by Night, and waited. The streak of ice was still there, the old fear that would never suffer to be entirely mastered. Fear of the drop, of the fall. An old friend.

I hated it.

"I've been fighting you since I was a girl," I told the night. "Gods, how many times did I face you?"

I had sought rooftop after rooftop, trying to scour the fear out of me, and yet here it was still.

"Even after all I've done, how far I've gone, you're still here," I said. "Still a part of me. You can be bound and blinded, kept in the cellar, but you've never been *gone*."

And how hateful was it, that even this small thing I had spent all my life trying to rid myself of could not be changed? I leaned forward, boot beginning to give against the wood, and though I knew the fall would not kill me still my stomach clenched. It was how I knew I wasn't dreaming: when I fell, in my dreams, there was never any fear. I just tumbled into the darkness, not making a sound, and I was swallowed whole. My bad leg throbbed with pain, a reminder this was anything but a dream.

"Is that the lesson?" I asked. "That it's not about getting rid of you, it's about continuing the fight?"

I thought of the night I had become the Warden, the dream of it. The faces I had worn, their warnings. *Do better*, one had whispered. *Don't flinch*, the other had ordered. And beyond them, the Beast that had waited. That I felt coil around me now, warm breath against my neck as it opened its maw.

"I don't believe that," I murmured. "Maybe there's never really an end like we want, like you get in the stories – a clean cut, a last light – but we do get to win, sometimes. If we bleed for it, if we're clever and brave and we don't bend with the current of the world."

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched.

"This isn't good enough," I told Creation. "This place, this end, this taste of ash in my mouth that I know too fucking well. *It's not enough.*"

And something like indignation burned in my belly, because deep down I had always wanted the world to be fair – for fairness, for good to be baked into its bones – but it wasn't. It was blind and brutal, and the only lights you found down there in the dark were the ones you'd lit.

"Maybe you don't care," I said. "Maybe it's a game to you, always was. *Fine*. But a game has rules, and I swear to anything out there listening that in the space between those I will carve a semblance of fairness. And if you won't help me, then get the Hells out of my way."

I had told the Beast I no longer feared it and meant every word. So I closed my eye, breathing out, and left my staff.

Then I took a step forward and let myself fall.

The Beast laughed, laughed loud enough for the world to quake and to drown out the scream of my fear. But it held me tight, warmed me and lent me its strength. My Name burned bright, chasing away the dark, and finally I was able to **See**. There was an above and a below, and below me I saw them all laid out. A never-ending sprawl of objects in motion, stars in the void. All the stories, the possibilities of them, and though the enormity of it threatened to snuff out my mind like a candle the Beast kept me together. And as I fell, as the enormity came ever closer and hurried towards me, I saw what I was looking for.

An object in motion.

I opened my eye, back cold with sweat, but I was not falling. I was still on the edge of the tower, a step away from the fall and

fear coiling cold in my gut. Maybe it'd always be like that. Not the fight, because there would always be a fight – if not this one, then another. Maybe it was about the victories you could steal from fear, the lights you lit. I looked up, breathing raggedly, and above me I saw the clouds of poison had parted. The night sky was a river of stars, breathtaking and depthless. I might never have thought to look up, if not for all this.

Dawn found me sleeping there, swaddled in the Mantle of Woe.

—

“Two days,” I told the war council. “Give me two days.”

“What have you learned, Black Queen?” Rozala Malanza asked with a frown.

“That the world is always larger than we think,” I replied. “So give me two days, and I will give you a miracle.”

They did. They watched me like a hawk all the while, spies and envoys dogging my every footstep and growing impatient as I did nothing more than prepare for a battle they did not think would be fought, but on the dawn of the third day an alarm was rung. An army had appeared south, its trail of dust piercing past the cover of the poison clouds. I sent a single messenger and waited at the edge of the camp while it woke up like a hive, ramparts being manned and officers sent for. But the dust parted, the army approached, and worry turned to surprise.

These were not the dead. It was an army of dwarves, thousands strong. I had seen true, then. Today would be a pivot, for us and for them.

The greats of the Grand Alliance trickled towards me, a war council forming, but I already knew what it would be about. Who was to go speak with the dwarves, they would say. And that I would go was a certainty, but there would be bickering about the rest. Too many could, while few must be sent. So I had sent a messenger for a diplomat enough of them would trust. The conversation died, smothered in the cradle, as Cordelia Hasenbach rode up to our side atop a warhorse.

“Warden,” she greeted me, blue eyes sweeping over the others.

“There,” I smiled at the others. “Does this compromise suffice?”

It did.

—

The Herald of the Deeps received us formally in his tent.

Not in a stiff manner, I meant, but in the same way he had once received me deep below in the Everdark: after a few courtesies were traded, small wooden bowls were brought out. Relics whose grain was left rough, without varnish or polish. Seeker Balasi himself came into the tent with an opaque glass bottle in hand, pouring half a cup's worth of *sudra* in each bowl before taking a step back. The liquor looked like wine, but its surface trailed vapour and it looked on the verge of boiling. The Herald had once told me no bottle of the drink, which dwarves used only on important talks, had ever left the Kingdom Under. The Named's green large green eyes sought out mine and he offered a respectful – though not deferential – nod.

I noticed that the staff he usually took everywhere, crooked wood adorned with metal chimes, was nowhere in sight.

"Warden," the Herald of Deeps said, "I greet you in peace."

"Herald," I replied, returning the nod. "Your arrival is an unexpected pleasure."

"Creations holds us all prisoner to its whims," he said, then turned to acknowledge my companion's presence. "Princess Cordelia."

"Herald," she calmly replied, then glanced at the bowls. "You honour us with this service."

Balasi didn't sit at the table with us, this time. He'd not approached again after taking that step back, instead standing behind the Herald with a face that might as well have been carved out of stone. It caught Cordelia's eyes just as it did mine. The Herald had always preferred to let the deed-seeker do most the talking when it was possible. Something had changed.

"If these talks are not to be called of import," the green-eyed Named said, "I know not which deserve the word."

A pause.

"I come to fulfill our bargain, Warden."

My brow rose.

"Has Lady Sybella been recalled as negotiator for the Kingdom Under?" I asked. "I'd thought you replaced."

For a long moment, the Herald neither moved nor answered. Not so much as a blink of those luminous eyes.

"A sennight ago," the Herald of the Deeps finally said, "I entered the Hall of Hearths and sought the King Under the Mountain as he sat the Diluvian Throne before the great land-kings of our kind. I demanded of him to summon all dwarves to war

and strike bargain with the Grand Alliance, so that we might end the Dead King once and for all."

My throat caught. A calmer presence in the back of my mind noted a detail: a week ago. Either this Hall of Hearths was close to here, or the dwarves had a way of travelling long distances quickly.

"And did he accept?" Cordelia quietly asked.

The green-eyed dwarf twitched in what I thought might be dismay.

"He refused," the Herald said. "And in his anger at my presumption, cast me into exile."

An exile that'd come here with an army, I thought, but my stomach was sinking even as I kept my face calm. So the Herald of the Deeps had come here with his loyalists to lend a hand to the fight. I would not turn away the help, but it was not the help we'd needed. Food was to be our saving grace, not more swords.

"But I gave an oath on my staff to fight for the terms I accepted with all my might," the dwarf quietly said. "So I did."

Cordelia stilled as I leaned forward. Power burned in the dwarf's green eyes, old and deep and without the slightest semblance of humanity to it.

"I slew the king on his throne," the Herald of the Deeps said, "and declared all of his line to be without burden or purpose. Unfit to rule."

I let out a sharp breath. Burden and purpose were the words dwarves used for Role and Name, I knew, but I had heard Balasi use them in a more religious context before. They seemed as much philosophy as namelore.

"And you got out of there alive?" I said, incredulous.

"Snapping my staff of office released the many spirits I have bound over the years all at once," the Herald said, sounding darkly satisfied. "The soldiers of the land-kings had greater concerns than to hunt me."

I felt like reaching for the drink even though it wasn't done cooling. That was, I thought, one hell of a way to resign. Still, for all that the Herald's act of defiance was impressive I was having some difficulty parsing the implications of it. Fortunately, I had brought Cordelia Hasenbach with me.

"You have not come," Cordelia mildly said, "as a representative of the Kingdom Under."

The Herald grimly chuckled.

"Princess, there no longer *is* a Kingdom Under," he said. "It has been a thousand years since the Kings Under the Mountain truly ruled, but the dignity of their blood kept the land-kings as part of the same realm in name."

He bared his teeth.

"I murdered that last restraint," the Herald said. "Twice over, when I declared the bloodline unfit: no brother or sister can be ushered into the seat to serve as a fresh figurehead. Instead every land-king now claims himself the true owner of the Diluvian Throne."

"Civil war," Cordelia said.

"Not one of them but thirty," the green-eyed dwarf replied. "A hundred, even. All of the old wars let loose again, without the King Under the Mountain to call for peace when a side wishes to surrender. It will be to the death, Princess Cordelia, until the Diluvian Throne is filled once more or the empire shatters all the way through."

I honestly wasn't sure whether that was better or worse than the Herald coming here with only an army of exiles. It was now a certainty we wouldn't be getting reinforcements from the Kingdom Under, because its armies certainly sounded like they would be busy for the immediate future. Fuck, I'd hoped- wait, no. Not *all* the armies were busy, were they?

"It got the impression," I said, "that neither the lands of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Expansion were under a land-king."

From context I'd put together that they were under the authority of the King Under the Mountain, at least in principle, though in practice they'd been under the Herald himself. If their throne was empty, though, who did they now answer to?

"Clever," the Herald smiled. "It is true. Balasi and I rode the Deep River to return there ahead of even the furthest land-kings. They soldiers have answered my call."

My heart skipped a beat. That was beginning to sound rather more like what I'd hoped to get. The Fifteenth Expansion was the underground of the Kingdom of the Dead, which was filled with fortresses and soldiers. The Fourteenth was the Everdark, which was being colonized with both civilians and soldiers. Together, the regions represented a large number of soldiers. Cordelia narrowed in on another detail, though.

"This Deep River," the fair-haired princess said, "could it be used by humans?"

My eyes widened. That was a way out our mess, I considered. If our armies could use the Deep River to retreat from Keter after the fall of the Crown of the Dead, extreme rationing might be able to get us back to Procer without killing too many from starvation. We should be able to buy supplies from the Herald as well. Nowhere enough to feed an army our size for long, and I doubted he'd empty his stores for us entirely, but maybe long enough to be able to manage the trip back south without too many dead if we took Keter quickly enough. *There would be enough in the Everdark for all of us, but without the Twilight Ways to get them to us there's no way they'll arrive in time.* From the corner of my eye, I saw that Balasi looked amused.

"It would be death," the Herald politely replied. "The Deep River is sailed by ship, but it is not water. It is..."

A frown, a look at the deed-seeker.

"Lava," Seeker Balasi provided.

The Herald nodded, turning back to us.

"Lava. The ships are sailed empty between cities, using currents made by runes," he told us. "I could protect myself and Balasi riding one, but more would be beyond my capacity."

I sighed. Yeah, that'd been a little too good to be true. So we were back at the start, supply-wise.

"Your help in fighting Keter would be most welcome," Cordelia said, "but I must confess our armies have grown troubled. Being stranded far from home without supplies has hurt our readiness to fight."

"It would," the Herald acknowledged. "I will not apologize, for the deeds of the Kingdom Under are no longer mine to bear as burden, but I would make restitution as a sign of good will. We will surrender Lady Sybella to your hands."

I blinked.

"You captured her," I said. "Where?"

"She was a mere two days away, waiting for you to bend to her terms," the Herald replied.

My heart beat wildly and I shared a look with Cordelia, whose eyes had lit up.

"She must," I slowly said, "have been keeping the supplies close, then."

"Atop a confluence of tunnels, near the shores of the lake you call the Tomb," he nodded.

Which was far, but even if they hadn't moved them – which I doubted – it wasn't that far. We could most definitely trade for supplies with the Herald to keep our soldiers until they arrived.

"They are in your possession," Cordelia stated.

"They are," the Herald of the Deeps said. "And though I am not the Kingdom Under, I come to fulfill the terms of the bargain."

The supplies and his help against the city of Keter and attendant lands. A cession of claim that Cordelia had already convinced the Sisters to accept. *It's better than if he was still part of the Kingdom Under*, I thought. The Herald could make a kingdom of his own out here while the rest of his kind fought it out for the throne, which would ensure his fragile beginnings were not simply annexed by whoever ruled close. *And it creates a state that has an interest in keep the Kingdom Under split so it never turns around to gobble them up, which is even better.* There was no real way for humans to meddle in that mess, but the Herald and his successors would be a different story.

Some of the drow might push for taking back their homeland when the enemy was still weak, I decided, but that trouble was years down the line and not impossible to navigate besides. I glanced at Cordelia, whose face was calm. She gave me a slight nod of agreement, also thinking it the right decision. So I reached for the bowl and took it in hand, raising it.

"Then I greet you in war, Herald of the Deeps," I said.

They matched me and we all drank deep, the sudra smooth all the way down and leaving that faint taste of copper behind.

We drank, and it felt like a light being lit.

arcanavitae15

I love this plot twist, this makes up for most of the assholery from the Herald of the Depths in my mind. Also new aspect, I really love the scene were she gets it, See is basically the enhanced story vision, two aspects that start with an S.

agumentic

I wonder if we will get the return of Seek from all the way in Book 2.

Bad@games

Steal is fairly close to take, and cat has a thing for doing stuff like that

ByVectron!

But she has still gotten that for free, over the years. I think that's just an innate talent for her at this point.

[Liliet](#)

That's... where Aspects come from, though? Hakram didn't get Lead as a divine affirmation, he got it as a positive feedback loop from his ability to, yes, lead. Catherine had gotten the ability to discern stories as stars in the dark long before her Aspect coalesced (and her first one which she talked about being about to appear was Silence, not See) and it had in turn come after years upon years of story-fu struggle.

An innate talent is what Aspects are *all about*.

Miles

A normal ability becoming an aspect also involves a powerup. So in this case she already had the power to permanently take the Bard's connection to stories and make it her own... how do you power up from there?

Like, what's the next step even?

[Liliet](#)

Doing it more easily / faster / with less prep.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

That'd be **Yoink**

[Liliet](#)

You know that's a good point

Someperson

My money is on the last aspect being Sacrifice.

Although, transitioning from Warden of the East to just plain Warden may have averted that as her aspect.

shikkarasu

We've had 3 'I will come to Collect's from Cat, now. I'm holding out hope for Collect as an Aspect.

Lictor Magnus

With the number one superpower on the continent shattered this truly going to lead into a new age.

arcanavitae15

I really love the Beast, as well as the two voices that accompany it, it's one of the better parts of names for me, making it personal.

SpeckofStardust

ah the dwarf empire collapsed because of petty greed and infighting how sad.

Oh well I the dead king gets to be the true evil for the next age as well than.

ruduen

Boost!

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

That shoots down one of my theories, but it's good to see stories and the world still moving, even with the war now hitting full stride. It's going to lead to quite an interesting world afterward.

One aspect left, Warden. Make it a good one.

Gabe Meadow

Wow. I predicted the Herald of the Deep coming through, but not like this. And it's great to see Cat getting the same Story-vision the WB had now. It's definitely something the Dead King is not going to like knowing.

Dylan

I did not expect this to happen, but love how it was done.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Might as well be the unofficial tagline of the story, am I right?

Juff

Typo Thread:

Alliance taken > Alliance had taken
years if > years of
to e viable > to be viable
meat grinders > meat grinder
I some sleep > I had some sleep

truly" > truly,"
out of blood > out for blood
Hells were > Hells we were
to agreed > to agree
risk of deserters > risk deserters
a price > a prince
green large > large
"It got the > "I got the
They soldiers > The soldiers

Xinci

Wonder if Malignant was messing with the soul or the body. Given how Cat messed up her own motor functions when she used necromancy on herself either or both is possible.

The Deep River being a lava one is interesting. Mainly in implications for ei runes manipulating pressure, the natural conditions that let it stay as lava, and potential similarity to the currents of magical power the Deoraithe used against the Drow. If the existence of creatures of fire the Dwarves use for their forges originated emergently from them it would have interesting implications for life on Creation as well.

Given time to grow I wonder if there will be a eventual dark Crusade on the Everdark by Night users. Goblins, Drow, and some Human users will likely hold a grudge and maybe even the Heralds people eventually may want to expand back with allies.

Someperson

I was under the impression that the Herald still basically holds on to the Everdark and the territory beneath Keter now that the Kingdom Under has dissolved into civil war?

Although, the Herald might be more amenable to allowing other races to settle in those territories than the Kingdom Under was. Assuming he can hold on to those territories in the coming years, which he might not if his focus is on Keter.

Also I am curious what the Crows would end up thinking about such a crusade. I am pretty sure something like that getting off the ground would be contingent upon Sve Noc getting behind it, one way or the other.

[shimizubad](#)

Nothing like a bit of regicide to bring people together

Ezario Gerion

Or apart, heh, heh.

KageLupus

Not just regicide. It sounds like the Herald walked into the throne room while it was filled with nobles and set off a dirty bomb. The Dwarven civil war kicked off with a bang, not a whimper.

Cuz

Don't forget he excommunicated the king and the entire royal line before setting off the dirty bomb

Crash

absolute legend

BargleNawdleZouss

1. OK, the Herald came through! I got that part right, at least. Now for Hye Su and the elves...

2. Cat now has _See_ and _Silence_. I'm reminded of the phrase, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil". Perhaps her third aspect will be _Listen_ or _Hear_.

3. I really dislike the idea of Still Water being used again in any context; is that just me?

4. Was the Blessed Artificer's invention the Ram already used in the initial assault on the walls of Keter?

Insanenoodlyguy

Guys, I'm worried about Lady Sybella.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Shave her beard in front of the Grand Alliance. Let it serve as both a lesson and a warning to all.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not tbh. Like yeah she's not getting out of this shit alive most likely, and I am 0 amount of upset over this -_-

BobbinRobbin

I read Insanenoodleguy's comment as worrying about her being a threat. People who get captured at pivotal moments have I'd say 50/50 odds of either just getting killed or causing trouble (breaking free to kill/damage something or someone important, revealing some grand betrayal/twist or saying something that breaks the morale of someone significant

Insanenoodlyguy

Actually it was sarcasm. She's screwed. The joke was that any of us had concern for the character. Though you make some good points!

Letouriste

She's just an envoy tho. Only doing what she's told to do. Hell, maybe she doesn't even have a boss now the king's dead

Insanenoodlyguy

Putting aside that we don't know how much of the offered deal was her idea, when you are in danger of starving finding out the people who fucked you over already brought the food is going to piss anybody off.

[Liliet](#)

there's a point at which "I was just following orders" stops being a valid excuse and I think the current war situation is hovering somewhere around there

Tesroy

"Three things she always keeps," Kairos Theodosian lightly said. "She speaks, she sees and she knows stories." (Book 5, Chapter 8: Veracity)

Looks like Cat is shaping up to be a mirror of the Bard in aspects.

[onedollargum](#)

Man, the oath "I will do everything in my power" has some scary depths to it. It's very Cat-like though.

The Warden and the Herald murdering their patriarchs has a certain symmetry.

Someperson

Hanno's faith in the Herald was well founded.

Mirror Night

Hanno tends to be pretty good at reading people especially Heroes when he is not prevented from being good at it due to plot lol.

Though I suppose its fitting Herald kinda walked the alternate path to White Knight that Hanno did not. By striking down the Dwarf King and starting a Civil War. That is one of the visions Hanno saw on his quest to become White Knight. Kinda fitting since the Herald is the champion of the

lower class being Herald of the Deeps as his full title and going that route would have made Hanno much the same.

Flameburst

Symmetry? Let the shipping commence!

Isi Arnott-Campbell

On the one hand, he already has a love interest, in fact one important enough to be the primary lever the Herald has for others to use on him. On the other hand, Cat's already got a polyamorous thing going anyway, and we don't have any information as to whether the Herald or his deed-seeker boyfriend care about monogamy or not. Could work.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Pretty cool.

It also fits with Cats characterization of him in the Everdark, where she couldn't quite make out if he was a Hero or a Villain.

Wonder

New shiny Aspects are the best!!!!
What would she See if she looked up?

Vagabond

Another amazing chapter! While emotionally the twist stuck out the most, and the herald is a great character that we have seen develop, the thing that really impresses me, is the way supplies and morale are not just glossed over in this story but instead of utmost importance and at times an insurmountable problem. The combination of the great story and writing, the meta-aspect of characters being aware of roles and stories, the characters and the willingness to look at the ugly and necessary is what elevates this work to be one of the greatest I have ever read. It is one of my great pleasures to be along for the ride!

[Liliet](#)

HELL YEAH HELL YEAH HELL YEAH

1. Finally we have Cat looking ugly necessity in the eye and saying no. There IS a line she won't cross, and it just smacked everyone in the face with a two by four.

2. SEER CAT SEER CAT SEER CAT

3. Cordelia Hasenbach, the diplomat of the Grand Alliance ^^

4. I really like how the current factual command structure is shaking out – Catherine is basically in charge and has the last word, but she's answerable to the rest of them who basically form a council under / next to her.

5. HERALD OF THE DEPTHS!!!!!!

6. And the supplies are there!!!!!!

KiltedBastich

You know, there are names like the Forgetful Librarian and the Doddering Sage, people so good at their professions those professions grew into Roles and Names. Cordelia's *literally* the best diplomat in all of Calernia. She has successfully negotiated with literal gods and empires, and used diplomacy to fend off the worst monsters on the continent repeatedly, first Malicia, then Cat, then the Dead King. I really would not be surprised if she didn't end up getting a Role and a Name, something like the Paramount Diplomat or some such.

Someperson

I think if she wanted a Name she would have it very quickly, she meets all of the requirements pretty much.

I dunno if she wants a Name, though, and that counts for something. Ironically, being Named might go against her Role as a Named. Being the badass normal human who matches wits with Dread Empresses and believes in self-determination of mortal powers is maybe just a little too close to her character at this point.

shikkarasu

Yeah, she would only take a Name as a last resort, and even then the Goddess of Stories needs to less put a finger on the scales so much as lounge on one side of them.

Oshi

She might not gain a name. But her successor might.

KiltedBastich

Well, it's like Cat said at one point, if you keep performing the Role, you get the Name, like it or not. There's plenty of examples of people who didn't expect to become Named, where it just sort of happened. Cordelia's already refused a name twice, so she's got that going for her, but I really think she might wake up one day and realize she got a Name at some point when she wasn't looking.

Someperson

Sure, but unlike Anaxares, "not being Named" is quite possibly part of Cordelia's Role.

Insanenoodlyguy

She's turned down a name three times. Once she did that last one I think that's it.

[Liliet](#)

One of them was a double, and I'm not sure that counts.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, especially now that she's settling into that role specifically in people's yes: the diplomat up Cat's sleeve. Instead of spreading her competence and impact around as a ruler more generally (which she also nearly got a Name for...)

zenanii

So, The Grey Pilgrim broke his staff at the prince's graveyard, and now The Herald of the Deeps broke his staff after killing The King Under.

Any bets on how long Cats staff will survive/what event will cause her to break it?

Earl of Purple

Her abdication. It's a staff of yew from the Twilight city of Liesse, fallen from the tree marking the grave of King Edward the Good King. It's a symbol of her crown.

Sinead

Her crown though in part is being the basis of Law for the Accords.

I don't think she'll break it.

Earl of Purple

I don't mean her **literal** crown, I mean her status as Queen of Callow. And we know she's planning on abdicating when the war's over.

[boballab](#)

Ok who else thinks that Abigail is going to find a tunnel when she digs her latrine?

RoflCat

She'll try, but will ends up accidentally develop some kind of battlefield sewage system.

Or just the whole underground bunker system

erebus42

Gotta love oracular powers. I mean I understand why most stories don't give them to the protagonist especially when also paired with more martial abilities but I always thought they create an interesting dynamic and provide a different kind of power to a character.

Yitzi

So now we've seen eight of her aspects, and they seem to be growing in power (only to be expected).

Learn, struggle, seek.

Take, break, fall.

Silence, see, ?

Santiago A Duarte

I don't think so. Learn was almost certainly the strongest aspect she's had so far, with the possible exception of See. Her second set was very direct combat aspects but not the sort of things that tended to shape storylines.

D

Seek, had she ever been able to use it, would (it is heavily implied) have been extremely powerful, far beyond what is normally expected of a transitional Name. From the very little we saw of it, it fed her information and specifically enabled her to find the way to achieve her goals, whatever those might have been. That's... on a level with her version of **See** in terms of utility, though of course we don't know the limitations of either (beyond that the former couldn't find a way to eject a demon of Corruption from her soul, at least not while she was using that aspect in a way that risked letting it in).

There certainly seems to be a trend of third aspects being a Name's most-obviously-powerful. This doesn't just apply to the two third aspects of Cat's that we've seen, but also to Ranger's **Transcend**, Hierophant's **Ruin**, Adjutant's **Rampage**, the White Knight's coin, the Black Knight's **Destroy**...

Notably, though, while final aspects appear to often be those with the most raw power, or the flashiest effects, they aren't necessarily the ones with the greatest overall impact. Hakram used **Find** more often; Hanno gained an enormous amount from **Recall**, and Cat formed an entire story groove with **Take** that would eventually become her Aspect-to-Artefact talent.

The takeaway from all this is that we should expect Cat's final Aspect to be something big and flashy that she can only use a limited amount compared to her two current "workhorse" aspects. If we're guessing at the S-theme, and knowing that she's appointed herself to be effectively a judge of Named, I suspect it may well be **Sentence**, allowing her to force a Named's story path into one imposing her idea of justice, so long as they have transgressed in a relevant fashion.

Daniel E

'Diluvian – Of or related to world-ending flooding, often biblical'. I confess.. I don't get it. I suppose this makes the Herald an antediluvian, but that's even more confusing.

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

I think it's a thing of age, here. The Old World of Darkness called their SUPER ANCIENT vampires Antediluvians.

Daniel E

I suppose that makes sense. Antediluvian is taken as 'time before the biblical flood' more than 'opposed to flooding'. So technically 'diluvian' could be interpreted as simply a marker of old times.

[Hargabga](#)

Probably this:

Historically, diluvium was a term in geology for superficial deposits formed by flood-like operations of water, and so contrasted with alluvium or alluvial deposits formed by slow and steady aqueous agencies. The term was formerly given to the boulder clay deposits, which some early geologists supposed had been caused by the Noachian deluge, a concept known as flood geology or diluvialism.

[Adrian_V](#)

So i can't believe i actually nailed it, i mean The Herald arriving with an army, and we still have the Titan as a wildcard, and this is another major change to illustrate this is the end of an era.

Now lets just hope giant fiery sinkholes don't start appearing at random because of the subterranean wars xD

Santiago A Duarte

Wow. I honestly was not expecting the Herald to have killed the King. That hit me. It's funny because I absolutely would expect it from one of the human heroes, that's a very classic gritty

hero with an oath thing to do, but something about the way the Dwarves were written kept it from seeming like an option to me.

Very very cool moment.

With regards to Sybella, I assume she'll be executed but that does feel sort of bad. She's just a diplomat following orders, however necessary her public execution might be for morale.

edrey

oh Herald, he doesn't know that Sve is now a dark choir, i expect a eternal civil war like procer great war fueled by Malicia. now i want to read again those two chapters of pale lights.

[AviKav](#)

What were the pale light chapters?

edrey

it is the next novel of erratica, a subterranean world after the rule of the "night" and countless wars, with gods and god killers. erratica put the link of the first two chapters a few months ago.

[Tom](#)

Cat as Odin, metaphorically hanging herself upside-down to gain See like how Odin gained knowledge of runes, where both of these grant mystical knowledge of their respective universes... maybe?

arcanavitae15

My theory for next aspect is Seize. Due to fitting the taking theme Cat has, continuing with the S aspects, and the whole seize the day saying.

Mirror Night

That checks out also Seize is a fairly natural evolution of her core Inherent Aspect being Take. Much like Hanno has at his core Recall.

I wonder what we should call such Aspects. Core doesn't sound great to me. Maybe Foundational Aspect since its the bedrock of a lot of what they do and how they see the world.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I also like **Swipe**

lenethren

By far my favourite story in many years, if not ever, is this one.

Hargabga

Continually amazing. I am do glad to be along for the journey.

It us a tad sad that Kingdom Under is broken. Not that it's a corrupt system that had it coming, but it was still one of the if not the greatest empires in Calernia. Nothing quite comes to match it.

superkeaton

Dorf ex Machina, you gotta love it.

Interlude: Calls

"Mind your sentiments, for they have a mind of their own."

– Proceran saying

It was a sultry night, as Keter's tended to be.

The heat was poisonous and unease thrummed through the camps like a pulsing vein. The arrival of the dwarves – a story heavily curated before it was released to the soldiers, though Akua had heard the full of it from the source – had given the Grand Alliance hope of victory once more, but all still remembered the last assault on Keter's walls. Much death had achieved nothing, and none were eager to be the tip of the spear when tomorrow came. It was certain death, all agreed, and even the ever-loyal Army of Callow was balking at the thought of being thrown into the grinder headfirst. None of that, though, was truly Akua's concern.

Perhaps if she had made different choices she would be leading the Dread Empire into the breach come dawn, or unleashing some horrible sorcery serving as Malicia's own treacherous Warlock, but it was not to be. Fingers tightened around her cup – a golden goblet set with opals, one of the few gifts she'd received as empress-claimant that she had liked – and she drank deep of the Cantal red. It was about to become a much rarer find, Akua thought. Procer would have better use for good land than vineyards in the coming decades, and that meant many vintages were on the verge of disappearance.

Perhaps for good. The world, these days, seemed set on changing.

"So best enjoy it while I still can, yes?" Akua murmured.

Fingers tightened around the cup again, her lips wet but far from sated. She did not regret making the choice she had in the heart of the Tower, not even now. Her eyes closed, thinking of the sound the match had made as she scratched it against stone, all Akua Sahelian felt was guilty relief. That she had not been trapped on that chair, chained to that fate. Made to go through a lifetime of empty motions, screaming inside. And yet as the days passed, she found that frustration had begun nipping at her heels. She traced the golden rim of the cup with her thumb, absent-minded.

"Vanity," she told the night, neither quite asking nor stating.

There was no one else in the tent for her to speak to, after all. The Army of Callow, while it tolerated her presence and many rumours had come from her departure and return to Catherine's side – some expected, like that it had been a scheme from the two of them from the start, others rather more amusing like Akua having found the Black Queen a better lover than the Empress and so turned her cloak again – would never be comfortable with her tent being too deep in its camp. She had never felt threatened, of course. Dartwick had ensured none would lay had on her few possessions, ever dutiful, and Masego had kindly wards around her tent on her behalf until she gained her own magic back.

But she would never be welcome there, in the beating heart of Catherine's kingdom of soldiers, and though she was not one to shy from hatred she had found she preferred setting her tent near the edges of the camp. In Keter that was not so far out, given the nature of the siege walls, but it had been far enough that she had been able to obtain a view of the Crown of the Dead looming in the distance.

"And if there was ever a reason to drink," she snorted, toasting the tall walls and the horrors still lying in wait behind them.

She drank, but it settled the restlessness in her belly no more than the other sips had. Vanity, she'd hazarded, but she was not so sure it was true. Akua was one of the great spellcasters of this siege, treated with the same awe as the Witch of the Woods or the Hierophant without having a Name of her own, but months ago she had been the fulcrum of an ancient empire's fate. She had been... more than she now was. That night in Serolen had not scratched the itch, only drawing attention to it. There had been a moment where it was all in her hands once more, and she had been able to *decide*.

It had felt good, returning to Masego what had been unjustly denied him. Of all the Named she had known, only Hierophant had

never wavered from that bright, impossibly clear moment that defined your Name. He had, from the beginning to the end, stayed true to himself. If such sincerity was not worthy of a good turn, what possibly could?

But the days had passed and Serolen now felt like a world behind. So now Akua Sahelian sat alone in the dark, drinking wine soon to be as much of a relic and looking at the heart of the darkness in the distance. The Dead King's subtle, creeping malevolence – so incredibly banal, until the pit of despair swallowed you up. She drank and wondered if it was vanity, to think she should be more than simply a spellhand in this war. Perhaps it was. Before she could be moved to decide whether that answer would be found at the bottom of a fourth cup of Cantal red, there was a whisper in the back of her mind.

Her wards had been set off. Curious, and not feeling particularly threatened, she lowers the threshold to allow for the entrance of they who would enter her tent. The flap was parted and a man's silhouette – ah, was that the slightest shiver of disappointment she felt? – entered, straightening before sniffing the air.

"Wine in the dark on the eve of a battle?" Kendi Akaze scorned, lighting a magelight with the flick of his wrist. "How very maudlin, Sahelian."

Akua was not sure what was worse. That he had come, or that some part of her was dimly pleased for it. Kendi was tall man, with a sculpted beard and the pale brown eyes of a mfuasa. Hatred of her never left them, which had learned to find a reassuring weight. It had been the one thing whose sincerity she did not need to doubt.

"That was my very aim," Akua easily replied. "How kind of you to compliment me so."

He took a seat across from her, not asking permission, and helped himself to her wine.

"You are growing comfortable again," Kendi said.

"Is that why you're here?" she asked.

The dark-skinned man eyed her with distaste.

"Why else would I be in your presence?"

Akua had spent several months being taught how best to use her looks, when she had been younger, and the lessons had not left her. It was the easiest thing in the world to shift in her seat so that her dress would call attention to the curve of her breasts, that the line of her legs would be put in display.

"I wonder," Akua replied, tone languid. "Can you truly think of nothing else?"

His eyes did not dip and he hardly seemed enticed. Hatred truly was a most useful thing.

"You are wrong, as it happens," Akua continued, shifting back into a more comfortable pose. "Comfort escapes me."

It was foolish to tell him as much, she knew. She was no longer as she had been in Ater, dazed and despairing. She ought to know better. And yet, looking at the man whose sister she had gotten killed for... what? She could hardly even tell, now. Looking at that brown-eyed man, she still saw the same thing she had when she had first spared him: her past made into a man. A voice speaking for the long line of sisters and daughters she had led to their deaths and never given a second thought to. No, it was only natural that it was not Catherine who had come to visit her tonight.

This one was an older ghost, with a deeper claim.

"Does it?" Kendi said. "You are returned to the Warden's side. Again in her service and confidence. What doors are to be closed to you, after this war?"

Akua drank.

"There is no after this war," she said, setting down the goblet. "She loves me more than she hates me, I think, but that is not forgiveness. Never will be."

Kendi Akaze smiled.

"Ah, Callowans," he said. "They do have their virtues."

"Are you satisfied?" Akua asked.

"No," he replied.

Her jaw clenched.

"I will have no part of Cardinal," she said. "That is certain. Or of the Confederation of Praes. And there will be no place for me in the lands of the Grand Alliance. Even if I survive I..."

There would be nowhere to go, she realized, perhaps for the first time. She had known it, deep down, but never spoken the truth out loud and made herself face it. Ashur always took Praesi exiles and it should not be difficult to live in the League, but what kind of a life would those be? An exile, sometimes called upon when of use but otherwise kept in the darkest hole they could find. A shameful secret, kept around only in case she was needed. Everything she was growing to hate about where she now stood,

only a thousand times more so. *I would have once been satisfied with this*, she thought. *Seen it as a victory, living to begin another rise to prominence.*

Now all the prospect made her feel was exhausted.

"You will not be anything but you," Kendi softly said. "And I can conceive few curses worse than that, Akua Sahelian."

"So that is your purpose," she said, tone mocking. "You come here to remind me that I should live so that your tortured sense of vengeance might be satisfied?"

"I don't care whether you keep breathing, Sahelian," Kendi said, sounding honest. "I want the vicious, empty thing that killed so many of us and lit the world aflame to *suffer*. Whether you are to serve as her prison or her coffin is not so important."

"So why save my life in Ater?" Akua harshly replied. "If you had not removed Malicia's killing-"

"She would have snuffed you out like a candle," Kendi acknowledged. "And what right did she have to that, after all she has done? It took more than a single pair of hands to craft the Folly. It would have been disgusting, for the Empress to pretend to pass judgement over you when all know she helped the deed along."

"So only you can judge me?" she laughed. "How highly you think of yourself, Kendi."

"It's not me either," the man smiled. "I would just burn you, Sahelian. End it, look for peace among the ashes of you. But my sister's shade demands better. So I will usher you through this journey until you reach your end."

"I don't understand what you *want* from me," she snarled. "That I open my own throat? That I leap into a chasm? Would it truly mean that much more to you if I did the deed myself?"

"Is that," Kendi evenly asked, "what you think would even the scales?"

"There's no evening those scales," Akua tiredly replied. "Even a fool would see that."

He watched her in silence

"Even should I live forever and save a life every morning, it would change nothing," she continued. "It's not as simple as lives lost."

She had seen that in Ater, the cascade of suffering her atrocity had begun. The Folly had been an enormity, the amount of death it

represented, but that had only been the tree above the ground. There were even greater roots below, out of sight, and how could those even be tallied for? Made up for? Redemption by number was an empty exercise, meaningful only in the abstract.

"So you do nothing?" he asked.

"I am to be jailor to the Dead King," Akua said. "Bound forever to keep him imprisoned."

There were still enough of the Twilight Ways for this to be possible. Liesse, it seemed, was not a city she would ever leave behind. He cocked his head to the side.

"And you chose this?"

She did not answer. It would have been a lie to say that she had, though it would have been another to say she had not. He shook his head, disgusted.

"Then it means nothing," Kendi said. "Will forever mean nothing."

He rose to his feet, leaving behind a cup of wine almost entirely untouched.

"Just another fate picked out for you."

Her heart clenched and she turned away, failing to keep her face calm. The mfuasa snorted, killing the light with a flick of the wrist and making to leave. Akua looked out at the walls of Keter, knowing she should keep silent. She did not.

"What was her name?" she asked.

Kendi's steps stuttered.

"Do you care?" he asked.

Akua looked down at her hands.

"Enough to ask," she finally replied.

"Sura. Her name was Sura."

The name echoed in the silence he left in his wake. Akua's fingers reach for her neck, finding only warm skin for all that she had imagined otherwise. She had felt as if she would find something, as if her fingers would have been able to tell her which it was.

A noose or a knot.

—

There were not many Rhenians with the army.

Cordelia had only summoned south a quarter of Rhenia's army at the beginning of the war, leaving the rest to hold the Rhenian Gates and her capital, and of those thousands now only a few hundred were left. The rest were long dead, their lives spent defending people they loved little so very far from home. Cordelia did all in her power to ensure the survivors were all comfortable and provided before she allowed herself to rest. Prince Otto had not neglected them, but the princess felt better for having put a hand to the labour – however scarce the necessity of it.

In truth, if one was to speak of neglect the word should be laid at her feet. How very little she had done for her people, not only Rhenians but all Lycaonese, since the war had begun. That no grudge seemed to be held by her soldiers over the fact she'd not so much as stepped foot in Rhenia during the entire war only worsened the guilt. Gods, sometimes she saw the pride in the eyes of her countrymen and it *burned*.

"You bargained everything to keep us alive," Otto Reitzenberg solemnly told her when they drank at the wake. "Even your throne. What more could we ask of you, Hasenbach?"

Coming from the man who had so bitterly fought to keep Twilight's Pass from falling, it had felt like a slap in the face. All the more for the way she knew he had meant every word, for Otto Redcrown was not what one would call a skilled liar. It was like none of them could see she had abandoned them, named them the sacrifice needed to keep Procer breathing through the first black months of the war. *Are we truly so used to doing the dying*, she thought, *that it no longer matters?* It was a dark thought, though far from the darkest she had been left to wrestle with.

Worst of all was the increasingly possible way they were about to lose the war.

Cordelia no longer sat in the war councils. She still had the status to, as a princess, but Malanza would rather bite off her own thumb than sit besides her and had instead taken to bringing Prince Otto to keep the Lycaonese bound to her. Wise, considering how estranged her people had grown from most of Procer during the war. It was not impossible for large swaths of the northwest to secede from the Principate, if the aftermath of the war was poorly handled. If there was an aftermath at all, anyhow. For though Cordelia no longer sat the councils, she still had access to several of those who sat them and to the formal supply documents besides. The picture both painted, when placed together, was a dark one. With the arrival of the dwarves starvation was no longer at risk, but that was no promised victory.

They Grand Alliance was, by Cordelia's estimation, two failed assaults away from collapse.

It was a broad estimate, relying on a number of casualties equal or greater to those of the first attempt – counting both the field battle and the storm – but she knew it to be correct. Another sixty thousand dead would only lessen the army's numbers around to half of what had first been brought north, but all the forces here were not equal. Or, for that matter, united. Every nation had its own host, but it was worse than that. The League alone fielded multiple different armies, and Procer still divided itself into the hosts under First Princess Rozala and Otto Redcrown. That was not without sense, but it meant that casualties could not be counted as if the force were a single army.

One of the principles of war her uncle had taught her as a girl had been that an army became unable to fight long before all its soldiers were dead. A host was an intricate machine, needing many different parts to keep functioning: horsemen and skirmishers, regulars and outriders. Losing any of those parts – or even too large a portion of one – could be an army's doom. That principle, when applied to the Grand Alliance forces, became a curse. Which armies would start collapsing into uselessness first, when casualties kept racking up? Cordelia believed it would be League's, whose individual armies were smallest and so most vulnerable to this, but she could not be sure.

The war had taught her that when a battle went bad levies died like flies, and Procer's forces still had an uncomfortably large amount of them.

Two defeats, she thought, and the Grand Alliance would have broken enough of its component armies that it would be impossible to take Keter. That was what her investigations had revealed, the ugly truth behind the coming acts of valour: valour alone would not be enough. Even if the broken armies were thrown into the grinder as expendables, it would not suffice. The coalition would fail and when it did Calernia's days would be numbered. Procer would fall, dragging with it the rest of the continent. Too many undead, no one left to stop them. And that would leave Cordelia with a hard choice, perhaps the hardest she'd ever had to make.

Bet it all on hope, some unforeseen salvation, or kill many to save the rest.

A mug was pressed into her hand and Cordelia almost started. Agnes was smiling at her sideways, the two of them alone in her tent. The Augur patted her arm.

"You think too much about what you see," Agnes chided.

Cordelia considered herself a tolerant woman, but the irony in that sentence was too thick for even her to swallow.

"You cannot-" she began, then her eyes narrowed. "You did that on purpose. You are teasing me."

Agnes looked inordinately proud, nodding as she brushed back her hair. The once-short bob had grown a little longer over the last few months, one of the first changes to her cousin's appearance since she had become Chosen.

"They always said I'm the funny Hasenbach," she noted.

Cordelia almost winced. 'They' had not meant that nicely as Agnes was understanding it. Being from even a branch line of the House of Hasenbach had ensured that none would dare to harass her cousin even when she had still been known as only a young girl overly fond of birdwatching, but it had not kept her safe from rumours. Or being ignored with varying degrees of politeness. Chasing off the memories, she took Agnes' hand in her own.

"You are getting better," Cordelia happily said. "For months now you have been growing into the present."

Away from the past and visions of what might be.

"It's a little confining," Agnes admitted. "Things only have one meaning and I have to listen when people talk."

"The grand curse of civil society," she drily replied. "You will get used to it in time."

"Maybe," the Augur said, wrinkling her nose, then smiled. "But mead is good. I don't know why they wouldn't let me drink at feasts."

Because your father disappeared down the bottle when your mother died, Cordelia thought, and none of us wanted you to follow him down that hole.

"I cannot imagine why," she lied.

Agnes shot her a suspicious look, which moved Cordelia halfway to tears. For years now she'd been watching her cousin – the last of her blood, now – wasting away, devoured from the inside by her Choosing. Before she'd left Salia, Agnes would not have been able to read a room enough to be suspicious. Much less express it so openly. Guilt followed, as it so often did these days. *I asked so much of you, Cordelia thought. Advice to avoid disaster or steer enemies into it. Only now do I begin to grasp how much it truly took from you.* Too much. She would never again ask for augury.

Sometimes it felt like Cordelia had lived all her life taking from others, like some dragon from an old tale gathering all the

gold of the world at her feet so she might make a kingdom of her greed.

"Boo," Agnes muttered. "Boo, Cordelia, booo."

She swallowed a smile.

"Now you are just going with the fashion, Agnes," the princess replied. "For shame."

They both smiled. It had been most of a year now, Cordelia thought, since the two of them only had each other left. Since Uncle Klaus had died, striding out of his life and straight into the legends of the Iron Prince's last charge. There were still Hasenbachs alive of course, she'd made sure the line would continue. Two distant cousins of hers were in Salia and one more in Rhenia itself, but Cordelia had never known any of them more than passingly. They were not *family* in the way that Agnes was and her uncle had been.

"Your mood is falling again," Agnes said.

"I fear I might not be very good company tonight," Cordelia admitted.

"You're the one I chose," Agnes shrugged. "What had you looking so sad?"

"I was thinking of family," she vaguely replied.

The other woman hummed.

"Prince Klaus, then," she said.

The two of them had never been close, Cordelia knew. There was no shared blood, Agnes found violence repellant and Uncle Klaus had been uncomfortable around powers he did not understand. It had not been a recipe for deep fondness, for all that the two of them had spent years at her side.

"Death leaves so much unfinished," Cordelia replied.

She had never reconciled with the man who had been something between a father and a grandfather to her while being neither by blood.

"That's the wrong way to look at it," Agnes said. "It's life where you don't finish things. Death is always complete."

The fair-haired princess cocked her head to the side.

"I do not follow," she admitted.

"Death's a closed circle," Agnes said. "A single act. Sometimes it matters and sometimes it doesn't, but it's never..."

She grimaced, groping for words.

"Continuous," Agnes finished, satisfied. "It's why you can make something so large of a moment so small: you can't undo it after by acting the other way. The circle is closed."

"Is that something you saw?" Cordelia asked. "I thought that these last few months..."

"It's not the Gods," Agnes said, shaking her head. "And I haven't seen much since I left Salia. They understand that sometimes to have to save your strength."

"Do they?" Cordelia asked, almost accusing.

It had been a long few months, a long few years. Perhaps even a long life. The Augur hummed again.

"I don't think they understand much, actually," Agnes mused. "Not like people do. It's why there's Good and Evil, so there's rules, because they *do* understand rules."

"Good is not an immovable absolute," Cordelia said. "Above was once worshipped by those who kept slaves, Agnes."

"The rules change," her cousin agreed. "But I think that's part of what they want too."

"Many have gone mad trying to understand the Gods," the princess warned.

"I'll be all right," Agnes reassured her. "Since I was already like that."

The utterly inappropriate laugh that got out of her ripped itself out of her throat as her cousin sat smiling and pleased.

"You need to laugh more," Agnes told her. "It will do you good. Maybe find a lover."

Cordelia almost rolled her eyes. As if now was the time for such diversions.

"If we are to speak of lovers," she said, "perhaps I should be drinking more."

"My mug is already empty," Agnes informed her, then batted her eyes.

Cordelia would have refused her, but it had been the better part of a decade since she'd seen her cousin act so much like the girl

she'd once been. She did not have the heart to tell her no, rising to her feet and going into the back of the tent – where she did keep a few bottles of wine for guests, and mead for family. At the rate Agnes was going through them, she would run out of the mead before the siege – or the world – ended. The blue-eyed princess chose one of the older bottles and straightened, though she froze when she heard a rattling gasp coming from the other side of the tent.

She hurried back to find her cousin leaning over the table, writing on parchment with a shaky hand.

“Agnes?” she called out.

Her cousin did not reply. She set down the mead on the table and knelt by her cousin's side, finding the other woman utterly absorbed in her writing – and hiding it from prying eyes. She finished writing after a moment, blew on the ink to dry it, and then folded the piece of parchment. Only then did she take her eyes off it and sag into her seat, breath irregular. Her skin had paled and was beaded with sweat.

“Agnes,” Cordelia quietly said, “what have you done?”

The Augur sought out her hand, threaded their fingers together and squeezed it.

“I saved my strength but it wasn't enough,” Agnes croaked. “I'm sorry.”

She forced her tone to be even.

“Are you healthy?” Cordelia asked. “Should I call for a healer?”

“I couldn't see everything,” Agnes said. “Just glimpses. But it doesn't matter.”

The Augur's eyes began bleeding and it was no longer a question worth asking. Cordelia shouted for a healer, for help.

“If it's a bet,” Agnes murmured, “then I always make the same.”

“Agnes,” Cordelia urgently said, “stay awake. I don't-”

“Don't read what I wrote until you need to,” the Augur told her. “You'll know when.”

“Agnes,” Cordelia hissed, cold terror in her gut. “*Don't leave me.*”

“I'm sorry,” she replied, smiling and bloody and heart-breakingly pale. “I wish we could have gone home.”

A shiver.

"Don't follow too quickly."

By the time the healers ran into the tent, Cordelia Hasenbach was holding the hand of a corpse.

Lictor Magnus

Dang that last part hit hard. Rip Agnes 😭

Eris

Noooooooo!!! Agnes!!

I wonder what Akua will decide to do. She, and the rest of the nobles of Praes have been completely sidelined, I wonder if they will accept their new place in the world.

Will Akua gain a name again? A name like Vivienne's Princess?

Soronel Haetir

How about the Name "Damned Jailer" for Akua?

Xantam

We already have a name for a prison keeper. Cat's not staying in Cardinal, unless the Dead King is too, I'm afraid,

masterofbones

Yup, the person named Warden, who designed a plan where someone would eternally watch over the Dead King's prison, is functionally immortal, and has been accepted as something of a peer by the Dead King. She's also been throwing out death flags like saying she will start wearing dresses when the war is over.

There's no way it doesn't end up with her holding the keys to the prison

Someperson

Well, you never know, Catherine is a fair hand at flipping the middle finger to fate when it counts. And even if Catherine accepted her fate, I'm not sure the Woe would take it lying down. If Catherine really wanted to sacrifice herself she should have finished eating the Book of Some Things over Hanno and Cordelia's protests and became a monster who could destroy the Dead King and die in the process.

But it seems pretty certain that at some point, she is going to have to confront this Role that she has literally made for herself step by step, apparently without consciously realizing it.

Who knows if she'll pull through that or not. In a lot of ways, the endgame of a story has a lot more flexibility than the rest. Somehow, I have doubts she will keep her Name if she **does** manage to avoid becoming the eternal Warden of the Hidden Horror. But hey, that wouldn't be so bad.

agumentic

The rest of Praes' nobility will be perfectly happy playing their political games for the Chancellorship, though. It's Akua alone who has no place in that new Praes, for all that she was the surgeon that cut it out.

[Liliet](#)

OH N000000000000000):

Soronel Haetir

Wow, the one person left that Cordelia actually wanted to save and she is completely helpless to stop it.

Bret

Wait so to clarify, did Agnes just build up all her Name's strength to pull off one massive, critical augury and that was too much for her body to take?

Ninestrings

She scryed the Dead King, it's mentioned earlier that anyone who does dies horribly.

Cpt. Obvious

And most likely her vision showed her a "solution" to something the DK has waiting for them. But this solution is something that either the DK can protect against if forewarned, or it's a trap that's just so horrible that if Cordelia were to know they would do anything in their power to avoid it.

And if they did avoid the trap then they would stumble into something worse, or something Agnes couldn't see a solution for surviving.

So reading that note beforehand might be a good way to ensure that the Dead King wins.

Konstantin von Karstein

Poor Cordelia... She truly has no one next 😞

[Liliet](#)

I mean. She does have a bestie

Konstantin von Karstein

Who?

[Liliet](#)

The other currently active GA prophet 😊

Konstantin von Karstein

Cat? 🐱

[Liliet](#)

her yes

shikkarasu

Maybe I'm a little callous, but I'm very curious what Agnes decided to go looking for. What she couldn't see all of.

Mary Gentle

In that case I'm callous too. Understandably, Cordelia has the healers and such to deal with – but after that, if it was me, it wouldn't be ten seconds before I read the message that Agnes died to bring me.

Soronel Haetir

I suspect that if she did read the message now that it would make no sense. Only in some later circumstance would it have any meaning.

Or worse, it would appear to have some meaning in the current circumstance but that understanding would be completely wrong.

dadycool

That's the worst part about prophecies. They tend to make far more sense after they would've been useful or after they bite you in the ass.

[Hargabga](#)

In this case it's the other way around. The prophecy is designed specifically to be most useful in a specific moment in time. Which makes sense – if you can see the future it's easier to find the most important decision and influence it, rather than finding exactly what set of instructions is needed to be given to influence the future, taking in mind all the side effects these instructions will have on the future aside from the one important decision. It's almost infinite amount of branching possibilities and you need to look through each one and compare the end result. Far easier to let thing go their "natural" course until it's critical to change stuff.

shikkarasu

So my nagging thought remains: what moment was Agnes aware of that she went looking for? That she saved up months of Name power and gave her life in the name of? She found an answer, or part of one, but what was the question?

dadycool

"How do I get my sis-I mean, my cousin to survive this war?"

ruduen

Boost!

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

Oof. Just... oof.

Tenthyr

Cordelia is in the grips of something like survivors guilt, I think. Her people don't begrudge her and at some level she loves them, and part of that love is respecting their battle and their place in it, even if it kills them.

She just feels like they should blame her. I hope whatever Agnes wrote will be enough to tip the scales for everyone.

[Hargabga](#)

It's not just survivor's guilt. She actually caused the thing she is guilty about. It was under her control and she knowingly chose otherwise. Survivor's guilt is about something that was forced on you. Unless I am mistaken.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I think survivor's guilt is part of it (it's not like Cordelia stayed in the safe capital out of selfishness) but part of it is much more immediate.

AsuraKyoko

We knew that Akua almost certainly wouldn't end up actually being the jailer for the Dead King, but I wonder if it might be Cordelia instead.

Cordelia has been presented as the counterpart to Cat in a number of ways: leaders of the East and West, representatives of Good and Evil, action vs discussion, etc. Cat, however, is now the representative of all of the Named, and is the foremost member of the Grand Alliance. She doesn't **have** a counterpart anymore.

Cat is essentially the guardian of life on the continent, and the Dead King, while he represents death, doesn't really fit the niche of counterpart. He's almost more of a force of nature than a character, and he lacks most of the things that would make him an actual foil to Cat. If, after he's defeated, however, Cordelia acts as the seal on his prison, she would fit that role perfectly, and provide that symmetry that so defines the way stories work in universe.

masterofbones

Nah, Cordelia doesn't have enough narrative weight in that direction. She's the politician so deadly that everyone sacrifices themselves for her despite her lack of power. She doesn't have the power, capability, or mindset for containing the Dead King.

bakkasama

"Don't follow too quickly", well, that doesn't bode well for Cordelia.

Gunslinger

It could be the 60 to 80 years of her full life too.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. All people die in time, even the immortal's. It's no great portent of doom to say one will die eventually.

Magnus

Honestly, it made me think Cordelia will be the Dead King's prison guard.

[theduckchris](#)

This chapter isn't linked properly from the last one btw.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Man, this whole thing hit hard, especially Agnes' death. I was just thinking about how cool and likeable she was and then bam.

edrey

you have to hate the Gods for that, with so many powerfull mages, named, gods, she could have survived, but the story would have been weaker. now it is in cordelia hands how to save the day. too sad, really.

[Hargabga](#)

You can't blame Gods for not intervening and saving everyone because then someone else will blame them for intervening and dooming everyone. With everyone being everyone individual in question considers important. Which can range from noone to oneself to literally everyone. Their isolationist policy is the only thing that allows even a facsimile of free will. You should only blame DK for, like, directly actually killing her.

Juff

Typo Thread:

lay had on > lay hands on
kindly wards > kindly placed wards
she gained > she'd gained
lowers the > lowered the
them, which > him, which she
would those be > would that be
reach for > reached for
They Grand > The Grand
be League's > be the League's
sometimes to > sometimes you

arcanavita¹⁵

Well that's an emotional suckerpunch for Cordelia, I will miss Anges I really liked her.

ninegardens

Huh.

I.... didn't expect Agnes to die.
I expected her to lose her marbles.
Or go to far and get possessed by the Dead King,
Or just evaporate into air and light.

But I didn't expect her to die.



caoimhinh

Yeah, it came suddenly and apparently random.

It didn't seem like something Agnes planned, maybe she was like gathering her strength holding herself back from the vision in order to make it count, and then suddenly reached her limit and HAD to have the vision.

Santiago A Duarte

It wasn't fully planned but somewhat anticipated. She mentioned she'd been saving her strength for the attempt, hoping she could survive it but knowing there was a risk.

[Liliet](#)

I did):

[Liliet](#)

I did):

[daegone823](#)

IF you ask me this is god's punishment/gift. I can't be the only one that remembers Cordelia refusing a name in front of an assembly, the bard, and I think Cat. She stated that she could dot his as a mortal all on her own. That she could change fate without their powers of above. She even decided to govern names with the political powers of kings. It is only recently that she learned to work with names but still she held onto Agnes preventing her from her purpose(Dwarves)

Her cousin is an Augur essentially in the same vein as the bard tethered to fate. Similar to the bard her visions don't really have an impact without anyone willing to listen or play the game. Cordelia essentially was trying to get her cousin to give up her name, being more "present". Who knows if the Augur received a whisper in that moment to choose between her cousin living or herself(give up her present for a future), or if she had a name dream of previous Augurs who put themselves before there gift of divination forsaking many. This was probably the Augurs only way of fighting and she held out at the most dire moment and maybe it still was not enough.

Above made a giant proclamation that always above holds sway over mortals. It is up to her if she takes above's help or not if she refuses this help she denies her cousin's dying wish.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think this is Above being passive aggressive. They do not get into these pissing contests with mortals as they'd win every time. Every mortal statement that they can win regardless of gods is based on factual evidence which is that gods let them win or lose on their own merit, with only some positive feedback loops worked in.

nimelennar

Yay Kendi!

Oh no, not Agnes!

dadycoool

You...you monster. How could you do that? I get that a seer making a Final Prediction is very powerful, especially when they really need the help, but still. It's Agnes. The last cheerful person there.

Darkening

We still have kingfisher prince being cheerfully badass at least. Maybe Cordelia will even acknowledge his feelings for her now that she's not first prince.

dadycoool

And Agnes did tell her to find a lover, so it's possible.

[Hargabga](#)

Imagine if all her prediction is about is getting Cordelia laid.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

"Don't follow too quickly."

Oh, this one hurts.

Crash

finished reading and immediately commented just that.

agnes got all her ducks in a row, made her final bet and last wish.

this one sure does hurt

lenethren

Wow. I didn't see that coming.

[boballab](#)

My guess is that what Agnes wrote is for when Cordelia is to let Cat know it is time to reshackle the villains to their stories. That is something Cat has been sitting on.

ninegardens

I like this, but also, feels like that's CAT's action. I feel like Agnes will have handed something to her cousin that is Cordelia's action.

Lord Haart

Yes I think it will be about the Ealamel. Not to have faith in the gods to save them, but to have faith in all the other humans who will try to save everyone.

Xinci

I suppose Agnes's comment does go with the thought of the God's rules broadly going mesh to pro- social and anti-social frameworks that by their nature are held by their creations societies and equated to positive values. In such a case, it being a continuum fully allows the rules their creations societies follow to change as they are like singular points of a larger paradigm.

Agne's death was a bit abrupt but she stuck to her views til the end. A fair death for her desires perhaps. Especially while Cordelia was being introspective over the cost of her interactions to the Lycaonese (somewhat fairly in noting they were a sacrifice)

Wonder

Cat!!! U gotta drop those " Akua becomes DK jailor" plans.

RIP Agnes.

bellacohl

Oh boy this hit harder than expected. I bet Agnes just won the war, by which I mean her sacrifice will be instrumental to defeat DK at the most critical point.

Snappy270

She knew. That's what is so shocking she knew she would have to look at the dead king, the bard and everything all at once. So she stopped having visions, for months till her name began to thin. All so she could go home with cordelia... and watch birds. And it wasn't enough.

Damm that's cold and sad. She was one of the few to fight the wandering bard and didn't lose anything. Or become mad. Best hero!

Hargabga

Yeah, if you think about it she probably planned to sacrifice her own Name and augury to power that vision so that she can have a life with Cordelia. And that wasn't enough.

KiltedBastich

That's true, the Augur is the only person I can think of to ever get a *clean* win against the Wandering Bard – all of Cat's wins came at high cost. Possibly this is because the Augur was a hero.

In any event, poor Cordelia. RIP, Agnes.

Lord Haart

Agnes also had faith in Cordelia, more than herself, and that is a POWERFUL story.

Liliet

I don't think her Name began to thin... she started recovering from the damage following it did to her, but her Name was as strong as ever, else "saving up her strength" would be worse than futile, and I don't think that's what's going on here =x

Crash

oh this one hurts

BargleNawdleZouss

Nominations for Cordelia's last chance fling/lover:

1. Prince Frederic Goethal of Brus, the Kingfisher Prince (would that be too icky re: Catherine?)
2. Hanno of Arwad, the White Knight/Sword of Judgment
3. Roland de Beaumaraais, the Rogue Sorcerer
4. Moro Ifriqui, Lord of Vaccei
5. Brandon Talbot, Grandmaster of the Order of Broken Bells
6. Prince Otto Reitzenberg of Bremen

I don't recall Cordelia expressing an interest in women. There was a reference to a few discreet lovers in the past, but I thought the implication was that they were men. If I'm incorrect, then please suggest likely female companions as well.

Santiago A Duarte

Yeah pretty sure Cordelia is straight as far as we know, though her personal life is extremely limited in detail

[daegone823](#)

She said she had a couple of discreet encounters with women. It was a chapter from her on POV where she talked about how difficult it was keeping up appearances. I believe before the coup by a guy from her inner circle.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia is explicitly bi.

~~and HAS HAD t e a s i n g with Cat~~

Le Légume Tout-Puissant

That was well written. By not telling us what is on the piece of paper, EE prevent Agnes's death from being overshadowed by the August's revelation. I love this kind of craftsmanship. Kudos for a death well done. Not that it overshadows Robber's death, of course. That one was a true master stroke.

Someperson

Rest in peace 😞

Agnes' note is about to end Neshamah's whole career

Lord Haart

"If it's a bet," Agnes murmured, "then I always make the same."

Yeah OK I cried.

Chapter 57: Dawn

"Only two things can get a soldier through war: courage or good legs."

-Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

An hour before dawn the camp would begin to stir, but I woke up even before that.

It was almost a mercy. My sleep was rarely anything but fitful – always returning to that night of green flames and red hands –

and there were only so many times I could wake up soaked in sweat before I lost taste for turning over and burying my head under a pillow. In the dark before the dawn I found a fire, my still sleepy guards spread out around me, and overcooked a pair of eggs. The bacon rashers were fine, though, and boiling water was transmuted into tea by the twin magics of patience and costly foreign imports. I wolfed down the meal and warmed my hands against the mug, sipping it at it while it was still hot enough to scald my tongue.

My duties had yet to wake up and I wasn't going to be squeezing into my battle armour any sooner than I needed to, so after I polished off the last of tea I got up to stretch my limbs. A walk around camp would do the trick, and though my guards seemed intent on following I dismissed them. I was now entirely awake, and so I could feel a string of fate pulled taut across the air. Not the battle's, it was too small for that, but not a small matter either. Best to have a look before someone got around to plucking it, I figured.

My limp was unhurried, as I knew I would not be late. I tread the broad avenues of the Army of Callow's camp, then the narrower alleys of the Dominion's all the way into the messy sprawl of Procer's sea of tents. Past a company of fantassins sleeping in the rough like corpses abandoned on a field, I found a half-broken watchtower – laid low by shoddy workmanship, not the Enemy's blows – and a silhouette atop stairs. A man's, leaning against the low shattered wall as if it were a balustrade, and though the cloak was a faded brown I recognized the build well enough. He did not turn as I went up to join him, though he would have heard me coming.

He was, I saw, staring at the dark and distant shape of the Crown of the Dead.

I squeezed myself in at the edge of the wall, leaning my staff against it and my shoulders against the irregular stone. In the gloom before day began to glow, Keter was difficult to make out even to my Night-blessed eyes. It was as some large beast curled up on an island of nothingness, unmoving but far from asleep. No one could look at the Dead King's capital for long without getting the impression that it was somehow looking back at you.

"How did you find me?" Hanno of Arwad asked.

I glanced his way, having to twist to do so with my flesh and blood eye – the angle was bad. He'd always been a tall a broad sort, Hanno, with a working man's frame and a working man's hands. It suited the plain but honest face, which, while not so serene as it had been when he still served Judgement had kept a sense of calm to it. He was not easy to ruffle. Yet this morning, before daylight and other's eyes caught up to us, he was allowing unease to reach his face.

"I followed a string," I said. "It's a thing I do now and then."

"Mysterious," he replied, appreciative. "Another ten years of this and you will drive young Named utterly mad."

"Hey, if I actually make it to old age it's my goddamn right to mess with the young," I shrugged. "It's not like Evil offers a pension or anything. They're a stingy lot."

He snorted.

"I cannot tell whether that's blasphemy or not," the dark-skinned man admitted.

"I'm getting that a lot these days," I mused, "which seems unfair, given that I'm the high priestess of an entire religion."

"One centred," Hanno said, "largely around theft and murder."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"And?"

"There's a saying about birds of a feather that seems appropriate," he serenely replied, "but I believe you'd never forgive me the pun."

"You *do* know me," I conceded.

I let the silence fall comfortably, settle in a bit. Then I struck with my usual finesse.

"So, glaring at Keter," I said.

He stirred at my side.

"A roundabout question?"

"If you came here for the view," I shrugged, "waiting after dawn might have worked better."

I'd not drag it out of him with a hook and rope, if he did not want to talk, but I suspected that if that were true my feet would not have led me here. I'd been on the other end of this kind of conversation often enough not to mistake reluctance with refusal.

"I never sleep well before battles," Hanno reminded me.

I didn't reply. We both knew not sleeping and coming out here weren't the same thing.

"I find myself irritated," he finally said.

Huh. Never heard that one out of him before. I cocked my head to the side.

"With?"

"Too many people," he tiredly said. "Which serves to tell me the troubles does not lie with them."

"Ah," I said.

He moved, craning his neck to look at me.

"Ah?" he asked.

"Ah," I confirmed.

He rolled his eyes at me.

"What you mean, 'ah'?" he pressed.

"That I'm not surprised," I said. "You're close enough to being Named that you can use an aspect and ride providence, but you haven't claimed one openly. Talking from experience, it's not a pleasant position to stay in."

My Name of Squire had died a long death in the throes of Winter, a span of time I'd spent fighting some of the most dangerous heroes on the continent and trifling with lesser gods. I remembered well what it had been like to have the Role without the rest.

"Even a saint with get tetchy," I elaborated, "if he keeps sitting on a spiked seat for too long."

"I do not claim sainthood," Hanno evenly said.

Never stopped anyone from tossing it at your feet, I thought, but true as that was it would be of no help at all.

"Can't blame you," I drawled instead. "Laurence was enough to put me off it too."

He wasn't quite amused – he remembered the Saint of Swords far more fondly than I did – but the growing tension in his shoulders loosened. Keeping an eye on him, I decided not to prod him any further. He had the look of a man chewing on his own thoughts. If the taste was foul enough he'd spit them back out anyways, yeah? And to think they'd said I would never learn patience.

I'd been patient enough to outlive most the fuckers, so how about that.

"There is a Name there for the taking," Hanno finally said. "All I would need to do was reach out."

"But you haven't," I observed.

Obvious, but it'd keep him talking.

"I have turned away from it twice now," he confessed, passing a hand through his close-cropped hair.

My brow rose and I had to repress the urge to let out a low whistle. No wonder he was feeling antsy. He was fighting off his own transition. When he'd become a claimant to Warden of the West he'd ceased being the White Knight, though at least one of his old aspects had lingered. In the wake of renouncing that claim and my rising to fill the Role, *what* exactly Hanno of Arwad was had remained up in the air. By the sound of it, he'd been struggling with that question just as much as the rest of us.

I didn't bother to ask what the Name he was shying away from was. I had my suspicions, but in truth it didn't particularly matter. A Name was just the crystallization of what you were supposed to be, what you were supposed to do. The red, the life of it was in the Role. It was what we struggled with, far more than whether a Champion should be Valiant or Unconquered. So the 'what' was an afterthought, really, in face of the question that *did* matter.

"Why?"

The word had him scowling. It was a rare sight and I almost found myself staring at it: it was, well... human. Not that Hanno had ever been alien in the way that some other Named could become, all cold and power stripped of everything else, but there'd always been something a little aloof about him. The calm, the serenity on his face and in his eyes, it was fitting for a White Knight. Expected almost. But it was something to admire, not to understand, because who could ever really understand certainty that absolute? And now he was scowling, almost childishly. I smiled.

"And what has you so amused?" Hanno challenged.

"When I was a kid," I said, "I sometimes felt like the world was caught in amber. Maybe not every part, but those that mattered at least. That nothing important ever really *changed*."

I traced the edge of the rough stone with my fingers.

"But we did change it," I said, almost disbelieving. "It didn't really feel like it was what we were doing at the time, but we *did*. And now that I know how to look for it..."

All those years of swimming against the tide, of blood and mud and tears, they'd given birth to the first tremors of a new age. Still fragile, uncertain, but the signs were there. In the way that the Dominion was starting to circle around Razin and

Aquiline like they were the sun of Levant, in the way that goblins drew on Night and planned to raise halls as far as the Morgentor, in that the empress of my youth was now a chancellor and a girl I'd once thought was now the heiress to my crown. Gods, these days I counted Procer as a halfway steady ally and looked forward to spending time with *Cordelia Hasenbach*. Somehow, along the way, we'd changed the world without even noticing.

But now that I could see it-

"... it's everywhere," Hanno quietly finished, eyes returning to the Crown of the Dead.

Calloused hands pulled closed, as if he was trying to catch something eluding his grasp. He let out a long, shuddering breath.

"Except me," Hanno of Arwad said. "It's everywhere except me, Catherine."

So my instinct had been right.

"You can be the White Knight again," I said.

"The same Name," he said, "that I walked away from."

I hummed.

"Aspects?" I asked, tone gone professional.

A trick that'd always served me well. Sound like you have a right to ask a question and most people will answer before they realize you're there to buy fish and there's really no reason you should be told about how much getting their horse shod cost at Billy King's smithy. Too much had been the answer. Brother Desmond had been right, the old bastard had been a swindler.

"One stayed," Hanno said. "Two faded."

I grimaced. That poor man. For an aspect to stick through a Name being lost and then being reclaimed, it'd have to be so intrinsic to who he was that it was more about Hanno of Arwad than whatever else he ended up being. I didn't know what Hanno had gone through for **Recall** of all powers to end up qualifying for that, but I doubted it must have been singularly unpleasant.

"Then it's not really the same Name, is it?" I pointed out.

"You were the Squire twice," he said, with the blithe assurance of someone who'd peered at many of my secrets through dead men's eyes. "Did you think it a different Name simply for having different aspect?"

"I was a different person," I replied. "It's why I didn't get Learn or Struggle. I didn't feel like I was so out of my depth anymore."

In the wake of First Liesse, I had been a victor: over Akua, over the High Lords, in some ways even over the Empire. My plan to claw back some sort of local rule over Callow had been a success and I'd been granted lands by Malicia herself. I'd not felt like I was one misstep away from death at all times anymore, and my Name had reflected that confidence.

"But it was the same *Name*," Hanno insisted. "Meant for the same purposes. Changing the horses on carriage does not make it a different carriage."

"There's an argument to be made that it does," I drily replied. "Since you never step in the same river twice and all, but I'll leave that bit of philosophy to the Atalantians. Why are you so keen on a Name always being meant for the same purposes, anyway? Even if it were true, it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing."

"You have to ask?" he tiredly said. "You are the one who forced me to look that mistake in the eye."

I blinked at him.

"You're standing where everyone else started and calling it a journey," Hanno quoted.

My own words, I realized after a heartbeat. From that night in Salia, when I'd had him at my mercy and savaged him with every hard truth I could find.

"I'd thought that rolled right off you," I admitted. "Like most of what I said that night."

"Even if you had been entirely my enemy," he replied, "I would have thought on the words after. It is a dangerous thing to fear self-examination."

Sounded a lot like 'the innocent have nothing to fear' to me, a sentence generally spoken by people who should not be trusted with even butter knives, but I'd sit on that opinion instead of sharing it. He had a right to his own beliefs, and there were more than a few reasons I'd not ended up dressing in white.

"All right, so you self-examined," I said, distantly glad Indrani was not there to make a filthy joke of that. "How'd that end up with you here and staring down stone walls?"

"Because I fear that you might not have been wrong," Hanno said. "It was... I struggled with the decision to act, Catherine. To sunder myself from providence and the Tribunal, however silent,

and take matters into my own hands. But I did, and I began to act."

His jaw clenched.

"And now I am to be the White Knight again?" he said. "To return where I began and sweep away all the doubts I wrestled with, the decisions I made, like fallen trinkets fit only for trash."

He angrily laughed.

"It was not a journey at all," Hanno told me. "I just walked in a circle so I could put on the same old cloak. All that grief, all these dangers and struggles and deaths, and what do I have to show for it?"

So that was it, huh. He'd thought he was becoming someone else, that he'd learned something. It must have been a bitter pill to swallow, the Creation itself seemed to think otherwise. At least in his eyes, anyway.

"Two aspects," I said.

He turned to me, frowning.

"You want to use a Name as measure of who you are, like Creation's some sort of fair judge?" I challenged. "I can't agree, but fair enough. You'll have to follow through, though: Creation judged you different enough from who you used to be that two out of three aspects faded."

"It's the same carriage," Hanno flatly said, echoing his earlier words.

"Maybe," I said. "But it's not the same horses pulling it, or the same man riding it – so why does it have to be headed to the same place?"

He looked away. Not convinced, huh. I wasn't fool enough to be disappointed.

"Perhaps it would be for the best if it did," he finally said. "For all that I chose to act, I have few gains to show for it. The Gigantes have not come, and the claim I troubled the Grand Alliance to press was a trap."

I hid my surprise. It was the first time I'd heard he'd reached out to the Titanomachy, though that was actually something I halfway appreciated. Cordelia had gotten some goodies out of dealing with the giants, but however skilled a diplomat she was being Proceran had ensured all paths would turn into dead ends. Both Hanno and the Witch of the Woods were said to have deep ties to the Gigantes, though, and a personal connection might have

yielded results where formal talks had not. A shame it hadn't. Mind, you all of this was babbling nonsense.

"Yeah, you didn't produce enough results to turn around the literal end times in, like, eight months of trying your hand at it tops," I drily said. "Just terrible, Hanno. Soon children will begin stoning you in the streets."

He sent me a long-suffering look.

"Must you?"

"Sure, when you're being an idiot," I easily replied. "You tried, Hanno. Maybe you didn't pull miracles out of thin air – more like not enough of them – but that doesn't mean you were wrong to act. You made some things better and some things worse."

I snorted.

"That's better than I fucking managed to pull off, some years."

Or Cordelia, for that matter. He mulled on that, silent, and I did not interrupt. Instead I looked to the distance, where on the edge of the horizon light was fast approaching. The gift of the Sisters told me dawn was soon to come.

"The world was never simple," Hanno murmured. "But I do miss them sometimes, the days when my role in it could be."

"Enough to go back?" I asked.

He did not answer. I stayed by his side, the two of us keeping in a strangely comfortable silence, until dawn rose to find us.

—

The silence was deafening.

Almost two hundred thousand soldiers stood around Keter, a fortified camp encircling that island of stone and death surrounded by nothingness, yet I could hear every cough. Empress Basilia had left with the Proceran cavalry, marching to the plains of the Ossuary to fight the battle that would keep our back clear as we stormed Keter. The rest of us – Levant, Callow, Procer and Praes – were mustered for war, for the slaughter about to begin. I sat Zombie's back in full armour, perched atop a now-empty watchtower, and below me the ranks of the Army of Callow were splayed out. It was not the last two bridges they were readied for, not this time.

Across the lines of legionaries cut massive, segmented steel bridges. Pickler's creations. Not long enough to reach across the chasm to the top of the rampart, for the amount of steel needed for it would have been prodigious, but long enough for our

purposes. There was a glint of light at my side, which bloomed into a circle when I granted it a glance. Masego's face appeared within.

"We are ready," Hierophant said. "When does it begin?"

"On the hour," I said, "though it will be First Princess Rozala that-"

"FORWARD!"

The air shuddered from the force of the call, which would have been fit to burst eardrums near the source. Still, the Proceran mages we'd trained at the Arsenal had done what they needed to: Rozala Malanza's voice had been heard by every soul in the Grand Alliance army. Not that the order applied to all of them.

"Understood," Hierophant said, and cut the spell.

My soldiers did not move, standing there as the wind picked up and the ozone scent of magic filled the air. Across the last two bridges, Proceran and Levantine soldiers began their advance on the enemy bastions. Streaks of roiling darkness shot up past the tall walls of Keter, the first wave of the enemy's rituals – curses so powerful they were sickening even for me to look upon – howling at our advancing forces. Our answer was well-oiled. Our own rituals shot up: the eerie dust-ghosts of binders, great spears of lightning from the Army of Callow and curses just as vile from the Praesi. Magic collided against magic, power spent to no gain but the stalemate we had been aiming for.

"Now," I murmured. "Now, Artificer."

Obeysing my order without ever having heard it, the Blessed Artificer at least unleashed the wonder she had crafted in Salia and refined over the months since: the Ram. It was impossible for me to miss it. The wooden pillar sheathed in copper caught the morning sun as it was dragged onto the platform we'd raised for it, then aimed at the wall before us. Adanna of Smyrna laid a hand on her creation, and for the first heartbeat nothing happened. Or rather nothing visible. It felt, to my senses, as if the entire world was breathing in.

And in the heartbeat that followed, as Light began to shoot out from the sides in wild spurts, the world breathed out.

She was knocked of her feet, as were the two soldiers helping her, and the Ram shot out like an arrow swatted by some unseen titan's hand. The Light roiled, screamed, and as a sudden burst of power came from behind the walls of Keter I felt the Hierophant's name shiver. **Wrest** killed their defence in the egg as the Ram flew, right at the heart of the wall before us. The same one where a Praesi siege tower had crashed into the stone,

weakening the wards holding the rampart together. Spinning and screaming, the Ram hit Keter's wall like the very wrath of the Heavens. Light flared, blinding and burning as the Ram fought to pierce into the rampart, and I caught sight of spurts of stone flying like drops of water before I was forced to look away.

Just in time, for the explosion that followed was powerful enough its breath sent tents flying behind us.

Shielding my eye with my palm more by habit than need, I risked a look at the rampart and let out a shocked breath.

"Merciless Gods," I whispered.

The wall had been savaged. Miles of stone had been slagged down to the foundation, the melted remains trickling down the edge of the cliff and into the drop. The streets behind the wall had been ravaged by broken and heated chunks of stone, looking as if a rain of sharpeners had been dropped across them, and though I could see soldiers swarming the sheer amount of damage was staggering. Just as we had hoped, the Blessed Artificer had blown us a path open into Keter. One that would not be the enemy's narrow killing zones on the bridges, nowhere as heavily defended. *And they'll have to keep defending those while we strike here, else we'll punch through.*

A heartbeat later the Dead King collapsed both bridges, but I smiled against the strap of my helmet. We'd been waiting for that: sorcery bloomed, Akua and the Witch keeping the broken bridges aloft and usable. We'd learned from our first defeat. I laughed, unsheathing my sword and raising high, as all around me the Army of Callow cheered loudly enough to echo across the sky. Keter's impregnable wall, reduced in a moment. My soldiers felt fires in their belly again.

"Begin," I shouted, and it rippled out.

The melted stone was not yet cooled, but we did not have time to waste. The longer the Dead King got to prepare against our landing, the more brutal securing that beachhead was going to get. Zombie let out a loud cry, wings spreading as I spurred her on to take flight. I glided over the Army of Callow as the First, Third and Fourth brought forward their bridges. They rose up in their air like poles, carefully aimed to the calculations of the sappers overseeing the effort, and then after a push gravity took its toll. They toppled forward, falling all in a row. Not that Keter was to let us land so easily. Magic bloomed ahead, but those I left to Masego. When I guided Zombie into a glide, staff in hand as I called on Night, it was to meet another threat: the great wyrm that was tearing through houses and streets to get to the breach. The great abomination of bone and leathery skin screeched, but I shouted back.

"Crows take you," I snarled, "and *burn*."

Black fire erupted from the tip of my staff, growing from a trickle to a torrent to a burning river as it struck the massive snake construct in the side. Magic whizzed around me, but none came close: all that would have hit suddenly changed trajectory, Hierophant slapping them away with Wreath. I grit my teeth and kept letting the Night flow through me even as my veins cooled and sweat beaded my brow, Zombie's long wings taking us into a smooth circling glide. I finally killed the working and lowered my staff, just in time to take my mount into a dive as Keter's first ballistas were brought into position and began firing on me.

I got a look at the wyrm first, though, and grinned fiercely: it wouldn't going anywhere.

Even with all the power I'd pumped through I'd only incinerated half of the construct, but it was quite beyond moving. It pissed me off a little that it'd still managed to accomplish part of its' objective – wedge its body between the falling bridges and the ground – but barely a third of our crossings had been blocked with the move.

"Priests will clean up the rest of it," I told Zombie, leaning against her neck. "Come on, we're going with the first wave."

Some brave souls from all three commands in the Army of Callow had begun the daunting work set out before them: crossing the chasm atop the steel bridges. We'd aimed for a wideness of three soldiers to be able to pass through each bridge at a time, for a total of ninety-nine legionaries at a time across all bridges. Much as Juniper would have preferred more, the amount of steel this had taken was already astronomical. Zombie's took us under the bridges, layering stripes of shadow and light against the cliffs surrounding me on both sides, and after passing the last I guided my mount into taking us up. What I saw as I turned to look at our assault gave me pause.

It was a massacre.

My soldiers had made it halfway through the bridges before enemy fire began to fall on them, but now that it had... Arrows and scorpion bolts shot out in hails, stones from scorpions and streaks of sorcery smashing through shields like they were made of paper. I wasted no time, spurring Zombie back into the fight, and began striking at the enemy – siege engines first, they were hardest to replace. It wasn't going great.

"Fuck," I snarled, dropping low to avoid another curse.

Already a full archer's volley was falling on my position, the impossibly precise coordination between the dead setting up the

sequence perfectly. Zombie was already diving but we had to spin to avoid twin ballista bolts – one skidded off the edge of my armour, another took a few feathers off her side – and we were forced to take refuge under the bridges for the second time before flying back up the other side. I'd torched two ballistas and an archer's nest, but the enemy was using its mages to shield against my Night workings. I guided Zombie back up and flew through a hail of arrows, swatting them aside with a burst of Night, and hammered at a ballista jutting out from some half-broken temple. The black flames washed over the shield, but a heartbeat later Hierophant wrested the defence away and I let out a snarl of triumph.

Without Masego covering me, though, the swarm of curses had me forced to drop below again.

I rose on the opposite side for another pass, but when we tried the same trick I found that the flames still didn't go through: the undead mages had layered the shields into two different spells. Fuck. They'd figured out the weakness of the aspect, then. Hierophant could take from more than one source of magic, but that meant splitting focus. On an artefact that was fine, but when there were other wills fighting him? They'd shut down our trick. I had to drop again, a glance telling me that our assault had stalled halfway through the chasm: soldiers were dying too fast to get further.

Another pass, and I went at it differently: I attacked the grounds around the ballista instead, shattering stone with entropy. Mixed results: knocked the ballista down but it wasn't destroyed, and Masego had to cover me from a mass of enemy magic as Zombie dove. On the next pass, the dead got even more clever on us. They began holding back the release of their rituals, letting them loose when I attacked so that Masego was forced to handle them instead of help me. I almost let out a scream of frustration.

"This is going nowhere," I breathed out, forcing myself to calm down.

And it had gotten there, by the looks of it: the bridges were almost clear, the last legionaries still on them try to get off.

Not a single man had gotten to the other side, and my soldiers were no longer trying to pass.

Well... shit

Darkening

Yeah, without a named leading those soldiers down in the thick of it, no way they charge through the teeth of that. Need a knight to bolster their courage and give the charge enough providence to thin the dying enough for them to get a beachhead. Like back when hanno charged black's army and barely lost a man despite hundreds of crossbowmen.

Linnus42

True also doesn't DK have an entire moat of some sort around Keter. So yeah blasting a hole in the wall is great but they still need bridges to cross to the other side. Which means DK can still exploit a bottleneck and funnels, its just not nearly as easy once they cross to the other side to keep them bunched up.

Honestly, though they need to change the game. DK just has to stall for time and not lose which makes his job way easier. He aint losing if the plan is charge across the bridges even if they can hold them up. Named leading the charge is a good place to start. Still this means according to Cordelia at least they need their next major offensive to actually work.

We still have the Gigantes waiting in the wind. I don't expect the Elves to do much to help if they show up it will be dead last.

Darkening

The elves getting the spring crown is a hanging thread. And there'll probably be some forced mirroring between that crown and whatever happens with the autumn crown they want to give DK. And yeah, there's the fallout from hanno's appeal to the riddle maker gigantes guy. If that actually comes to something it'd probably be a good push for hanno to accept his new name since he actually did accomplish something. After all that, the only uninvolved group on the continent is the chain of hunger, so clearly they'll defeat the dead king only for a downer ending where everyone is eaten by skaven.

Mirror Night

You know I suppose I should give EE credit here. I think its fairly well known I wasn't really fan of how Praesi Arc ended for Akua. I thought it was anti-climatic and she could have just taken control of Praes then and there and shaped it how she wanted after her walkabout through the local populace, shift towards healer and general interactions with Kendi. Instead to my mind she ended replaying plot line that we already seen really

more will she want she with Cat? More indecision over whether she should seal DK. I am not going to go over my wider issues again.

I also wasn't a fan of how that Warden of the West ended. Cause again there really wasn't any evolution for Hanno. I mean Hakram saw an issue stepped up and followed the seeming theme of "If not now then When" but for Hanno he basically ended up right back at the start. Traded a Choir for Cat and got slapped down from exerting political influence in a rather messy way that seemed like a wasted arc. Where right after Klaus died in the aftermath it seemed he be going one way and ended up going nowhere in my book with him being naive and unable to mount good arguments. While being much more pro Cordelia in my book.

But now it does seem EE is going to get somewhere I like more and do a pretty good job. Perhaps, I was too quick to judge though in my defense that is kinda the nature of this webnovel format with its small numerous updates as opposed to a big book at once, you can only judge with the material you got and I didn't especially like the material I got. So props to him for that especially considering he is battling Covid to deliver this product. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Onos

Well, maybe that's a lesson learned – trust an author who's brought you this far.

Mirror Night

I don't believe in blind trust. Also for instance, I still hate the Everdark arc and that is not going to change.

I think though I will stick with my current approach. I will be effusive with the praise and scathing with the criticism as is my way. Anything less in my book would be a betrayal of trust. EE can count on me to not sugarcoat things and always shoot straight.

gingerlygrump

I hate the Everdark arc, too, it I think my issues with it are not the story itself. EE's chapter release schedule back then was too much pressure on him, 3x a week is a lot of work to produce in a short time. The longer chapters released twice a week have been and continue to be where he really shines.

Mirror Night

Perhaps though my issue was more Cat being massively disconnected from most of the cast, the whole plot feeling kinda repetitive in terms of interactions, Cat being at

her worse personality wise (I mean I suppose to root for a would be mass slaver?), and me finding everything happening elsewhere with other characters (in the interludes) far more interesting and engaging

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah but he doesn't need that from you. He knows how the story goes and bluntly, you and I and the rest of this group have done very little to alter that course (nor should we). You talk about being upset with the lack of resolution on arcs that are incomplete, which of course are not resolved! What's the point of such criticism?

Stephen Marsh

I really liked the Everdark arc—but then I was at TSR when the Drow were released.

Arden

Oh wow, you are from the original writers of D&D in the 70' and 80' Right?

I liked the everdark arc too, and generally all the firstborn culture in these books.

shikkarasu

After 6 Books of consistently blowing (most of) us out of the water, I wouldn't call our trust of EE 'blind'. I think the only 2 things that didn't sit great with me were the Ranger Vs Students story in Ater being just a little rushed/hard to follow and the Epic Rap Battles of the Drow only showing up 5 minutes before Cat needed to use them as inspiration. Across 6.5 years that's an amazing track record and I will continue to bet on EE pulling another rabbit; that hat should have been empty long ago, but that's never made a difference before.

Miles

TLDR Mirror Night creates an excuse to whine about the story yet again, because some minor detail didn't go the direction he demanded, way back when.

He's at the \$0.005 level on patreon and therefore very important and is entitled to creative control over other peoples' work.

Mirror Night

Talk to me Miles when EE bothers to actually respond to one of your comments. He actually knows who I am and listens to

my advice which is more then can be said for you and most of my detractors.

I am not under any delusions I am super relevant...EE is the Sun but compared to him I am an Elephant and you well I am not sure you even rise to the level of a single cell organism.

Titan

Lmao you are surreal, Mirror Knight. I would recommend you sit down and read a book to relax, but we all know how you get after reading.

Insanenoodlyguy

And this makes you think you are important? I'm doubting you in the first place, mind, but even if this is 100% true, and there is some post out there where EE goes "thank you Mirror Knight I value your input so much" that in no way invalidates the optionions of others and makes them more or less valid. Hell it doesn't even make your opinion more or less valid.

What I can say is this post makes you look incredibly arrogant, apropos to the character your name refers too.

calliope

> EE is the Sun but compared to him I am an Elephant and you well I am not sure you even rise to the level of a single cell organism.

i bet this sounded way better in your large, cavernously empty head dude lol

workshop your angry replies a little bit before you post, it'll make them less funny to your... detractors (?)

(or more funny idk what angle you're going for here honestly)

Konstantin von Karstein

I wonder what kind of Name Hanno would accept. Probably a new one.

Well, Neshamah really is the worst😏 No wonder no Crusade ever took Keter.

RoflCat

Judge, imo (would also be the biggest walk away from "I do not judge")

Recall for checking past precedence.

Counsel for the people he's dealing with currently, with a leaning on trying to help rather than punish.

Sentence for making the decision.

Miles

I hope it's a pun that makes Cat irrationally angry every time she hears it.

caoimhinh

I think he really will be White Knight again, but realize that while his Name is the same, his Role will be something different this time.

Insanenoodlyguy

Pale armored noble horse rider! A new name for a new age. Second aspect is "why the hell were you so Stubborn look what convoluted crap you made us do"

Cpt. Obvious

He has a perfectly good name, but I doubt he would dare to admit that it's Shiny Boots. Indrani would bust a gut, not necessarily her own, hearing that...

edrey

well, it's a nightmare, nothing less expected of keter
i was expecting the machines of the dwarfs but maybe next chapter

Captain Amazing

You know, if there ever was a time for offensive use of Still Water, now would be it.

[308924810a](#)

Well.. yes?

Once firepower gets beyond a certain point casualties jump way up. Disproportionately compared to the casualties armies would have been used to taking in going over the walls of less defended castles.

The early-modern military solution to this is either just being determined to feed more men into the breach until the attacker wins, or calling up the defender and negotiating a surrender that wouldn't devastate both forces. But once there's a breach it should be possible to force it, so long as the confrontation remains conventional and the attacking army doesn't lose its nerve.

Mary Gentle

Mining. For the best approach you mine under a castle's walls, fill the tunnels with gunpowder, and then drop down the walls with an almighty boom. Saves you getting all your troops killed assaulting walls.

...But unfortunately there's just a leetle problem with doing that here.

Cat's difficulty is one she knows well: defence is always much stronger than attack, just by virtue of **being** defence. Especially dug-in defence with how many traps waiting?

All those lives and not even a beachhead, yet. You have to wonder what's waiting for them on the inside. The more I think about it, the more I think this can't be solved by frontal attacks. Not as things stand...

I used not to like Hanno at all, but I'm warming to him. Even if he is theoretically on the side of good.

Konstantin von Karstein

If the DK has more than 2 neurons (or whatever), there will be archers, javeliners and mages on each roofs and at all windows as well as wards and traps on all streets. That's not counting the devils, constructs and Revenants ready to ambush the attackers.

Imo, trying to do a frontal assault is doomed to failure. Named or not, there's no way the mortal soldiers can go in there without getting mauled. Maybe having Still Water could help, but that won't be enough.

Insanenoodlyguy

Don't underestimate a named leading w charge. That kind of momentum can and has carried armies before.

Xinci

Considering Benevolent said something similar with his whole "Own what you are, no matter how ugly the face of it" line, Cat took a rather strangely ironic stance for a Villain on Hanno saying that one should always be willing to self-reflect. It is also kind of exactly the opposite of "It is a dangerous thing to fear self-examination." meant in her case, but that may be Cats blinders getting the best of her.

It's not surprising that Hanno hasn't transitioned beyond the White Knight, since in the end its not like he truly delved into himself or went through the depths of identity dealing with Recall while also seeking out even more experiences to grow come

what may. ie. Even if he was willing to act, he didn't take the simpler in some ways but the far harder road for growth that's available to him.

It looks like they will need ever clever schemes or rather wanton bravery to get across that barrier...almost like a surprise charge from a spot that it should be unfeasible from?

Juff

Typo Thread:

last of tea > last of the tea
got up so > got up to
tall a broad > tall and broad
Judgement had > Judgement, had
troubles does > troubles do
with get > will get
do was reach > do is reach
thought was now > fought was now (or missing words)
horses on carriage > horses on a carriage
al the > all the
the Creation > that Creation
looked way > looked away
least unleashed > last unleashed
of her > off her
Hierophan's > Hierophant's
pierced into > pierce into
raising high > raising it high
their air > the air
form the > from the
wouldn't going > wouldn't be going
its' > its
Zombie's took > Zombie's dive took

[Hargabga](#)

Good question though: where are all the Named? Like yeah, we got usual heavy hitters, but that's just a power and power Keter could always much blow for blow and more. We need stories to tip the scales. Like, you know, literally the only thing DK fears? Where's the Princess leading the charge, where's a band of rambunctious youngsters going YOLO, where's all of that? They fight it like it's your average war instead of a metaphysical debate between New Order and the Old in which living people are just props. It's literally the battle of Liesse Accords. Cat is trying to prove that no matter how powerful you are, if everyone else unites they'll be stronger. This will be an Ur-Example for the ages about what Named can and cannot do. It should be all story-fu.

agumentic

The earlier they send in the Named, the earlier their stories are spent and DK kills them. For all the trouble the walls are causing them, they are just the first line of defence. The command will send the bands if there is no other way, but they are trying to preserve them.

Adrian V

At least without the wall they have a more clear line of fire, as in they can throw magic, munitions, etc to clear away the area before hand, even if they don't have the Ram anymore if Adanna makes a lesser version of what is basically a magical missile they can now aim behind the walls.

And no mention of the dwarven army here, its possible they have more than 1 usefull toy

Mary Gentle

I forget because it's a while since I read it, but *how* big is the dead city? You won't hit all of it from beyond the walls, or from just inside the walls.

It's been grim so far, but if it gets down to fighting in the city – there's a reason every army on the planet and throughout history hates street fighting. It's trap after trap, with more trap sprinkled on top, as we've seen Cat do before now.

Plus the problem that most armies in our world don't have: as soon as the Grand Armee start dying in the city, they become the Dead King's soldiers. You're not just killing your own; you're adding to your enemy's forces.

OK, so we have the autumn crown to come, and the Giants, and maybe some help from the dwarves in addition to food . . .

Actually, that isn't the thing that bothers me most. It's that the more the non-dead army fights the Dead King, the more like heroes the Grand Armee become. I don't think I'm ready to give up on wanting the villains to win. I don't want DK to be the only option for a villain victory.

Miles

"always returning to that night of green flames and red hands"

I'm gonna need you to be a whole lot more specific

Darkening

You know, the one where she stabbed a guy.

Bad@games

The one time were cat got blamed for the goblin fire, ya know

Bad@games

Guys hear me out here.... Undead suicide goats. Its now or never. Get the undead you control up in there, packed with goblinfire or something and boom.

Oktarine

I don't understand. Why didn't they construct the bridges with walls, like a U shape? That would have saved thousands of lives. Unless...

"Thirty heartbeats passed. Then the dead on the bridge started to rise.

The cries of dismay from the alliance changed tone as the fresh undead began to march on Keter.

Impervious to arrow and curse, the corpses of the living made war on the corpses of the dead."

Hmm...

jamesc9

> the ozone scent of magic filled the air.

That's new. As far as I remember, we haven't been told that Keter's Due had a characteristic smell before. It's entirely plausible; that's what you tend to get, if you dump the right amount of energy into an oxidising atmosphere.

Lord Haart

I've definitely read the ozone smell before, though not 100% sure it was in PGTE.

Chapter 58: Mud

"Invading Callow is like stepping on a porcupine: do it long enough and it shall be crushed, but one should expect to lose the foot."

– First Princess Clarisse Merovins

Juniper looked like she wanted to bite someone's head off, and it was not impossible she would before the day ended.

"They were already retreating," my marshal admitted. "I called the retreat myself so it would be in order instead of a rout."

So mostly to save face, I thought with a grimace. All attempts to cross the bridges had ceased, a sight that had my stomach clenching in fear and unease. The longer we let the Dead King dig in on the other side, the worse this would get. I thought it pretty telling that no serious attempt had been made to destroy our bridges yet. Sorcery was still traded back and forth, filling the sky with streaks of colour and eerie shrieks, but so far the enemy had not even tried turning their ballistae on our forces this side of the chasm.

"We need to punch through," I bluntly said. "If we don't the battle's good as lost."

The attacks through the last two stone bridges were going to get shredded if we didn't draw enemy forces with our own push and the Praesi had orders not to commit their forces before we had a beachhead inside Keter's walls.

"I *know* that, Catherine," the Hellhound growled. "You think I don't? But I also know that if I give the order it won't be obeyed."

I grit my teeth.

"I know casualties are-"

"We've lost almost two thousand already," Juniper evenly said.

The number gave me pause. Gods. That many?

"It hasn't even been an hour," I numbly said.

"Those bridges are pure murder," the Marshal of Callow replied. "I ordered a push with mages putting up shields and all it did was draw ballista fire. The only saving grace is that the bodies fall instead of block the way."

It obscured how many we'd lost, too. At least to some extent. Men who'd been three companies back when the battle started were going to notice they were now the frontline because everyone in front was dead.

"We need to commit Named," Juniper said. "Can Hierophant cover our advance?"

Still feeling numb, I clumsily undid the clasp of my helmet. My face was covered in sweat and dirt, too-warm locks of hair falling over it when I took off the helm.

"Not without fucking over another front," I said. "If he protects our advance, he's not countering enemy rituals."

I spat to the side, fruitlessly trying to get the taste of iron out of my mouth.

"How's the Blessed Artificer?" I asked.

"Back on her feet, it was just a bump," Juniper said. "You think she can run interference for us?"

"I think she's the only heavy hitter left that's not already committed," I said, "so it's her or no one."

"I'll send for her," Juniper replied, then hesitated.

"Speak your mind," I said.

The tall orc looked uncomfortable.

"It won't be enough to get them to take the bridges again," she said. "Not after the slaughter they just went through."

Brushing sweaty hair off my dead eye – my ponytail was fraying – I turned to the Army of Callow. Juniper's command tent was well situated, overlooking the offensive while boasting both a solid set of wards and room for me to land Zombie. She was still back there, tied to a post. An army, I had thought more than once, was like a large beast. It had a breath to it, lungs and veins and blood. It could be angered or wounded, made brave or craven. And though I did not have it in me to call any of these men and women who had followed me halfway across the world cowards, I watched those shifting ranks and saw the fight had just been beaten out of them.

Twice now every assault on the walls of Keter had failed and now they were asking themselves an ugly question: could they be breached at all?

They weren't sure, not anymore, and in a battle like this that was as bad as thinking it couldn't be done. Once you doubted, the whistle of every arrow was a dirge and the glint on the enemy's blade as the promise of death. Like a worm in an apple, the doubt was eating my army alive.

"My fault," I quietly said.

Juniper turned to glare at me.

"I don't know what you've gotten in your head but-"

"My fault," I repeated, in a tone that brooked no contradiction. "I've been fighting this battle mounted, Hellhound. That's not what it takes to win a slog like this."

I clenched my armoured fist.

"Blood and mud," I said. "It always comes down to the blood and mud, doesn't it?"

I pulled my helmet back down on my head. Juniper glared at me.

"Recklessness won't bring us victory," she said.

I secured the clasp, pulled at it to make sure it'd stay in place. The gesture was familiar, almost comforting. How many times had I done this before? Gods, how long had I begun to? I smiled at her, unable to help it.

"Do you remember the first war game we ever had, you and I?" I asked.

She snorted.

"Ratface and I had a war game," Juniper corrected. "You were just some bum with a sword that took command after I beat him."

My smile widened into a grin.

"I still remember how godawful furious you were, when I used my Name to leap over that log trap," I said. "You snarled 'what the Hells was that?' and-"

"And you replied: 'me, winning'," Juniper finished, almost smiling. "I remember."

I looked at the broken walls of the Crown of the Dead, the empire of horrors that still awaited beyond it.

"Come a long way, haven't we?" I softly said.

"All the way to the end of the world," the Hellhound replied, baring her fangs.

She had that look in her eye that'd made me want her from the start, even when we'd just been kids playing at war in the Tower's shadow. The one that was all flint and iron, that said the soul behind it would rather snap than bend. I raised my arm, offered it, and after a heartbeat of hesitation she took it. An old legionary's salute.

"The army's yours," I said. "You know the plans."

Her face tightened, emotions flickering across it too quickly for me to read. Her grip tightened around my arm.

"It's a fool thing, what you do," Juniper of the Red Shields said, voice hoarse. "It's a damned fool thing, and I can't even shout at you for it."

She released my arm as if the armour had burned it.

"Warlord," Juniper said.

My staff I raised, then slammed it down. Though it was only dead yew and beneath it was stone, it parted for the wood like water. It was stuck in the stone and would stay there until I took it up again.

"Hellhound," I replied.

And without another word, I went down into the crowd. Into the ranks. My eye wandered, looking for something, and found it. A boy, about my height, and as I opened my mouth I recognized with a start that I knew him.

"Edgar, isn't it?"

"Ma'am, yes," the boy – no, it'd been years, the young man now – hastily saluted. "And I'm a sergeant now, ma'am."

"So I see," I replied, glancing at the stripes.

He swelled at the words.

"I need another favour of you, Sergeant Edgar," I said. "I must borrow a shield."

He did not hesitate, I saw with something that was neither quite pride nor grief, for a moment. Without batting an eye he offered it, even helping me slide in my arm.

"Won't do no good on your monster crow, though," Sergeant Edgar noted. "It's a footman's shield, ma'am."

"Then it's exactly what I need," I replied.

He paused, and others did around us. Neither of us were trying to stay quiet, and the press of soldiers was close. Murmurs rippled out.

"Get another before you go in," I said, clapping his shoulder with affection. "Fortune be with you, Sergeant Edgar."

"Hells," the young man grinned, "that'd be a first."

Hard, satisfied laughter followed. I let it carry me forward. One limping step after another, I crossed the sea of legionaries. Eyes followed me as if I were a falling star, hands reaching out shyly to touch my shield or the hem of my cloak as I passed. And I felt it move with me. Something like a shiver, a physical tremor going through the great beast that was my army. I was there, among them. Word of it passed from lip to ear, moving so quickly that before long the soldiers ahead me were already looking my way. I did not hurry my limp, because hurrying would do no good. When I reached the edge of the camp, the edge of the

cliff, when I rose the steps to the beginning of the bridge and turned, I found a sea of faces awaiting me.

Above us a clouded, hellish sky lit up with the eerie lights of war sorcery. The distant eruptions of power were like a broken breeze, just enough to have the banners moving. First Army. Fourth Army. And, standing before me, the Third. The vanguard of my every victory, which I had named Dauntless for that unflinching bravery.

"I won't lie to you," I told them, Name strengthening my voice for all to hear. "There's death ahead."

None were surprised. They had seen too many of their friends killed to be.

"They'll come for us with fire and storm," I said. "With every horrible trick they've been waiting to unleash. The moment it looks like we might win, they'll unleash the Hells until the broken gates are left swinging in the wind."

I breathed out.

"And still I ask it of you," I said. "To march. To bleed. To die, until we've crossed the deep and rammed death back down the Dead King's throat."

There were no cheers at that. It was not a boast I'd offered them, something to laugh about. They all knew what it would cost to get there.

"I won't blame you if you run," I told them, "even though there's nowhere left to run. We're all a long way from home."

I looked at them, and I saw in their eyes that they did not want to fight. They loved me, I thought, but still they did not want to fight.

"But if we don't win here we'll bring down the world with us," I said, "so I'll be crossing that bridge."

Murmurs bloomed, low and urgent. The shield on my arm was hard to miss.

"And I know it's more than a queen can ask," I called out, "but I ask it anyway."

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched.

"You trusted me through Dormer and the Camps, through Maillac's Boot and Four Armies," I said, "through Arcadia and the Wasteland and every misbegotten bit of land a soldier's ever died on."

Gods, where had I not dragged them? They had even bled beyond Creation, as if Calernia was too small a field for them to die on.

"Trust me once more," I asked. "Follow me into the breach, through dark and ruin until we come out on the other side."

Maybe one day they'd call me a soldier queen, but the truth of it was simpler: I was queen of soldiers. I'd spent more time in the saddle than on my throne, pawing off the intricacies of rules to one regent after another as I went off to scatter Callow's enemies. They might have crowned me in Laure, anointed me and said the words, but my real kingdom stood before me: banners and steel.

The Army of Callow.

"You and I against the rest of the fucking world, one last time."

In the distance lightning crackles, exploded in a burst of light, and as ash fell from the sky like rain I stood before a sea of soldiers that would not look me in the eye. Silence hung in the air like pestilence, and the longer it lasted the harder my stomach clenched. It would not be broken, I realized. They would not gather their courage, raise the banners and follow me again. All my life I had wondered – feared, hoped for – the moment where I would finally ask too much of my soldiers. When they would at last balk, hold back the loyalty that had kept me on my feet long before I'd begun using a staff. So here it was, I thought, at long last. *You lasted until the end*, I thought, looking at them. *There is no shame in this.*

But I had a duty, and I had sworn an oath: whether they be gods or kings or all the armies of Creation. So I unsheathed my sword, slowly, and raised it to them in a salute.

"Be proud," I told them, meaning every word. "You reached the edge of the world."

And I turned my back to them. One limping step down the bridge after another, the steel clanging against my boots. Three, five, ten. In the distance a pair of ballistae were aimed, and I saw the flicker of movement. Gritting my teeth, I pulled on Night and let it loose through my veins. I slashed at the air, darkness trailing in my sword's wake as a streak of Night slapped aside the stones that would have torn right through my body. I squared my shield, straightened my back and began moving again. Simple, I thought, I just had to keep it simple. There was only the enemy ahead, nothing else in all of Creation.

One more step. Always one more step, until I made it all the way to the other side.

“DAUNTLESS!”

My steps stuttered, but I could not let myself be distracted. Far ahead, a nest of mages loosed in my direction a ritual that was as a crawling wave of grey. I pulled on Night again, smashing a pillar of pure black into the spell and twisting my will. The working sucked in the magic before detonating, breaking the spell formula with it.

“DAUNTLESS!”

The shout came again, and this time more voices picked it up. I limped forward, shield up, as the world narrowed in front of me. I walked a span of steel three men wide, without railings or anything that would stop a single misstep from seeing you fall to your death. Lines of it stretched to my right and left, like teeth cutting at the void below us. Sorcery bloomed ahead, cabals of mages that were little more than bones and burning green sorcery shaping mounds of curses or frost. Gods, the numbers were overwhelming and I hadn't even reached arrow range yet.

“Sve Noc,” I prayed in Crepuscular. “My enemies are many and their wrath is great: grant me ruin, that I may deal it out to them in your name.”

I twitched, Night bubbling up my veins, and let out a hoarse shout as shadows ripped themselves out of my back, fleeing the cover of my cloaks in flocks. Crows that were as shards of darkness took flight by the hundreds, spreading out in a wave that flew heedless into the enemy's sorcery. My lip tasted of blood and I wiped it with the back of my gauntlet, spitting the rest into the chasm. One more step, I reminded myself. In the distance, the crows plunged into the spells and faded like morning mist – tainting every spell they touched, eating away at them from the inside. How many more of those did I have in me? Enough, I told myself. I would have enough.

My fingers were slick with sweat, my aketon soaked under the plate. Flakes of ash stuck to my face, to the wet cloth covering my dead eye, but still I advanced. My bad leg burned, throbbed with every step, but the pain was an old friend.

The ballistae had been silent, and now I saw why: they had been repositioned, awaiting the moment to fire a full volley. Only it wasn't on me that the stones and bolts were fired. The machines spat out death at my bridge, but at others too. And I could not resist the glance, even knowing it would shatter my calm. Behind me, the Third Army's banner flew in the wind and legionaries advanced. Tight ranks, shields up and faces grim. But they had come, marching down the lines of steel that were as a road straight to death, and my heart clenched at the sight of it. Always the Third, dauntless to the end. I would not let that trust go betrayed.

I thrust up my sword, Night already welling up inside me.

"I bring the word of the two-faced goddess," I said.

Night swirled above me, sweeping up into the sky as a raging wind, and like a blade piercing the Heavens my working pierced the clouds. Arm trembling from the effort, I pulled down my sword and the rest of the sky with it.

"And that word is **no**," I hissed.

Wind and clouds raged, a river drawn across the bridges like a stroke of paint, and the projectiles were swallowed whole. I released the working, panting as shivers of exhaustion went down my spine. I'd ripped a hole in the clouds, and through it the light of day shone. The sunlight found the rain of ashes, bathing in pale, and I might almost have thought it was snowing. In the distance I heard hoarse cheers, but there was a closer noise. Boots on steel. Legionaries catching up to me. And with them, on the too-warm wind, came one last sound drifting up to my ears.

"The knights will get the glory

The king will keep his throne."

I was not sure whether to laugh or weep, so instead I kept my eyes ahead. One more step, I swore, and limped forward.

"We won't be in the story

Our names will not be known."

Sorcery swelled ahead, but the sky screamed out and streaks of pale lightning struck down at the enemy mages. No, not lightning – Light. The Blessed Artificer had come out to fight. Cheers sounded again. One more step, I prayed, and through the raining ash advanced.

"So pick up your sword, boy

Here they come again

And down here in the mud-"

"It's us who holds the line," I whispered.

One more step and all the Hells opened: arrow range. I was halfway through. They had massed archers and crossbowmen while we waited, crammed every skeleton upright and able to aim in thick lines covering every bit of stone they had to spare. They released all at once, with impossibly perfect timing, and death flew out in a swarm. I pulled deep on Night, blade wreathed in darkness, and slashed away. Behind us a great javelin of Light

flew out, and as captains screamed out orders the Army of Callow loosed a wave of massed fireballs.

It wasn't enough.

I hacked away at the arrows in front of us, even covering the bridges to my sides, but others flew in arcs above and there were simply too *many* to cover. Steel punctured shields, ripped into flesh, toppled soldiers screaming into the void.

"The Princes take the Vales

The Tyrant is at the Gate

Our crops wither and fail,

The enemy's host is great."

The line wavered, I could feel it buckling. But I kept advancing so they did too – voices rising defiantly to add to the song. The storm of arrows was not the danger of a single breath. It was a doom in three beats, as again and again the enemy went through the same movements: nock, pull, loose. The dead did not tire or hesitate, only missing a shot when a string strapped and needed to be replaced. And so death came for us in waves, relentless. A shot skittered off the side of my shield, another grazed my cheek and I could barely move quickly enough to gather Night to me.

"Mages, forward," went up the cry, and soon shields bloomed in front of us, but like before they attracted attention.

Ballistae concentrated fire on the visible targets that were the translucent panes of magic, shattering them were arrows failed. The line was buckling again, and even for me to take a single step forward was like wading against a river's current. We were failing again. I was already tired, more than I should be, but what point is there in hoarding power when we were about to lose? I took a step forward, almost swallowing my tongue for the burning pain of my leg, and clumsily ripped at the straps keeping my shield on my arm. Arrows fell, but I had a guardian of my own: a ball of blue flame formed in front of me, spinning and expanding to swallow all the projectiles before it burned out. Masego was protecting me

Then it was on me to protect everyone else.

I threw away the shield, hearing it rattle against the edge of the bridge and vanish into the dark, and I breathed out deeply. In and out, steady. Seizing too much Night when I was exhausted could make me throw up otherwise.

"So pick up your sword, boy

Here they come again

And down here in the mud

It's us who holds the line."

I dug deep. Until my breath came out mist for the cold inside my veins, until light began to hurt my eyes and I could hear my heart beating like a drum against my ears. I'd done many a powerful working of Night, in my time, but this one would be different. It was not the First Under the Night walking down that bridge, the highest priestess of Night. I was the Warden, come to bring order to the madness, and so it was not black flame or curses I was calling on. Keter thought to cowing me by unleashing one monster after another, by sowing a field of death.

But I'd brought my own, made of every death I owned.

"Rise," I snarled, hand pulling up, and for a moment there was nothing at all.

Then the shadows beneath the bridges, the dark nestled beneath the cliffs, began to boil over. Strands of darkness shot out, thick tendrils of Night, and they gathered like a river to the sea. Above my head a shape began to form, and though Keter unleashed storms of sorcery to shatter it the Hierophant allowed not a speck of magic to pass. Watching it was seeing an artist at work: curses turned into flame, which burned acid into smoke, which coiled into tendrils choking out green light. A single will cascaded down a line of spells, breaking them with the same exquisite grace of a duellist's perfect killing stroke. Again and again, the man who had once been the Apprentice got the best of them. And with every moment he bought me, every ballista the Blessed Artificer shattered in a burst of Light, the shape above me grew. Swelled, until it stood so tall it blocked out the sun.

A river of arrows was fired into the dark, disappearing as if they'd been dropped in a well.

And when the storms of sorcery broke, the smoke scattered and the ash-wind broke, facing the enemy was a behemoth of a monster. Mine, my Beast. It was shaped as a wolf would be, if shadows cast on a wall by a scared child: too sinuous, its impossible large maw bristling with teeth. It was my old companion, the breath of the back of my neck and the laughter in my ear. The monster I'd built out of a hundred thousand corpses, sown across battlefields from the east to the west. I'd built on my throne atop a mountain of dead soldiers but today, just this once, the throne would give back. Monstrous maw opening wide, the great beast of Night breathed in the air of Creation like it was savouring it. Behind me my men had halted, but I turned back and offered them a wild grin.

"FORWARD," I shouted. "FORWARD AND FOLLOW ME!"

The Beast began to laugh, and Gods though it was a terrible the terror was on our side. I limped forward, breaking into a pained run, and ahead of me the monster charged.

"Man the walls," my legionaries sang as they followed, "bare the steel."

Sorcery screamed, ballistae fired and a howling volley of arrows disappeared into the Beast's body. I quickened my steps, a hoarse shout ripping itself clear of my lungs – as much pain as glee.

"Hoist the banner, raise the shield."

The Beast tumbled into the enemy, crushing undead with every step and laughing as it swallowed whole a siege engine. We ran, ran as fast as we could, knowing that the opportunity would not knock twice. Two thirds through, and then more. We were so close.

"A free death they cannot steal."

Rituals bloomed again, and enemy archers began took aim at us again instead of wasting their arrows on my monster – which was tearing them apart with tooth and claw, ravaging their tightly packed lines. Steel broadheads began to fall on us again, taking blood and lives, but the run had taken on momentum. It did not slow even when bodies began to drop.

"When we meet them on the field."

I felt Masego try to West the enemy's rituals but there were just too many. Great thorns of sickly green magic were shot in the Beast's belly, and though it screamed and clawed at all around it I could feel something hollowing out my working from the inside. I was not the only one on the field who knew how to make use of ruin. The Beast began to fall apart piece by piece, howling and clawing at the enemy as it did, and as my boots hit the bridge the heart of it faded into mist. A heartbeat later I took another step, and instead of steel I touched stone.

I had crossed, and my army was mere feet behind me.

"So pick up your sword, boy

Here they come again

And down here in the mud

It's us who holds the line."

And as the song died, the Army of Callow followed me into dark and ruin. I laughed and slammed into a skeleton, cutting through bow and string and neck. It collapsed like a stringless puppet. The enemy had been waiting for us, but we'd caught them flatfooted and the Beast had put them in disarray. They'd not had

time to redeploy, so as I tore into a line of archers sword in hand I felt the heavies of the Third Army crack those lines like an egg. Heading unseen orders the skeletons tried to retreat, scampering up slopes and through broken houses, but we swept through them like a tide.

"Mages," I shouted, parrying a blow and returning a vicious riposte.

The skeleton's head broke under the pommel, shattering clean and killing it.

"Mages, fire on the ballistae," I shouted again.

They obeyed and fire burned bright, the enemy's engines finally silenced. A wave of steel swelled behind me and we smashed our way through archers and crossbowmen until there were none left to smash. Behind there were proper fighters, skeletons in armour with swords and axes and shields, but even charging uphill the momentum was with us. We'd break through, past this breach and into Keter. That was why I could already feel the coming, I thought. The Scourges. But it wouldn't matter, not a whit, because we weren't done either. As Keter mustered its horrors and my men drove back the dead, pushing forth the beachhead, long shadows fell on us all. Between us and the sun flew great fortresses, bristling with soldiers and mages.

The last gasps of the Dread Empire of Praes had come to make war.

Liliet

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

ninegardens

AAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaAA!

TRUELIKEtheRIVER

[illegible]

zenanii

[illegible]

Axel Rafael

[illegible]

Isi Arnott-Campbell

AA

Inay

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!!!!!

Dominic

I COME FROM THE LAND OF THE ICE AND SNOW WITH THE
MIDNIGHT SUN WHERE THE HOT SPRINGS... FLOOOOOOW

Christos

Aaaaaaaaaa@aaaaaaaaaAaaaaAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

Mekharfet

AA

Someperson

Aaaa

Bad@games

ÀAAA

M0och123

THUNDER! AHHHHHHHAAHHHHHHHAH! THUNDER!
AHHHHHAHHHHHAHHHAHHHAH! THUNDER!

Luna

AA!!!

AbraKadabra

Ahem. Here it is.

JoeRob

The Dauntless' song lines up rather well with Battle Hymn of
the Republic

Scott's Folly

It does fit the rhythm, within the usual amount of stretching
and squeezing, but to me that seems like too upbeat a melody
for the subject. I'm hearing something in a minor key,
perhaps along the lines of the folk tune "John Barleycorn".
(Surprisingly hard to find a straightforward version without
excessive vocal or melodic ornament! Here's a link to one

such: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tswuvIIi4SA>)

This isn't a song for a triumphant vanguard racing onward to victory, it's one for the sloggers of the 'Poor Bloody Infantry'. They know that the fight will be coming to them. They know that they will be there to meet it, bloody it, and send what's left right back to whichever corner of Creation it came from this time. They know that next campaigning season they'll do the same again in a different direction. And they wouldn't have it any other way.

arcanavitael5

I really love the relationship between Cat and the Army of Callow it is one of the most beautiful parts of the story.

Nadav

I cried so much!!!

bob

Good Shit.

Tenthyr

As a final charge for Catherine with her armies go, you couldn't do better, or more grim.

dadycoool

This is the end of the world and we're all gonna die. Who wants to go out screaming with me?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Sounds like a pickup line.

Sykomantis

Who says it's not?

megaprr

There's something just so great about the Beast in this chapter. Cat's baring her Name to the world here. The shape of it, at heart. And man was it glorious.

Lox

Where is Hanno?

[*Liliet*](#)

At a guess, filling another important hole.

dadycoool

Yeah, isn't there, like, four fronts to this attempt?

Kai Wingless

Lucky Indrani isn't here right now to make this into a filthy joke.

Mirror Night

I mean its not especially clear what most Named are doing during these pushes.

Basic tactical logic would probably suggest you put Mirror Knight in front, a healer behind him and push through. But Cat is the lead so she has to shine which is tricky when such a large cast gives a lot of options cause it leaves the audience with a lot of questions and what is optimal.

caoimhinh

Supposedly they are assaulting the walls of Keter from various sides at the same time, which requires them to make these heavy sacrifices to succeed because if they were to focus on a single front then Keter would focus its defenses on that point too.

Allegedly, the other sides are also facing heavy resistance as Catherine is making that charge, and the dozens of other Named are required for dividing the Dead King's efforts in the other sides.

Mirror Night

Oh I am sure they are busy offscreen and that you can no prize explanations. Though I do think the writer probably should bother to state why obvious solutions are not being tried. So it just kinda stands out that they didn't put a tanky Named in front and try to push through like that since it such an obvious solution that gets used other times in the story.

agumentic

I mean, what's a tanky Named going to achieve here? The army would just die around them even if they wouldn't.

caoimhinh

What he could achieve is to get rid of the ballistas. That was the only issue they had and why the army couldn't cross and apparently why the flying fortresses couldn't cross either. The archers and the mages weren't the problem, since the Grand Alliance had answers for

both, the issue was always the ballistas, but I honestly think it is a valid option to have used the Mirror Knight to make the cross and break the ballistas, while Masego, Cat and the army mages cover him from the sorceries of the undead.

Once the ballistas were gone, the rest of the army could cross without much issue, since the ballistae were the only thing that could pass the defensive panels of the mages.

agumentic

Are you suggesting just sending Mirror Knight on his own to break dozens of siege engines spread on top of the wall and surrounded by an army and mages and, as we now see, Revenants up to the Scourges? There are much easier ways to kill him, for all his tankiness.

caoimhinh

No, no. I really think he could pull through. Keep in mind that the Scourges are waaay on the back, to the point that even now Catherine is just feeling that they will approach.

Masego can take care of the curses and sorceries of the undead, which are what could really hinder MK's advance. The arrows would be useless against him, and the stones shot by the ballistae wouldn't stop him because he can reflect them.

Those are skeletons that even regular soldiers (albeit very badass ones) could beat, so they would be unable to even delay Mirror Knight as he cleaves through them with the Severance, nothing that was shown in this chapter would be able to stop him from getting to the siege engines. He just needs to reach the ballistae, as there aren't that many of those, evidenced by how Cat's mages quickly got rid of them upon crossing the bridge.

Once the ballistae were gone, the Army of Callow could cross without much issue, even if the mass of undead soldiers could somehow overwhelm Cristophe, which is highly unlikely, they could establish the beachhead and support him once the ballistae are gone.

So I don't believe it is a crazy suggestion. In fact, I think it's likely Mirror Knight is doing exactly that, but on another front, which is why Catherine

needed to do this on this front, since he was occupied somewhere else.

agumentic

Yeah, I think you are very, very much overestimating how much MK could do without a good story behind him. He is not nearly as invulnerable as to be able to walk through the army, even leaving aside that it would take him so much time that Keter would be able to bring reinforcements.

Also, the Scourges are not way in the back, they are ready to respond the moment there's a danger of the army actually breaking past the wall.

Regret

Because a tanky named wouldn't convince anyone to cross. The issue is one of morale, not armour.

Letouriste

Worse, a tank can be easily killed if dropped in the void under the bridge. Just concentrate fire enough on them to push them

caoimhinh

That's why the others should be there to cover him. Masego or Catherine get rid of the sorcery of the undead, the army mages use the panels to cover him from the arrows, and he just tanks the stones of the ballistae.

And we know for a fact that he is able to go through that, because one of his abilities lets him reflect whatever is thrown at him, so the stones would just rebound and neither damage him nor push him.

Then it's just a matter of Cristophe cutting through those skeletons with the Severance and get rid of the ballistae. Then the rest of the army can cross without issue and the flying fortresses can land without being shot down.

ohJohN

My dude, this seems like a reading comprehension issue:

Cat straight up says that the Blessed Artificer is the only Named that is both available and powerful enough to help. That's enough information to infer why your plan isn't being tried: either Cat judged that the Mirror

Knight (or any tank) wouldn't be particularly helpful here, or he's committed to another front.

Tbh, my guess is both. The idea that MK tanking his way across the bridge is an "obvious solution" to this situation is insane to me – they're trying to get an army across, not one dude!! His powers would do basically nothing to protect the legionaries crossing behind him, and a beachhead consisting of him and the corpses of the entire Third Army is worth *jack shit*. At that point, why not just have Cat airdrop him on the other side of the chasm, instead of sacrificing an army to get him there?

It's a dumb idea – just a very obviously bad plan, orthogonal to the characters' stated goals – but whatever, I have a bunch of dumb ideas every chapter and sometimes I even comment them. It happens!

I just think it's a dick move to suggest EE didn't "bother to state why obvious solutions are not being tried" when the chapter starts with Cat pretty explicitly saying 'the only Named available to help are me and BA', and *especially* when your "obvious" solution is so bonkers.

Rynjin

Mirror Knight consistently has reading comprehension issues. I'm not sure if they're a very committed troll or they really are that deluded about their own intelligence.

caoimhinh

To be fair, the use of Cristophe is a valid suggestion. Since the only real issue was the ballistae, it is a valid wonder why they didn't use Cristophe to make it there and break the ballistae in order to clear the path for the army to cross the bridges. Once the ballistae were gone, the rest of the army is free to cross the bridges and the flying fortresses made it across the chasm without issue.

True, Cat mentions that everyone else is occupied somewhere else, yeah, but we don't know any details beyond that, so it's a valid question. I mean, for all we know, Cristophe IS doing that right now for the other front, since they are assaulting Keter from 2 or 3 directions at once. This is the struggle on Cat's side, but it seems logical to me that the other front is using Cristophe in the way Mirror Night suggested, it's simply that the assaults have to be done simultaneously.

On another note, a single one of the Scourges would have been enough to stop Cat's army from crossing, simply by occupying Cat the rest of the army would be slaughtered. Why weren't they used until the army has crossed? Like, even now Cat is barely feeling them coming to her after the army has secured a beachhead.

ohJohN

I think you're arguing something different than Mirror Knight was – they didn't mention the ballistae at all. Their idea was:

"Basic tactical logic would probably suggest you put Mirror Knight in front, a healer behind him and push through."

and then again: "put a tanky Named in front and try to push through like that"

I can see how crippling Keter's siege weapons maybe could have given the Third Army enough relief to cross the bridges, but it's a big leap to get to that idea from "tank in front, just push through". I'm not trying to say there's no way MK could have possibly helped, just that the idea as presented was not recognizably a solution, let alone an obvious one.

I agree MK is most likely fighting on another front. (If anything, that's the crux of my point – we weren't given many details, but it's still easy to figure out if you're paying attention: we know all Named are committed, and he's not here, so obviously he's fighting on one of the other fronts and can't help out here!)

And I don't begrudge anyone for wondering what, specifically, he or other Named are doing – I'd personally enjoy an interlude covering the other fronts in this battle.

I just thought that dig at EE was kinda shitty, especially because the criticism seems so glaringly baseless. The writer DID give them enough information to figure out why their (imo dumb) solution wasn't being tried! That's actually really neat, and a credit to the author!

Just, if you're gonna accuse someone of careless writing, a) don't be a jerk about it, but if you can't manage that, at least b) make sure it's not actually the fault of your own careless reading.

SomeGuyWhoReadsThings

That fails to account for the Story aspect of this. This is DK tactics, drown them persistently but never too hard. Hed be making good stories for the heroes by overplaying his hand with the Scourges

caoimhinh

True, but as far as we know, the other front is using Mirror Knight in exactly that manner you suggested. The problem is, even if he can make a beachhead there, Cat still needs to make a beachhead in her front, and do it right as the others are being made because otherwise the other fronts will be overrun.

They are assaulting Keter from what? Three directions? Cristophe can clear the path in one front, but the other 2 had to get creative or bloody in order to make it across.

So I agree with you that MK would be a solution here (the ballistae were the only thing for which they had no answer, and he could make that trip to break them) but I believe he is currently doing that on the other front, so Cat needed to do this on her own front.

Friend of EE

The Army of Callow wouldn't follow a Proceran into the breach, and it's the Army of Callow's "turn" to assault the walls.

Sun Dog

Tactical logic suggests you put the Mirror Knight in a catapult, where he can do the most good.

Sir Nil

Because in this world what is most tactically sound has to also depend on 'Story' beats, the unspoken rule is that every Named can only fill a few roles in any encounter. Spending Mirror Knight cracking the door open might mean he's a less effective wielder of Severence when they five man band DK.

arcanavita¹⁵

I wonder if Cat will get an aspect out of this because this is something that I feel should've gotten an aspect because leading and inspiring people is what Cat does, maybe it doesn't fit with her role well enough.

[Liliet](#)

I think it doesn't quite fit with the Name yeah.

dadycool

Yeah, she's a Named wrangler rather than a general. She leaves that to her orcs.

[Adrian_V](#)

I still think at one point she will summon a ghost or specter army basically of all the people she considers her own that have died, there are too many hints and references with lines like "you are one of mine and one day i will come for you" or stuff like that

[Liliet](#)

I low key thought that was what was going on here. But no... it's saved up still ^^

(When it happens, will be a callback to Twilight Liesse too)

shikkarasu

"I will Collect" running tally: 3

- "This is not a bargain, King of Winter, it's an oath," I hissed. "One day, we'll meet again. Not tomorrow, not next month, not for decades. After your game's played out. After I've learned to kill gods. On that day, I'll come to collect."

- (To Robber, as he died) No matter where you end up you will be one of mine. Sooner or later, I will come to collect.

- "I'll see you around, Alaya," I said, eye cold. "Don't die before I come to collect."

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Remember how, in the alternate-timeline illusion trap Akua used on her, one of Cat's alts came into the Name of Tolltaker? I can see why.

shikkarasu

Hands down my favourite chapter. The Four Fold Crossing was magnificent. Pun neither intended nor apologised for.

Isi Arnott-Campbell



BargleNawdleZouss

Edgar the Lender? Edgar the Armorer? Good to see him, in any case!

Where was Abigail in the muster of the Third Army?

Death Knight

I'd wager she was the first to scream Dauntless!

[Liliet](#)

I'd wager against that LMAO

[Liliet](#)

...actually nevermind, I could see it! She's always been the clear-sighted kind of scared.

agumentic

Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised if Abigail immediately thought "Oh Gods, if the Black Queen dies here we're all doomed, we have to support her" and was the first to rush after Cat.

[Adrian_V](#)

Don't forget to mention about Juniper eating her liver, probably with Hakram too xD

Regret

Or "Oh Gods, if I don't get the army to charge then the only way I get to keep my pension is by charging on my own"

Velrix

Ahah, so likely. I really want to see more of this character. She's not named but Abigail is loved by creation, and the readers.

shikkarasu

I like to think of us as the Gods Above and Below. The ones that guide Hanno's sword, whisper clarifications into Tariq's ears, and, of course, the ones who applauded Kairos' final hour. Often via the comments section, but mostly in our hearts.

In this way, Abigail is truly beloved by the Gods and will suffer accordingly.

Soronel Haetir

Dayum!

edrey

the Beast in the end of the world, really poetic.

Juff

Typo Thread:

on porcupine > on a porcupine
heartbeat if hesitation > heartbeat of hesitation
bride > bridge
crackles, exploded > crackled, exploding
Creation.So > Creation. So
bathing in pale (something missing here)
were arrows > where arrows
is there > was there
protecting me > protecting me.
cowing me > cow me
built on > built
began took > began taking
West the > Wrest the
the coming > them coming

Vernal.ancient

The storm of arrows was not the danger of a single breath. It was a doom in three beats, as again and again the enemy went through the same movements: nock, pull, loose.

Loved that line

Bad@games

Every time there is a chapter like this i cant help but laugh triumphantly and smile like a madman. its so good. Cat and the

army of mother fucking callow, the callbacks and everything too good.

Espen Nilsen

The last gasps of the Dread Empire of Praes had come to make war.

Holy shit thats a good line

[vexingvision](#)

Glorious. Breathtaking.

[sengachi](#)

One last time. Into the breach.

Wonder

I love this chapter . But juy one tiny thing, did it have to be a wolf? Why no other shape?

Agent J

The Beast has always been a large furred monster. But, ngl, I always saw it more like a tiger. What with all the times Cat was referred to as such. Well, "all the times". I'm more thinking of Black waxing poetic about rearing tigers and complaining of stripes. Also, well... Cat.

dadycool

Well, for one thing, we've been saying for a while that she's been gaining an Odin-like presence, what with the two crows, a staff that's more than a staff, and her wolf of a name.

Sinead

Also, when she was a struggling warrior, I could see her emblem as a solitary hunter.

But as she has become more and more the representation of the institutions of Law? That is a wolf.

[Hydrargentium](#)

Remember also that Captain (and the loss of her) has been a looming presence for Catherine for a long time, since long before she even started down this current Name's path. So perhaps the Wolf is in part shaped by the memory of Captain.

Hg

Dome Zasrekh

What if it wasn't just Zeze protecting her, but a certain other talented sorceress?

Agent J

Ah! Of course! I agree, it must have been the Haunted Witch. 😊

nick012000

Cat in this chapter: STAND POWER!

shikkarasu

Stand Master: Catherine Foundling

Stand Name: *Treacherous Gods*

Destructive Power: A

Speed: D

Range: B

Stamina: C

Precision: C

Development Potential: B, even after all these years

nick012000

Nah, it'd have to have the name of a song. Clearly, the name of Catherine's Stand would be Here They Come Again – the song she sings in this chapter.

shikkarasu

Oh, an in-universe song. Good idea. I went for Ensiferum, although in fairness *Treacherous Gods* probably fits Captain better.

bellacohl

Very very nice. The song reminded me of Farrier too.

dadycool

Whew. Glorious. Absolutely glorious. Nothing inspires soldiers more than their leader actually leading them rather than directing them, and that's exactly what they needed right then. And we even got to see the Beast in Creation for the first time! I was sincerely hoping to see it, made up of the corpses that fell, climb its way up to the walls, but this was probably better.

Darkening

Yeah, I was kinda hoping for that too, but it probably would have had unfortunate effects on the morale of the soldiers following her.

Velrix

Yeah, but generally this end badly for the general. The enemies will focus on him and if he die his army will likely rout. It's done in last solution when the moral is extremely low and the defeat imminent, or when he can charge without retaliation. And even if not routed the army would be crippled by the loss of the leader, and then defeated.

shikkarasu

Truth, but generally the general is not High Priestess of Night and is not known for such deeds as stealing wings from the Princess of Summer, walking off decapitation, or punching a tower-sized devil-snake so hard that it *died*.

Cat... honestly I'm a little surprised that she needed the Beast at all.

dadycool

lol, I miss those early days when she was a badass warrior girl and her men came up with ridiculously overdone tales of her greatness. Them worshiping her as a minor god is nice and all, but it was nice when they simply admired her instead.

Squeamish

Ah I've been lurking reading this for a while now but we're getting towards the end and this scene was too good.

My favorite scenes have always been these ones, where it all seems so hopeless that to even take a step is more than anyone can ask of you. That to struggle is sheer defiance. But God, only Catherine could make that struggle so glorious

Crash

It's that first verse that always gets me

"So pick up your sword, boy

Here they come again

And down here in the mud

It's us who holds the line"

It's been coming back since the very first "Too much" for Cat's armies, fighting Diabolist's devils at Marchford. And yet, somehow, every time it hits just right.

Daniel E

This one took a bit of digging, but I think I got them all. Every mention of Edgar to date, in order; Beheld II, Intervention, New Tricks.

Daniel Ball

alas, I'm wondering if Neshama is realizing he made a mistake, or if he's sitting back in a Gendo pose thinking 'all according to my master plan'.

Crash

those are some dangerous thought for a villain who doesn't know when the Sword of the Rest is gonna be broken

shikkarasu

10 Denarii says he has a plan to bait out the Rest at what he considers the perfect moment.

Not sure if Cat falls for it, feints and breaks it later, or walks into Nessie's trap and then declares that she was prepared for this eventuality. All options are very Catherine.

Letouriste

Finally got the time to read this!
It was so freaking good. Full of epic lines.
Felt completely heroic tho 😊 but I'm not sure it's a problem anymore given her role.

ruduen

Ah, back to basics. With so much work in the army, it's good to go back to one of the oldest lessons Cat was taught.

A Named's job isn't to work the same way units would in an army. It's to find pivots and smash right into them.

Looks like she found the pivot she was looking for.

Someperson

This was a good chapter.

Advancing across the bridge to the heavily fortified breach into Keter on foot on her own? I expect nothing less from Cat tbh

naturalnuke

I fucking LOVE YOU AND THE STORY YOUVE CRAFTED.

Ugh, god you're the only author who can consistently give me actual chills while reading the absolutely peak scenes

morroian

Goddammit I want to see the events of this chapter in an interlude.

Chapter 59: Steel

"War is the greatest of alchemies. It takes men as can be found in any town in the world and makes them into heroes and monsters."

– Extract from the prologue of the first volume of the "Annals of the League of Free Cities", by famed historian Shapash the Ashuran

The skeleton was decked in bronze, the scales of the armour pristine and the strange horned helmet it sported was freshly polished – as well as open faced. I closed the distance so the swing of its axe would pass behind me, rasping down the Mantle of Woe without even cutting cloth, and smashed the pommel of my sword into the skull. One blow shattered the jaw, a second the nose and the third ripped the head right off the spine.

"Form up," I shouted. "Seventh Company, do I need to gently hold your fucking hand before you put those shields locked?"

"Yes please," a woman's voice shouted back.

I snorted, getting a glimpse of a tall Soninke flashing pale teeth at me before her lieutenant slapped the back of her helm. The seventh company heeded my order, though, echoed as it was by the shouts of a dozen angry sergeants. With the seventh, the twelfth and the fourth forming up on our left flank we should be good to push further up. Their shield walls blocked the streets on that side, though at the moment they didn't have anyone to face down. My hand was still smoking from my last use of Night collapsing a row of the houses between those streets, helped along by every mage we could scrape together. We'd wanted to leave them up, use them to keep the dead herded when they showed up, but it'd been too much of a risk.

After the fourth time a supposedly clear house was revealed to have had ghouls hidden somewhere in it that then leapt from the

roof straight at a mage to die tearing the throat out, I'd decided to stay on the safe side. The houses had been almost absurdly easy to bring down, we'd found, which had the back of my neck pricking. That did not strike me as an accident. Satisfied with the seventh company's formation, I tore my gaze away from them and turned to the tall orc lieutenant that'd been waiting patiently on me as I shouted.

"I'm listening," I said.

"Ma'am," he began, "we-"

He was interrupted by a horrific scream as a hellish burst of red light bled all over the clouds above us, a distorted ring of magic burning with runes flickering open a dozen blocks ahead of us. A misshapen horror dropped through, too-small wings looking like rotted bone slowing the descent of a creature with distended scaled belly with too-long arms ending in massive claws. The horror dropped down out of sight, still letting out those soul-rending shrieks. The lieutenant drily swallowed. I clapped his shoulder.

"Cheer up, lieutenant," I said. "Sure, that was one of the foulest abominations either of us has ever seen but for once the damned fucking thing's on our side."

The flying fortress hovering above that part of the city, raining down spells and stones, made that pretty clear. The Praesi were tossing devils into the mess ahead of my army like a fool trying to buy a wish at a fountain, which was both encouraging and not: much as I was happy they were softening up the opposition, I did have to wonder how bad it must be for this to be the seventh time they were burning a greater devil contract.

"Hungry Gods," the orc got out, "I guess that's something to be thankful for. Fuck of a day if-"

His face turned anguished, pulling a fresh cut on the side of his nose, when he realized who he'd just been cursing with.

"-ma'am," he hastily added, then saluted for good measure. "The front is stalling, ma'am, Commander Spitter requests that you come help break the stalemate."

I nodded.

"Tell him I'm on my way," I said. "The flanks are set up, we need to begin pushing into the city."

The avenue we so badly needed to get to was straight ahead, by memory, and I'd spent so many hours looking at maps of Keter that I could see the layout of the city when I closed my eyes.

It had been millennia since the fall of Sephirah and the living ceased to stay within the walls – save for a few hundred servants deep in the heart of the city – but though the Dead King had had worked his horror on all that lay within the walls there were still traces of the city that once was. I'd seen in the Arcadian echoes that Keter had been raised on a pair of hills by a river, and though the water was long gone the city still echoed of it. The Crown of the Dead was built upwards, the bottom of it beginning at the foot of its forty-yards high walls and rolling up to the raised plateau where the two hills had once stood.

There the five palaces of Keter awaited us, and the Hellgate whose taking would be our victory.

The inside of the city was a maze whose layout changed according to the Dead King's whims, streets and 'houses' – most of them empty, used only to store the dead and their arms away from weather so they would not rust and decay – raised and demolished according to arcane designs, but a handful of parts had remained unmoving through all the crusades. Most important of them was a set of six large avenues crisscrossing the city, the largest of which went through north to south and had been built over the now-dry riverbed of the river that had attracted people to live here long ago. For our push into the city to have a change of getting anywhere, we needed to get onto one of those avenues.

The rest of Keter was a playground of death, and though those avenues were sure to be trapped and heavily defended at the end of the day they were the one part of the city that Neshamah couldn't actually destroy while defending his capital: he needed the damned avenues to move his soldiers around. He could use the smaller streets, sure, but them being a maze was a double-edged sword and they also happened to be *narrow*. Meaning not a lot of soldiers could squeeze through and given that the Dead King's great advantage was numbers that was a harsh handicap when tangling with the Army of Callow. We'd earned our reputation as the finest foot on Calernia the hard way.

Soldiers were milling about in a semblance of good order, lines and companies shifting to anchor our flanks or press at the front while we expanded on all sides to make room for the troops continuing to cross. I winced as I saw a ballista bolt from somewhere to the northwest scythe through a few of my soldiers, killing or toppling them to a more horrible death. Neshamah was beginning to move siege engines in position at the top of the still-standing walls on both our flanks, which was going to be a problem. We'd either need to take the walls to silence them, spreading out further than I'd like, or keep our mages lines focused on the defence until the soldiers had crossed. *Juniper's problem*, I reminded myself. She'd figure something out. I shook myself out of the thoughts and followed a line of regulars

towards the front, through melted stone gone cool and buildings shredded by the Ram.

Beyond the grounds glassed by the Light the shattered buildings rose into a ragged slope of collapsed walls and loose stones, which we climbed in haste as arrows fell in sparse rain from a long distance. Arcing shots, likely fired blindly from behind enemy lines at a place they knew would force us to lower shields for balance. Let it not be said that the Dead King's commanders were unskilled, however empty and brutally efficient a kind of skill it might be. Climbing down the slope onto a paved street, I saw exactly what Commander Spitter had needed me for. After crossing the bridges we'd swept through the enemy defences and then another three city blocks beyond that as the dead tried to put together a shield wall to check our advance, but it'd not been enough.

Keter had recovered from the surprise two blocks further in, though. A barricade was encircling our position, as I blinked in astonishment at the sight of it – it'd not existed a quarter hour ago – I realized exactly why those houses on our flanks had been so easy to collapse.

"*Shit,*" I muttered.

Keter was possible to fortify in a way that no other city in the world was, when it came down to it. Even the great fortresses of Calernia had to make concessions to habitability, but what did the Crown of the Dead care for that? There were no living souls within the walls and so the city made solely to be held against invaders, massive armies led by heroes. And though we'd avoided the worst of the defences by collapsing a wall instead of taking one of the gates, we'd known that was not a state of affairs that was going to last. Nor had it. That impossible barricade that had encircled our vanguard, leaving only one way through in a narrow street, had not been assembled – it had been *collapsed*. Undead had smashed the houses, collapsing them in a way that blocked streets as well.

I threw up an eye of Night as high as I could and cursed again at what I saw. Like industrious ants, skeletons were going around collapsing houses all around our beachhead to encircle it in a loose ring. And where a later of barricade had already been made, they went about adding a second. *They're hemming us in,* I thought. *If we don't break through quick enough, they'll just bottle us here and shoot us like fish in a barrel.* And like all the finest trap did, they'd left us with a visible way out so we'd commit: that narrow street in front of our vanguard, packed so tightly with undead they could barely move. A funnel for us to charge down and die in. I began elbowing my way forward, though after the first few times my soldiers saw who I was and parted their ranks instead.

"Shield wall," I shouted. "Get those fucking shields up before you all get shot!"

Officers echoed me across the army, our lines grown ragged from the breakthrough steadying just as the first undead crossbows and javelinmen began lining up atop the barricade. We'd taken the Dead King aback with our charge, but now he'd forcefully stabilized his line with the collapsed houses and he was setting up another killing field: if those barricades weren't about to be sprouting a forest's worth of range troops, I'd eat my crown. I particularly did not like the look of the javelins: those went right through shields and plate when thrown right, which the skeletons were sure to. It wasn't the thought that we couldn't smash our way through that had me worried, mind you. We could and goddamn would. It was the other ninety times we'd have to do it before we got anywhere near a victory. Was the Dead King already ordering a second ring of barricades to be collapsed around us, or was he going to wait a bit more?

Either way, I grimly thought, the only way we weren't going to be drowned in street-by-street fighting was by moving too quickly for him to be able to keep us bottled up. And the only way for that was to break through another fourteen blocks straight ahead, to reach one of the five central avenues of Keter. I knew better than to think every step in direction wasn't going to sprout a fresh nightmare in need of putting down. Thankfully, I was due the presence of some people who knew a thing or two about doing that. I swung my sword at a knot of skeleton crossbowmen, blowing them off the rampart as air exploded in front of them, and ran a hand down the chord of a story. One was almost there.

I felt out the outcome a heartbeat before the sequence of it could begin, and immediately pulled on Night. A large beorn came into sight, having climbed a large tower to the east, and after a roar it leapt. I could see the trajectory before it had even begun to move. A smooth arc down, straight into the company of heavies from the Third that was hammering at the enemy shield wall trying to keep us pinned in the avenue. And it might have landed, if not for the silhouette that ran up a half-collapsed house without breaking stride before leaping up, shining with blindingly bright Light. I caught a glimpse of a greatsword being swung as the beorn was carved through from head to toe and somewhere behind me I felt the twin shiver of an aspect being used and magic blooming: a gale of wind caught the halves of the beorn and the roiling skeletons within, tossing them back into the enemy ranks.

A heartbeat later the Blade of Mercy landed on his feet and the Rogue Sorcerer ended his spell. A heartbeat after that, what looked like a horse-sized worm made entirely out of muscles and fingerbones popped out from behind a tower to the west and spat a cloud of poison at that same company of heavies.

Fear, relief, horror returned. The Dead King's favourite play.

"None of that," I said, clicking my tongue, and released the Night.

A spinning sphere swallowed the cloud before contracting and exploding into a ball of poisonous flame, which a flick of my wrist sent right back at the bloody horror. It slithered into the tower for cover but not quite quick enough, its bottom half incinerated as the roof of the building collapsed atop it. Since Roland and the Blade of Mercy were here, she should be somewhere – I frowned, then turned around and hit the space right behind me with the flat of my sword. The Painted Knife let out a yelp, cold steel slapping her cheek, and I spared a glare as she backpedalled.

"How many times am I going to have to tell you you're not bloody invisible, Kallia?" I said.

"At least you didn't drop me down a tower this time," the Painted Knife reproachfully replied.

"Day's young," I grunted, "and if you keep trying to sneak up on me during battle I might reconsider."

I was completely serious, which the heroine seemed to pick up on.

"I hear your words, Black Queen," she assured me.

I hummed, entirely unconvinced. I was pretty sure this had turned into one of those headache-inducing Levant honour things for her, which meant I was going to have to keep breaking her legs until she decided not even the bragging rights were worth that amount of pain.

"Your last two?" I asked.

"They should be-"

There was a great cracking sound to my left and I immediately turned, eye going straight to the unusual sight of someone single-handedly smashing their way through a barricade that was almost entirely stone with little more than a war hammer. A woman in bright red plate – Gods, the sight of it had every inch of me offended, that was just *asking* to get shot – with a helmet forged to look like a grinning devil and weapons strapped on her back was pulverising chunks of stone with every swing. And though she was almost seven feet tall and broad as a barn door, it wasn't muscles alone that let the Red Knight shatter stone like it was overripe cantaloupes.

She wasn't good at much aside from breaking shit, but that much she was *really* good that.

The villainess might still have taken a few javelins in the neck for her troubles courtesy of the undead above, though, if not for the fact that they were currently occupied with an enthusiastically murderous wolf the size of a small barn. Where the Hells the Skinchanger had actually found a wolf that large in Lycaonese lands was a mystery to me, much less killed and skinned it for use, but I wasn't going to argue with the shapes the woman had chosen to take up: they were a pretty repertoire of clawed and fanged nightmares, even the fucking birds. I didn't know why the eagle-thing she sometimes turned into had horns, of all things, but apparently they were both amour-piercing and poisonous so why the Hells not?

A someone who had ridden a flying horse for several years, I had a healthy appreciation for aerial impalements.

"There," I completed for the Painted Knife. "So I see."

She looked faintly embarrassed. So she hadn't actually ordered the Red Knight to make that breach, huh. I sympathized. Even I found the villainess difficult to deal with, and unlike Kallia my authority was bolstered by the fact that I'd once brought down a four-story tower on the Red Knight's head just to make a point. Hadn't actually done much to her, which was why to this day I was pretty sure to kill her I'd need a pool of acid of some sort. Fortunately, she was so infuriatingly terrible a person I was also pretty sure I could get the Concocter to brew said acid for free.

"A second breach will hasten our advance," I continued. "But you need to get your band ready after we punch through."

A steady stare met mine.

"The Scourges are coming," the Painted Knife said.

"At least one," I agreed. "And it'll be coming with lesser Revenants to use as meat shields."

The Dead King wasn't going to commit his finest remaining blades to fights to the – second – death so early in the battle, but he'd be looking to pick up a few kills among our Named if he could. Thin the herd, so to speak, and throw Revenant bodies in the way to get his Scourges out if we got too close to taking a scalp. I had every intention of snuffing out one of his last heavy hitters if the occasion arose, mind you, and Hanno should be fighting at one of the gates with the same intention. The trouble, we both knew, was that invaders past a certain point there was no choice but to fight on the Hidden Horror's terms.

Not something that tended to go well for us, as a rule.

"We will be ready," the Painted Knife swore, then hesitated.

I cocked an eyebrow.

"Might you keep the Rogue Sorcerer by your side?" she asked.
"Skilled as he is, we move quicker without him and he is most useful from the back."

"I'll drag him along," I agreed.

Roland was one of those eminently reasonable mages that actually wore armour, so I had no issue bringing him into a battlefield. Besides, for a spellcaster the Alamans was actually ridiculously difficult to kill: the amount of protective artifacts he wore on him at all times was impressive paranoid even by Wasteland standards.

"Good hunting," I said, offering my arm.

"And you, Warden," the Painted Knife replied, clasping it.

I waited for Roland, and gentlemen that he was he didn't make it long. Some part of me was always surprised that the Rogue Sorcerer wasn't taller, I thought. It must have been the long leather coat over the chain mail, covered with pockets full of artefacts. Though the dark-haired man usually went without a helmet, this once he'd made an exception and put on a plumed bassinet that pressed his curls against his head. He had a short wand painted blue in hand, which to my senses reeked of the fae. Huh, I'd never seen him with that one before.

"Catherine," he greeted me, glancing at the melee ahead. "I'm grieved we only came so late."

"Named wouldn't have been useful on the bridges," I admitted. "It would have been handing Revenants to the opposition."

Not entirely true, but the few Named that would have made a difference had been needed elsewhere. I was already here, after all, and insisting the Army of Callow should also have the services of the Witch of the Woods on top of mine would have been a hard sell.

"Then we'll make up for the absence it now," Roland firmly said.
"Where do you need me?"

I couldn't help but smile. He'd been one of the first heroes to grow on me for a reason.

"You're with me," I said, "and we're going into the thick of it."

"Ah, certain death," he drily replied. "How I missed working with you, Warden."

"Don't be so gloomy," I chided. "It's only *mostly* certain death."

"That would be our finest odds in quite a while, then," he snorted.

He gallantly offered me his arm to walk, which was a nice thought but still got him elbowed in the ribs. It was a battlefield, not a garden stroll. *Alamans*, Merciless Gods. Even at the bloody end of the world. The closest we got to the front, the harder it got to move: the press of soldiers tightened, kept on tightening until it squeezed into the sole street that had been the sole way out of the barricades. Now there was another opening, I thought, but the pressure would not be relieved for some time yet. Maybe thirty feet ahead of us I saw the shield walls hammering at each other, the dead packed tight as my heavies tried to break through them. I leaned closer to Roland.

"Can you clear that?" I asked, gesturing in the melee's direction.

"Given time to cast," the Rogue Sorcerer replied. "Why?"

"Because unless I'm mistaken," I murmured, "we're about to ambushed. I need you to draw attention."

He sent me a pained look. I stared back, unmoved, until he conceded with a sigh.

"Bait it is," Roland said. "Is Kallia near?"

I nodded. The Painted Knife, for all that her team had some rather straightforward brawlers, was still an assassin at heart. She was waiting too. The Rogue Sorcerer rolled his shoulder.

"Then let's get to it," the hero said.

I took a step back, pulling on Night, and let it fall over me like a veil. I tore out a sliver and shaped it into an eye, tossing it up in the sky, and as I closed my eye of flesh I saw through the other. The Red Knight's breach had let the companies there turn the tables. Climbing through the mess was hard and there were corpses all over the slope, but now my legionaries had climbed atop the barricade and were tearing into the crossbowmen and javelineers. Ahead of me I looked past the brutal melee in the street, seeing how skeletons were pouring in from all adjoining streets to pack this one so tight they could barely move. Yet it was the houses I looked at closest, the tiled stone roofs. I couldn't see a Revenant yet, but that hardly meant there were none.

Ahead of me, the Rogue Sorcerer let out a hoarse shout and pointed an ornate casting rod at the sky: flames poured out like a flock of birds, bright and of many colours.

I could not spare a longer look than that, because the enemy were moving. Three Revenants on a rooftop that'd been empty until an arrow went flying – my heart clenched for a moment but the archer was in bright green leathers, so not the Hawk – and an illusion broke. I kept my eye on them even as what must be a mage Revenant, given that otherwise the swirling colours of those robes would be some sort of a crime, raised an ornate golden staff and pulled an illusion on them again. I'd had a heartbeat to look at the third, finding good plate and a large shield that did not belong to any of the Scourge. Whichever was there they were still lying in wait, so I held back as well.

Around me soldiers began to press forward, parting around my position without knowing why, and I made a note that whatever it was Roland had used it had seemingly worked.

The three Revenants were under illusion again but now that I knew what to look for I could taste the subtle power in the air and follow their position. The Painted Knife's band went about it another way: a heartbeat later a hawk dropped down on the rooftop, turning into a large hound as it landed, and immediately began sniffing the air. Knowing their position was blown, the Revenants engaged: the illusion went down, an arrow was loosed at the Skinchanger – which she turned into a bear to shrug off – and the sword and board undead doubled back to attack our scout Named. A tactical mistake, I thought as the Painted Knife appeared behind their mage and hacked through the hand holding the staff. A heartbeat later the Blade of Mercy was there as well, landing in a flash of Light that tore a hole through the roof and forced him to roll forward so he wouldn't drop through.

It wasn't a done deal, I thought as I watched them. The mage Revenant's hand kept wielding the staff even when cut off and the Blade of Mercy backed off in surprise when the sword and board undead took on his greatsword without batting an eye, but the band of Named had the advantage. Which meant we were soon due... Darkness fell over the roof and I cursed. I'd been too much to hope that being buried under most of Hainaut had been enough to kill off the Mantle, I supposed. At least I got to find out where she was, which happened to be a rooftop far to my left. Standing besides what had to be the sloppiest Revenant I'd ever seen: barely more than ragged skin and bones, with floppy hair and loose farmers' clothes. Not a weapon in sight and he looked pretty confused.

He couldn't have been more obviously dangerous if the word had been branded on his fucking forehead.

"All right," I grunted. "My turn."

The setup ought to work. I released the Night hiding me and shaped it into solid shadows instead, coiling around me and then exploding outwards in tendrils that I used like great legs.

Shouts of surprise came from my legionaries below as I stepped over them and over the barricade, skeletons hacking away at the shadow limbs harmlessly. A streak of magic whizzed my way but I adjusted my position absent-mindedly to let it go wide, eye still on the Mantle. She pointed her great steel mace towards me, her armoured silhouette cast in the half-light allow through by the clouds, and the world shivered from the strength of the curse that shot out. She had, unfortunately for her, fallen prey to the story I'd prepared.

A woman decked in red steel leapt up in the way of the curse, laughing, and the world shivered again.

I'm not the fifth in their band, I thought, you struck too early. I smiled down at the Scourge even as I guided myself to land on the rooftop closest to the Mantle's. The Red Knight joined me up there, her armour glimmering deeper red from the curse she had been able to **Devour**. She spat to the side, reaching at her back and taking up a broadsword.

"Weak," the Red Knight sneered. "Your hatred is weak. I'll show you what a real Named is like, you petty armoured bitch."

I rolled my shoulder, limping up to her side as the Mantle pivoted to face us and the Revenant at her side looked at us with befuddlement. I reached out with my Name, tried to get a read on what he could do, but all I got was a vague sense of bad luck. And yet I smiled, as I felt a ripple behind me and to our side the Mantle's darkness suddenly vanished. Roland's **Confiscate** worked on the Mantle's curses, then. Good to know.

"Keep her busy," I told the Red Knight, preparing to leap to the other roof. "But don't take risks. We can afford to wait until the others are-"

Instinct pulled at me and I obeyed, taking a step to the side. It saved my life. I felt a raging current of power suddenly unleashed from below and the world exploded. I tumbled down through heated shards of what had been tiles a moment ago, shielding my eyes, as a curse passed close enough to rustle the Mantle of Woe. I hit the ground a moment after, swallowing a scream as I landed on my bad leg, but I stood through the pain to face a simple oaken staff being pointed towards me. A ragged figure in faded grey robes, eyes lifeless and long black hair tumbling down his back, stood before me inside a circle of wards. The Tumult, greatest spellcaster in the Dead King's service, began to incant. Instinct pulled at me again, the warning of certain death, but before I could heed it and *move* a cacophonous noise drowned out everything else and the ground shuddered.

The wall blew up a heartbeat later, spraying shards everywhere as the flying fortress crushed three city blocks and I had to pull Night to be just so the shockwave wouldn't splatter me all over

the walls. The Tumult was not so lucky, his wards allowing through no harm but just enough wind that he was smacked flat against his own magic shield. Breathing out raggedly I released the Night, wiping dust out of my eyes, and found laughter bubbling out of my throat as someone floated down to the ground to stand between me and the Scourge. Akua Sahelian, armoured from head to toe and somehow still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, stared down the undead mage

"This one you can leave to me, darling," she drawled. "We never did finish our little chat in Hainaut."

In the distance I heard hooves, followed by war cries in Mthethwa, and finally I let the laugh free.

Time to collect some scalps.

[ErraticErrata](#)

It's a little early for it, but happy New Year!

edrey

Happy new year to you too.
And thanks for the chapter and this great novel.

Cicero

Happy New Year

captainmarcia

Happy new year!

[Liliet](#)

Happy New Year!!!!!!!

Mirror Night

Happy New Year

BargleNawdleZouss

Happy New Year, and I hope you are feeling better, EE!

ByVectron!

Please take a beat to relax and recover, EE. Be well, and happy New Year.

lenethren

Wonderful chapter. Thank you. Happy New Year!

erebus42

Happy new year.

letouriste

Happy new year!
Hope you finish recovering smoothly

Frivolous

Happy New Year and thanks for the chapter.

Thanks also for, finally, a good look at the Red Knight, with some dialogue even.

I guess the RK is mostly immune to magic, yet not quite immune to physical damage or entanglement, or else they'd be launching her at enemies like they do Christophe the Mirror Knight.

arcanavita15

Nice to get the update, I am happy to see Cat interacting with the people on the ground level both Named and regular people.

nimelennar

Mage fight! Mage fight! Mage fight!

And Happy New Year, EE!

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Happy mage fight!

Sinead

One could note that the deeper Cat sank into her 'Ultimate Villain' Role, the more detached from people she came.

Could trying to reclaim 'the best part of herself' as so charged be her Good half be the return to the more banter and interactivity with both Named and non-Named people?

[Liliet](#)

THIS ENTIRE CHAPTER WAS SO CUTE AND WHOLESOME SOMEHOW

like no okay I'm aware this is the middle of a bloody battle but it was also cute and wholesome and no-one can take it away from me

special shoutout to Kallia not being invisible ♥

[Liliet](#)

Other special shoutouts:

- the soldier who would not mind if Cat held her hand if you know what I mean;
- Cat giving tactical orders to soldiers she's next to period;
- Roland being the best and also short;
- finding out more about the Red Knight! damn now I like her, and also I love that Cat brought down a four story tower on her to make a point;
- HELL YEAH NAMED VS UNDEAD COMBAT;
- TENTACLE STILTS;
- just, Catherine being badass with Night and her Name. perfectly excellent;
- finding out more about Keter!!!
- what story;
- AKUA!!!!

ByVectron!

And every single bit has been purposely and clearly lead-up-to to this pint, with not a single *deus-ex-machina* in sight. This story has been one of the most rewarding bit of reading I've been able to enjoy in my nearly 50 years on this earth, including Foundation, A Song of Ice and Fire, Lord of the Rings, Enders series, Deathworlders- a Kevin Jenkins Story, and The Expanse.

BargleNawdleZouss

Aha, a fellow Deathworlders fan! 😊

[wadeingintheriver](#)

There are dozens of us!

[shimizubad](#)

Hundreds

Rey d`Tutto

A significant cross-section.

Someperson

I'll admit, this story honestly took a little while to really grow on me. It was mainly the thing I read while I was waiting for updates of different serials. Good, but not necessarily great.

But man am I glad I did keep reading.

As you have said, EE really does a superb job of building up a story step by step, with everything being intentional. All of the stuff that has come before really adds to every scene we get now, to a degree that I think is pretty dang rare.

'Ladi Williams

Happy new year @liliet

RoflCat

At this point Kallia is that one cat who keeps trying to do that slowly sneaking up on you and go still if you turn to look at it.

And after you shooed it away for the nth times it has decided this has gotten PERSONAL.

In contrast to Archer who's the cat that smugly strut up to you and just flops down in your lap because it knows you know that if you refuse then you're going to wake up tomorrow to the face full of cat butt.

ninegardens

Oh god, the raggedy one is the Fortunate Fool.
Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck.

AceOfSword

Yeah, that's what immediately came to my mind too. Hopefully being undead makes him less funny? That way he wouldn't be as hard to kill as the usual comic relief?

'Ladi Williams

Who was the fortunate fool? And when was he introduced? What is/are his powers?

Earl of Purple

He disarmed the traps on the way to the Red Flower Vales for Klaus during the Crusade, and he sacrificed himself to kill the Ghoul King during the timeskip into book six. He's comic relief, he disarmed the goblin munition traps by stumbling, getting blown into the air, and landing on the next until a path was clear.

Bad@games

I agree that's probably the Fool, but I'm not 100 percent. If the Dicer died it may be them stealing cats' luck or smthn

letouriste

Cats know well the Dicer, she would recognize him at first glance.

I assume it would be the same for any of the heroes who joined the alliance (so the fortunate fool too).

ninegardens

My main question is... is any of his old crew here. I feel like Nessie very much **didn't** deploy him vs his old friends Hanno or WotW who would have had some story vs him involving the power of friendship and/or tragedy... but I think maybe the Painted Knife should recognize him? Was she in Hanno's old (V2) band at the Vales?

Sir Nil

Who lucky could he have been? He's dead.

Sir Nil

How* goddamnit autocorrect

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Autocorrupt

LarsBlitzer

I get the sense that if the Story required a sacrifice on the part of the Heroes it would be one of the few things that could override his luck, which seems to be pretty potent. I suppose since he's a revenant now the luck would be somewhat diminished, but it would still take something on the order of using a name to usurp it.

RivettedReader

2nd para: "somewhere in hit that then leapt" -> "somewhere in it that then leapt"

BargleNawdleZouss

It seems to me that the DK's Revenants and Scourges do not change their powers and Aspects in their undeath. IIRC, the Fortunate Fool only had good luck for himself, but was unable to project his fortunate like the Pilfering Dicer can. If that's the case, then FF should have survived the Fortress Drop(tm), but nothing else.

ruduen

I wonder this means if I get my old question answered now. That is, what happens if the Pilfering Dicer and Fortunate Fool meet?

Juff

Typo Thread:

you put those > you get those
in hit that > that
distended scaled belly with > a distended scaled belly and
one our side > on our side
had had > had
forty-yards > forty-yard
change of > chance of
the slow > the slope
city made > city had been made
a later > a layer
trap did > traps did
in direction > in that direction
amour > armour
that invaders > that as invaders,
impressive > impressively
plaint > plain
it now > now
the sole street > the street
to ambushed > to be ambushed
if fall > it fall
I'd been > It'd been
allow through > allowed through
A woman decked (extra space)
to be just so > just so

ohJohN

bassinet > basinet

(the former is a cradle, the latter a helmet)

Mirror Night

Mage Rematch

Also we finally get to meet the Red Knight eh. Few Named have gotten talked about more before actually showing up. Very She Hulk inspired or I guess Red She Hulk not so much for the coloration difference more that Jennifer is pretty smart all the time when Hulking Out.

As for her armor standing out well when your seven feet tall and Named not sure do subtle well anyway. I say its more a liability against Undead (or thinks that dont have fear). She seems very much like old Mirror Knight though more Offensive.

BargleNawdleZouss

I always saw The Berserker as a more direct analogy of The Hulk, not She-Hulk. I would compare Red Knight to Juggernaut, or perhaps, given the way she absorbed that curse, to Absorbing Man.

Regret

I though the Red Knight was more inspired by Logen Ninefingers, AKA The Bloody Nine.

"Something dug into the Bloody-Nine's back, but there was no pain. It was a sign. A message in a secret tongue, that only he could understand. It told him where the next dead man was standing. "

"Kill me?' The Bloody-Nine laughed louder than ever. 'I do the killing, fool!"

"The man screamed, and screamed behind his mask, and the Bloody-Nine laughed, and twisted the blade. Logen might have pitied him, but Logen was far away and the Bloody-Nine had no more pity in him than the winter. Less even. He stabbed, and cut, and cut, and smiled, and the screams bubbled and died, and he let the corpse drop to the cold stones. His fingers were slick with blood and he wiped it on his clothes, on his arms, on his face – just as it should be. "

Earl of Purple

Ever since I first read about the Red Knight and the Skinchanger, I wanted more. Now we've got more and I love them. It's a pity Red Knight can't meet Captain, and have a big lady competition. Skinchanger would have been useful after Beastmaster died, so they could sort of keep the manticore. And I think her skins may have come from the Chain of Hunger. I wonder if she could wear the shape of an Ancient One.

Wonder

Happy new year y'all

WAAAAARRRRRRGGGGGGGHHHHHH

Nothing else was streaming from my mouth other than a silenced version of the above with my fist shaking in the air ...

This chapter was totally AWESOME!!!!

Kane A Larabee

Love me some good ol Rouge Sorcerer. Easily one of my favorite Named all time. Good stuff from cat and we get to see more named fun. Happy new year!

Bad@games

Wait a sec. If that shamblly revenant is the the Fortunate Fool then this may be a problem. Or mabey the Pilfering Dicer? Idk if they are dead or not

letouriste

he's not, as far we know. He was there in cat's showdown against Hanno and Cordelia and there's no report he died since then

[Liliet](#)

We have a problem regardless, and even if this is not the latest Fortunate Fool, it definitely seems to be one of the genre...

agumentic

If this was a Named from this war, Cat would just recognize them. So it's someone new.

letouriste

yep 😊

I bet on a twin personality guy

Someperson

There is an off chance that it's one of the past holders of a Name like Fortunate Fool, but yeah it isn't somebody we've seen before.

Earl of Purple

If the Fortunate Fool were a villain, I'd agree with you. Unfortunately, he's a hero. Cat would have had very little to do with him, and was fighting on another front when he died. He stayed with Klaus, and the Procerans from the Red Flower Vales. He might not have had a rest period away from the lines, so it's quite possible that they never actually met. Even during

the Crusade, he was fighting on the southern front against Amadeus, not Cat's own army.

agumentic

That would be true if there wasn't a two-year time skip Fortunate Fool died in. Cat was fighting on the same side as him for at least a year, and I am willing to bet she could recognize every Named that participated in the war, much less someone whose sacrifice was apparently so important that it was one of the turning points of a campaign.

Earl of Purple

Why should she? Cat had enough trouble throwing Ishaq through a table and collapsing a tower on the Red Knight to stop them taking over her job, and cutting off the Pilfering Dicer's fingers because he stole luck from her soldiers. When she meets heroes, she's going to pay attention to the ones that she thinks matter, the strong ones, the attractive ones, the powerful ones, the ones that Hanno tells her about. The Fortunate Fool, a comic relief Named whom Klaus mentioned carried more herbs than an alchemist, isn't strong. He's not attractive. He doesn't really seem to matter. His most notable achievements are killing the Lord of Ghouls and clearing a path through a minefield at the Red Flower Vales. Cat was on the same side as Adanna of Smyrna for two years, the Blessed Artificer, and was still surprised when Roland mentioned she had yellow-gold eyes. There's too many Named for her to have met them all, and her duties as head of the Villains means she's going to concentrate on those.

Earl of Purple

Also the heroes that cause trouble for her or her allies/friends/underlings/Hanno, like the Mirror Knight and possibly the Maddened Keeper- though she's forgotten most of what she knew of her.

Wonder

Where has it been shown that Cat only cares or pays attention to the attractive heroes? That undermines her sense of danger, her experience .

Earl of Purple

I'm not saying she only pays attention to them, I'm saying they stick in her mind better. If she met Fortunate Fool whilst he was with a band, he's probably the one who stays in the background. His Name grants him luck, and from Klaus' opinion of him- more herbs than an

alchemist- I don't think he'd make much of an impression, unless it was just the two of them and he was visibly stoned.

Miles

Cat has paid particularly close attention to comic relief characters since before the Bumbling Sorcerer. She'd notice.

[laguz24](#)

This is probably was an orphan peasant who took up the sword and still retains some story power from that.

Someperson

So is Catherine 😊

Someperson

Well, now we've seen the opening moves with the armies on a strategic level, I suppose it's only fair that the Named start fighting their fights.

And Akua. Because Akua doesn't need a Name to beat up a Scourge.

Those barricades are gonna be rough on the armies, though, especially for armies less badass than a Callowan heavy shield wall. I don't suppose there's a way they could pre-emptively collapse some of those buildings so they aren't in the way as much?

Sadly, the art of lake-o-mancy is probably out of the question, for a number of reasons.

Frivolous

Better Akua than any Named actually, because the Scourges have the story of killing Named.

Akua, being powerful yet not Named, sidesteps that little issue.

Sykomantis

... why has it taken me this long to realize that the Rogue Sorcerer reminds me of Constantine?!

Barrendur

@Sykomantis:

I can definitely see the similarities in magical style, and in intelligence/knowledge, wit and balls of depleted uranium! But

though Roland is probably just as dangerous as John, he still manages to be likeable with it, affable, almost playful, whereas John is a sarky bastard with a big mouth, who gives the impression that if he claps you on the back, he's just getting a sense of where best to plant the knife.

Love 'em both, but I'd be hard-pressed to say I actually *like* John Constantine. I *do* like Roland the Rogue Sorcerer... and I think their different styles of self-presentation might be why it took you a while to notice the similarities.

Rey d`Tutto

And as an un-Named Role, Akua likely learned a little Story-fu after the Cloak Shade Incident.

Chapter 60: Blood

"When the gathered princes of the Alamans demanded to know by what right she asked them to swear obeisance, Triumphant laughed and replied: 'To be Dread Empress of Praes is to be a question asked of all Creation: will you kneel, or be made to?'"

– Extract from the Scroll of Dominion, twenty-fourth of the Secret Histories of Praes

I'd never seen her wear that armour before.

A plumed conical helm of steel worked with gold engravings led to a sheet of mail covering her throat, all of it above a beautifully worked set of red chain mail covered in parts by segmented plate – pauldrons sculpted like lionheads, an ornate breastplate with a crimson sash for belt and skirted panels that covered both her legs down to her knees. It was all red and gold, save for the sword sheathed her hip. That was pure steel except for the egg-sized ruby set into the pommel. The entire set shone with subtle engravings that reeked of magic. Protective enchantments, I guessed. I made myself stop staring, though not quite quickly to avoid an amused quirk of those full lips.

"You sure you've got him?" I asked, gesturing at the Tumult.

He was rising to his feet, magic already ticking around his hands.

"My heart," Akua drawled, "if I had him any more, I would already have spent him."

"A yes would have sufficed," I informed her, pulling at Night.

"Ah," she smiled, "but where would the fun in that be?"

Tendrils of shadow tossed me up a moment later, even as I smelled a scent like ozone and heard Akua say something in Mthethwa that sounded a lot like 'how pedestrian'. Well, if she could afford to be that condescending I figured she'd be all right. I landed with a hiss of pain atop the tiled roof just in time to watch the Red Knight lose a few teeth. Even most Named I knew would have died when taking a hit of the Mantle's mace on the side of the face, but instead the villainess was thrown like a rag doll and spat out a few bloody teeth. The Mantle did not pause to rejoice, instead turning to me without batting an eye as I looked for the other Revenant that'd been there and found him missing. I was not sure whether to be glad of that or not.

I pulled on Night and released most of it, tossing a handful of black flame her way, but just as I'd thought she immediately pulled her favourite trick: the world went black as she drenched the area in darkness. For me, anyway. The worst part of that trick had always been how it didn't affect her at all.

Fortunately, she'd used it often enough I was not in the least surprised. And, more importantly, I sunk the last of the Night into the tiles of the roof. A heartbeat later I felt one resonate as a step was taken on it, so without hesitation I flicked my wrist and agitated the Night in the tile: it blew up. The darkness faded, revealing the hole the Mantle had just fallen through, and I smiled. The Scourge was twice my size and encased in the heaviest armour I'd ever seen, but those strengths came with costs. Like, you know, weighing enough that you'd fall right through any weakened rooftop instantly. I limped to the side, a cursed turning to powder the tile I'd been standing on a moment earlier, and through that opening tossed another handful of black flame at the Mantle. I'd used the fire on her often enough to know it wouldn't do shit to that armour, but there was one thing it was quite good at: blinding the Revenant senses that she used instead of her eyes.

So while she put out the fire I'd just thrown in her face, I continued limping away and let the Night rage through my veins. I wove strands quickly, doubling back to strengthen them, and I had just finished the second layer when I felt the Mantle lose her temper. Or so I assumed, because she'd put enough strength into that curse there was goosebumps all over my skin. I kept backing away, but it came to nothing when the entire roof turned into smoke beneath me. *That's a problem*, I idly noted as I began to fall. The way she waiting for me below, already beginning the

swing that would smash my ribs and rupture my guts, was also something of a problem.

Fortunately for her, I had a secret weapon.

"Know your place," the Red Knight snarled, and smashed her war hammer into the back of the Mantle's head.

There was a satisfying sound as the back of the Revenant's helmet crumpled, but to the villainess' surprise her blow went no deeper. The real win was my insides staying on the inside, though, as the Mantle had to kill her swing long enough to backhand the Red Knight through a wall. That was two wins, really, when you thought about it. My Name tugged at me and I did not resist, angling my fall. My bad leg gave when I landed, to my swallowed moan of pain, but the way I dropped down ended up ensuring that a boiling curse didn't end up cooking my brain so luck me. Wincing as I rose, I stepped out of the way of a mace swing. I wasn't worried up close, at least.

The Mantle had been a priestess in life, not a warrior. Her danger up close came from strength and size, not skill, and I was a few years past being scared of something just for those.

"You know," I said, "I've never heard you talk."

The swing shattered the wall behind me but a half-step took me out of the arc, and she wasn't quite quick enough with the follow-up curse: I tossed a handful of black flames at her wrist before she loosed it, scrapping her aim. It went through the open door and melted stone in the street. *Nasty*, I thought.

"I can't tell if you're one of those Neshamah had to cut up the soul of badly so they'd obey," I said, "or if it's because there's just no mouth to speak with under that helm."

It was an impressive piece, admittedly, covering her entire face in lengths of steel save for two downwards eye slits. The spikes that went past the crown of her head almost evoked the shape of a crown. The floor trembled as the blow meant to rip down through my shoulder hit nothing but air and stone while I twisted my will, keeping an eye on her as I took the working I'd crafted earlier in hand. Almost ready, I just needed her distracted. A heartbeat later what looked like a wave of pure heat melted through half the room we were in, forcing her to hastily backpedal away while in the distance I heard Akua call the Tumult a clumsy debutante in Mthethwa. *That'll do*, I mused, and pulled.

The string of Night twanged over my head, pulled tight by one of the pulleys I'd formed out of sight, and it caught the Mantle in the chest. The force of the pull slammed her into the wall, where she immediately began to struggle to get out. I took a limping step forward, raising my hand.

"That's the problem with being so large," I told her. "Makes you an easier target, and you need so much room to move."

Another chord passed over my head with a twanging sound, tightening her against the wall. And I didn't need to bend because she was so tall, not because I was fucking short. I was a goddamn queen, so implying otherwise was treason. The Mantle changed tactics, moving to smash the wall she was being pinned against instead, but I flicked my wrist and another chord bound her while she was trying to move it. No room, no swing. She could be as strong as she wanted, without space to move it meant nothing. I bound her twice more as I approached, closing in.

"I couldn't help but notice you usually move when using a curse," I told her. "Not everyone needs that, but then you weren't born a priestess of curses were you? While you breathed it was Light you used. It's not your speciality."

And undead, for all their strengths in some regards, could not truly learn. If it had been a limit for her while she lived, she would not overcome it no matter how long she existed. I raised my sword, pulling on Night, and dipped into my Name to **See** what lay ahead. I paused in surprise, which almost cost me my life. When her mace exploded with power, a blind curse of wrath shattering the wall the Mantle was bound to, I froze for a moment as I returned to the here and now. Tearing through the chords of Night she swung down with all her strength, but in the moment that I beheld the present I saw it. An opening. A half step to the left as the mace came down, inclining my head even further and angling my body so that the diagonal downwards swing missed by a hair's breadth.

She pivoted, other hand coming to slam a curse into my belly even as she broke the floor with her mace but I pivoted and smoothly, almost gently, thrust upwards. I'd barely even taken two steps, I thought as the point of my sword slid into the eyehole, but then that was the difference between strength and skill wasn't it?

"Silence," I said, aspect burning down my blade.

Her power winked out and her limbs dropped as I felt steel cut into bone. As I'd thought, she couldn't actually move around that mass of steel she was encased in without the help of something like an enchantment. I knew deep in my bones that the aspect would only silence the Mantle's power for a moment, but a moment was all I needed. I pulled on Night as I raised my free hand, moving to slam it onto the pommel of my sword to incinerate everything inside the armour, but before I could sorcery bloomed above my head. Gods, I thought as I glanced up, above *everyone's* head.

Storm clouds roiled, but that wasn't half as worrisome as the lightning I could see rippling inside them.

I hastily threw up the Night I'd been pulling in into a shield instead of a killing stroke, feeling it shudder as lightning struck at it. And then twice more. I backed away, half expecting a mace to be swung at my head, but after I took cover under an arch what I saw was that the Mantle had been blasted as well. She'd dropped her mace. Unlike me, though she was able to walk a lightning strike off. Something she proved by hastily leaving the house we'd been brawling in, turning the corner and out of sight. *Fuck*. I took a step forward, wanting to pursue, but lightning began to fall again and I had to put up a shield of Night. Cursing, I doubled back to where I'd left Akua only to find her already headed my way.

"That's the Tumult, right?" I said, pointing upwards.

"It is," she admitted. "I took off both his arms but he fled and threw that up behind him to cover his retreat."

"The Mantle's as well," I grunted. "Can you end it?"

She shook her head.

"Magic was used to make the storm and is still being used to guide strikes, but the lightning storm itself is not magical," Akua said. "Unless I-"

Lightning struck, but that wasn't what caught my attention. It was the way it curved back up, then hit another lightning bolt. *What in the Hells*, I thought, as slowly every speck of lightning within the clouds was gathered into a single sphere. I felt an aspect at work there, but it wasn't the Tumult's. I was sure of that.

"Gods behold," Akua grinned, almost girlish. "It is Masego."

"Lightning's not a form of power, though," I said. "He shouldn't be able to control it."

"Unless," she said, "he copied the Tumult's guiding spell from looking at it, cast it as well and then wrested *that*."

Lightning came down in a blinding wave ahead of us, forcing me to cover my eye and serving as helpful reminder that Masego was still one of the most terrifying people I'd ever met. I was reminded twice over when we linked back up with my legionaries, finding then that the lightning had ended up clearing most of the enemy ahead while essentially razing three city blocks as a collateral. *Fucking Hells, Zeze. You're not pulling your punches today*. As I'd expected, Kallia's band of five had come out ahead in the struggle. I got to hear as much from her, as well as something else I'd spared a moment to wonder about.

"The wizard Revenant retreated with the ragged one," the Painted Knife told me.

I grimaced. So Neshamah had decided they were useful enough to keep for the rematch that no doubt awaited us deeper in. Good to know.

"Stay with the Army of Callow," I ordered her. "I need you to cover them from Named. Akua Sahelian and I will go with the vanguard."

"As you say, Warden," Kallia replied.

The push to the avenue was staggeringly fast, what with Hierophant having essentially vaporized our opposition. We pushed forward and the moment I set foot on the pavement stones I sent a runner back. We were, at long last, past the first hurdle.

Keter's avenues were massive things, all of them at least forty feet wide and paved with massive slabs of granite that went deep into the earth. It was needed for constructs to be able to move about the capital without constantly wrecking everything – no matter how careful a giant death snake was being, it did not stop being a giant death snake. The rain of ash made it hard for men to see too far ahead, but my dead eye had become a thousand one of Night instead. I saw far and gave a hard smile at what I found: we'd caught the enemy out of position. The avenue went up in an angled slope all the way to the inner-city wall, a ring of stout bastions bristling with soldiers and war machines, and though there were enemies by the thousands gathering along the length of it there was no cohesive force.

It was half a dozen packs of undead being thrown in the way, not a proper army.

"Secure our position," I shouted. "I want those alleys blocked off and a vanguard readied for a push."

Absent-mindedly I pulled on Night and tossed out a ball of black flame, incinerating the head of the beorn that'd risked popping out of cover ahead of my men. The legionaries cheered and got to work with tired professionalism, moving out as the sergeants and lieutenants barked out their orders. Though we'd broken through the Dead King's barricades, our advance put us in a precarious position. We were like an iron spike driven into a block of ice: all the streets around the grounds we'd taken there were still thick with undead. Right now we were suffering only small probes, but that was because they would be gathering in bands led by Binds so that they could mass enough numbers to be a threat when attacking our position instead of blade fodder.

The relative steadiness of our advance was an illusion whose end was fast approaching. If this were another sort of siege it would

have been worth it to try to clear the lower city of Keter before we assault the inner wall, but here it would be suicide: we'd wreck our armies beyond repair doing that. Instead we had to push through and roll the dice, driving deep towards the Hellgate so we might take it and the Dead King with it. I grabbed the shoulder of the closest captain – a dusky-skinned Taghreb with chubby cheeks – and leaned in closer.

"Where has Lady Akua gone?" I asked, lowering my voice.

"She has gone to rifle through dead bodies, Your Majesty," the captain replied.

There was not a hint of the distaste in his voice that I would have found in a Callowan reporting the same thing. I almost asked him 'what for', but I was doubtful he knew and it'd mean admitting that I didn't. Instead I sagely nodded and released his shoulder after reminding him to send Commander Spitter's runner my way the moment they arrived. I needed word from the rest of the fight for Keter as soon as possible before deciding whether we should commit to a push up the avenue. The opportunity was there, and soon to fade, but if we were going at it alone it'd be nothing but an elaborate suicide charge. Thankfully, I did not have to wait long.

Though I had expected one, it was not a legionary that returned bearing news and I cocked an eyebrow when an unexpected pair approached instead. One I was familiar with, a girl in dusty mages robes with a bony face and a scowl bearing Masego's old Name: Sapan of Ashur, the Apprentice. The second I did not know as well, save through the words of others. The Page was not all that tall, though his slenderness gave the impression he was, and his chestnut hair was a riot of enviable curls. His armour was too light for my tastes, a cuirass and leather instead of proper plate or mail, but it was still better than the rapier he'd somehow been tricked into thinking was an acceptable battlefield weapon.

"Should I take it there's no need to wait for an officer?" I asked.

"Commander Issawi decided it would be simpler to send us directly to you, Your Excellency," Sapan said, offering a short bow.

The Proceran mirrored her perfectly but I barely paid attention to him. Issawi, she'd said, and not Spitter. The old commander was probably dead, I grimly realized, and if I remembered the ranks right his senior tribune was another Callowan so she was probably dead too. Our senior officers were dropping like flies, which smacked of Keter targeting them. Fucking Neshamah, he'd figured out our weakness compared to the Legions of Terror: the comparative lack of experienced officers.

"Then speak," I said. "How go the other offensives?"

"Lord Hanno had taken his gate and is pushing towards the inner city, Your Excellency," the Page proudly told me.

Meaning the Lycaonese had once more lived up to their reputation and pushed unflinchingly through the slaughter it'd take to get boots atop a gatehouse of Keter. Good. We'd gambled that they might, sending Hanno and the Kingfisher Prince there on top of a heroic band of five and the Witch of the Woods for magical muscle.

"The other gate?" I asked.

"The Dominion and the Clans were forced to retreat," Sapan told me. "The Warlord decided casualties were too high and their foothold on the gatehouse too fragile to keep up the storm."

Fuck, I thought. That meant there was only us coming from the southwest and the Procerans coming from the east of the city. We'd hoped that my army's push would draw enough dead that Hakram and the Blood would be able to take the eastern gate, but that might have been too ambitious. *It might be why we weren't as badly drowned in soldiers as I thought we'd be*, I mused. Neshamah might have decided to focus on keeping the third army out of his city instead of focusing on either us or the Proceran. If that was true, all those reinforcements were about to begin hammering at the Army of Callow's positions soon. I forced myself to set the speculation aside.

Whether it was true or not didn't matter, since the choice I had to make hadn't changed: we were committing to an attack on the inner wall or not?

"How recent are your news about the Lycaonese offensive?" I asked.

"Half an hour, Your Excellency," the Page told me. "I fought with mercenaries before being sent as a messenger."

However learned his courtesies, he did not quite manage to hide the resentment in his tone. Would have preferred to stay with the push, huh. The Apprentice did not seem so burdened, I could not help but noticed, as befitting of someone who'd gone through the gruelling campaign in the Wasteland under my commands.

"Half an hour," I muttered, drumming my fingers against the side of my leg. "And you say they were pushing deep?"

"They were storming barricades up the avenue when I left," the young hero agreed.

That was the advantage of taking a gate instead of a breach like my army had: the Procerans had been on an avenue from the start. If it went well, I assessed, it was likely that Hanno and the Lycaonese would take a swing at the inner-city wall before my people did. That thought clinched the decision, because the same reason I was hesitating to commit to an attack – fear of attacking the inner wall alone and getting my teeth kicked in – was now also a reason to commit to that very same attack. It'd be the Procerans getting their teeth kicked in, if I left them to hang high and dry.

"Then there's no room left for hesitation," I said. "I need you two to carry word back to Prince Otto, assuming he still holds command of the Proceran van."

"He does, Your Excellency," Sapan assured me.

"Then tell him I'm taking a run at the inner wall," I said, "and committing all my reserves to the push. I'll see him when we're both through."

The Page looked split between irritation – at being made a messenger again, no doubt – and eagerness at being able to return to fight with his countrymen, but as far as I was concerned he was just the escort. The Apprentice nodded and I clapped her shoulder amicably before sending them both off. I didn't offer them an escort. That was the point of using Named as messengers, after all: they could get through the undead-infested city without one. It felt like absurd luxury to use champions of the Gods as messenger pigeons, but if there was one place on Calernia that warranted the absurdity it was the Crown of the Dead. I sought more mundane messengers as well, to send word to Commander Issawi that she was to prepare for a push.

That, and to send for my personal standard and the people bearing it.

Akua returned not long after, what she'd been up to during her absence quite evident. She was riding what could generously be called a horse, at least in shape. It was a necromantic construct, made out of stripped parts from ghouls and larger monsters. Sloppy in some ways, I mused, since some muscles had clearly been melted together – a brute force method – and the sections that'd been sown together sported shining thread. An enchantment, not real thread, and so vulnerable to being dispelled. Still, I could only be impressed that she'd put together what looked like a leathery horse-shaped golem in what could only be half an hour. It was moving pretty well, too, its bone hooves clacking light against the stone.

"Expecting to need a horse?" I idly asked.

She cocked an eyebrow at me.

"The enemy up the avenue are in disarray," Akua said. "Knowing you, you will want to strike while the iron is hot."

She did know me, I thought with the usual mixture of pleasure and dread. Enough that a glance at what lay ahead had been enough to figure out what I intended, apparently.

"Can you reach the flying fortresses?" I asked. "I need to send word."

"I already have," she said, "but another was ahead of me."

I blinked in surprise.

"Marshal Juniper has ordered the Old Mothers to move to support the push towards the inner wall and the rest to protect the Army of Callow's flanks," Akua amusedly said. "It seems I am not the only one who can see through you, dearest."

Gods, Hellhound, I thought, still awed after all these years. Any report you get should be at least half an hour behind me and confused, on top of having a lesser read than I on what's going on at the front. And still she'd been a step ahead of me. I closed my eye, sinking into Night to find Zombie and have a look through her senses, only to find that below the hippocorvid two banners flew. I jostled back into my own body, lips twitching as I corrected my estimate to Juniper of the Red Shields having been two steps ahead of me. I turned to glanced behind me, Zombie large black wings folding as she plunged down through the sky and landed on the stone behind me at a run, circling around me as legionaries hastily got out of her way. Further back, more of my soldiers were moving.

Parting to make way for the same people I'd sent for now knowing my marshal had already sent them out: banners high, the Order of Broken Bells came forth.

Cracked bronze bells on black flew by the Sword and Crown, under them the first order of knights raised since the Conquest advancing in good order. Horses and men barded in steel carved with hymns to the Heavens as my people had done for centuries, killing lances raised not yet lowered for the charge. There was not a man or woman among them whose armour was not scuffed and dented, who'd not had at least a horse killed under them. Grandmaster Brandon Talbot rode at their head, the raised visor revealing his strong jaw and neat black beard. The once-heir to Marchford had gone from my prisoner to one of the few nobles I actually liked – if not trusted – over the years and led his knights through many a battlefield in my name.

Too many, perhaps. The Order of Broken Bells now numbered eighteen hundred, a respectable number given the losses in the Wasteland and on the plains of the Ossuary, but that was a

fragile thing. When the siege of Keter had begun, I'd given a permission to Talbot that I had denied him throughout my entire reign: he was to knight his squires as he wished, without regard to age or training. The Broken Bells fielded eighteen hundred knights because there were no longer squires in the order, and barely any spare horses left for that matter. The strength mustered today was the last they had to wield, and should it perish the riders of Vivienne's own knightly order would be the last cavalry left in the kingdom.

The Army of Callow had fought too many battles, too many wars. Even after draining my kingdom dry of manpower as fee queens before me had dared, we were running out of war bodies to put in suits of armour – much less the likes of knight, costly to arm and train as they were.

"We come as called, Your Majesty," Brandon Talbot greeted me.

I held out my hand and Zombie nuzzled it, rubbing her feathered cheeks against the gauntlet. I patted her until she purred, only then moving to hoist myself onto the saddle.

"I have work for you," I said.

He glanced at the avenue, the dead gathering there in throngs of thousands and beginning to raise barricades. The nobleman spared a look for Akua as well before returning his gaze to me.

"To ride into the jaws of death," Sir Brandon said, sounding rather pleased.

There was, I thought, such a lovely madness to my people sometimes. I rolled my shoulder, limbering my sword arm. I was getting cramps, the costs of not spending enough time on the training field these days.

"Momentum's still on our side," I said, "but we need to prevent the enemy from consolidating before the Third Army can begin its push. That means trampling..."

I trailed off, flicking a glance at the gathering horde.

"All of that, more or less," I idly finished.

"An afternoon's work," one of the knights called out.

There was grim, satisfied laughter. I indulged them with a smile, because if they hadn't earned the right to a few harsh boasts then who on Creation had? I caught Grandmaster Talbot's eye.

"Do you remember the first time we met, Brandon?" I asked.

The bearded man smiled.

"I could forget my name, Your Majesty, and still remember that," he said.

"You thought I was too young," I teased.

"The world's gotten older," Brandon Talbot simply said. "So have we."

True enough. Flakes of ash crusted at the edge of the banner first raised from a cell, the cracked bells on imperial black that I had chosen as much as a warning as an emblem. I felt the warm breath of the Beast against my cheek, just as I had that day.

"Do you regret it?" I suddenly asked. "That you knelt that day, struck your bargain."

The brown-eyed man studied me for a long moment, his face grown hard to read.

"There were times I did," the grandmaster admitted. "Lows and long nights, when the bodies piled too high."

I did not dare interrupt, breath caught still in my throat.

"But here we are," Brandon Talbot softly said, gesturing at the horror around us. "The end of our road, Catherine Foundling. Perhaps of all our roads."

The knight smiled.

"It has been a long ride," he said, "but I regret nothing, Queen of Callow."

The breath I'd been choking on left my lips, ragged, and I offered a stilted nod back. Sometimes you didn't know you'd wanted to hear something until after you'd heard it.

"Then come on," I said, voice steadying as it rose. "All of you. It has been too long since the Dead King last heard the horns of the knights of Callow."

My sword cleared the scabbard, rising to catch a glint of sunlight.

"Let us remind the Enemy," I said, "why so many learned to fear the sound."

I guided Zombie with my knees, leading her forward into the avenue. Talons scraped against the stone, her wings folded close to her side, as behind me men began to move. The banners flew high, catching wind that shook off the ash, and the knights of Callow sounded the old defiance. The horns sounded once, twice, thrice.

All knights charge, the call went, and charge we did.

—

It was like a clap of thunder, the sound of a wedge of heavy cavalry going through a shield wall.

I hacked down half-blindly, smashing open an iron helm as Zombie barreled through the undead and all around me heavy lances tore punched through shields and corpses alike. I hacked and hacked, like a farmer reaping wheat, until suddenly there was nothing but stone pavement before me and my mount let out a cacophonous caw. I led her forward, only slowing when knights began to catch up. Half of them had discarded broken lances, unsheathing swords to replace them.

“REDEMPTION IN STEEL,” Grandmaster Talbot shouted.

A hard cheer echoed him, and we gathered into a wedge again. Ahead of us, another shield wall was forming even as behind us the shattered remains of the thousand skeletons we’d just trampled into dust fled the avenue. The Third Army’s banner was on the move, I saw. The push was beginning, we needed to clear the way for it. The horns sounded again, and we began to advance at a trot. Akua pulled close to me, her necromantic mount keeping pace as she held her sword like someone who’d not used one in too long. The enemy brought a few spears out in front of the shield wall, maybe half a hundred, but it was not them my eye sought.

I felt sorcery at work, and soon found it: cabals of robed mages, skeletons with burning green eyes and not a speck of flesh left, stood at the back of the shield wall shaping eerie cubes of what looked like smoke.

“Akua,” I shouted.

I heard her snarl out an incantation even as the Order of Broken Bells quickened, going from trot to gallop. We began to close the distance, the smoke cubes rising in the air even as Akua’s fingers traced runes in the air and tore through them, but it was not to be so simple. On the streets that flanked us on both sides I saw movement, creatures looking like pale white – the pale of foul flesh, of creatures from deep water all wet and shining – hounds rising from crouches to break into a run. There were hundreds of them, and with an angry hiss I pulled on Night. I scorched our left flank, the abominations fleeing the black fire, but those to the right got through.

They leap with unnatural agility, baring half a dozen mouths full of curved teeth, but that was not the nastiest turn. Those that were cut or pierced took the blows like butter, staying stuck. It was fat, I realized with dim horror. The fat of corpses, riddled with teeth and unleashed like hounds. Men and horses tumbled down

where the abominations caught them, biting into our wedge, but moments later I could spare no more thought for it: thunder clapped as I slapped away a spear and Zombie trampled the shield wall, tearing into the enemy. I hacked and hacked, arms burning from the toil as my Name steadied my hand and whispered lovingly in my ear. We would win, it promised. We would get to the end.

The cubes of smoke were brought down on us, exploding into clouds that smelled of death, but though a handful of knights choked to death in their armour the worst of it was blown away by the burst of wind that Akua smashed into the enemy, blowing away soldiers as much as the smoke. The hole it made relieved pressure enough for the Order to finish breaking through, barrelling through the undead and continuing down the avenue. We slowed, formed up into a wedge again as I tossed fire behind us to keep the fat hounds away – they were vulnerable, a spark was all they needed to light up – and our eyes moved ahead. There the enemy had gathered up, dragging up chunks of wall to make a barricade as archers and javelinmen massed behind thick lines of skeletons.

And beyond them, I saw, it was worse. Three more large knots of enemy, getting larger and better dug in. Half a dozen smaller ones at least. How many knights were dead already? Too many, I thought, and it would only get worse as we tired and began to slow.

“REDEMPTION IN STEEL,” Grandmaster Talbot shouted.

They shouted it back and we broke into a trot, advancing unflinchingly. Curses shot out from the enemy formation but the knights laughed, the sorcery sliding off their armour like water off a duck’s back. Akua screamed an incantation, throwing at the enemy a swirling ball of darkness that exploded into drops. All of the undead they touched twitched and began to turn on each other, hacking away. The Order of Broken Bells cheered, cheered the deed of a woman they had hated an hour ago and would hate again an hour from now. There were hardly any lances left, all of them left in broken bodies, but the handful remaining were lowered as we broken into a gallop.

I watched the flanks, and my vigilance was not for naught: I caught the movement first. Ghouls that had crouched atop rooftops suddenly rose, leaping down and running towards us with howls, as something altogether more sinister rose behind them. They looked like great worms of bone, though the tail ended looking like a lizard’s and under their ‘neck’ two leathery, spindly arms ending in claws jutted out. It was the lungs that drew the eye, though, two bulging great sacks like a bullfrog’s stomach with the appearance of muscle that were pumping in air and swelling. Using the clawed arms to drag themselves into position atop the roofs, the creatures all turned to face us and unhinged their ‘heads’ to reveal toothless maws.

The spat clouds of some foul black gas at us, filling the air.

Akua incanted again as we tore through the ghouls in our way, hacking at the flesh, but they'd not been meant to win, only to slow us. Volleys of arrows fell in a thick rain, the gas drifted towards us on a lazy wind and the enemy mages began their rituals. I pulled deep on Night, ignoring the gas – Akua would have to take care of it – as Brand Talbot shouted for the knight to form up, to prepare a charge anew at the enemy ranks. It was turning sour on us, I realized, and... and a shadow was cast over us all. Wind screamed as the flying fortress approached and lightning began to fall in the enemy's ranks. A heartbeat later, the bottom of the fortress let out a burning light that tore through half a dozen houses in a heartbeat.

And then ladders were lowered.

"Forward," I shouted, "forward!"

We cut through the last of the ghouls as Akua blew black the gas, tightening ranks as we broke into a gallop again. An arrow slid off the side of my helm and another sunk into Zombie's skull, which annoyed her more than anything else. The Order smoothly split into two wings, one for each opening in the enemy barricade, and we thundered through. I screamed myself hoarse, hacking away at a sea of skulls and rotten faces, hands and blades coming at me from all sides. From the corner of my eye I saw a scythe hit Akua's armoured wrist, slapping her sword out of her fingers, and with a shout of anger I torched the Bind that'd dared. We pushed at the ranks of the enemy, the momentum of our aborted charge now gone, and knights began to drop.

But even as legionaries began to land on our side I found that the undead before me no longer bore swords, only bows and javelins and crossbows. I had reached the back.

"Almost through," I shouted.

"Callow," the shout came back. "Callow and the broken bells!"

But we were slowing, dying and I had begun to pull on Night again when a spell hit the middle of the enemy formation and crushed half a dozen soldiers with a projectile. No, I realized a heartbeat later, not a spell. High Marshal Nim, the Black Knight of Praes, rose from her crouch and swung her warhammer with a great cry.

Undead were scattered likes leaves in a storm.

And just like that, it began to turn around. I could feel it in my bones. The sky filled with thousands of tons of stone and arrogance and they gathered again, my ragged Order of Broken Bells. Spells fell on the dead like summer rain. Fire and

lightning and frost, acid and darkness and smoke that moved and swallowed men. Wind blew up in geysers, sand heated almost to glass was thrown in sheets half a mile wide. And curses, curses of the likes Calernia had learned to fear: iron rusted and bent, flesh melted and bone turned to powder. Souls were ripped out of Binds and turned into streaks of weeping flame, skeletons exploded into shards. And worse, curses even *Keter* stood in fear of.

And as the mfuasa unleashed a millennium of learning on the enemy, the lords of ladies and Praes came down to fight.

The Legions of Terror were forming, steel ranks spreading out in every direction with my father's cold ghost smiling through their eyes. Legion mages torched ghouls with methodical and concentrated volleys, sappers disappeared entire ranks of the enemy with sharpeners. The heavies smashed through the enemy ranks like they were made of paste, regulars following behind: orcs locking shields with Taghreb and Soninke and Duni, the shadow of an empire dogging their footsteps. And yet it was not them I my eye was called to as the Order formed up again. It was the splendid few, the beautiful monsters in armours glittering of gold and jewel who stood out among drab and smoky *Keter* like a flock of birds of paradise in a gutter.

The nobles of the Wasteland, household troops standing around them like a fortress of steel, reminded the world why the Dread Empire of Praes had ruled Calernia from sea to sea.

Devils filled the sky, winged and shouting in the darktongue, as an empire's worth of hidden vaults was emptied at the hosts of *Keter*. The air filled with fire and blood dripped from the sky, the wind itself turning red as the High Lord of Okoro rode it on a chariot and sowed burning seeds of fire like a farmer on the field. Storms roared in wrath as the High Lady of Kahtan unleashed the old spirits bound by her house, colossal things of ruin and wind striding the field. Ghouls fled before the unleashed bestiary of Aksum like whipped dogs, tides of fouled water swept hundreds as the High Lord of Nok commanded the waves and at the heart of them all Sargon Sahelian was laughing, baring his crooked smile like fangs.

He wielded thirteen pillars of stone large as towers, crushing enemies beneath them like a child hammering down at ants with a pestle.

But beyond them all, behind them all, the woman who had once been Dread Empress Malicia struck deeper still. For with the falling ash from the sky now fell paler motes, spread about by the fortresses. Still Waters, refined and turned into even more terrifying a weapon. Wherever legionaries fell, now they rose again with empty eyes as eights. Unflinching, obedient, unrelenting. And the enemy buckled as well, for the ritual

lighting up within the fortresses were not only for the Praesi dead: they were also for Keter's. Stealing dead from the King of Death was perhaps too much, but to shatter his hold? Oh, that they could do. Wherever enough of the compound fell, the dead went wild.

Turning on each other, maddened by wrath and despair as the behest of the last empress of Praes.

And we sat the saddle at the heart of it all, the worn survivors of the Order of Broken Bells. *Redemption in steel*, the cry went up, and we charged. We went through bone and ash, a ray of fire from a fortress opening a path. We cut through towering abominations that looked like the bones of giants trailing ribbons of flesh, shattering knees as the rope-like flesh tore men off horses and ripped them apart. We carved through apes of rotting flesh and the wriggling worms of spoiled blood they burst into, faceless horrors of sown flesh that oozed sickness.

The further we got the harsher the fight, skeletons bearing shells full of burning oil throwing themselves at us as broken bones rose together into drakes mad of soldiers' remains and acid began to fall from the sky, burning at armour and searing flesh. But we got through, Merciless Gods. We smashed and hacked and died, until before us stood the heights of the inner wall and the iron gate barring the way past it. Enemies bristled atop the walls but Grandmaster Talbot shot forward, hammering at the gate thrice with the pommel of his sword, and I laughed myself hoarse. We'd fucking done it. Behind us, flanks covered by the Legions, the ranks of the Army of Callow approached.

We'd gotten them to the wall.

captainmarcia

Hot damn.

[Liliet](#)

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

Boost!

William

Norsk? Where are you?

Tenthyr

Holy fuck.

Daniel E

The bit that truly allowed me to visualize this madness: "An empire's worth of hidden vaults was emptied at the hosts of Keter". When you consider the sheer quantity and power of nefarious crap that the regions of Praes have been sitting on for centuries. All of the artifacts, contracts, and spells kept in case of a 'mutually assured destruction' event. Literally every Evil trope that makes Praes such a delight is being used against the Dead King. There is no rationing the doomsday weapons here, they are going all-in.

nimelennar

Not every doomsday weapon; it doesn't look like anyone has resorted to summoning Demons.

Yet. It is yet to be seen if there will come a point when it will be worth releasing one from a Hell Egg, despite the damage a Demon (Madness? Corruption? Absence?) does to friendly forces and the landscape, along with foes.

wec

Could you just... chuck them all through the portal to the Serenity and then have Zeze seal it up? No friendly forces to worry about in the Serenity.

SuitorShooter

While that might be a very Praesi kind of solution, a demon left free to consume an entire Hell would almost certainly not *stay* confined to that Hell.

Someperson

Sure old bones might be a bit rusty but I still don't think the demons would win

Shebmeister

I loved that reminds me of Tolkien's charge of the Rohirrim. Three huzzay for the Broken Bells!

[Sugar Roll](#)

Good chance to get rid of everything unacceptable to the accords. Might as well use them and improve your chances at being the next chancellor.

Veyros

All-in, using every artifact and WMD they have stored because its not just the Last Battle against Keter, it's the final fight of the Age of Wonders. There won't ever be Flying Fortresses, chariots of blood and fire, or undead plagues again. There's no place for them in the Age of Order.

Juff

Typo Thread:

a cursed > a curse
was goosebumps > were goosebumps
she waiting > she was waiting
luck me > lucky me
crown. The > crown. The
bit I > but I
be by > me by
thousand one > thousand
It was half > It was half
we assault > we assaulted
mages robes > mage's robes
had taken > has taken
changed: we were > changed: were we
recent are > recent is
but noticed > but notice
to used > to use
glanced behind > glance behind
Zombie large > Zombie's large
raised not > raised, not
fee queens > few queens
of knight, > of knights,
They leap > They leapt
The spat > They spat
rain, the > rain as the
Brand Talbot > Brandon Talbot
knight to > knights to
blew black > blew back
likes leaves > like leaves
I my eye > my eye
gold and jewel > gold and jewels
as eights. (wights?)
as the behest > at the behest
mad of > made of

caoimhinh

Also, this part

"...there was only us coming from the southwest and the Procerans coming from the **east of the city**. We'd hoped that my army's push would draw enough dead that Hakram and the Blood would be able to take the **eastern gate**, but that might have been too ambitious."

One of those two must be changed, as they can't both have been fighting for the eastern gate.

I think it's either the Procerans should be coming from the west or Hakram failed to take the western gate. But those two armies can't be on the same front.

[Liliet](#)

Ah yes, erratic vs cardinal direction strikes again uwu

miles

They directions are snoruth weast

miles

All directions are snoruth weast*

Darkening

Considering she mentions that the other army in the city is the only other army in the city I was assuming the procerans and the levantines were together over there. But it could be a mistake, too. It'd make sense if you had levant at one gate, orcs at the other, and procer at the third while cat takes the breach.

Gerion

Since two of the four bridges are down, they can only storm two gates. The way I read it, the Procerans led by Hanno take one while the orcs band up with the Levantines to take the other one, but fail. I can already see the haughty Procerans looking down on the "barbarians" for that perceived failure, until someone beats some sense into them again.

kaedonbolas

There's also "Lords of ladies and Praes" which should probably be "Lords and Ladies of Praes" even though I find the former more amusing

Ci

Well, now the hard part begins.

Tamina

Dang dang DANG D A N G

dadycoool

Magnificent. Occasionally, I get emotional when I read a chapter and this is one of those chapters.

Casey Glick

I may have missed it. Why were the armies heading for the wall? Was it because Hanno is at the gate and needs the area cleared so his armies can come in?

TigerQuoll

The Army of Callow (with Praesi support from the flying fortresses) under Catherine and the Procerans under Hanno + Kingfisher attacked on two different sides of Keter. The whole chapter is a bit chaotic (which makes sense, given the plot), but if you think of Keter as a circle, they've gotten through the perimeter at two points, but they haven't gotten to the centre, which is the lynchpin or end goal. And they need to get there fast, because, as Catherine discusses, they can't afford to let DK have time to try a counterattack or pull out a trump card, i.e the poisoning of the air in another crusade, those demons he has in reserve, or just bringing tons of troops in through the serenity. So they need to push on immediately and get as far in as fast as possible, and Catherine's beachhead decides to be the one that pushes first. It's not clear whether this is due to Hanno's forces being weaker, or sentimental "we should bear the brunt", but yeah.

Mirror Night

I think it's more she has to push if Hanno and Kingfisher are pushing because if she stops and doesn't push then DK can focus fire. She needs to force DK not to concentrate especially with Hakram's army failing to breach.

letouriste

no, both sides are pushing together. If Cat doesn't push on her side, the other push will not succeed well enough and these troops get surrounded. They need to attack two sides to prevent efficient reinforcement in the dug in positions

Rey d`Tutto

That's my understanding as well.

knockoffnikolai

Keter, like many medieval cities, has multiple layers of wall. In real life cities this is because the cities grew beyond the inner walls and had to keep building more walls around the expanding town; in Keter's case that might have

initially been the reason, but it's also been noted that he's turned the city into a tactician's dream scenario for defense in depth.

As for why they need to hit the inner wall **right now**, Cat and Hanno are attacking from different directions. If they arrive at different times, the defenders can throw all of their resources against one assault, drive them off, and then pivot to the other one. This is what's known as "defeat in detail," you get the enemy to split up and then defeat them in a series of asymmetric engagements instead of just mashing your whole force into their whole force. To avoid that, Cat and Hanno are both rushing to hit the inner wall as fast as possible and force the defenders to split their forces.

[Casey Glick](#)

Got it. I think I totally missed that they were attacking an **inner** wall. I thought she was pushing super hard to get access to the outer wall in a different place.

[Liliet](#)

It's the inner wall, not the outer wall.

ninegardens

>"with my father's cold ghost smiling through their eyes"

Oh this line. This line. DAMN.

I love it. Epically played action, like I have seen very few times before.

The 6 books of set up really does add so much punch to this.

thomas johnson

So I think I have finally found an epic scene that mirrors the tyrant trial.

Praes and Callow fighting together under a banner an alliance. I think I am gonna sit on this chapter and stew for a bit before I make my comment. Also the berserker vs the red knight... that is a fight I would like to see.

caoimhinh

Yeah, this was epic.

Also, the berserker is dead, sadly

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I'm not so sure of that.

Villian. "Need to see the body" trope. She was just backhanded into a wall that fell on her. Cat dropped a tower on her and she walked it off.

caoimhinh

The Berserker? No, she was explicitly shown being killed. She died by arrows back in Interlude: Blood in book 6.

The Berserker spasmed in pain, half a dozen arrows stuck in her body and three through her forehead, but from the monstrous shape she'd turned into she slowly turned back into a woman. The Ophanim whispered and Tariq's hands tightened.

"Is there anything we can do?"

Silence. There was no. The Berserker's rage ended, leaving only a mortal behind, and that mortal did not breathe. Only the wrath had kept her alive.

Keter always had the last word.

Alex

Time for Rumena to make good on his sigil oath. For the Tomb-Maker to become the Tomb-Breaker.

[sengachi](#)

I cannot wait for the moment night falls and the reforged drow get to go wild on Keter. Rumena has already buried one immortal would be god this month, it's only right to give him first dibs on burying this one too.

Bernardo Corti

Thank you for the excelent read 😊

Matthew T

Your ability to reach new heights on the Holy Shit Quotient is incredible. And I loved Talbot KNOCKING on the gate after that epic charge. It's completely in character for him!

RivettedReader

lords of ladies and Praes → lords and ladies of Praes.

Also perhaps Lords and Ladies depending on if this is intended to be a titular description or just adjectives.

arcanavitaet15

HAHAHA that is glorious, just glorious the whole chapter, also the scene with Talbot hit me right in the feels it meant a lot to Cat.

SomeGuyWhoReadsThings

Ol Neshama playing it close to the vest. Real stingy with the revenants. Inner wall and citadel will be a nightmare

Ed

But that final assault will be a job for bands of five, all of this epicness is just to get them where they can begin.

Oshi

Catherine still bears a black blade. He pulls that out and she has all the license she needs. Nothing is done until the story ends.

BargleNawdleZouss

1. If all the squires in the Broken Bells have been knighted, I'm guessing that means our Knight Errant is now Sir Arthur (finally!).
2. Speaking of which, if Arthur wasn't fighting with Catherine and the Broken Bells, nor teamed up with Sapan the Apprentice, what's he up to?
3. I imagine we'll next have an interlude or two from Hanno and the other assault.
4. What are the Herald and his dwarves doing during all this?
5. We've seen Team Ishaq (Barrow Sword, Vagrant Spear, Stained Sister, Harrowed Witch, Grave Binder) and Team Kallia (Painted Knife, Rogue Sorcerer, Red Knight, Blade of Mercy, Skinchanger. Clearly they're taking the approach of mixed Good and Evil on their Teams; I'm looking forward to the combos they've come up with. If Hanno, Antigone, and Rafaella are a team once again, then what villains could possibly work with them?
6. As mentioned in Book 6, Chapter 65, "Cross-Check", they have now reached the gates of the Crown of the Dead itself. I want to see what Pickler has come up with to smash them down.
7. Are the drow the hidden knife which Catherine has us up her metaphorical sleeve?

Bad@Games

1. Hopefully

2. I thought he be either palling around with nim or Mirror knight bc they have the swords
3. Hopefully
4. I Imagine they are assisting on another front
5. Mabey some nbs villains? is headhunter alive still? idk but im excited
6. ITS TIME FOR PICKER TO GO OFF OHHHHHHH
7. I really want iva and THE TOMB MAKER to have some badass moments. Remember THE TOMB MAKER has made some spicy oathes.

Wonder

Hooooo, this is the shit!!!!!! Anyone catch how enthusiastic Cat burnt the ghoul that dared to attack Akua? CatKua all the way even in a chaotic battle!!!!

Marshal Nim ,as awesyas ever!!!!!!!!!!!!

I do not believe I have read many books with a war as savage ,chaotic and deadly as this one !!!!

[Liliet](#)

yep, Catkua soaring to ever more glorious heights ♥

[Sugar Roll](#)

Callow and Praes fighting side by side. Are we going to see the Drow together with the Dwarves next?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Better yet: the Procerans together with anyone, including other Procerans.

erebus42

It still amuses me to no end how the largest Good nation in Calernia seems to be almost as universally despised as the largest Evil ones.

Gabe Meadow

I wouldn't use the word 'despised,' but the massive amount of internal plotting and fuckery in Procer over the course of the story – especially in the face of threatened extinction – has definitely soured a lot of external observers on it.

erebus42

That and it seems they also have a shared unfortunate history of attempted imperialism which no doubt has contributed to a broad spread cultural suspicion of them.

jamesc9

The needs of the empire and the wishes of the god.

[Bad@Games](#)

TBH this side of the whitecaps is putting in work ngl. The two old enemies turn together to absolutly FUCK keter up. Callow and her knights plus Preas and all its bullshit. the only thing to worry me is the revenent that was probobly the fortunate fool is MIA and thats a bad thing.

Oshi

No he retreated with the wizard.

[Liliet](#)

That's not a "no". That means yes, we don't know where the two of them currently are.

Mary Gentle

Does that mean it was important for them to come and look? Or to be shown to Cat and the armies? DK has to have done that for some actual reason...

[Dominic](#)

It's my birthday. Couldn't have asked for a better way to start my day.

serdar314

So the end begins.

Raved Thrad

If the Order of the Broken Bells survives at all, I can see a statue of Talbot, head held high, holding a ragged banner, and the words "Redemption in steel" on a plaque at his feet.

While reading through this, I was reminded of the only other world crusade against a mad god I remember reading, the one in David Eddings' *Tamuli*, and they seemed to have it so much easier by far. EE's version portrays a much harder fight, and really highlights the slog of the fight on the ground. Well done, sir!

Lord Haart

If you like chapters like this, I highly recommend Erikson's Malazan Book of the Fallen. Hits many of the same notes as PGTE, the Legions in particular.

RobberXAkua

This was so good! I'm always amazed by how well you write battle scenes. Honestly, keep delaying chapters if these are the results, always fantastic.

Prince Of Doom

Just waiting for the Green Flame at this point.

Because it always ends with Green Flame.

I wonder if they can burn the mansions of Keter down...

Someperson

Theoretically, Catherine has three knives aimed at Neshemah's heart.

The Sword of the Rest to unleash the villainous stories against him

The Autumn Crown to wrest control of the undead from him

The Doom of Liesse to be his captor for Sealed Evil in a Duel

But we all know it's gonna end with goblinfire and Catherine getting blamed for arson yet again

naturalnuke

In the words of the Great Robber, KNOCK KNOCK MOTHERFUCKERS

badatgames2911

"Unleash the GOATS"

BargleNawdleZouss

Further thoughts:

8. I'd love to see the first six Apostles Of Night(tm) developing their skills and making a mark.

9. I'm not sure why I'm focused on this character in particular, but I want to see the Royal Conjuror open a can of whoopass on Keter. IIRC, we've only seen him act in flashbacks/reports.

9A. Same for the Forlorn Paladin!

10. It would be nice if the Hierarch contributed in some way to the battle, even if only to aid the Bellerophan forces to be more than just meat shields.

11. Can we get some game-changing info/insight from the Wise Astrologer, now that the Augur has passed?

12. Where is Kreios the Riddle-Maker and Hye Su the Ranger (incumbent) already?

13. If the elves don't make a contribution, will someone please kick their asses into the Skiron Ocean?

Someperson

I was scared for a sec that the broken bells were gonna get sacrificed en masse to secure the win
I am glad it seems they pulled through

Lord Haart

Well, some of them. Doubt they number enough to be a fighting force again for years. 😞

[jezebeau](#)

Feels like the revenants were pulled out to set up for patterns of three to discourage releasing Below's stories.

Talbot knocking, though! Someone get this man a Name. The Lance Unbroken! The Knocking Knight! The Gatecrashing Grandmaster! Brazen Bearer of Neshamah's Broken Balls! Let's hear it for Graaaaaandmaster Talbot!

Someperson

The Steel Redeemer 😊

Or if we want something less flowery "The Grandmaster" works just fine

[jezebeau](#)

I did think about that one, but it seemed too specific to his exact circumstance to get established as something that could later fit others without changing the meaning.

totalpretzel

Literal goosebumps from this and the previous two chapters, holy shit ee, magnificent work. Also I absolutely love the hilarious unreliable-ish narration that is Cat describing Akua's clothes in exquisite detail every time no matter what she's wearing.

masterofbones

This chapter's background music brought to you by Sabaton

Lurch

Just... wow. The imagery of that charge, and the arrival of the Praesi. And the sheer badassery of two nations that have been at war for generations upon generations, archetypal Good and Evil, fighting together against what would be the Death of all. Callowan knightly steel and Praesi power and ruin united, both glorious in their own right.

Chapter 61: Break

"If victory were not sweet, we would not drink its poison so deeply."

– Dread Empress Terribilia

We came at the wall in waves.

Thirty feet of stone, topped by an army's worth of dead. Bastions that rose even higher to make room for the siege engines to fire, bristling with catapults and ballistae. Wards crackled with power as the first ladders were laid against the wall, cracking the steel-capped wood, and out of sight dead mages stood in circles to weave rituals that would turn men to screams and dust. I sent away Zombie after the second time she was shot under me, back on my feet with a sword in hand. Legionaries – mine and Praes', in the smoke and ash it was hard to tell them apart – put up their shields above their heads as the dead shots bows and threw chunks of masonry.

I saw an orc's head turn to pulp as rock the size of a table went through his shield, the corpse toppling to the ground with it. Javelins punch through plate, sorcery tore burning holes in the shield walls and above us the clouds were turning dark again. I tossed around Night heedlessly, feeling the coolness in my veins begin to turn raw – like sandpaper was being dragged around my insides – and shattered a parapet just in time for a young legionary to land her ladder into the rubble. A heartbeat later a skeleton wielding a hooked pole tried to push it back, but Akua's hand shoved me aside as she yelled out an incantation in the mage tongue.

A ball of translucent sorcery formed around the top of the ladder, expanding into a shield that blew the skeleton off the rampart.

"Forward," I shouted, ducking low to avoid a whistling arrow.
"It's the last wall!"

Half a lie. The palaces would have walls of their own and the Dead King's lair as well, but it was true there were no ramparts left lying ahead. Behind the heights of stone stood the inner city of Keter, the central third leading to the ancient hills turned plateau the city had been built around. It would be the hardest fight yet, I knew, but my blood still sang at the knowledge that *we were there*. We'd nearly made to the heart of Keter, past all the horror and madness. We were so close to the last struggle I could almost feel it on my tongue. The girl who'd landed her ladder began to climb, but three rungs up she dropped with an arrow in the throat. Her body fell to the side, rising a wight, and a large orc began his climb.

I hurried there, elbowing soldiers as I went and Akua following in my wake. Legionaries kept taking the ladder and they kept dying, the dead intent on snuffing out the first ladder landed, but concentrating their fire cost them. Other ladders began to stay up, and as the twentieth body died to rise undead my own boot touched the bottom of the ladder.

"Catherine-" Akua began.

"Keep them off me," I interrupted, and sword in hand began the climb.

My bad leg throbbed. It'd been too long since I'd last put on full plate as I now wore and I wasn't used to the weight anymore. But climbing up the ladder wouldn't require me to dance around, just to keep going. Akua cursed profusely, but even as arrows began to fall on me from both sides roiling winds shot up to blanket me. A rung, then another, and as I rose a legionary stepped in to follow. A javelin came from above and I had to press myself against the wall, the wood of the rung digging into my throat, and though it passed me the man behind me took it in the eye. Another rung. There was a shout from below and I looked to my left, drawn by instinct, only to find a blur of movement.

I pulled on Night and threw black flame at it, the heat and power of the impact forcing the ballista bolt off course. Gods, that would have gone right through my ribs.

I hurried up and I was two-thirds through when the shield Akua had bespelled to protect the top of the ladder shattered under a stream of curses, breaking into shards that soon faded. Even as I desperately dragged myself up I saw a pair of skeletons with hooked poles catch the side rails and begin to push. There were soldiers beneath, enough that the ladder weighed too heavy to easily push, but it moved backwards half an inch and my heart leapt up in my throat. I climbed another rung as Akua blew one of the skeletons away, but it was replaced in a heartbeat and more

began to put their hands to the pole to push. *Fuck*, I thought as I went up another rung and saw I wouldn't make in time.

The ladder was pushed back another inch, and it was so close to the angle that'd topple us that I hissed. I threw Night in clumps but the skeletons I shattered were replaced, and as I went up another rung the ladder began to topple – until I snarled, sending Night racing down the edge of my blade, and hacked at the hook of the closest pole pushing us back. The strike went right through, the headless pole dipping down and getting stuck between rungs as the weight shifted. Half the ladder was against the wall again, and with a triumphant cry I went up another rung. Close enough to hack at the legs of the skeletons, though I had to duck back under to avoid getting impaled by a spear.

I tossed a ball of black flame over the edge as I did, and a heartbeat later I was atop the wall.

It was a bloody whirl after that. I couldn't even tell how many of them I was fighting – they were coming from all sides, with swords and axes and spears. I ripped a dagger out of one's hand after blowing through his head with Night, taking it as parrying blade, but Gods I wished I had a shield. Legionaries followed behind me and we were pushed back-to-back, forced to keep our foothold on the wall open with the clash of steel. I parried and struck with the strength of my Name, shattering arm bones and cracking skulls, until I felt Akua behind me again and suddenly the wall to our left was a frozen block of ice. I moved to cover her while she stood back panting, face trickling with sweat, and took off another skeleton's head after turning his blade aside with the dagger.

Legionaries kept coming up, wights among them, and I took a few steps back from the melee to catch my breath. It allowed me a look at the fighting on the wall beyond us, which was a grim sight. We were landing ladders more easily now that we'd forced the dead to fight us up close as well, but soldiers were dropping like flies. Would I even still have an army come nightfall? *If the Praesi hadn't come we would all be dead*, I thought.

Akua's ice broke as curses struck it from below, exploding into a shower of shards – I felt some cut up my cheeks and the side of my nose, blood flowing free – but a ladder was being landed past it and I moved that way, sword high as I called for soldiers to follow. The push was aborted, though, when arrows of bright red flame tore through the enemy and there was the howl of wind. A heartbeat later the Rogue Sorcerer landed with a fluttering coat among wisps of flame, footing uncertain from the wind magic he'd used to aid his lip.

"Clear the wall," I shouted, pointing my sword at the enemy laying beyond him.

Legionaries charged, sweeping past him and colliding with thick ranks of skeletons. I didn't go with them, instead moving towards my friend as soldiers began to come up the ladder to our side.

"Where the Hells are the Procerans?" I asked him, shouting to be heard over the din. "We're getting butchered out there, Roland."

"They got bogged down," he shouted back. "Ran into the Grey Legion."

I spat to the side, spit sticking to lips and flecking my cheek. Yeah, I couldn't blame them for slowing in the face of those monsters. I'd been hoping the Dead King would hold them back like an honour guard, but apparently they were worth committing to keep Procer off his back while the inner wall was fought over.

"Is the Prince of Bones leading them?" I asked.

"No, he isn't," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Catherine, something's wrong. There's word from the League, the Hawk isn't at the battle out in the Ossuary. Hanno says he fought the Seelie and a pack of Revenants but-"

A crack of thunder drowned out his last words. I got the gist anyway. The Scourges that'd fought had been held back from serious engagements, the Prince of Bones and the Hawk had yet to make an appearance and it all stank to the high Heavens. I went to look for a story, and though I couldn't quite feel out what it was about my stomach sunk when I was faced with tangible proof that there *was* a story. One about the last remaining Scourges, who numbered five. *About them fighting as a single band. Indrani went out with the army,* I thought. *We have no one who can check the Hawk except for...* I grabbed Roland by the collar and dragged him close.

"Get the Silver Huntress here," I ordered. "As quick as you can. Send the Painted Knife to get her if you have to, otherwise we're-"

If Akua hadn't slammed a shield in place a heartbeat later, I would have died. The arrow would have gone right through my neck, instead of slowing as it punched through the panel of sorcery and letting me move just quick enough it bit at the side of my helmet instead. I backed away hastily, once more cursing my lack of a shield, which ended up saving my life for the second time in two heartbeats. I heard the crunch even as I felt the air against my face. It was, I realized, a rock. Someone had thrown a rock the size of a small house my way, and it'd come close enough to me I'd felt like a whisper on my skin. It tumbled past the wall, earning screams and then a wet crushing sound, and for a heartbeat terror seized my throat.

Akua was alive, I saw. She'd been moving between me and the edge of the rampart, so she'd been out of the way. The knot in my guts loosened, but only so much. I turned to Roland, who was gaping, and my hand went back to his collar.

"You still have that wind magic?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Why do you-"

"Get me the Silver Huntress," I cut through, and threw him off the rampart.

It was only thirty feet. Wouldn't kill a hero even if he didn't get his artefact out in time – which he did, ending up rolling across rooftop tiles like a human tumbleweed. By the time I turned, Akua had stepped back from the rampart's edge and closer to me. Her free hand was low, magic dancing across her fingers in subtle shifts of light.

"That was the Prince of Bones," the golden-eyed sorceress told me. "And it won't be the last stone he throws."

"We're fucked if we stay here on the wall," I said. "Almost all of them are nasty customers from a distance and we're out in the open. We need to-"

It was prettily done, I appreciated that deep down. First the stone – large as the last, and this time I saw where in the streets it came from – drew my eye and I pulled on Night by reflex, spinning rope around it to swing it around like a sling to throw back. But it had been meant to get caught, and in its wake came an arrow. Akua caught *that*, belted out a spell that had steel shivering all around us and froze the arrowhead in the air. Then the both of us took the Mantle's curse right on, as we'd been meant to all along. I dropped my working on the stone, abandoning it to gravity, but the Night I tried to throw up in the way was just a shade too slow. I was blown off my feet, blinded as I felt myself fall through dust. *Stone*, she broke the stone.

Akua screamed, as much in rage as fear, and the two of us fell down in the street below. I felt blades scrape at my armour and one cut across my face as I abandoned my flesh eye and looked through Night instead. We'd fallen into a knot of enemy soldiers, Akua missing a chunk of her left pauldron and the shoulder beneath it. I glimpsed bone even as she laid a hand on it and flesh formed anew with a hiss. I slashed through a head, then was driven back by a warhammer I awkwardly stopped by hitting the handle but still bounced off my shoulder plate. Snarling, I leaned forward and pulled on Night: I spat out a stream of black

flame, incinerating the undead before me. But they'd lasted long enough to slow us, damn them.

I helped Akua back to her feet, hacking away at a spear that came a little too close, the two of us finding out backs to a powder-covered wall.

"We need to get to stairs," she said. "Get back to your troops."

"We need to survive," I grimly replied, looking ahead. "They're here."

The Prince of Bones was hard to miss, hulking shape of steel that he was. Like half a dozen armours had swallowed slightly smaller ones, leaving only a monstrous golem with the outline of a man. His face was a mask of steel, frowning sternly with eyes that were sculpted. Not a hole anywhere on him, only shifting layers of steel and the large greatsword he held in a single hand as he marched towards us. The Mantle was but a step behind him, mace hoisted on her shoulder, but of the Hawk and the Tumult I found no trace. They would remain hidden until they struck, I thought. As for the Seelie...

"Steel yourself," I warned.

A heartbeat later, it struck us like a wave. **Love me. You love me, love me most of all the things in the world. You love me, so obey. Rip her apart.** In the back of my mind Komena sneered and the force broke into smoke, but at my side Akua went stiff. I was already striking by the time the mane of red hair appeared in front of her, but as I opened the throat of a voluptuous redhead in a ballroom gown it faded without my steel touching anything solid. An illusion. The tricky pest always –

"Fuck," I snarled as I felt a knife slide between my ribs.

The Seelie's impossibly beautiful face leaned towards mine, smiling as she went for a kiss, but I grabbed her by the throat and drew on my Name to toss her up. She flew for a moment, then shattered into rose petals as I put a hand to my side. My armour was unmarked. A real wound or another illusion? I'd never fought the Scourge up close before. I shifted under my armour, but the wet I felt could be sweat as well as blood. The pain, though, that was real. Akua was back to herself just in time to throw up that magnetism spell again, though she put her back into it this time: not only did it catch the Hawk's arrow but it also crumpled the three closest ranks of skeletons into balls of metal.

"That," Akua bit out, "was *most* unpleasant."

"Tell me about it," I grunted. "Never been good with redheads."

My flesh eye had been working for some time, but it was still with the others I looked around.

"Stairs to the left," I said. "It's our best chance."

"Depressingly true," Akua noted, which I took as agreement.

We made a break for it. If there was one weakness to the Prince and the Mantle, it was that their bulk made them slow – especially in broken terrain like the ruined street full of undead soldiers we were fighting our way through. The enemy wasted no time in trying to stop us. Rain began to fall in front of us, a ball of clouds gathering and being milked dry of water that is spat out as a torrent of water filling the street. Undead were knocked aside, and though there wasn't enough flow to topple us the street ran wet and our footing slowed. I evaporated the cloud ball with a blast of blackflame, in time for Akua to send a spike of sinuous darkness right into the heart of a sizzling curse – it broke apart instantly.

Undead converged on us from all sides and I could not torch them as fast as they appeared, not without slowing too much. I parried and hacked and tried to push forward but that *fucking* water got everywhere and when I was forced to make an awkward parry I slipped. Akua blasted off the Bind's head but my back still hit the floor, water seeping into my armour by the neck, and I swallowed a scream as my side throbbed. Yeah, the Seelie had definitely stabbed me. I was dragged back to my feet, slashing blindly at a ghoul coming close, but froze when I saw that above us a hundred spear of sizzling lightning were forming. Gods, we were both drenched. It wouldn't even need to hit *us*, just...

I pulled on Night and Akua released me to raise her hand and incant, but the Hawk shot again and I had to spin a sphere of darkness that sucked in the arrow that'd have killed her. From the corner of my eye I saw a flicker of movement – red hair and that fucking smug smile again – as **love me, love only me** pounded away at my mind. Akua shifted her incantation halfway through, flicking her hand and melting the Seelie's face to the bone, but it'd been an illusion. Above us the lightning spears came down as she Scourge reappeared to my side, knife already halfway to my lung, but the Beast laughed into my ear. A boot tore into the Seelie's cheek, her face betraying utter surprise as Hanno of Arwad landed on it feet first.

Above us, the spears had stopped midair. They went an inch down and then back up, as if two wills were fighting for control of the spell. *Masego*, I thought, *you prince among sorcerers*. Forty feet away I saw the Prince of Bones stop to casually rip out a wall and throw it our way, but before I could pull on Night the scent of ozone filled the air. The wall crumbled into dust and through it I saw a silhouette standing atop the wall, a

woman in a painted stone mask and a long green cloak. The Witch of the Woods had come, I realized with a pulse of excitement.

"Apologies," Hanno calmly said, getting back to his feet from the crouch he'd landed in. "I must admit I got lost on my way."

The Seelie had faded into golden smoke as she fell under him, though not before receiving a cut across the face for her troubles.

"Fighting back against Ashuran stereotypes, I see," I croaked out, because 'thank you' would have been too much.

It got a snort out of Akua, at least. Wait, should I be worried the Doom of Liesse was the only one who'd laughed?

"I try," Hanno said. "Reinforcements are headed our way, Warden. I called on all we could spare."

I cracked my neck, wiping away some of the blood still seeping down my cheek mixed with sweat.

"Let's see what the Scourges of made of, then," I said, spitting to the side.

Above us the lightning spears suddenly faded. The Tumult, I suspected, had decided it was better to try another spell than to keep pitting his will against Masego's.

"Let's," Hanno agreed, raising his sword with a smile.

The Prince of Bones moved first and I tensed, but to my utter surprise he did not attack. Instead, he turned his back and *ran*.

"Bold," Akua murmured, appreciative.

"Fuck," I feelingly said. "Pursue, *go*."

The Hawk tried to put an arrow in Hanno's eye, who plucked it out of the air with a vaguely irritated look – *come on*, part of me complained, *he's not even Named right now!* – as Akua and I shot forward. The Dead King would have none of it, though. All the undead across four city blocks went still for a moment, and then they began to throw themselves at us. I shouted and let loose streaks of blackflame as I cut through a torrent of soldiers who didn't even try to kill me, just throw themselves in my way, but even when Akua blew them away with a gust of wind it was too late: darkness came down over us, the Mantle covering the retreat of the Scourges with her favourite trick.

It didn't last long with Hanno around, Light coming out in a torrent that shattered the curse, but it was enough. The Witch tossed a few houses at them as they retreated but we caught none and I felt frustration bubble up my throat. The Dead King was

denying us a scrap, had been doing it all day. Was he trying to tire us out or simply keeping the Scourges as his last trump card? Either way, dragging Named here would just be wasting them at the moment.

"Hanno," I shouted. "Go help on the wall. Can the Witch help get the Procerans through the Grey Legion?"

"We'll do what we can," he shouted back.

I nodded him thanks and he offered back the sketch of a bow. The cheeky bastard. I felt Akua's eyes on my back and turned.

"To the stairs," I told her, looking back up at the rampart.

The Legions of Terror and Army of Callow had secured more than a dozen footholds, it was time to turn that into a push. The Dead King wanted to play coy? I'd force his fucking hand.

"I'm with you," Akua promised, which I enjoyed hearing more than was wise.

We went back up, scything through the dead, and I found a captain to bark orders for me. We took two companies into the closest gatehouse, clearing out the ghouls and the beorn inside, and then forced the gates open. The steel jaws opened below our feet, soldiers pouring through, and I grinned. Now we had the initiative again. Roland should be back with the Silver Huntress soon, but I wanted us to gobble up a few blocks to hold first. We fought our way back down, arms tired and short of breath, to take the lead of the companies that'd gone through the gate. With a shout I took them to the last dead on the avenue, smashing our way through, and we pushed into the inner city.

Resistance, to my rising discomfort, was sparse. The dead were disorganized, coming at us in disjointed bands, and the push I'd meant to take a few blocks with kept ripping forward through the ranks of the dead. I only began to slow when we were past at least ten blocks, and when I found a great granite gargoyle at a street corner I frowned. I knew this place I realized. This corner. I had once been carried past here on a litter as a guest of the Dead King, dead royalty bearing me to the Silent Palace where I was to be hosted. We weren't just past the inner wall, we were halfway to the heart of Keter. To victory. My heartbeat thundered against my ears and my steps slowed, my legionaries slowing with me.

"Catherine?" Akua asked.

"We're getting close to the five palaces," I said. "We need the arrows in our quiver readied before we go further."

I kept my words vague, since you never knew who might be listening in this city, but she knew what I meant: the Mirror Knight and the Severance, Hierophant and the Crown of Autumn. Going after the King of Death without either would be madness. Neshamah was the most powerful sorcerer Calernia had ever known and likely ever would, fighting him head on in his seat of power would only get us killed. Not even the Sisters would be able to help me when we got to the hall where the Greater Breach lay and the monster that'd made it would be waiting for us.

"I'll send the signal," the golden-eyed sorceress agreed.

The spell was simple enough, a variation on the signal lights that the Legions and the Army had been using for years. Akua flicked her wrist at the sky, incanting brusquely, and three streaks of blue shot out. After rising high they exploded into a broad circle, one large enough that there would be no missing it even through the poison clouds and the ashen rain.

"Thanks," I said.

Then I turned to the company at my side, its soldiers and officers having ceased to advance when I did.

"We're in deep now, ladies and gentlemen," I told them. "Maybe half an hour's walk ahead are the palace we're going for, and before we can send in Named to end this we're going to need to secure this corner. First we--"

Everyone felt it, when the sorcery lit up. Even the most power-blind of my legionaries felt their bones shake, their soul flinch. My hand shot up, Night already raging through my veins, and Akua was already halfway through a shield spell before we both stopped. The magic wasn't coming from ahead of us but from *below*. Far under our feet.

"Akua?" I asked.

She did not answer, golden eyes gone wide. Instead she knelt down on the ash-streaked ground, ripping off her helmet and pressing her cheek against the stone.

"Akua," I said again, tone sharper.

"The ritual is below," she said, palm against the floor. "Far enough not even Hierophant can trouble it. But there is something more, Catherine. It is an array, a large one, and--"

The pulse washed over us in the heartbeat that followed. It felt like nothing at all, I thought, but then Sven Noc was howling in rage within my soul and Night boiled out without my having even called it. Akua had gotten to her feet, I saw, and was panicking as she shouted an incantation and traced glowing runes in the

air. Over the three heartbeats it took her to finish the spell, I saw her face under the helmet change. Lines deepened, the arc of her brow grew more pronounced. My stomach dropped as I turned towards my soldiers. Their helmets were open-faced, hiding nothing: faces aged, skin growing thick with lines and hair turning white.

Before ten heartbeats had passed every single one of my legionaries dropped dead of old age.

"Gods," I croaked, staggering back.

I looked further back at the others who'd followed me past the wall, and saw that behind me lay a trail of corpses that'd fallen down as gently as leaves dropping from a tree. Not a single one of them taken by sword or spear, they'd just... died. The trail of corpses went all the way back to the inner wall, atop which some of my legionaries were shouting in horror. *It ends at the wall*, I thought. Ice seizing my heart I turned to Akua, who was shimmering with pale green light but was, to my immense relief, alive and no longer aging. She panted softly, sweat trickling down her brow.

"That," Akua Sahelian softly said, "aged me at least a decade."

"This isn't time magic," I numbly said. "There's no such thing as time in Trismegistan magic. What the Hells is this, Akua?"

"Not a spell," she said, straightening. "It is Keter's Due."

My fingers clenched.

"You meant he pulled off what you did at the Doom," I said. "Sucked in the magic of the Due into other arrays and-"

"He was not quite so skilled," Akua interrupted me. "As I said, Catherine, this is not a spell."

She shot a look at the stone under our feet.

"I believe that somewhere under our feet are buried artefacts that were empowered by the wasted magic of the Due," she continued. "Thousands of them, whose only purpose is to tint that emanated magic with a specific kind of entropy."

My eye narrowed. Night raged in my veins, the blessing of the Sisters keeping death from touching me.

"Aging," I said.

"Specifically flesh, I think," Akua said. "Or perhaps living flesh?"

"But that means," I slowly said, "that this isn't even the ritual from below. Then what is that fucking magic *for*?"

Fate handed me the answer, bitch that she was, when in the distance there was an ear-splitting rumble. It was so loud as to drown out even screams, but I saw enough. Over the inner wall I could see the top of some towers, and they were *moving*. The outer city was rotating, Gods save us all. And it got worse, because when the city ceased turning instead it moved another direction: pushed up by some invisible force, entire districts of the city shot up. Though I could not see it, from the way some towers disappeared I guessed that some districts were going *down* as well. Like some sort of demented jigsaw puzzle, the outer city of Keter had just turned itself into a series of plateaus and chasms.

"Gods preserve us," Akua murmured.

She saw it too, then. This was death, the death of every living soldier in the city. Maybe not immediately, but that single stroke had ensured there was now not even a single *army* inside the walls: all our forces had been moved away from the breaches they'd come in through and then split into smaller pieces, left alone on platforms with whatever enemy forces had been in the district when it was raised or lowered. We'd win some of those fights, for sure. But it wouldn't matter a fucking bit, because now all those soldiers were stuck and the dead would go around extinguishing them one force at a time. There could be no reinforcements, no manoeuvring, and undead could climb goddamn cliffs – or leap down them, if need be. Living people *could not*.

"I've killed us all," I faintly said. "Weeping Heavens, I've killed us all."

The city was as much an army-killer as the dead within it, and I'd driven us deep into its embrace. There would be no recovering from this.

"The battle is not yet over," Akua said. "We can still recover. Retreat, perhaps, if-"

Behind us, dead soldiers began to twitch. And I heard the sound of boots coming from ahead. More undead, soldiers that'd care nothing for this curse of entropy.

"Catherine, we need to go," she urgently said.

I stood there dazed until she pulled at my arm, allowing myself to be tugged away. It was over, I realized. We ran through the rising soldiers I'd just led to their deaths and I felt myself blast those who came too close with Night as if someone else were doing it – Akua could do nothing, all her concentration maintaining the shield that kept her alive – and we ran for the

wall, for the gate where some my soldiers still stood and fought. We climbed the stairs, black flames burning behind us, and as Akua finally released her spell I stumbled to the edge of the rampart. There I saw it all, the madhouse that Keter had become. Raised heights of and deep drops, both moved by some mechanism built deep under the bedrock of the capital.

And as the magic below our feet kept burning, the outer city began to move again.

It span, only what had been a mere imposition was now brutally lethal: houses broke, soldiers and undead fell off the edge of those cliffs as the centrifugal force caught them. And for those below, they found those same broken houses dropped atop their heads by the force of the spin. Shields of sorcery and Light bloomed, trying to mitigate the damage and staying there until at last the spinning stopped, but I knew it wouldn't be enough. The Dead King would just keep spinning his city again and again until the ritual burned out, long after the last of our mages and priests had fallen to exhaustion. And none of this, I realized, not a single part of this was actually aimed at anyone. It was all indirect, distant. The kind of danger that no hero would rise against, that no story would help destroy.

"We lost," I murmured.

The exhaustion of the day caught up to me all at once and my leg gave, tearing a pained gasped out of my throat as I half-fell and had to catch myself against the crenellation. There were shouts of surprise and a moment later Akua was holding me up, arm under my shoulder as she asked a question I didn't hear. Gods, I was so tired. I'd burned myself out on Night, and now that the strength of my Name – the hope of victory – was fading, the edges of my vision were going dark. And I was seeing thing, too, because suddenly light got harsher. I blinked dumbly, looking up at a sky that was suddenly cloudless.

"What's happening?" I croaked out.

Akua said something, but it was as if she was speaking through water. I saw them then. Only a few hundred, standing in the ruins of the gate Hanno had broken, but they were impossible to miss: never before had I seen so many giants. And among the Gigantes one stood taller than all the rest, a flame burning within him that hurt my eye to behold.

"Blood loss," Akua said, talking to someone else. "The fucking fool, she's going into sho-"

"Young King," Kreios the Riddle-Maker called out, "let me remind you who is it that you dare ape with your works."

When darkness came to swallow me whole, I did not fight it.

Gabe Meadow

Holy shit! Called it! Thankfully, the coins tossed in the air are coming down providentially when they're needed most: the Herald to end starvation, Kreios leading the Gigantes, all to stop the things that Named can't fight.

Still, you have to hand it to Neshamah, he's backed up his warning to Cat that she hasn't grown enough.

Dome Zasrekh

My only problem is, where are the Drow and dwarfs?! Would have been an epic sight, together storming the inner wall! Also N000 Akua aging, you EVIL bastard!

KageLupus

The Dwarves aren't actually a part of the war effort and are just supplying food and arms. Don't forget that the entire Kingdom Under has been thrown into a mass civil war so there can't really be any kind of organized war effort on their part.

As for the Drow, if I remember right they are fighting on a second front and were needed there to keep the main attack force safe from that direction. Even just getting the combined armies of the Grand Alliance to Keter took a lot of blood and sweat and effort.

ohJohN

I think this is a bad take on the dwarves – the Herald arrived with “an army of dwarves, thousands strong” to “fulfill the terms of the bargain”: “the supplies and his help against the city of Keter and attendant lands.”

You're right that the Kingdom Under is currently a gigantic clusterfuck, but the Herald took control of the lands under the Fourteenth (Everdark) and Fifteenth (Keter encirclement) Expansions – “together, the regions represented a large number of soldiers” – and said “the soldiers have answered my call.”

He promised supplies and help taking Keter, he commands a large amount of soldiers, and he brought at least thousands with him – I think the dwarves are gonna join the fight *at least a little*.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2021/12/17/chapter-56-brink/>

Cpt. Obvious

There were an army of Drow that Cat brought with her, but they've been absent for the last few chapters. However even with Sve Noc restored to full power they are not very good at fighting by day. As I remember it all but the most powerful of the Mighty are about as strong and fast as a human. At the same time they are not trained to fight without the use of Night. Nor are they trained to fight in tight formations like soldiers. So using them as soldiers during the day is wasting a lot more than it's worth throwing a few thousands more bodies at the enemy.

The real monsters like Rumena, Jindrich (sp?) and now the Lord of Silent Steps are able to draw on Night even during the day, much like Cat. But again, they are so much stronger during the night.

There's also a few shards of night that was formed when Sve Noc tried to move the Gloom. There were mentioned that these are able to shield the Drow from the day, but we don't know how large that shield is or how many could be spared to send with the army.

So still many unknowns...

ohJohN

It's still daytime, so most drow are barely more effective than obsidian-clad skirmishers, and Cat only brought a relatively small contingent with her to Keter, the rest remaining in/around Serolen to hold the northern front.

(I think also there had been plans to reserve the drow for nighttime defense of the camp, too – but as the situation stands, come sunset there's a decent chance they'll be deployed within the city)

[Adrian V](#)

The Drow are probably being held off for night combat duties, but yeah where are the dwarves?

Zachary A Sloan

To be fair, I'm not sure what Catherine could have done about this even if she knew about it. They were going to have to move the troops through that area regardless, and the activation of the artifacts apparently happened too far away for Masego to do anything to stop it.

Eunuch

...damn

Lictor Magnus

This story never ceases to have great surprises and I'm happy to say that beyblade city of death never crossed my mind as a possibility 😂

Dome Zasrekh

I'm i weird if I thought of him rearranging the city was the smart thing to do on his part?

[Liliet](#)

No, definitely not weird.

ohJohN

As Cat notes, this was an objectively masterful move on his part: basically everybody within the inner walls dead, the armies within the outer walls split up and trapped for easy extermination, and all without being a direct enough attack for heroes to counter with a story.

The only thing keeping this single move from outright winning him the war is the appearance of Kreios + the Gigantes (and we don't yet know how they'll counter it) – so yeah, I think it's safe to say it's a pretty smart move 😊

Frivolous

So that's what the Seelie does. Huh. Nasty.

The area of effect curse of aging is even more nasty. A side effect, not an actual curse, and so very difficult to block.

Would this be the third time Catherine goes into a coma during a major battle? She has a story of doing that, and then rising to save the day. Always costs her and/or someone else, though.

Insanenoodlyguy

This one might have been paid for already. Watching all the people that rallied with you one final time die as the side effect of the spell being used to defeat you is at least a decent down payment,

Death Knight

Of course the Riddle-Maker will call the Dead King, favourite son of Below, millennia old monster "Young King".

The burn. I'm reminded of what an old (comparatively speaking) General once told the living embodiment of the Sword once "Let's begin before one of us dies of old age."

erebus42

I'm not sure it's accurate to even say that he's Bellow's "Favorite son" since while he is definitely one of its most long lasting and successful agents he seems to have a more stasis-based paradigm which seems to clash with their overall tastes and Philosophies.

Someperson

I'm giggling right now because I just realized how prophetic Rumena's taunt was

Rest in pieces, Laurence de Montfort

You were such a good weapon but such a bad hero

Reineken

Fucking finally they enter the war.

[Adrian_V](#)

Well Kreios is showing he has learned at least 1 thing from living that long: how to make a good entrance!!

dadycool

Whoa. That was a masterstroke on Nussy's part. They committed everything because this was supposed to be the final push, so now everyone's inside the Rubik's Cube City and scattered into bite-sized chunks. Good thing Cat triggered a Darkest Hour flag, giving in to despair.

[Liliet](#)

Yup, that sums it up.

totalpretzel

I am in absolute awe this was amazing to read

Mirror Night

I mean I am not surprised the Gigantes arrived. Surprised I suppose that they arrived before Hanno even got his name though. And Surprised they did something major before the Dwarves did anything at all lol.

DK is a bastard lol. Moving the city like a jigsaw up and down and a very unique kill spell.

diverstones

I wonder if the Gigantes arriving is what will allow him to access a different name. Hanno mentioned a couple chapters ago how frustrated he was that getting involved in worldly affairs didn't seem to have worked out, so maybe this is a big enough pivot to stop being the White Knight.

Someperson

Honestly, Hanno is in a fluid enough position right now that he might make for a distant third place candidate for "the poor sod who is supposed to spend eternity guarding old bones", right behind Akue and Catherine.

ninegardens

On the one hand, thanks Krieos, stopping Nessie from spinning the wheel and laughing at god over and over again... on the other hand, couldn't you have stopped him the first time?

But yeah, god damn, they *knew* the city was a trap, but did they really think it wouldn't also include a "kill absolutely everything available" type trap as one (or three) of its contingencies.

Still, nice turn of battle, well executed.

Feels kind of like the Scourges are being specifically lined up to kill the pieces that Nessie is most concerned by (from our POV, Cat, but I wouldn't be surprised if Mirror knight and Masego were also targets). Which is a smart move. Nessie knows that there's a limited number of number who have the story to kill him, and if he can bring those down then.... well, that's that.

Good job. Nessie is suitably terrifying, without the battle feeling entirely hopeless.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, that also leads to darkest hour triggers. The last soldier of Callow gets up, and unexceptional to this moment, By being the last soldier and getting up she rips the dead king apart with nothing more than her standard issue dagger. And so does Abigail become the life queen.

No the way to do this is to kill it all at once. An unending grinder of finality where the big names are not the first or the last but simply being crushed with the rest.

Someperson

> On the one hand, thanks Krieos, stopping Nessie from spinning the wheel and laughing at god over and over again... on the other hand, couldn't you have stopped him the first time?

If this wasn't such a tropey setting you'd of course be right.

But seeing as it is, the choices are either to play your cards early and have them be countered when Nessy plays his own hand, or wait for Nessy to do something horrible and then slap him down just in the nick of time.

A similar meta applies to the use of Aspects in a duel between Named

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

Exactly, play an empty threat to bait your opponent's Force of Wills and Pact of Negations, then laugh as they're tapped out and unable to respond to your combo.

Zahariel

Well, that was awesome.

On another note, I do believe now is the perfect time to break the Sword of Rest. The Dead King is at his apogee in the story of the battle, I feel : precisely when Fate would start punishing him and the heroes make their comeback.
Or am I too optimistic, and the worse is yet to come ?

Someperson

For good or for ill, the turning point has probably got to be when the Warden and the Dead King are finally face-to-face at the heart of Keter.

BargleNawdleZouss

I'm just hoping that Catherine isn't hallucinating Kreios and Co.!

dadycoool

Maybe they're really there, but disguised in some way and her hallucination is stripping it away, just for her?

[Liliet](#)

Nah, they're way overdue, and the hallucination is too specific, Catherine doesn't know enough about them to envision this on her own.

Juff

Typo thread:

dead shots > dead shot
I saw an orc's > I saw an orc's
Javelins punch > Javelins punched
A ball of translucent > A ball of translucent
made to the > made it to the
skeletons way > skeletons away
his lip > his leap
down in > down to
that is > that was
could ball > cloud ball
asides > sides
spear of > spears of
she Scourge > the Scourge
The went > They went
through I night > through Night
ahead are > ahead is
throughs > through
stuckand > stuck and
heights of and > heights and

agumentic

You know, if Neshamah and Kreios really throw down without anything to compensate for collateral damage, they'll have to redraw the maps. The last time wielders of Trimegstian and Ligurian schools clashed, Warlock and the Witch smashed through a mountain range and before them, Triumphant and the Giants sunk half of not-yet Levant. I'd rate both the Dead King and the Maker of Riddles as pretty far above that. Wouldn't be surprised if they could literally tear the continent apart.

Konstantin von Karstein

That's a big fear I have. Appart from the full might of Sve Noc, I don't see what can prevent Keter and everyone inside to get nuked.

[Liliet](#)

Good thing Sve Noc is there?

Konstantin von Karstein

Euh, i know?

Daniel E

While the Gigantes arrival is great and all, that does nothing to help the literal entire Grand Alliance army that is now disorganized and completely cut-off from each other. Unless the Gigantes can reverse the clockwork bits of Keter, the GL is still screwed.

[Hargabga](#)

I mean the counter is pretty obvious, isn't it? If DK used time to kill his enemies, just turn it *back*.

Miles

Problem is he used entropy instead.

ninegardens

Just turn Entropy back then!
Entropy reduction is a thing. Right?

Right?

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

Crazy Diamond says it's possible, just need to punch it hard enough.

beleester

We've seen them use flying fortresses as troop transports already. Once the city stops spinning maybe they could use them to regroup.

BargleNawdleZouss

The Fifth through the Eighth Crusades, and likely the Ninth, were all against the Dead King. Are you telling me that the Beyblade Rubik's Cube Jigsaw Puzzle Gyroscopic City of Death defense has never been used before?

OR...is that why no one can remember what the Ninth Crusade was about, if a Demon of Absence was used?

gbevis

Have people not on patreon met the riddle-maker? He shows in Colossal, Antigone's origin. I would feel sad for people robbed of an understanding of the character when he finally appears on the main stage....

Someperson

Those of us not on Patreon still got two(?) interludes about Antigone's backstory, IIRC, which included stuff about who the Riddle Maker was and how he ended up being the last of his kind.

I don't think EE would allow some bloke to save the day if half of the readers barely knew who they were 😊

beleester

The previous crusades were significantly smaller – fewer nations and no Twilight Ways to make logistics easy. And the forces of Good tend to be worse on offense, since Evil always survives to have another go. Frankly, I'm surprised that previous crusades even managed to make it to the gates of Keter, given what they're up against.

(Then again, the real-world Crusades weren't exactly a parade of successes either.)

Eris

Gosh dang it, we need more names popping up!!

I feel like being surrounded by undead, fighting for the fate of the entire continent, is enough to make some common soldiers rise up w/ to roles. Isn't that how the Scorched Apostate formed, Hunter Magician, and a few others formed? Through fighting the Undead King?

I feel like we can see some names rise up from survivors of all of these massacres, like Lone Swordsman, Grizzled Legionaire, Callowan Knight, or Weary Magician

gbevis

Average named get three words they can speak in BOLDFACE to shape reality. Amadeus and Cat can from short BOLDFACE phrases to command others.

Kreios can speak not only speak complete BOLDFACE sentences, he does them in iambic fucking pentameter!

What he said was not simply announcing his arrival and intention, he was using BOLDFACE words of command for the world to obey.

Miles

I think this is more like the Seelie's song than that.

D

It should be noted that Speaking (the **boldface words of command**) is by no means exclusive to Amadeus and Cat. While Cat learned to do it unusually quickly, and being able to use it on other Named is a sign of rare power (Malicia could do so, and Cat gained the ability as she started to come into the Name of Warden but couldn't either time she was the Squire; I don't recall if Amadeus was ever shown to), as I recall any Named at all can do it to un-Named if they survive long enough to pick up the knack (though Villains are much more likely to actually do so than Heroes).

Kreios is still impressive for using something that has the same kind of "Creation listens" *weight* behind it for a

comparatively lengthy and eloquent line (though it's neither iambic nor in pentameter by my read), but we needn't undersell what Named can do to point it out.

D

(I always assumed that the same underlying mechanism lay behind Aspects being bolded, but only when invoked with a word or when we're seeing the thoughts of someone in the process of using them, and Speaking being in bold: that having the weight of a Role meant one could compel compliance in bounded ways. With Speaking, that's compelling people to comply, and with Aspects it's making *Creation itself* do so. In both cases, it's bounded by the need to be in compliance with one's Role.)

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Re: Maddie Speaking to other Named: it's been years, but I seem to recall him making Heiress!Akua stab her own hand with a fork that way, though I forget why other than just to be a dick as was sometimes his prerogative.

CGundlach

Apart from Speaking to Akua, Amadeus also Spoke to Cat when she just got the Squire Name, forcing her to watch the execution of the Callowan rebels in Summerholm.

ohJohN

I could be wrong, but this doesn't seem iambic to me, let alone in pentameter? Like, his words have 17 syllables!

Someperson

When they were spending so much effort taking the walls, I had to seriously wonder if Neshamah would just

collapse them

the moment it was a majority of Calernian forces that stood atop them

But then I figured, well, what with providence and all, if the Biggest Bad engineered a self-destruct button into his own walls, you *know* some hero would figure it out in a heartbeat and use it to collapse the walls before marching the armies over the rubble easy peasy

So that wouldn't quite work

Making the entire damn city into a merry-go-round of death, though...

Well played, Neshamah

Well played

oktarine

To sleep, perchance to dream?

Darkening

So, the bit with Cat picking up the story of the 5 man band of scourges feels weird. Like, wouldn't they count as villains? Why is there a story? Seriously, there's been a lot of story sort of stuff going on for not having any villain stories.

john

Probably at least one of the final five Scourges was a hero in life, and the Grand Alliance has firmly established that mixed hero / villain Bands of Five can be a thing.

superkeaton

Oh wow, the Dead King pulled a Unicron. Y'know, I always thought just some collapsible townships was a little tame for him, glad to see I was corrected.

Chapter 62: Finish

"There should be no second chances. To think your days on Creation as a test, as something that can be won or lost, is a mistake. The peculiar delusion to believe that you are alone and all others are rivals. No lone soul can bear the weight of the world: come Last Dusk, we will rise or fall as a whole. So do not be stinting in kindness, in offering chances without counting them. Come the end, we may find that saving one soul saved all the world."

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

-my sword cleared the scabbard, rising to catch a glint of sunlight.

"Let us remind the Enemy," I said, and then stilled.

More words were on the tip of my tongue, defiance and pride, but my vision was swimming and suddenly I felt like emptying my stomach all over the avenue. Something had just happened. I'd just been... Choppily moving around on Zombie's back, I saw the dead gathering in bands down the paving stones that would lead us all the way to the inner wall. Nausea clogged up my throat and I retched drily, pawing at my sweaty face. Tears were trailing down my face, like I'd looked into the sun for too long, but when I turned I saw enough. My knights were going through the same thing, several of them vomiting on the floor while others had been thrown off by panicked horses. *This isn't what happened*, I thought. My blood was pounding away at my temples.

"Akua?" I rasped out.

My eye went to her and found her bent over her necromantic horse, breathing panicked as she tried and fail to say still.

"Sorcery," she got out. "Something..."

She used a word in Mthethwa I'd never head before, maybe from one of the northern dialects.

"I died."

I shifted in my saddle again, feeling like a raft going down rapids as bile rose up my throat. It had been Brandon Talbot who spoke. His face was haggard.

"I remember dying," the bearded knight continued. "Thrown off the edge, the way my skull broke when I landed."

The Sisters were talking in the back of my mind, their voices like the scream of a migraine, and I couldn't even make out what they were saying. It was fast and angry and worried. But I remembered it, just a bit. Charging up that avenue with the Broken Bells behind me, Praes coming to our aid. Storming the wall, setting foot in the Dead King's last redoubt and then... I let out a hoarse scream, clutching my helm as warm nails were driven into my brain. The pain, Gods the *pain*. Someone laid their soft hand on me, whispering an incantation, but it was dim. Distant. The memories were not. *I led us straight into a trap*, I remembered with dread. There had been no way to know how many had died when Keter had turned into a lethal jigsaw puzzle, but I could hazard guesses.

Armies had been broken, mine worst of all.

"The Riddle-Maker did this," I guessed, forehead burning with fever.

The last thing I remembered hearing was his challenge to the Dead King, though the precise words escaped me. Most the knights

seemed all right by now – shaken, but no more than that – but I was still feeling shaky. Had I gotten it worse than most? Why did... no, I could wonder at that later. We had been sent back by an hour, maybe a little more, and now we knew that Keter itself was a death trap meant to shatter our armies. My eye turned to Akua, who looked a little green but otherwise fine.

"I can't feel the ritual getting started," I said. "Can you? If he got sent back an hour as well, he should be striking immediately knowing we won't fall for it twice."

"A ritual on that scale cannot be done by snapping one's fingers, Catherine," the sorceress peevishly replied. "We saw the end, not the preparations. The first steps are likely being taken below our feet as we speak."

Unless the Dead King hadn't gotten sent back – or his memories sent back, or whatever the Hells this was. *That would be too lucky*, I grimly thought. *I have to assume he went back as well*. The only person who could tell me what this all was would be Kreios the Riddle-Maker himself, who was... actually where was he right now?

"Talbot, Akua," I said. "Hold, do not charge."

Both opened their mouths, but before they could ask me anything I'd spurred on Zombie and she took a few bounding steps before leaping into flight. Streaks of sorcery whizzed past us and arrows were fired, though they fell far short, as I the hippocorvid beat her wings hastily and circled ever higher. The smoke was thick up here and ash stuck to my drying sweat in clumps, but I looked with my fleshless eyes and saw where I needed to. The gate that the Procerans had taken not so long ago was full of fantassins and conscripts, but there was not a hint of the Gigantes I had glimpsed there before passing out.

"Are you not here yet?" I murmured.

Gods, I thought. I knew that, like teleportation, 'time' magic was theoretically possible. Not under the Trismegistan theory, sure, but what would a Titan care about that? The sheer amount of power it would need, though, was somewhere between mind-boggling and outright divine. I hadn't thought even an ancient old monster like Kreios the Riddle-Maker would have that in him. *Because we know fuck all about him in the first place*, I thought, *except that he's to Gigantes what Sve Noc are to drow*. Regardless, I had my answer: the Titanomachy was not here, had yet to arrive, and that meant in every way that mattered we were still fucked.

We couldn't stop the Dead King's ritual puppetry of his city and we had nothing prepared to take armies through the field of entropy magic that lay beyond the inner walls. Even if we made better time than our last swing at this, went in better prepared,

we would lose. And I had my doubts we'd do better, now that the Dead King had no reason to hold back since his trap had already been revealed. He'd come for us with all he had. I cursed under my breath, knees guiding Zombie into a dive. She screeched, displeased she'd done all this flying without getting to kill anything, but obeyed. I was in no better mood. I'd put it all on the line and it had not been enough, so there was only one thing left to do.

Call the retreat.

We landed back with the Order of Broken Bells, which had formed into a wedge in my absence but obeyed the orders. Akua looked better, I thought after glancing her way. Almost back to normal. My knights were even better, except for a few whose faces were still sickly. *Those who died*, I guessed. Talbot saluted when turned to him, face grim.

"We pull back," I told him. "We can't take the inner city and if we can't do that then we're just throwing lives away."

"It will be butchery getting out," the grandmaster evenly said.

"I know," I said, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "But it'll be a lot worse than that if we stay."

In his eyes I saw he did not agree, and I was not sure whether that was irritating me or making me proud. Maybe a little of both.

"Send riders to the commanders on the ground," I ordered him. "We need to move quickly."

"As you say, Your Majesty," Brandon Talbot replied, fist over heart.

My gaze turned to Akua, who already had a cocked eyebrow.

"I'll reach out to the flying fortresses," she said. "Ask them to cover our retreat instead of our advance."

"Everything they can," I quietly said, eye moving to the dead gathering on the avenue. "This is going to get messy."

I'd been taught an army was never so vulnerable as when it was retreating, and that'd been talking of some field or city. This was Keter.

It was going to get bad.

—

I charged twice with the Order of Broken Bells, to disrupt the dead before they could mass enough to overwhelm our position at

the avenue. It was a brisk, shattering business that left skeletons in pieces after which we withdrew. Above us the flying fortresses were pulling back as well, but not before High Marshal Nim gave Keter her goodbyes. A trail of barrels fell in the wake of the retreating fortresses, smashing into the ground to a familiar sight: green flame. The Black Knight unloaded her stocks like a spendthrift, drowning the Crown of the Dead in death all around the Army of Callow's dug in positions. The ogre was not willing to sacrifice the Legions to cover our retreat, but she was willing to do the next best thing.

Word was sent to the Levantines and the Procerans that we were beginning the retreat, though I had no doubt they were doing the same already, and my army closed ranks as it began to cede ground. We'd have to cross the same steel bridges that had brought us here under fire once more, which would be costly, but we'd survive taking a licking like that. The same could not be said of staying in the city. Besides, with the goblinfire surrounding our position we shouldn't be too badly pressed. I sent the Order back, since knights would be of no use in narrow streets packed increasingly tight with our soldiers, and gave Grandmaster Talbot orders to expediate the first bridge crossings.

On my way back to the hill we'd bled so much to take, I found the Painted Knife's band waiting for me. Roland still looked sick, I noticed, but the others were fine. *More sensitive to power?* Didn't matter and I didn't ask. They had news for me and that took precedence.

"All armies are retreating," Kallia told me. "Just heard it from the Page, Warden. The Grey Legion is hammering at the Procerans and my people are on the verge of collapse."

"Why is the Dominion folding?" I frowned.

They hadn't been that badly off last time.

"I do not know," the Painted Knife unhappily admitted. "Neither did the Page. All I can say is that there is a fighting retreat on all sides."

"It's the best we can hope for," I grunted. "At least we-"

I didn't even have time to tempt Fate, it took the lead. Before I could finish my sentence I felt the fabric of Creation begin to bend and scream, as atop the tower in the depths of the inner city a burning glare turned its attention to us.

"Demons," I quietly said. "*Fuck.*"

The Dead King had decided to stop pulling punches, and it went downhill from there. One of the abominations bent the very floor

of Keter, wiping away the goblinfire and turning it into a surreal sculpture as undead poured into the breach. To the east instead a two-legged creature without legs whose very silhouette hurt my eye to behold began to eat the green flames, finally answering the old question of whether goblinfire worked on demons. Only some of them, it seemed. What had been an orderly retreat went to shit in moments.

"Akua-"

"I won't be enough," she interrupted me. "We need diabolists, Catherine. We need the High Lords."

She was right, and if the demons weren't contained then it was more than just the Army of Callow that was at risk. They might sweep through right into the camp.

"Fuck," I cursed again, and drew my sword. "Get them down here. On my authority."

In some ways, what followed was worse than Maillac's Boot. There we had picked our grounds, prepared and weighed the risks. Here it was madness on all sides, my soldiers never in the right place while the enemy struck from everywhere. I fought in the whirlwind of the melee, never staying in place, always going where the shield wall was collapsing or the monster had broken through. I emptied myself of Night, torching ranks of Binds and almost broke my arm dragging a soldier out of a collapsing house. Moments later I had to bring down another on top of my own legionaries as a swarm of ghouls overwhelmed them, biting the scream on the tip of my tongue.

The Praesi came, but there was no clean victory to be had here. One of the Old Mothers topped down, the enchantments that kept it aflight twisted by a demon of Corruption, and as I saw that great fortress topple behind enemy lines I knew every soul inside was dead. The High Lords and their retinues came down, joining the desperate fight, and sorcery lit up the dusty sky. Demons were bound, driven back, and at the heart of it all Akua led them sword in hand. A hand touched my shoulder and I near leapt out my skin, already halfway through a swing when I realized it was Roland. The Rogue Sorcerer was covered in soot, his boyish face drawn and tired.

"The Blade of Mercy's dead," he told me. "And the Skinchanger lost an arm. We were ambushed by the Prince of Bones and the Seelie."

My grip tightened around my sword.

"Pull your band back," I said. "Every Named corpse will be Revenant by tomorrow."

"Kallia already gave the order," Roland said. "The Blessed Artificer was wounded, but she's still covering the retreat across the bridges. We need to get out *now*, Catherine."

"I'm not leaving my soldiers behind," I harshly said.

"Then lead them out of here quickly," he replied. "The Procerans are mostly out of the city now. We're about to have all the Scourges after us, not just two."

That the Hawk had not shot at me or any of mine even once remained a private source of dread. If he hadn't been after us, then who *was* it he'd been shooting at? I spat to the side, into a thick carpet of ash. Much as I disliked it, Roland was right: if we kept retreating with a measure of control, we'd get killed anyway. I was going to have to tell my soldiers to run, knowing they'd get shot in the back all the while. *But it'll be worse if we're the last people in Keter, I thought. That's suicide.*

"I'll give the orders," I said. "Go tell Akua we need to get a move on."

He nodded. I got hold of a captain, then worked my way up the chain to a tribune before I found no one higher. Everyone else was dead. My word was enough to get them moving, and it was exactly as brutal as I'd feared. The dead spilled forth uncontrollably with no shield wall to contain them, and as everyone made a run for the bridges panic began to spread. I made my way to the hill where I'd sent Roland and last seen Akua, but they were further ahead. Behind a half-collapsed house, arguing about something.

"I can still save-"

"Yourself," the Rogue Sorcerer bit out. "Come on, we need to get-"

I saw the glint of the sun on metal, but neither of them did. I shouted in warning even as I pulled on Night, tossing it blindly, but the arrow went through the power like a knife through butter. Akua fell to her knees, a dark-feathered shaft having sprouted in her throat and gone through the sheet of mail.

"No," I shouted, throwing up an illusion to hide them.

Another arrow fell blindly, missing both as Akua clawed at her throat and gasped. Roland put his hand on the arrow and met her eyes. She nodded. I did not have the heart to look, only hearing a wet gurgle. I almost tripped on the stones, falling to my knees next to her as I ripped away the mail and laid a hand on her bloody skin. Her throat had been shredded, now a red mess. I stopped the bleeding with a pulse of Night, but I could not heal. *She* could, though. Tracing runes in the air, eyes fluttering, she

began to close the skin of her own throat. Then I felt the illusion being ripped through. Roland threw out a shimmering shield as I helped Akua up, drawing her close.

She still couldn't talk, she'd lost some vocal cords.

"We run," I said, pulling on Night and throwing another illusion.

Roland suddenly twitched, reaching behind me, and his arm lit up with half a dozen shades of green light shaped like leaves. I ducked, but it would have been too late if he'd not stepped in: the arrow that should have gone through the back of my neck was instead caught in the leaves, punching through them and the mail below to cut the side of his arm.

"Let's," the Rogue Sorcerer fervently agreed.

We legged it. Behind us I saw a flicker of movement and tossed black flame at it without breaking stride, forcing the Seelie to duck away, and we ran for my army and the relative safety of the press of the crowd. Curses broke houses to our sides as we moved, the Mantle revealing she'd not been far behind, and I forced back a whimper of pain as I kept running despite my bad leg. Akua gently pushed off my arm, fine running on her own, and my stomach loosened when finally we reached my soldiers. They parted way for us some, even as everyone tried to hurry onto the bridges even as the ramparts in the distance shot at my crossing men.

Roland stumbled and I caught him, glaring at the man who'd just elbowed him, but that was when I noticed how pale he'd gone. When he dropped to his knees, he didn't get back up. My stomach dropped and I laid a hand on his neck.

"Roland?" I asked. "What is-"

"Poison," he rasped. "Must be."

I found it a moment later and went still. I knew this poison, I'd seen it before. It had been in Hune's blood after the Varlet struck her, and the moment it'd touched Night it had turned into acid and killed her instantly.

"Akua," I shouted, turning around, "I need you to-"

She was already at my side, magic wreathing her hand yellow, but her face was somber. I got up, yelling for a priest, but there were none. They'd already crossed, we were with the last of the rearguard. Roland had gone even paler and his breath was slowing.

"No," I begged, kneeling back down. "Please."

He smiled at me, grasping my hand.

"Charlatans run out of tricks," Roland whispered. "Nothing to it."

"You won't," I said. "We'll--"

I looked at Akua, but she wouldn't meet my eye. The breath went out of me.

"I don't regret it," Roland told me. "I don't. Get them all home, Catherine."

For the first time in years, I let out a sob. He drew me close.

"Beaumarais," he murmured into my ear. "Bury me in Beaumarais. There's a girl..."

He trailed off. His breath was difficult.

"I will," I swore, because what else could I do?

"We did good," Roland whispered, eyes closing. "We did..."

He did not breathe in again. It was over, all because of that small cut on his wrist. A single moment of inattention on my part, that was all it'd taken. I crossed the bridge in silence carrying his body on my back, Akua trailing behind me, swatting stones out of the sky. I went all the way through and up the hill, back to the camp and the tent I had come from. There I found my staff, stuck in the ground, and ripped it free. Eye closed, I sagged against it.

The battle was over.

—

It would take hours before we could count how many soldiers had died – at least twenty-five thousand, by the most conservative of reckonings – but some casualties were easier to count. Names began to filter in with the reports. Prince Rodrigo Trastanes of Orense had died in battle against the Grey Legion, keeping them off routing conscripts long enough to prevent collapse of the Proceran flank. The captain of Hakram's retinue, Dag Clawtoe of the Howling Wolves, took the Hawk's killing arrow for his Warlord. High Lady Takisha of Kahtan blew her own brains out rather than be taken by a demon of Corruption and High Lord Jaheem of Okoro incinerated himself along with three city blocks when he found himself surrounded.

Not all deaths were worth a story. The princess of Creusens was trampled to death by her own panicked horse, Red Ella – Aquiline's second – was pushed off the wall and broke her neck. The senior legate of the Fourth Army was torched by mage fire from his own troops, which had misheard the order of their

captain in the mayhem. War was one third heroism, one third horror and one third the simple cruelty of luck.

Some losses were more keenly felt than others. Levant lost its steadiest hand when Careful Yannu was taken by the Prince of Bones, leaving it in disarray as it retreated from its failed assault. The First Army lost General Zola to a ritual bombardment that'd gotten past Hierophant and two layers of wards. It'd been a nasty curse and an even nastier way to die, taking half of the First's senior staff with her. We were so lacking in officers there was talk that Aisha might need to take command, as one of the few old hands left.

When it came to Named, the amount of death was staggering. The Scourges had focused on them rather than racking up crowned scalps and it showed. We'd lost the Royal Conjurer, the Marauder, the Swaggering Duellist, the Balladeer, the Forlorn Paladin, the Blade of Mercy, the Anchorite, the Bloody Sword and the Pilfering Dicer. The Skinchanger had lost an arm, the Myrmidon a leg and the Stone Carver had been struck blind. I'd known few of them in any depth, so my grief was kept back for the one I had counted a friend.

But I swallowed my grief, got myself patched up and changed my clothes before downing as much herbal painkiller as I could. My day wasn't done: the Gigantes were on their way, and that meant there were talks to be had before I could collapse into a bed and weep.

—

It felt more like a town assembly than a war council.

My preference for fewer people in the room was forcefully set aside by circumstance. Twice over, given that not only did we need a crowd's worth of people but we did not have a room that could fit the Gigantes. The gathering took place outside in an abandoned drilling field, the fate of Calernia to be determined over beaten earth besides training dummies. Chairs were dragged in, wards layered one after another by half a dozen different mages under Hierophant's watching eye and then we sent for everyone that wasn't already there.

Every Proceran prince left had dragged their hides there, led by First Prince Rozala Malanza and the unofficial second most powerful man left in the Principate: Otto Redcrown. Frederic sat there wearing a pristine doublet in his family colours, with him a few familiar faces. Beatrice of Hainaut and Arsene of Bayeux. Others I did not know as well: the rulers of Aisne, Orne, Arans, Lyonis and Segovia. The absence of Procer's southeast boded badly for Rozala's later reign, the four principalities that had effectively abandoned the rest of Calernia forming a territory as large as Levant and significantly richer. Adding to the crowd

were the most prominent fantassins captains, most of them having fallen behind the most powerful among them: Captain-General Catalina Ferreiro of the Liga Bandera, a handsome scarred woman I'd fought with at the Battle of Hainaut.

In the back of their gathering, still a princess in name, Cordelia Hasenbach sat. Her face was calm, but those blue eyes troubled. They had good reason to be, I conceded with a grimace.

The League of Free Cities gathered around Empress Basilia of Aenia like a pack of birds huddling for warmth, save for the exhausted-looking general from Bellerophon and the aggressively unremarkable minder stand behind him. Hopefully the kanenas wouldn't execute the woman, things were tense enough as it was. First Magister – for life – Zoe Ixioni and Princess Zenobia Vasilakis, Basilia's vassals and closest allies, sat to her sides. The philosopher-priest from Atalante, a short man with a wildly unkempt beard, instead stuck closer to Secretary Nestor and the newly-elected Exarch of Penthes, a nervously skinny young man by the name of Leontios Notaris. They were in the finest mood here, however grim that height: their victory out on the Ossuary with dwarven support had been a crushing one.

The Levantines had brought captains as well as Blood, but that'd not been entirely the choice of the last remaining lords and lady of Levant. Lord Yannu Marave had no issue and his designated successor was in Levant. The most influential captains of Alava had come in the stead of their fallen lord, forcing the lordlings and Lord Moro of the Brigand's Blood to follow suit. They were a brawny and bearded lot, fierce of appearance and decked in colourful paint, but Careful Yannu's empty seat seemed to swallow up space at the heart of them. Even Aquiline and Razin seemed a little lost at his absence: they'd been foes in some way, but Yannu Marave had been the Dominion's leading commander for most of the war against Keter.

The Confederation of Praes, artfully arranged around Malicia, had brought not only the Black Knight in her function as High Marshal but also Lady Nahiza Serrif as the ranking mage and the surviving gaggle of High Lords. Leering old Abreha Mirembé had it made it, as had Sargon Sahelian and venomous old Whither, but the High Lady of Kahtan and the High Lord of Okoro left empty seats. The High Lord of Nok was wounded but alive and had sent his daughter to sit in his stead. Their like was still glittering with gold and jewels, but the rest of the Praesi were anything but. The Warlord had brought with him the chiefs of his most powerful clans, which Hakram was turning into an informal council. Oghuz the Lamé of the Red Shields and Troke Snaketooth for the Blackspears, Hegvor Allspeak for the Split Trees and Arban Twelve-Fingers for the Graven Bones.

My own lot were not so numerous in comparison, though we did have some famous names among us. Marshal Juniper and all my generals were the core of it, with Masego and Akua requested to be present to lend their knowledge. Vivienne was here as my successor, Indrani because she was certain to face the Hawk and though Hanno and Ishaq could not really be considered of 'mine' they sat with me as befitting captains of Above and Below subordinate to my office of Warden. I stood in the back of my delegation, draped in the Mantle of Woe and with two great crows on my shoulders.

The Firstborn did not send anyone but General Rumena and my two scribes. They did not need to: as the defence force of the camps, they had yet to try the walls. Their losses had been the lightest of us all, though that would not last. We had been saving them up for the last push, and that was fast approaching. The dwarves had earned the right to have a seat at the table with the foodstuffs promised, then earned it again by fighting alongside the League on the field today. Yet they preferred keeping their distance, sending only the Herald of the Deeps and Seeker Balasi flanked by a pair of armoured guards in heavy plate that covered their faces.

The last, but not the least, was a single man. Kreios the Riddle-Maker was taller than any of the Gigantes I had seen by a dozen feet, his thick skin a pale brown and his hair long. Unlike what I had seen of his kind, he had long brown locks but shaved his face – though not recently, by the looks of the stubble. His eyes were what drew the attention, large pools of a grey so pale it almost seemed white. They were steady and unblinking, as if there was nothing in the world that could possibly concern him. Given that the Titan sat higher than some towers, even seated with folded legs, I could believe it. Though he did not move and had not spoken since the Witch of the Woods came to stand at his side, it still felt like he was looming over us all.

First Prince Rozala rose to her feet, not even the generous cut of her tunic enough to hide how close to giving birth she was getting.

"I will begin by giving formal thanks to the Titanomachy," Rozala Malanza said, and then to the surprise of some offered a bow to Kreios. "If you had not lent your aid, we might not now be alive to thank you."

Some of her countrymen looked aghast at a First Prince bowing to a giant, but others were openly approving. The Titan studied her, then bowed his head back.

"Worthy causes ever find friends," the old gold rumbled.

He didn't mean to sound so deep, I decided, to have the sound of his voice resonating in our bones. But then did humans mean to breathe strong enough to move flies?

"An honourable sentiment," Rozala replied, sounding sincere. "In its spirit, may I ask what manner of spell was used to move us through time?"

Kreios glanced at the Witch, whose face of painted stone looked sternly at us all.

"It was not movement in the sense you mean," the Witch of the Woods told us. "A moment was severed from the flow and, once separate, made to begin anew. It was then joined anew to the flow."

Hierophant leaned forward.

"You mean that we lost an hour compared to the rest of Creation," Masego said. "Instead we repeated the same hour twice."

Kreios watched him.

"You have good eyes, Cutter," the god praised, "and witness much."

"There is so much to see," Hierophant smiled.

They might have gotten started on the magic talk if left to it, I figured, but we couldn't spare the time for that.

"Can you do it again?" I bluntly asked.

It was the Witch that answered me.

"Not without erasing most of the Kingdom of the Dead," Antigone said. "It will be centuries before severing causality here should be considered again."

Mhm, I'd figured it would be something like that. Power that useful never came without a price. An hour for a few centuries of silence, huh. Creation was more fragile than I'd thought, or perhaps more hard-handed in erasing mistakes. I'd moved the conversation back to practicalities, which had been my objective, so I didn't step into it again. Aquiline was the one who first put the cards on the table.

"Though we have taken great casualties," the Lady of Tartessos said, "I believe we all know the truth: if we do not strike tomorrow, we will lose this war."

There were grim nods of agreement, and then the inevitable hesitation. People wanted to wait longer, to let the men rest and finish healing the wounded. To make new plans to invest the city. It was Hakram that put an end to it.

"We learned the lay of the Dead King's defences today," the Warlord growled, "at great cost to many of us. If we wait, we

throw those lives away: every hour that passes, the dead build new dangers to ruin us. *We cannot wait.*"

There was a *hear, hear* from Otto Reitzenberg that had a few Procerans cheering, Levantines loudly voicing their own approval. Eyes went to me, but I kept silent. It was Juniper who spoke for the Army of Callow, voicing her agreement.

"We can't wait," the Hellhound grunted, "but let's not kid ourselves about our chances either. If we don't have anything for the shifting city and that death trap in the inner city, then there's no point in attacking."

There the dwarves stirred.

"I believe I know where the ritual lies," the Herald of the Deeps said. "Though I cannot stop it from beginning, I would lead my soldiers underground to end it."

There were some nods of appreciation.

"Keter's Due will begin to be fed into the secondary arrays long before the city begins to move," Akua said. "We need a way to deal with it first."

"The leading issue is the entropy trap," Chancellor Alaya agreed. "We cannot take the Hellgate and reach the Dead King without being able to push past the second wall."

"I will silence the power," Kreios the Riddle-Maker stated. "When soldiers reach this wall, I will go with them and keep this trap dormant."

There was a moment of silence, none quite daring to speak up after that. I cleared my throat.

"Then we have the bare bones of a plan," I said. "We will assault the city again, with Lord Kreios allowing us to push past the inner wall while the Herald and his army strike at the Dead King's ritual."

"That still means we have to take Keter again," Lord Moro of the Brigand's Blood grimaced. "The Enemy will await us, and there are no bridges left. We will depend entirely on sorcery to cross."

"No," General Rumena mildly said. "This is to be the last battle, yes? Then the Firstborn will lead the charge. All can follow in our wake."

It was enough of a boast that it had to explain after, but fewer questions were asked than one might assume. It had not gone unnoticed that I had not contradicted the drow general. An hour and change passed as tactics were argued and then the attribution of Named. The greatest change was that there would be no army

sent out to do battle on the Ossuary: there would be no other chance of winning after this. We were all in, do or die. Remaining in my seat, I closed my eye and sunk into my Name. Let it wash over me, hands reaching into the void as I exerted my will to **See**. And I found it, exactly what I was looking for. It was right under my hand, almost eager to be taken up.

The last stories were falling into place, huh. Even Fate believed it would all come down to tomorrow.

When I opened my eye I found the Riddle-Maker staring at me. Hierophant had, Gods bless his soul, stepped between us in a gesture that could be taken as protective. The Titan wished me no harm, though. I knew exactly what it was that'd drawn his attention.

"You have stolen an eye from the Intercessor," the Titan said.

Silence fell, all other conversation dying. I reached for my pipe and took it in hand, stuffing it full of wakeleaf with well-practiced movements. I passed my palm over the mouth and pulled on a shard of Night, lighting it, and pulled deep. I let the burn linger in my lungs, the acrid pleasure of it, and spewed out the pale smoke. I was even nice enough not to do it on the back of Juniper's neck, merciful queen that I was.

"Taken," I corrected in a drawl. "It's been a habit since I was a girl, I'll confess."

The old god seemed unmoved by my words.

"And what did you find?" he asked.

"We're about to have a visitor," I smiled.

I wasn't tied into the wards, but I knew the mages that were: and each and every one of them shivered. A heartbeat later a silhouette stood in the middle of the circle. Tall and slim and androgynous, they had a spellwood sword at their hip and a long green cloak. Smoothly the unsheathed the sword, and though half the crowd reached for weapons I did not move. I pulled at my pipe, eye unblinking as the Emerald Sword plunged it into the earth. It met my gaze, face expressionless.

"We acknowledge the debt of the prince and the tower, Warden," the elf said. "We will honour the bargain struck."

I spat out smoke, making them wrinkle their nose, and inclined my head in a nod. They had better. I'd opened them a gate into Twilight from the room in the Tower they'd been stuck in, surrounded by goblinfire on all sides, at a price. When the time came for the Dead King to be brought at an end, the Emerald Swords would lend their swords to the cause. It'd taken me long

enough to get them to acknowledge I had a right to be bargained with that I had gotten late to the bottom of the Tower and the tragedies it had in store for me, but it had been worth it. I had seen the might of the Emerald Swords, in Ater.

They would make a difference.

"I expected no less," I replied.

They didn't bother to answer me, or even address anyone else here. In a blink of an eye they were gone, the only proof they'd ever been there the dozen blades that'd been pulled and the length of spellwood that had been thrust into the ground. Eyes were still on me, but all I offered was a friendly smile. Always one more trick, that was the way. And I wasn't even finished pulling on that particular thread. I rose to my feet, then stretched and cracked my bones.

"I believe this war council can come at an end," I said.

"Do you have somewhere else to be, Your Excellency?" Ishaq drily asked.

"I'm going to start a cooking fire and find a stiff drink," I frankly replied, then cast a look at the rest of them.

Thoughtful looks, some amused ones and a few offended.

"Tomorrow's our wager with Fate," I said. "Make sure you're ready to face it."

As for me, I knew exactly who I wanted to spend my last few hours before the plunge with.

Souloist

I'm caught up – right at the endgame! Amazing work as always 😊

dadycoool

You made it! Now sit down, enjoy the anticipation with us.

Conquest

Same, its also my first comment. I'm glad I was able to catch up right at the best part, I wish I had done so sooner. Waiting will just make it better.

Kildare

Oh you sweet summer child. You actually thought this was the endgame? 😊

Joseph Perry

Smoke, Mirrors, and a Knife

Someperson

Smoke, Mirrors, and a Knife

AKA Lies and Violence

Konstantin von Karstein

N000000! ROLAND!

Bad@games

AHHHHH IM GONNA DIE. MY FAVORITE HER00000 N00000000. HOW CAN YOU DO THIS TO ME AHHHHHH

Isi Arnott-Campbell



Adrian V

In my head Roland is like Harry Dresden, so even now that he died i won't count him out!! Ghosts, resurrection, etc there are many ways his story could not be over, and its not just me being in denial!! That is only like 90% of it xD

Mostly that tiny veneer of optimism comes from what he did to some Fae in the arsenal, basically he confiscated something about them that altered their basis (Archer noted somethign strange about 1 fae remember) so for all we know when he died it was just 1 more chapter for him as a cosmic/fate chew toy.....

Someperson

Maybe Masego figured out a way to duplicate him like Catherine has been asking for ages

Tom

Don't worry, Nessie will bring him back 😊

sengachi

If Roland has to be killed a second time as a Revenant, I will scream.

Lord Haart

Cat's chances of surviving as Warden just doubled, his Confiscate had me thinking he'd replace her.

My favorite hero too, great backstory. 😞

The Hawk has probably killed more Named than Amadeus at this point. Lots of karma due.

MadnessIndeed

Right on the cups of the end. The very edge of things. Exciting stuff.

dadycoool

Everyone could use a drink after last chapter, especially the people in the blender. I wouldn't be surprised if not a single person entered Keter sober.

jamesc9

Is there any chance that that's the critical success condition? That the Gods Above and Below prefer fools and drunkards over Nessie?

[aurikdomi](#)

amazing as always

Juff

Typo thread:

when turned > when I turned
expediate > expedite
tone third > one third
unkempt bear > unkempt beard
old gold > old god
the unsheathed > they unsheathed
come at an end > come to an end

[Theo](#)

Roland died > There was an illusion of Roland dying, but he went to go live on a farm instead.

Tenthyr

The final push, The drow as the vanguard and Rumenas chance to fulfil Its oath, the surface front where the armies shall try to take the heart of Keter, shielded by the Riddle maker, a desperate subterranean assault on the ritual that would turn the city into a glorified blender.

And the next, painful twist that will make Cordelia open the last words of her cousin.

[Adrian_V](#)

Yeah Rumena's oath will be important i bet, he has a lot of power, reputation and "weight" so there is no way such an oath won't have some effect in the story.

Someperson

I hope Rumena doesn't die.

I hope that there is still a sassy ancient drow just sorta doing his thing in the Age of Order after the war ends.

ninegardens

Having only read the first paragraph, I would like to quote something from the previous comment section:

"I mean the counter is pretty obvious, isn't it? If DK used time to kill his enemies, just turn it back." -Hargabga

Welp... congratulations buddy, you called it. Good job.

smibd

"Prince Rodrigo Trastanes of Orense had died in battle against the Grey Legion."

"Frederic sat there wearing a pristine doublet in his family colours, with him a few familiar faces. Beatrice of Hainaut, Arsene of Bayeux, Rodrigo of Orense."

Rodrigo of Orense somehow both died in the battle(post time-rewind) and was present at the subsequent downhill meeting

Konstantin von Karstein

It's Traitorous who took his place!

Someperson

...or possibly a undead if it's on purpose...

[Adrian_V](#)

Well probably a mistake but with so many demons running around plus the beating reality took from Kreios anything is posible you know?

RoflCat

AM00GUS?!

(not sorry)

ohJohN

I also noticed:

"The princess of Creusens was trampled to death by her own panicked horse"

""
"Others I did not know as well: the rulers of Aisne, **Creusens**, Orne, Arans, Lyonis and Segovia."

[Hargabga](#)

Nah, it was ruler, that can be chalked up to ruler being different.

Wonder

Holy shit !!! How power is this Titan????

CatKua on the battlefield!!!!!!!!!!

RIP Roland...

Mirror Night

Pretty darn powerful and remember this is a crippled version of the Titan. He is not anywhere near the peak of his powers...hence probably why Hanno said the Titans calling themselves gods wasn't arrogance.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Fun fact you may recall: dragons in this setting are what was left after the Titans met a bunch of animal-gods, didn't like them, and decided to imprison them (and thus render them irrelevant) until the set of story grooves that made them gods were shallow enough to be manageable.

Hotcha

Rodrigo of Orsene is both dead and at that meeting?

Linnus42

Wow Hanno might have a more annoying wait for a new name than Cat at this point. At least you could figure out the contours to hers pretty easily. Hanno's better have some OP Aspects to go with it as well at this point.

So its like LOTR...the last Alliance of Elves, Man, Drow, Orcs, Goblins, Dwarves, and Gigantes. Kinda feels like we are rushing though. Throw the Crown into the Fire lol...

RIP Roland...also bury Roland's body surely the safer bet at this point is to incinerate his body. Not sure they should be taking chances with dead bodies around. Makes sense DK would try to take him out though, he has a very dangerous ability for DK. I am not sure he could totally seal DK's power but any reduction would be a massive aid.

Linnus42

I think part of my issue to expand on this is I don't remember much alternative POV during this final siege...that is kinda what I like about these big events you get to see how other characters besides Cat sees the Battle. We have gotten little of that this arc...I suppose we got time for it.

Snappy270

I do agree. The lack of POV does make it seem short. I think the pace of cats POV is normal. There should be one of Hanno's side and maybe one before the time reset, seeing people die in the city beyblade.

[Adrian V](#)

Blame the whinny readers who complain about the interludes

[clavesoon](#)

Nooooo. Roland.

edrey

well, officially all the continent is here, except the rats of course

this was really a amazing chapter, for sure.

as side note, i expect Ranger awaiting at the side hellgate.

JRogue

Its funny you mention the rats.

As soon as Cat mentioned that she had other cards up her sleeve I wondered if she had somehow figured out a way to bring them into it, even if it is just something close to diverting a river. You cannot control the flow of the river, but with enough work, you can decide where that river flows.

Miles

Cat had done a lot with rivers. And lakes. Lakes that used to be rivers. Rivers that used to be lakes. Lakes that moved across dimensions. If it's like a lake (or a river, which is really just an uppity lake) she has the power to do whatever needs to be done.

Lox

I feel cheated that Roland died.

dadycoool

He felt too prominent and close for him to die, but so did Robber, Ratface, and so many other friends along the way.

Revenant

All their names began with an R, as does RIP.

In hindsight their deaths were inevitable.

Zachary A Sloan

Trying to think of any other major characters with R names.

nick012000

Rumena.

Miles

Ranger

[Liliet](#)

Rune?

KageLupus

There are no victories against the Dead King, only varying degrees of loss. Roland can rest easy, knowing that his story helped lead to the fall of Keter. He will be missed.

[boballab](#)

I think he had to for Fate and the Story to play out right. I keep thinking back to when the Pilgrim told Saint that Cat's story is playing out as a Hero's story. If the Pilgrim is right then the worse things are at the end the bigger boost Cat gets to overcome it, sucks for Roland and others close to her.

Miles

Roland died like a mentor. He helped out early on and taught her a trick or two, did his own thing for a while, came back just to save her from overwhelming death and die in the process.

Too bad there are too many heroes with conflicting stories involved. GP and 100 heroic axioms warned about this.

dadycoool

HOLY SHIT! I'll admit, I never expected time magic. Nussy should report for hacking because that was utter BS. He went from total victory to only getting scraps of one and several secrets revealed with nothing to show for it.

As an aside, it's interesting to see how everyone's coming together for the final push. The interaction between Cat and the Riddle-Maker was fun.

Crash

You gotta wonder if he's sweating by now. Literally everyone is here. This stuff is powerful and hasn't happened before. Nowhere close to this, the Name of Warlord came back from the grave, Kreios came out from his temple, even the fucking Elves are here.

Some folks are wondering about the ratlings, I do not think they count as they cannot be bargained with as a people. Horned Lords may be capable of speech, but they're not able to speak for the whole Chain.

For all purposes, all of the peoples of Calernia are standing at his gate. They've got Neshamah quite cornered one might say so that should be fun.

ksmvr

Yo, what about the General Nekheb, "General Catastrophe" of the 10th Legion? The one dragon we know is still alive and he's not dragon his ass up? Bruh where is he?

Crash

Every time they mention the Legions of Terror I think to myself "is it finally happening?"

[Liliet](#)

Sleeping, last we checked.

Joe Mama

I actually think it would be incredibly funny if we were trolled out of seeing the dragon that was introduced three books ago in action at the big final battle, just because he was sleeping. I am now praying that he does not show up.

ohJohn

I suspect, like the Titans and the Gigantes, the drakoi were vastly more powerful ancestors of dragons, but even still: it's probably not a great idea to get Nekheb and Kreios

within a hundred miles of each other, given the, uh, tumultuous history of their peoples 😊

zenanii

“the newly-elected Exarch of Penthes”

Oh crap, this is bad. REALLY bad. Once Anaraxes is informed he is no longer the Hierarch he will no longer have the legal right to keep judging the choir of judgment, which means he won't. Once that happens the angel weapon trap will be active again and all Bard will need is for someone to fire it.

theFluffy

Why would a newly elected Exarch mean Anaraxes isn't the Hierarch anymore?

Jstj

What do you mean, no longer Hierarch? There's not been any change in that. The Exarch of Penthes is the person who rules Penthes, Anaxares is the Hierarch of the League

Earl of Purple

Different title. The Exarch of Penthes is the military ruler of that city, opposite the political ruler I think. Basically he's their top general, with limited authority elsewhere in the city and less in the rest of the League.

Cheetah724

You're thinking the Strategoi and the Basilius (I think I spelled those correctly) of Nicea. The Exarch of Penthes is simply the ruler of Penthes (it's also a Name).

Earl of Purple

Oh, my mistake. Thank you for the correction.

Crash

Being Hierarch is not why Anaxares is giving the choir trouble. The fact that they attempted to judge folks not under their purview (according to Anaxares) and by rules not made by them is the problem.

Either way, the angel weapon is still in play regardless of the current state of the Choir. Much ado has been made about it and how unpredictable it is with or without interference. Cordelia still has her finger on that trigger.

[Liliet](#)

No, no, the Free Cities have their individual leaders AND the Hierarchy, this is fine

AkuaXMasego

Man, I'm bummed that Roland had to die here. I can't wait for our traditional roasted pig and alcohol segment, those are always nice.

Bad@games

1. Roland N0000000 AHHHHH IM GONNA DIE. MY FAVORITE HER00000 N00000000. HOW CAN YOU DO THIS TO ME AHHHHHH.

2. Hehe elf fo brrrrr

3. ITS TIME FOR THE TOMB MAKER BITCHESSSSS

4. Rangers gonna be there. Mabey prob get good interaction w/ her and cat bc ya knoww cat knifed some white dude in new york or smthn

5. Haha gigantes go brrrrrr

Bad@games

Hmm i dont like how this comment sounds now. I apologies if this comment sound like i dislike literally anything about the story that was meant as a joke love you thx.

Bad@games

Still crying bout MY POOR BOY N000 roland. Im just really upset he died HOW COULD YOU DO THIS THIS IS ALMOST AS BAD AS ROBBER AHHHHHHHHHH

[Liliet](#)

Get them home, Catherine

Kiara

Worse than robber.

Robber went out as best he could, in a last moment of glory.

Roland just went.

Miles

Roland died saving Cat's life. That's a pretty glorious way to go.

Lord Haart

Yes, though one thing about time rewinds is that as a reader you expect them to happen again after subsequent losses... Roland's death might have hit harder at the moment if instead he had come back with them feeling merely tired, then as Cat leaves that council she finds out that he died in the meantime.

Wonder

So up to now we still don't know anything about Vivienne's Aspects.

Darkening

I dunno how many she'd even have at this point. Maybe she got one during the initial charge that gave her her name, but how many significant character moments has she had since then? The negotiation with the former callowan legion I guess, people don't always say their aspects out loud so she might have gotten something there.

[Liliet](#)

It was stealing the Thirteenth that gave her her Name

Darkening

Huh, I thought it was during the charge in, I wanna say Hainaut? The city where tariq and robber died. Guess that was just when the name started forming instead of when it crystalized into Princess.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's when people first started calling her "the princess" despite her not having the title yet.

Cicero

Might have gotten an aspect before the Name formed.

[Liliet](#)

True! That does seem very early though, given it was only the first hint she MIGHT eventually get a Name out of that.

Cicero

There was when she acted in the Tower when Auka burned the throne... and maybe when she robbed Cornelia's library,,,

I think that's about it though.

So... I'd say there's probably be something about inspiration/ hope for an aspect, another aspect about thievery (something metaphorical perhaps) as that's to much a part of her to just disappear (recovering the 13th Legion also plays into that).

Two aspects maybe?

Dawn and Dusk maybe? With dusk using the slang meaning of theft?

Sir Nil

"Not without erasing most of the Kingdom of the Dead," Antigone said. "It will be centuries before severing causality here should be considered again."

Am I the only one who thinks this is an effective last resort suicide weapon? Can't be worse than the angel nuke.

SnappleFacts

I think the main issue though is that they're all stuck there, and Twilight is broken.

Snappy270

The other issue is will it destroy the hell gate ?

[Liliet](#)

the problem with environment destroying AoEs is they dont work super great on Named (and DK qualifies in this sense)

Unrecovered

So gigantes know the ultimate art of Save and Load. That's terrifying.

Lord Haart

But they saved over the ideal save with a new one a bit too late in the game 😞

More likely, Above wouldn't countenance a full reset since it would imbalance the story too much.

BargleNawdleZouss

So many thoughts!

1. Kreios the Titan finally contributing.
2. Elves ready to contribute...FINALLY!
3. Dwarves contributing in combat...FINALLY!
4. The drow taking the lead. First claim to Rumena!

5. Ranger should be showing up any minute. But will she be contributing, or dueling Indrani?
 6. Crown of Autumn waiting to be deployed.
 7. Sword of the Rest waiting to be used (broken?).
 8. Severance waiting to be deployed.
 9. Hanno about to come into his (new?) Name at a narratively appropriate time.
 10. The Peregrine sword waiting to be deployed; Arthur ready to come into his other two aspects?
 11. Sapan, time to level up!
 12. Augur's message to Cordelia waiting to be read. If not at the big bonfire party, then when?
 13. Hierarch showing how nettled he truly is at what the Dead King did to him.
 14. The last ride of The Woe + Akua, with Princess Vivienne playing coordinator. Big faceoff coming with The Scourges?
 15. Do NOT want Pilfering Dicer deployed against the Grand Alliance. Does it take longer for the DK to raise Named to his service compared to regular undead?
 16. What will the Wandering Bard have to say for herself when she finally shows up?
 17. How close will Cordelia get to deploying the ealamal?
- Narratively, she will be within moments of pushing the button when SOMETHING happens (perhaps #12 above).

Earl of Purple

Re: 15- Did not take long for poor Tancred to be killed and raised in Keter's service. And now Neshamah has a night.

Bret

Oh my god, what a chapter. The goddamn EMERALD SWORDS are here, let's see the Scourges stop those.

Hype as it is, I am just sad now because Roland is dead and my single favorite hero in the whole story is no longer with us 😞

ohJohN

Roland is dead, and everything is worse now"

nimelennar

Ah. THERE are the demons.

The dwarves, elves and Gigantes have shown up; now the only missing force, as far as I can remember, is Larat's.

It looks like watching Akua die might have finally pushed Cat to give in to get feelings for her.

Joe Mama

Technically the Rats are missing too. WOG is that we won't see the Gnomes in this story iirc, but they are, again, absent on a technicality.

Lord Haart

I mean, Ashur/Baal/Yan Tei as well.

I hope for one more scene work Larat but my guess is more that he'll come back to stabilize and heal Twilight. After all, he was actually the first ruler thereof.

Mary Gentle

Is Careful Yanno still dead? Going to miss him.

I have a personal prejudice against time-reversal in stories – it always seemed to be the trope of choice in tv sf as I was growing up. A way to have your cake and eat it too. Protagonists are led to the moment of death and maybe beyond, and then reprieved by some jiggery-pokery. So you can have the heroes really truly screw up, and all the advantages of an enemy who's read the Evil Overlord List... but then you get a do-over.

I'm not sure whether the fact that erraticerrata does this immensely well is a plus point or a minus point.

The entropy trap that killed Cat's Legionaries was truly horrible. As a person, I might feel really glad it now that it didn't happen. As a reader, I feel cheated out of my tragedy.

Maybe Roland's death is expected to make up for that; some real loss to balance out the "missing hour"... Dunno. I miss Robber and Amadeus more than him.

This isn't a complaint, really. It's that for the two chapters before the last one, I've had a vague feeling that there was something missing. In retrospect, after that last chapter, it was a feeling I identified as this: the battle against Keter ought not to be a Napoleonic Grande Armee, or a Legion slog in the mud, because the fight against the Dead King ought to be *more.*

And last chapter, with the slice-em-up city, and the entropy that could wipe out a whole legion, that was exactly the "more" that I needed.

Now I'm told that didn't happen.

I can't help but feel let down.

Then again, I'm confident that erraticerrata can pull any number of be-fanged and be-clawed rabbits out of hats in the next few chapters. There's finally Rumena. And elves. And a Titan god who surely will be doing more than dissipate entropy...

But reading is a realtime process, and just at this particular moment, I feel let down.

shikkarasu

This is twice, I think, in 7 books that we got some variation on a mass mulligan. I'm inclined to forgive it, since it was very well done, as you mentioned, and the fact that EE isn't leaning on it. The trope is being used sparingly and skilfully. That's all we can ask.

It isn't Game of Thrones level butchery, but also several beloved, or at least recurring, characters have died. It also clarified stakes by showing, not just telling. I will go so far as to say plus two points, even with a trope that can be hard to swallow.

Mary Gentle

While I mostly agree with you, it doesn't stop me feeling disappointed right now. I may feel better about it later on. (Or not – I still don't like the 2 year timeskip.)

'Showing, not telling' ...Hm. They're both equally valid things to do, I've always felt. "Showing" is dramatisation. "Telling" is narrating. In fiction, you need both, because sometimes you need to show the footfall of every ant, and sometimes (despite what I say above) you need to tell the reader "Two years later..."

So it's points for whether those things were used appropriately, rather than which one was chosen. I'm with you in that I think there's no better way to do the last chapters than how they were done. If it had to be done.

Oddly enough, I'm not asking for an end-of-Hamlet type of butchery. Though normally I might be the first. 😊 I still miss Robber. And Amadeus. Hell, I miss Hakram, and he's still here. (We just don't see him often.) And Masego.

I do wonder if I'd be half as happy to see Cat around Akua if her other loved ones were still with her. Indrani is barely on stage . . .

Let's say plus 1.5 points, since I want room to gripe until the next startling chapter!

Snappy270

Tbf the titan riddle maker is the foremost expert of time magic and entropy. Remember the fight between the witch of the woods and warlock mentioned several time based spells one named after

the riddle maker. So it wasn't like the time related magic wasn't telegraphed and he is perfect for solving the entropy problem.

Dark elves and wood elves fighting together maybe ? Should be a laugh.

ohJohN

Relatedly, it's notable that the protagonists only resort to cheap time-based fuckery *in response to other* cheap time-adjacent fuckery. IMO the symmetry of this situation cancels out a lot of the inherent cheapness of save-scumming.

ohJohN

Totally valid. I think Get Out Of Jail Free cards should definitely be rare and justified, but I enjoyed this one – though I'm struggling to nail down why. I guess it's just a bunch of minor reasons that added up:

- its effect is limited – only 1 hour, so they can't undo the entire doomed offensive – and they can only use it once
- they were forced to use it pretty much immediately, so it's not hanging around lessening the stakes of future battles – and now they have even fewer miracles available to protect them in the next battle
- it's double-edged: DK presumably also remembers the first loop, and could have gathered valuable intel from it; it's physically rough on humans; and, thanks to continuity of experience, it was probably pretty demoralizing to experience death and then have to redo the last hour of horrific fighting
- it still hurt their forces pretty badly; they didn't avoid a thrashing, just stopped it from being fatal
- it was a bigger emotional hit: I know losing every soldier inside Keter was an objectively worse outcome, but I'm a lot more invested in the confirmed dead this time around 😊
- the G00JF's existence is plausible: it is a suspiciously powerful tool, but it was created by the oldest, possibly strongest god on the continent, working in his area of expertise – that checks out
- they earned it, narratively: I was really invested in Antigone's interludes, especially the Titan mythology, and those threads twined so well with what was the peak of Hanno's arc so far, when he starts judging for himself and decides to ask for Kreios's help. excellent, no notes, miracle bought and paid for

- DK is so powerful that this doesn't feel like an unfair advantage; they're still barely keeping their heads above water

I guess in aggregate it comes down to: it's a story, so underneath it all I want the protagonists to win, but I want to feel like they **earned it**. If the author is making things too easy, or arbitrary, or inconsistent, that's mostly when it gets boring or disappointing, for me.

DC

Masego and Kreios getting chummy is an idea that appeals to me for some reason.

Also, not to put too fine a point on it but wouldn't erasing most of the Kingdom of the Dead be at least an option to put on the table at this point?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Yeah, but it would also kill off the armies and Named as well. Ad it likely wouldn't kill the dead king or his hellgate

Daniel E

"The philosopher-priest from Atalante, a short man with a wildly unkempt beard". Please please never fix that typo. This is canonical now and you will never convince me otherwise.

erebus42

Godsdamn, is EE pulling a Wildbow and rolling dice to see who survives?

Farewell Roland, you were easily the most reasonable of the Heroes. You will be missed.

I'm excited to see some real balls to the wall full on drow action -even if a lot of them are probably gonna die. Hopefully though it will help cement their place in the world to come and make people less willing to fuck them over the way they had been trying to up to this point.

[Liliet](#)

Oh EE is not pulling a Wildbow. This was well-calculated.

Joe Mama

Wait this is a joke right? Wildbow didn't actually decide deaths randomly? I read worm a very long time ago but it felt all planned out.

[Hargabga](#)

He did, he even said so himself. He rolled deaths in Leviathan attack saying that even if Skitter dies, he will abide by it and change main hero. 1 in 4 as in universe. And then again in Behemoth attack, only with a caveat that Skitter survives anyway because he already wrote a lot.

[Liliet](#)

He planned on her dying and switching the protagonist actually, Taylor truly survived against all odds.

shikkarasu

I think this is why I could never finish a Wildbow serial. Gloves are just a little too eager to come off for my liking. Still wildly enjoyed the amount of Pact/Pale I have read, though.

Earl of Purple

Ironically, as I recall it, the character he'd planned to take over if Skitter died was Aegis- who got stepped on by Leviathan and didn't survive.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, and he died against great odds just as Taylor lived against great odds, so Wildbow decided it was fate lol

Avandar

I agree – and to add some humour, I really want a POV of General Abigail and what legendary things she has stumbled into. You KNOW that this chaotic mess is made for her to shine... and when the hour is removed, she knows she has to do it all over again...

shikkarasu

Well, at least I don't need to worry anymore. Half my company dead and we are stranded with no hope on a spinning island-pillar. I guess I can at least take some solace in that-

FTW? I'm alive? Oh shit. Oh SHIT. That means..."CROSSBOWS, FORWARD. SHIELDS, LEFT SIDE. Anyone who died recently, follow the lead of someone less shaken and more terrified!" ... I'm going to get another gods-damned commendation for this, aren't I?.

jamesc9

> gods-damned commendation

Please, can this kind be made into an officially separate category 😞

Barrendur

"Chapter 62; blood, death, dismay – oh, and this seems like a good place to wipe out the Rogue Sorcerer, so let's do that." This was a very off-handed death for a well-developed and (apparently) significant character, and it trivialises Roland's story arc and character. "Major character? Nah, just more padding."

[Liliet](#)

I disagree strongly.

Joe Mama

Disagree. They're taking Keter, fighting the literal King of Death. People are going to die, a lot, including our closest heroes. It actually seems a little odd that he's the only one of the "main cast" outside of I suppose Yannu, to die so far.

Daniel E

I feel ya man. I had the same reaction to Zombie III's demise.

[Hargabga](#)

I think it was the point. Sometimes people just... dir. And there's no great story.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine is truly queen of dying. This is THE record for stupidest death. Now mind you I'm sure Creation nudged things a bit to contrive this to happen with more certainty so Akua couldn't save her, between it being a doomed timeline and the symbolism of the soldier queen dying right after her army, but also, Catherine really did that

Catherine really did, and I cannot mock this enough, GET DISTRACTED FROM HAVING BEEN STABBED BY BANTERING WITH HANNO

Joe Mama

Cat's at 6 deaths, correct? I don't want to go back and count but that sounds about right. Doesn't seem like there's enough story left for her to get to nine and live up to her name, but you never know with EE

shikkarasu

- Lone Swordsman: Round 1 (half dead)
- Demon of Corruption in a Name Dream (got better, but worth mentioning. also necro-puppeted herself earlier that day)
- Lone Swordsman: Round 3 (actually decapitated. Mugged an Angel in retaliation)
- King of Winter (literal heart removed. This might not count, but...)
- Became Queen of Winter (Stopped being a mortal woman. Heart only beats when she remembers it should)
- Had the Crown of Winter ripped out (Death of a god, rebirth of a mortal?)
- Whatever Sve Noc did to her while peering through her soul (They called this one 'Thrice Dead' in the chapter title.)
- Shot by the Hawk (not even Named. Pulled through in the end, all the same.)
- Stabbed, aged, and then bled to death (retroactively didn't happen)

So somewhere between 3 and 9, depending on what you count.

Crash

Truly, what a fuckin legend.

LOLIPOP1136

Not much to do with this chapter in particular, but, prediction time:

So I saw a comment on reddit predicting that one of the Scourges would escape DK's control at some point in the finale, since "the unfairly treated minion betraying the villain" is a classic trope and whatnot. Well, after entertaining the thought of it for a minute, I realized that there's actually already some possible foreshadowing for a specific one of the remaining Scourges!

Recall two chapters ago, when Cat was fighting the Mantle. There's two things of note here – the first is Cat pointing out that the Mantle is one of few Revenants who can't talk, theorizing that it's because what DK is making her do is too against her original moral code when alive.

The second is the most compelling part I think. Near the end of the fight, Cat uses *See* and is surprised by the results. Now, in the context of the fight, it seems that what she's surprised by is the Mantle's next attack – but that doesn't actually add up. Cat's *See* isn't just future sight, it specifically lets her look at people's *story threads*. So what story threads does the Mantle have? Well, we don't know of any rivalries with a member of the GA like the Hawk has with Indrani, so that's out. One possibility is the story of the remaining Scourges joining in a Bo5... but Cat comments on that one in the next chapter, and it

seems new to her. Thus the only other story that I can think of that adds up is the one of somehow fighting back against DK.

Anyone else think this is plausible? Or am I just reading too much into Cat's banter and inner monologue?

[Liliet](#)

Huh. No, this does sound right.

Cheetah724

Problem is, Evil Stories are still off the table until Cat breaks the Sword of the Rest.

[Adrian_V](#)

Well everything big about the chapter has already been mentioned so how about some small details? Like Kreios and Zeze's interaction, the fact the the Titan genuinely praised him was sweet, and awesome coming from him, and how they seemed to get along, almost seems like someone telling him that "see, he surprised you, there are still wonders to see int he world and to protect it", basically something to beat away his apathy

alexjmscott

The entropy trap and the jigsaw city were unexpected at the time, but in hindsight we – and Cat – should really have expected *something* to go wrong with that assault. This is, after all, a world built on story tropes:

- If a protagonist has enough resources (time, ammunition, money, whatever) for three attempts on something and no more, it's a good bet that the first two will fail.

- If a prominent character (Rumena) has vowed to do something, they will either do it or fail dramatically in the attempt. It won't be done by someone else while the one with the vow is busy covering their back.

- The first two assaults set the Alliance and Neshamah up for a Pattern of Three, harking back to some of Cat's earliest encounters with Namelore. The first assault was a full win for Neshamah. The second was arguably a draw: the Alliance were forced to give up their gains in the city, but gained valuable foreknowledge and allies for the final push. The third and final assault would then be the Alliance's victory.

shikkarasu

I've been dying for someone in universe to acknowledge Rumena's boast for a while. I think it mentioned the vow in Serolin, but other than that it's been this Chekhov's Gun for, like, 2 books now.

Lord Haart

Yeah big story miss for Cat here.

Unless she thought the assault would fail around the palaces but not so badly.

ohJohN

A THEORY I AM ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT:

1. Cat refers to Creation as “fragile” wrt the time shenanigans. It’s not quite explicit, but it seems very plausible that – like we’ve seen happen with other mystical energies – the time-jump damaged the fabric of Creation around Keter, and that damage is preventing them from (safely) trying again.

2. The ealamal, like all angelic power, has a ‘tabula rasa’ effect: “Pissing angel light all over the land fixed the accumulated damage in the fabric of Creation.”

3. Cordelia has the ealamal key and not much else; Agnes looked into the future and wrote down instructions, telling her cousin, “Don’t read what I wrote until you need to. You’ll know when.”

Conclusion: AGNES BOUGHT THEM A SURPRISE SECOND REDO!

I imagine a scenario like:

- they get *extremely close* to victory on this run, but Cat still lacks some crucial (likely WB-related) realization/choice/story, and without it the worst happens: dead Woe, Cat possessed by DK, etc. The situation is hopeless, defeat is assured.
- Cordelia is like, welp, it’s definitely time! Agnes’s instructions nudge her towards angel-nuking Keter at just the right moment.
- Cat struggles against the inevitable and finally finds the missing [Triforce Shard], but it’s too late: DK escapes right before impact.
- The blast heals Creation and leaves Kreios unharmed (bc extremely Good). It *also* splatters Cat and every other GA villain, but whatever – time-jumps, demonstrably, can revive the dead!
- Cat, momentarily dead again, ruminates on what she learned and forges the [True Master Sword].
- As DK reappears to strike the final blow, Kreios initiates Cat’s ULTIMATE RESURRECTION: it’s an hour ago and the Woe are alive again (except one, for story weight 😞). It’s her third and final attempt, but now she has a sharper sword, the Woe at her back, and an extra powerful story.

[Liliet](#)

THAT WOULD BE REALLY GOOD ACTUALLY

ninegardens

But... if you reverse time PAST your mending of creation, does creation get "unmended"?

And if the Angels truly DO do a tabula Rasa, do they erase the record of the time you are trying to rewind into? (More like splicing a new section of tape into place, rather than actually mending things?)

Like... I love the idea, but no matter how I try to fit it in my head, it feels like it shouldn't work.

ohJohn

Thank you for pointing this out, I'm incredibly embarrassed that I did not give sufficient thought to the attendant Time Bullshit™. I am usually ALL ABOUT Time Bullshit™ (i.e. how introducing time travel makes reasoning about something very complex and unintuitive).

I definitely agree that, if the jumping-from point (now) is healed but the jumping-to point (1hr ago) is not, then that probably still ends in disaster. I can imagine scenarios where that doesn't happen, but nothing that's particularly supported by the text (e.g. angel-healing actually propagates backwards + forwards in time a bit, because... reasons?). Damn, I really liked this theory 😊.

john

I think the theory's salvageable. As described, the reset doesn't actually reverse time as such, just splices in a duplicated section across a limited area, like blockchain trickery. Memories aren't reset, probably because souls are exempt from duplication, and the "fabric of Creation" likely falls into that same category.

Incidentally, on the off chance you haven't already read Mother of Learning you absolutely should.

lenethren

Wonderful chapter. I will miss this story after it comes to a close.

naturalnuke

Cat and the Save-scumming Giant

tnozone

I'd like to propose the hypothesis that Masego regaining his magic made Roland more vulnerable. They were sort of counterparts

of each-other for Above and Below, both having no magic of their own but could wield it through an Aspect of theirs. Maybe it would've set up a later story involving them both as mirrors of sorts. But when Masego regained his magic, that removed that similarity and perhaps it thus also removed some divine Plot Armor that Roland didn't know he had.

Jernik

So what happened to the Fae riders again? The Jack of something? That was so long ago that I don't remember the ending of the plot thread.

Jernik

I google it! Larat and the Wild Hunt! Have we heard from them since they left the founding of the twilight ways?

Chapter 63: Farewell

"A life without friends is a banquet without food."

– Proceran saying

It was on a whim I took up a shovel and began to dig the firepit, but once the steel bit into the ground it felt right. Like I was doing something I could pour all of my mind into, enough to forget the blood-soaked day I'd waded through to get here. I'd not thought twice about where I began to dig, simply choosing somewhere relatively out of the way since I well knew there could be no hiding place in a military camp, and instead busied myself with the labour of it. Mantle of Woe tossed aside into the dirt, sleeves pulled up and hair held in bun, I shovelled clumps of dusty earth.

Vivienne was the first to come.

I didn't hear her approach – Princess or not, she was almost as light footed as when she had been the Thief – but I felt eyes on my back and turned to find her standing at the edge of the pit. She looked as tired as I felt, her pale green tunic hanging limp on that slim frame. There was still a sense of regality to her, though. She was not wearing the circlet that had become her right after she was raised a princess of Callow, but the loops of the milkmaid's braid gave the same feeling. Her face, though still

sharp, had matured enough that her blue-grey eyes no longer seemed almost too large for it.

She looked like a queen in the making, a princess forged in the crucibles of the long wars we had spent half our lives fighting. There were days where looking Princess in the eye still drew complicated feelings out of me, but this was not one of them. Sweaty hand resting on the handle of my shovel, I found that today I found only pride. *We made it to the end, the two of us*, I thought. Caring about anything else just seemed unforgivably petty.

"You know," Vivienne Dartwick said, "even back when we were enemies, Catherine, that was the thing I admired about you."

I cocked an eyebrow, leaning my weight against the shovel.

"What's that?"

"You never balk at being the one in the pit," the Princess said, eyes unreadable, "getting your hands dirty."

I brushed a bang out of my eye, unsure how to respond, but in a blink of my eye she'd gone. Not for long, though. The Princess of Callow came back with a shovel of her own, that standard-issue tool of wood and steel of the Army of Callow we'd taken the Legion pattern for. She leapt down into the hole, brushing her arm against mine, and took up a place at my back. Neither of us felt the need to talk, reluctant to break the comfortable silence of people who'd learned each other deeply enough not to feel the need to fill every void. Instead we dug together. It was easier work with two pairs of hand on it, one of those simple little truths that cast a broader shadow than they should.

Indrani came second.

"Wait, I have something for this," Archer mused, looking down at us from the edge of the pit.

"I feel as if am I about to be disappointed in many ways," Vivienne noted.

"Something something royals holding big shafts?" Indrani tried. "No, wait-"

She chortled.

"Royally shafted," Archer triumphantly exclaimed.

"Huh," I said, then flicked a glance to my side. "I might have to start calling you Prophet instead of Princess, Vivi."

"You barely even call me that," she muttered.

"I know," I sagely replied. "Won't even take much effort."

We might have kept at that for a while if a pile of dust hadn't been kicked in our faces. I covered my eyes – both of them, out of habit – even as Vivienne began to cough and spit out the bits she'd swallowed. When I looked up, I found the afternoon sun shining at Indrani's back as she scowled at us and wagged a finger.

"Don't flirt when I'm trying to annoy you," she chided us. "It's rude."

"I feel like no one ever taught you how to flirt and we've all been paying for it ever since," Vivienne told her.

Wow, I thought, sending her an admiring glance. That'd been a little savage.

"'Cause you're known as a great mistress of the subtleties of seduction, Dartwick," Indrani skeptically replied.

Vivienne cocked an eyebrow, then turned towards me. She leaned close hand coming to hold my neck from the back, and even as she pulled me close she dipped me down. This was, I mused, embarrassingly close to a daydream I'd entertained once or twice back in the day.

"Catherine," Vivienne gravely said. "Let's slay your enemies in battle, drink too much table wine and then ignore important paperwork to have a tryst on your desk instead."

I blinked, then turned to shoot at a look at a befuddled Indrani.

"She's hitting all the right notes," I admitted. "Damn, maybe you *should* learn from her."

Indrani scowled and kicked dirt into our faces again, which alas had the mistress of seduction dropping me unceremoniously so she wouldn't be made to eat dirt quite literally for the second time. Though this was a foul betrayal I recovered from the disappointment and got back to my feet, just in time to see Vivienne smugly smiling at Archer – who seemed unable to decide whether she was irritated or amused. It was a good look on her, brightening the hazelnut eyes her darker skin and green scarf already made pop out. Indrani had always been beautiful in moments, those stolen heartbeats where she was so incandescently alive, and between the sun and the smirk pulling at her lips this was one of them.

It passed, and I reclaimed my wits.

"So what'd you come here for?" I asked. "It better not be kicking earth back into our firepit, 'Drani, or I'll be cross."

"Been going around getting my hands on bottles since you got the ball rolling," she said, "but they're running out and no one wants to sell theirs anymore. I need your seal to crack open you army's last crates."

I grunted, not entirely surprised that I wasn't the only one intending to drink myself insensate tonight. It'd been a dark day and tomorrow didn't look much brighter, plan or not.

"Take whatever you need," I shrugged.

"Already tried that," Indrani idly said, "but you changed the lock. Tell your phalanges to help, would you?"

Wasn't hard to find one of the adjunct secretariat's officers looming around – there was always one kicking about wherever I ended up, a habit Hakram had instilled them – and I got that sorted, sending Indrani back on her way. By the time I returned, Pickler had shown up. She was pacing around our pit, muttering under her breath, and almost ran into me. Her head would have reached higher on my body than I cared to admit.

"Have you started talking to yourself?" I asked. "Because they don't let you get away with that without there being *talk* until you're a priestess, in my experience."

"Yes, yes, all hail the Crows," Pickler dismissively replied. "May the Matrons perish trying to bite a chunk out of them, preferably after I've gotten good seats to watch the whole thing."

"Your faith is touching, Sapper-General," I drily replied. "I'll pass the word along."

"You do that," Pickler told me, then poked my chest with an accusing finger. "Did you know your pit's half a foot too deep and nowhere near large enough? We're cooking pigs, not digging a tunnel."

"We're not finished yet," I defensively.

"I was just following orders," Vivienne called out from below, the treacherous weasel.

"You should have taken the engineering classes at the War College instead of that useless stuff you picked up instead," Pickler told me.

My brow rose.

"Tactics and Strategy?" I drily asked.

"Yes, those," the goblin told me, undaunted. "Haven't tactiqued or strategized your way into digging a proper firepit yet, have you Foundling?"

I opened my mouth to object, then closed it. I raised a finger, tried again, then my teeth clicked closed under Pickler's satisfied yellow gaze.

"Just tells us how to dig," I finally sighed.

"An hour late, but there's only so much you can expect out of humans," my Sapper-General allowed.

"I'm going to write you up for discrimination, High Ridge, see if I don't," I muttered under my breath.

We were nearly done making something to Pickler's satisfaction when Aisha showed up, legionaries carrying cart of firewood following in her wake. I took the opportunity to drag myself out of the pit, wipe my face with a cloth and guzzle down water from a skin. I was even generous enough to pass it to Vivienne afterwards, though not so generous I didn't do that by throwing it at the back of her head. The noise it made hitting her was most satisfying. Aisha watched me with laughing eyes, her lovely heart-shaped face pulling into the hint of a smile.

"Juniper's gone to pick out the pigs herself," she told me. "She'd having fun dickering with the Fourth's quartermaster for Vale hogs."

Famously the fattest meat in Callow, which had me salivating already.

"Archer's handling drinks," I said, "but have we got anything except the meat on the way?"

Dark eyes moved to study me with sudden intensity.

"Kilian," Aisha said with deliberate nonchalance, "offered to get a cauldron of dirty rice going."

Rice mixed with oil, onions, tomatoes and up to half a dozen other ingredients depending on where in Praes the recipe came from – apparently Wolofites added bananas while Aksumites swore by ginger. Mind you, it was the dish that had her looking at me like I might be on the verge of biting her nose off. Kilian hadn't been at one of these since we'd parted ways, at first because she'd declined invitations and later because I'd stopped asking. I honestly wasn't sure how I felt about her trying to get a foot back in now, but I didn't have the heart to refuse her. Not tonight of all nights.

"That'll do," I nodded. "Remind her to get the cauldron here early. You know how territorial Juniper gets when the pigs are on spits."

"It's rather endearing," Aisha agreed with a fond smile.

Not exactly what I'd been getting at, but uh – good for her? I finished the pit to Pickler's exacting specifications and then left her to haranguing legionaries into putting the firewood in the right sort of stacks, helping Vivienne out with a hand that she'd didn't particularly need.

"We could probably use a wash," she said, taking a sniff at the both of us.

I wiggled my eyebrows.

"Trying to impress anyone?" I teased. "Thought you were one of those chaste maiden kind of princesses, Dartwick."

"I've thought about it," she admitted. "There are some men I could see myself taking to bed with an assurance of discretion."

"Might be our last night," I quietly told her. "We have a chance, Vivienne, but there's nothing certain about this. Take your comforts where we can."

She smiled at me.

"If it is my last night," Vivienne said, "then I would rather spend it with the lot of you than with a stranger. It'd be a greater comfort than a lay, however pleasurable."

"You say sweet things, sometimes," I smiled back.

"You really need to bathe," Princess then told me, wrinkling her nose.

I sighed. I couldn't even blame her for that entirely. I'd trained this into all of the Woe, because... I blanked. There must have been a reason at someone point, I reassured myself. *Surely*. I was still desperately trying to recall what it might be when I took my friend's advice and began to limp towards my tent, where I was due a wash and a nap.

—

I woke half an hour before dusk, pleasantly refreshed. I splashed my face with tepid water to finish clearing out the last dregs of sleep, then pulled on a clean black tunic and took the time to sit and massage my bad leg for a while. It wasn't throbbing as badly as I'd thought it might after the battle I'd been through. It could have been-

Get them all home, Catherine.

My stomach clenched. My throat was dry. And a heartbeat later I dropped my leg with a hiss of pain, the marks on the skin where my fingers had dug in red and visible. I'd forgot, just for a moment, why it was I'd gone to dig a pit. My friend was dead. Roland had been taken by an arrow that had been meant to kill me. Why else the poison that reacted to Night, the very power I would have called on to lessen my wound? Akua had been shot too, and there had been no poison in her. With the Varlet destroyed last year and the aspect that had made this thus lost, it was likely too rare to be used any way other than sparingly. Neshamah had meant to kill me and come so very close. *I need to be better, I thought, fingers clenching. More careful. To see the next one coming.*

Or else more friends than Roland de Beaumarais would get killed trying to keep me alive.

I put on the Mantle of Woe, more for the comfort of its weight than a need for the warmth, and slipped out of my tent. It was a childish thing, to flee the place where the dark thoughts had come, but I indulged them impulse anyway. I didn't feel like talking with the two phalanges that began to walk behind me, or with anyone at all, so I briskly turned a corner and pulled down a veil of Night to cover me. I shook them off, limping deeper into the Army of Callow's camp, and let the noise of my soldiers wash over me.

There was a frenetic energy to the camp. It wasn't quite despair – we'd taken a licking today, but we'd still gotten deep into the city before retreating – but it was a cousin of sorts. Every last of my soldiers knew they could die tomorrow. Some of them remembered dying today, saved only by a Titan's will. No one wanted to be alone tonight, or leave things undone they might never get the chance to finish. Stashes of liquor and smokes were being blown through, grudges being settled or set aside and then the opposite of grudges: more than a few of my soldiers had snuck off into dark corners to fuck with someone who'd caught their eye, or even simply someone that was there. It felt like the aftermath of a summer fair, only without the good singing voices.

There was some theatre though, I found.

Some bold souls had decided to spend their last night in Keter's shadow putting on a trick play, which had drawn a large crowd of legionaries in varying degrees of inebriation. The Barber and Edward play was putting them in a fine mood, and it was loud laughter that'd drawn me there in the first place. I stood at the edge of the crowd, listening in, and found the premise hadn't changed. It was still about the cunning goblin sergeant Barber, whose beauty drew suitors like moths to the flame, and the grim squire Edward whose strokes of good luck always ended unmade by

his need to get even with his enemies. As was customary, between the two of them they got in a lot of mockery and dead foreigners which was exactly the kind of play my soldiers were in the mood for.

I was still taken aback by the sheer fucking audacity of it when I saw a goblin with bones glued on try to get to Barber to read her poetry only to get his head cut off by Edward – only for another bone-wearing goblin to pop up at the edge of the stage and try again. Those were, I realized with a shocked grin, the fucking *Dead King*.

"I would love you forever, beauteous star without a rival," the goblin Dead King crooned.

"Not even if I were dead," Barber scathingly replied.

Edward cut off Neshamah's head again, wiping his brow exaggeratedly afterwards.

"We've been at this all afternoon," the squire complained. "Maybe you should reconsider the suit, Queen Barber has a ring to it."

Barber, who had not known the Dead King had a kingdom before, then hatched the plan to marry him and immediately bump him off so she could inherit Keter. It devolved quickly into slapstick humour as a bunch of heroes tried to crash the wedding only for their attempts to kill the Dead King to get in each other's way and prevent Barber from speaking the vows. I was halfway to leaving when I noticed that the priest that had been about to officiate the wedding was suddenly dragged off stage, replaced by someone with a fake beard. Someone with a staff and a tattered cloak of many colours. The goblin Dead King peered at 'me'.

"Have I met you before?" he asked. "You seem familiar."

"Never," the Black Queen replied. "Unrelated, but do you have any particular weaknesses someone might use to kill you for good?"

The Dead King's yellow eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's part of the traditional Callowan wedding ceremony," the Black Queen lied.

Two goblins dressed in black popped in behind her, cawing their hearts out as they flapped the wings of large wooden crows that they made perch on the Black Queen's shoulders. She batted them away in a panic.

"Coincidence," the Black Queen assured the betrothed. "I must have had some seeds on my cloak."

The crows kept coming back, though, forcing her to make increasingly tortured explanations, and with a grin I pulled on Night. The next time the crows flew off, I replaced them with two feathered apparitions I'd woven out. The Black Queen actress stiffened and the crowd stilled.

"Nothing to see here," I made one of the crows say.

"We have invitations," the other one insisted.

The sound was so sudden it was like a sharper had just blown: the roars of laughter approval drowned out everything else, a quarter of the crowd looking around to see if they might find me. I was gone before anyone got too enterprising, though, disappearing into the avenues.

I had a fire waiting for me.

—

Most of them were already there when I arrived.

Juniper was turning her spitted pigs and loudly arguing with Vivienne about whether 'catapults' could ever be legitimately be an item in a royal budget, though I couldn't help but notice that unlike the way it would have been a few years ago the two of them were smiling. Aisha and Masego were playing shatranj as they sipped glasses of wine, Indrani draped over his shoulder and giving him terrible advice he was duly ignoring, and Pickler was halfway through a mug of ale larger than her head as informed the lot of them that goblins had a game like shatranj, only the rules changed and you could get stabbed if you lost. Indrani looked worryingly interested.

The sight that had me shuffling in discomfort, though, was Kilian of Mashamba leaning over her cauldron of dirty rice with a long spoon in hand as she calmly spoke with Akua Sahelian. I'd never seen them together before, and hadn't quite grasped how much taller than her Akua was — Kilian was barely taller than me, after all. I slipped in close before I could get noticed and got to eavesdrop a bit on the conversation.

"- and Ratface used to put saffron in it by the handful, which was *odious*," Kilian was saying. "He was a deft hand with chicken dishes, but not a man you wanted anywhere near rice."

"We have a family recipe with fried peppers in it," Akua told her. "A few generations back, one of my kin actually had another assassinated over-"

Golden eyes found me, and I forced nonchalance as I approached them. Kilian looked hesitant when she noticed I was there, her

fair face closing, so I limped closer to lean over the cauldron and breathe in the vapour.

"Smells good," I said, clapping her shoulder.

I would have lied if it didn't, but I hadn't had to.

"Rat Company recipe," Kilian replied with a relieved smile. "They used to teach us in our first year."

I blinked in surprise.

"I never was never taught it," I pointed out.

"I would surmise you also never had to cook, darling," Akua amusedly said. "Did you not become company captain within days of first joining?"

"It was Ratface's idea," I pointed out, perhaps a tad defensively.

"Of course it was," Akua easily smiled.

I narrowed my eye at her, only then noticing the startled look that Kilian was giving the both of us. It left me feeling strangely naked, so I excused myself to grab a drink instead of lingering. The strangeness quickly faded, leaving me instead to sink into the warmth of the company I was keeping. I spent most of my time bickering with Indrani about whether or not some poet I'd never heard of should be considered a classic – absolutely not, I'd never heard of them – and stealing pieces from the shatranj game that Pickler had insisted she would beat Aisha at since she'd beaten Zeze. Since the good lady Aisha Bishara ensured my glass stayed full, in an act of brazen quid pro quo I ensured that her pawns never stayed more than two turns off the board when they were taken.

It got bad enough Masego started to cheat *against* her, which naturally drew Indrani into it and therefore utter chaos.

I was grinning up to my ears by the time Juniper declared the pigs were ready, a signal that the traditional ritual was about to begin. We all gathered with our plates as the Hellhound began making her cuts, as usual beginning with the naked favouritism that was Aisha getting the first place the best pieces. Masego cocked his head to the side.

"Why is it that she always goes first?" he curiously asked.

Juniper turned a gimlet eye on him.

"She's the only one of you lot that removes headaches from my life instead of adding them," the Marshal of Callow growled.

"Oh, that seems fair then," Zeze plainly agreed.

As usual, the use of Masego's most dangerous weapon – sincerity – disarmed his opponent without contest. Not so much that she didn't slap Indrani's hand away when she tried to carve out a piece from the side of the pig, though. Still, looking at them all I could not help but feel something was slightly wrong. The last time we'd done this, in Hainaut, there'd been... *Ah*, I thought. *There'd been Hakram*. He had been invited, Gods of course he'd been, but he was also the Warlord and our camp was not the only one lit up tonight.

"Ah, just in time."

I turned and coming out of the cold were two silhouettes. One I did not recognize, an orc with long fangs and scarred-up shoulders bared by the leather tunic she had on. Big girl, shorter than Juniper but noticeably broader. The other one, though, was a prayer I'd not voiced answered. Hakram stood easily on his prosthetic leg, a loose coat fur over his tunic, and offered me a smile.

"I don't suppose you have two more plates?" the tall orc asked.

"I think we'll find some lying around," I smiled back.

"Sigvin!" Indrani called out. "Though he might drag you here. Come on, sit with me."

Ah, so that was who. Sigvin of the Split Tree Clan was, if Archer was to be believed, the closest thing Hakram had had to a lover in the time we'd known him. They didn't keep to each other's bed only, she said, but she was sticking around and he didn't seem to mind at all. Bet it had something to do about the scars, I mused. I still remembered how wild orc girls had gone over his after he scrapped with Vivienne and the Lone Swordsman. Sigvin's face betrayed no nervousness, but there was something of it in her stance. There were, I supposed, a lot of famous names gathered here tonight. She stepped forward, though, and after offering me a curt bow pressed two bottles into my hands.

"Aragh, Warden," she said. "A gift for your fire."

I met her eyes solemnly.

"Where have you been all my life, Sigvin?" I asked.

That got Indrani laughing, and Aisha as well, which bled some of the tension out. Hakram shot me a knowing look as he passed me by, gently brushing his shoulder against mine in unspoken thanks. I sat with him, Akua by complete coincidence happening to sit on my other side as Juniper finished doling out her cuts and we settled down to eat. With full bellies and plenty to drink, we

settled down around the fire and the conversation remained lively. I let myself be drawn into a debate by Vivienne about whether or not the Exiled Prince would have been able to beat the Barrow Sword in a fight-

"Absolutely not," I firmly said. "Ishaq's ridiculously hard to kill and he can even use Night now."

-but afterwards I took step back for a bit, pulling up my pipe to indulge in wakeleaf as I watched them. It was a balm of the heart to see them like this. Masego idly playing with Indrani's hair as she rested her head on his lap, Pickler drawing something in the dirt that Aisha and Sigvin were look rather skeptically at, Juniper looking appalled as Akua told her about secret Tower histories and both gestured animatedly in the firelight. Vivienne was chatting with Kilian by the pigs, the redhead tracing a few symbols of light in the air that the Princess was shaking her head at. Slowly, I felt something loosen in my gut as I pulled at my pipe and blew out a stream of smoke.

"I missed these," Hakram quietly said.

I'd heard him coming, but we had kept silent until now as I watched and smoked. There was no sense of hurry to the air.

"I'm glad we got to do it before the end," I murmured. "It wouldn't be the same, going into the dark without first having sat by the fire."

He slowly nodded. I was seated and he standing, the two of us apart from the rest. It was a familiar feeling, though somewhat bittersweet.

"Tomorrow," he began, then trailed off.

"There'll be the battle," I said. "And then after. When that time comes..."

"I'll find you," the Warlord said. "I can still feel it, you know."

I glanced at him, found his face pulled tight.

"The pull," he elaborated when I said nothing.

My lips quirked.

"And this surprises you?"

He did not answer, which was as good as an admission it did.

"I told you, Hakram Deadhand," I said. "When the Woe will fight, where would you be if not with us?"

I meant it, I did not speak out loud. *You're still one of us*. He stayed silent for a long time.

"I will not be the Warlord forever," he suddenly said.

"You'll need to step down eventually," I agreed. "Else they won't know how to be without you in charge."

He nodded.

"When that day comes," Hakram gravelled. "I-"

I raised a hand, interrupted him.

"Don't feel like you have to make that promise," I said. "Wasn't that the point of all this?"

"You should have let me finish," he snorted, baring fangs in amusement. "I could think of worse places to retire to than Cardinal."

It wasn't quite an offer, I thought, or a promise. But it was something. There was a lump in my throat I couldn't quite swallow, so instead I took his hand. The dead one, the skeletal fingers that he'd come into fighting for me. I squeezed them and he squeezed them back. I sighed, closing my eye, and for a moment allowed myself to lean my head against his side and rest. It wasn't the same it used to be, I thought.

But that didn't mean it couldn't be good.

—

When it all wound down, when everyone was drunk and began to fall asleep around the dying fire, after Hakram and Sigvin had gone, I still sat wide awake. Vivienne was snoring under a blanket and drooling on a log, Pickler draped over her and somehow not awoken by the racket. Juniper and Aisha were whispering softly in a corner, Indrani had gone off to get water for an unusually dead drunk Masego to drink before he fell asleep and I found myself with Kilian of Masham standing before me. She had not grown any less beautiful in the years since we'd parted ways, I thought as I watched the paleness of the moon caress her skin and light up the green of her eyes.

"Thank you," Kilian softly said. "For saying yes."

I could have pretended I didn't know what she was talking about, but it would have been unworthy of the both of us.

"They're your friends too," I said. "I wouldn't keep you from them on a night like this."

Her lips quirked in a rueful smile I knew well.

"And us, Catherine?" she asked. "Are we friends?"

I could have told her that I'd once offered her that and she had turned it away, but the bitterness of that would have left a poor taste in the mouth. It was a done business, done long ago at that.

"No," I honestly said. "But that's the choices that were made."

She nodded, and I found her face hard to read.

"I suppose we aren't," Kilian agreed, then glanced at the others. "It'll get cooler out, later on."

I cocked my head to the sight. Her eyes found mine, steady.

"It would be warmer in my tent," she offered, and I stilled.

We both knew what she was truly offering, and it would have been a lie to say I wasn't at least a little tempted. She had, after all, not stopped being beautiful. And I had fond memories of her behind closed doors, for all that had come after. But it was only a passing thing, soon gone. It was, as I had just thought, a done business. Pretending otherwise would be sweet, for a time, but it would be a sickly sort of sweetness.

"I've gotten used to the cold," I gently replied.

To my surprise, she smiled.

"I didn't think you'd say yes," she admitted.

I cocked my head to the side.

"Then why offer?"

"The terror of an entire continent," Kilian teasingly said, "and still some things about you are the same as when you were fresh out of Laure."

I was still in too good a mood to get irritated, but she was headed in that direction.

"For old time's sake," Kilian said, "I'll tell you one thing, Catherine."

She paused, then looked away.

"You never looked at me the way you look at the Sahelian," the redhead told me. "Do yourself a favour and own it."

She raised her hand to touch my shoulder, but she must have seen something on my face and she aborted the gesture. With one last faint smile, she took her leave and left the cast of the fire's

light to vanish into the camp. I sat there, resting my cheek on the palm of my hand, and sighed.

"Eavesdropping?" I said.

A moment of silence, then a smooth gait on the dirt until she came to sit by my side. Close enough to touch, yet not touching. Years made into a sentence, that.

"You started it," Akua replied.

I rolled my eye but did not argue. We were both had bad habits in that regard. The silence that lingered after was not tense, but neither was it easy. It felt like the moment before a blade was drawn. And in the end, it was not me who cleared the scabbard first.

"Will you?" she asked.

"Will I?" I replied.

Golden eyes found mine.

"Do yourself a favour," Akua said.

My fingers clenched, then slowly unclenched. I did not answer.

"No," Akua murmured. "I don't think you will. There's too much of who you are invested in holding that last redoubt."

I did not look away.

"So you won't," Akua slowly said, "but neither will you stop me."

Her hand cupped my cheek, tenderly, and she leaned forward. I closed my eye, felt her lips move against mine. It was soft but the softness kindled a hunger, and I would have bitten her lip and leaned in had I not held on to that last redoubt. But I did, she leaned back. Her breath was soft against my lips.

"I am not sure," Akua whispered, "whether that was love or cruelty."

My eye still closed, I felt her rise to her feet. She brushed her hand against my neck, my shoulder, and then suddenly the warmth of them was gone.

"Neither am I," I admitted.

She was gone when I opened my eye.

I stayed there for a long time, sitting there in my silence.

—

Though it was late and the night was at its deepest, I did not crawl into my tent to sleep. Instead I rose and slipped past the sleeping bodies on the floor, past the people I loved most in the world, and headed deeper into the shadow. Past the last fires to be lit, the last watching eyes that a twist of Night ensured slid past me without seeing anything. I did not have a destination held firmly in my mind, instead trusting my feet to get me where I needed to be. One of the old Fairfax kings had once said that the evening before a battle was like an entire nation breathing in, and I felt the truth to the words. For all that the camp had gone still and silent, there was palpable sense of *something* in the air.

But we were still in the moment before the end began, and so there was room enough for one last conversation to be had.

I found her waiting in the shadow of a watchtower, leaning against the side as a slice of moonlight cut across her face. The Ranger had been beautiful once, and perhaps still was, but that beauty had been marred. She still held the burn scars of Summer flame on the side of her face, but also fresher ones. Still red and raw, three cuts: one across the nose and two down her cheeks. The parting gift of her last pupils, the children of Refuge that had risen against their terror and teacher. They'd left her broken on the floor of the Tower as goblinfire burned behind, her fate entirely in her own hands. We'd all known, deep down, that it would take more than that to kill her.

I limped forward, Mantle trailing behind me as the moonlight shone down on my hair, and the half-elf's dark eyes flicked to me even through the veil I had yet to cast down. It was no longer needed, though, so with a flick of the wrist I abandoned the working.

"I've been expecting you, Hye Su," I calmly said.

"I did not," the hard-eyed woman said, "give you leave to use my name."

I hummed, unmoved, and cocked my head to the side.

"But the Name you want me to use instead," I said, "isn't it feeling a little loose in your grasp, nowadays?"

I felt it then, the will to kill me. An intention so strong it felt like Creation would bend to it, just like the first time I'd met this monster when I'd been a girl who didn't know better. I did now, though. And I was no longer that girl. I leaned forward, smiling, and pit my will against her own. For a moment it was as if two ships were colliding, but then in the heartbeat that followed there was a *crack*. And it was not me that'd given. Ranger drew back into herself before it could turn worse, face

giving away nothing, but her body was not so silent. She was, I found with amusement, wary.

How long had it been since she'd come out the loser in a game like this?

"Better," I mildly said. "Now make your offer. It's why you came for, isn't it?"

She pushed off the side of the watchtower, the slice of moonlight expanding to swallow half her face. How very unfair it was, I thought, that she was beautiful enough the cut on her cheek seemed more like a tattoo than a blemish.

"I want a trade, Warden," Hye Su said. "An oath out of you."

"And what manner of oath would it be?" I asked.

I already knew the answer, but it needed to be said.

"A duel," she said. "You and me. Ten years from now."

I thinly smiled.

"Am I to rejoice," I asked, "that I have become worth hunting?"

Her face tightened with sudden, poisonous anger. It startled me.

"No," Hye Sue coldly said. "Not that. Never that, for you. This isn't Ranger business."

Ah, I softly realized. It wasn't the Named that had come tonight, the legend. It was the woman.

"You want to kill me," I said.

"If you die now Calernia might break," she said. "And if it's just after the war, it'll be more trouble than it's worth. So I want an oath that, ten years from now, you will come to me for a duel to the death."

I breathed out a laugh.

"Indrani didn't think you'd take revenge," I told her.

"He did it to himself as much as you did," she said. "I know that. And that it's not a good fate in the making, killing you. It'll bring too much down on my head."

"But you don't care," I slowly said.

I was, I would admit, fascinated by the cold flame I saw in the other woman's eyes.

"But I don't care," Hye Sue repeated, the quiet of her voice a deep grief. "I loved him, Warden, in a way that can't be replaced. That time won't change. I loved him and you killed him. So in ten years, one of us will die."

Looking at her, at the gaunt cast of her face, I believed it at last. That in her own strange and twisted way, Hye Su had loved Amadeus of the Green Stretch just as deeply as he'd loved her. Enough that she was breaking the rules that'd kept her alive through centuries of fighting Named and monsters, enough that she was willing to risk being hunted by entire kingdoms. This might just be, I realized, the first time I had ever liked the Ranger since first meeting her. I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"You said this was a trade," I reminded her. "Should I take this oath, what would you offer in exchange?"

She met my eye, unflinching.

"I know," Hye Sue, "a secret way into Keter. Take the oath and I'll show it to you."

And there it was, the last piece that'd been needed before it all fell into place. Before we brought an end to this endless war. I stood before her, our silhouettes draped in moonlight, and after a long moment I offered my hand. She took it, fingers digging into my wrist, and we shook on it.

I gave her the oath and she gave me a way past the impassable.

Soronel Haetir

Very impressive.

Grey

Goblin theater is consistently hilarious.

Bad@Games

Cat also making props for goblin theater is constantly hilarious

aurikdomi

I like to think that her soldiers are starting to believe she just is everywhere and sees everything

[Liliet](#)

Considering her Aspect and her Night eyes habit, that's not ENTIRELY inaccurate...

Liliet

Cat DISRUPTING THE PERFORMANCES of goblin theater!

Like, that first time she literally changed the plot by giving them the staff. This time? We have no idea but those crow constructs sure aren't the actor goblin!

They are going to have to improvise and I just have to think everyone's dreaming of seeing that happen.

RoflCat

Or start worshipping the Crows to ensure their 'unexpected invited crows' are ever present.

Liliet

I was thinking short term but yes that's SO happening.

Cpt. Obvious

I've never had the feeling that goblins really liked the Gobbler. It's more like they feared it and didn't have any alternative. Sve Noc on the other hand is more active, actually rewards their followers, understands what being mortal means and have a sense of humor that's as dark as Night.

Liliet

Mhm!

Hargabga

What was the chapter that happens in? I want to reexperience the beauty.

gideon

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/11/20/chapter-74-herald/>

It's right before the battle for Hainaut.

Someperson

I do hope the Crows make it a longstanding tradition, listening in and occasionally manifesting unpredictable miracles of Night to troll goblin theater.

They probably won't, but I can hope.

[Liliet](#)

Considering there's nothing stopping theatre goblins from gaining Night / goblins who have gained Night from doing theatre... the probability is in the other direction ^^

ruduen

And there go some of the loose ends. Many of the questions that have gone unsaid and unanswered, from those from within the year to those which have been coming for a long time.

It's hard to say whether or not there will be any more time for things. Keter truly awaits.

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

Lictor Magnus

So many feels in this chapter 😞

The bit with the crows at the end of the play was great. I actually cackled out loud.

BargleNawdleZouss

1. Comedia interruptus again!
2. Long price, almost paid in full.
3. Fuck you, Hye Su. I hope Catherine squashes you like a cockroach in ten years, preferably with a plan reminiscent of one of Amadeus' strategies.

Death Knight

10 years to get acquainted and master her Name as Warden? The experience from fighting against the Dead King's champions?

Hye Su just signed her own death warrant.

I mean shit, Cat just proved her will is STRONGER than the Rangers. So, what happens if Cat simply silences Transcend? Or, better yet, perfect? Sure, Ranger could learn Cat's workings etc, but she wouldn't be able to perfect the knowledge and she can't even perfect it, how the hell can she transcend?

This is just suicide.

And I love it.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Hye's dying in this battle and Indrani's getting her Name. Mark my words.

The oath was pretty much pretext for her to help.

Crash

This. She's just here to make a point or a declaration maybe?

This is Amadeus' flare for the dramatic really. She has all but said that she has nothing else to care about. She came here to die.

Nix

I disagree. The oath to fight the Warden in 10 years would pretty much ensure Hye at least lives the 10 years to fight her. And if it goes as far or as strong as some stories, Archer will probably have a hard time taking her down. She basically traded this for a chance to destroy the deadking so that story is bound to have weight. Plus I don't think Archer needs to kill Hye to take the name at all, she already trumped Ranger when she beat her with the others... and also made a point of not killing her there. Rangers name will probably still fade but she is a freaking badass with fate aiding her. She could come into a new one. And Catherine will be 10 years past her coming into her name, who knows what chaos could happen.

[Liliet](#)

I disagree with your disagreement.

I do not think Indrani is going to kill Hye. I think Hye is dying in this battle fighting for the Grand Alliance.

The thing is, she's not helping them for the sake of the duel. She could just challenge Cat in 10 years or however much later she felt like if that was all she wanted. No, her purpose in coming here was TO HELP, the duel in 10 years was just... drawing a boundary. Telling Cat how she felt about her in a way that could not be a lie, because actions cannot be lies, only words can.

That's the weight that duel has. It's Hye's communication.

Actual challenge? Catherine crushed her in a duel of wills already, and Hye's Name is already sitting loose. It's not getting better after 10 years. What's she going to do for those 10 years, wander around sighing? I do not believe that she will be honestly able to keep the enthusiasm for the duel for that long if she actually moves on in any way

shape or form, and if she doesn't move on, she's already lost.

jamesc9

> because actions cannot be lies

In one of the 'Belgariad' books, our focus character looks at his former lover in a way that (wrongly) communicates platonic interest only. I'm yet to be convinced of this claim.

[Liliet](#)

That's communication, not action. Communication is a subset of actions, certainly, but my point is actions that are not communication cannot be lies. "Lie" is a property exclusive to communication.

Like... the focus characters falsely communicated something to that other person with a look, but it's completely true that they looked. Like, the shifting of the gaze itself, resulting in them getting visual information from that direction, is just a fact.

[Liliet](#)

Actually, rereading what you were replying to, yeah, this could be a lie. It'd be one hell of an investment though!

Someperson

I dunno, the decade thing does have a certain paralellism with how Catherine treated Alaya, which might help it stick. It feels... significant.

And Catherine formally accepted the duel, acknowledging Hye as somebody worth dueling.

I am pretty sure that if Hye survives Keter, the narrative will give her enough of a leg up that in 10 years time she will be capable of posing a threat to Catherine.

...which does not guarantee at all that Hye will win, but she will get her chance.

[Mincheriit](#)

I agree, she should still have a chance of killing Cat in 10 years, though i believe its a 'win-win' situation for Hye Su. She doesnt care if she dies fighting Cat, kills her then is hunted or is killed after killing Cat, its all 'acceptable'.

[Liliet](#)

My point is that Hye ain't surviving Keter. She's dying to Indrani's claim to Ranger, by which I do not mean Indrani literally kills her but more the reason Cat avoided Tancred and Arthur.

IF Hye survives for another 10 years it'll be another story... and I frankly suspect it will be one of her no longer wanting to duel Cat all that much actually (and Cat is not super interested either). I think she honestly knows that and the oath was more of a Formal Declaration than her expectation to actually ever get that delivered on. Insurance, really.

I do not think Hye expected to survive the Ater confluence and I do not think she's enjoyed it.

Heriaks

Hye is imortal, 10 years is nothing to her. She will wait without losing her hatred (because her love for Amadeus is irreplaceable) and will try to kill Cat.

And will die in the process if not at Keter

[Liliet](#)

I'm sure that's Hye's logic yeah

Shadow Chancellor

I think Hye is surviving Keter, but she won't survive as Ranger. Just as Cat said that it wasn't Ranger that came to make the Oath but Hye, I think Hye won't survive the fall of Keter while remaining the Ranger but she'll live the 10 years to see the duel.

[Liliet](#)

That's a possible outcome! I don't think it's likely but it could work too.

Лято

What else do you think it is? It's a suicide by proxy and she knows that. It's absolutely intentional. She is not the type of person who would kill herself directly, she will use Cat. I am wondering if she has ever thought what would she do if Amadeus had died in any other way, since she clearly can not proceed as is?

[Liliet](#)

I think Hye's original plan when she was accompanying on Amadeus on his Very High Risk Journey was that her own students would kill HER. She didn't get thrown by Amadeus's death itself (it was predictable, they talked about it in East II) so much as by Amadeus's death combined with her own survival (but being bested by her students).

Andrew Smith

I mean the dead king champions are also something Ranger has practiced against and well as for Silence, I can easily see Ranger just cutting that from effecting her because broken bitch.

Though giving Cat aka Amadeus Daughter 10 years to come up with a plan to take her down is the real thing that would kill her and even then even is she wins she will get killed by the all the people who will be mad at her for killing Cat like Cat said Ranger is breaking the rules that have kept her alive all this time.

like she will die to Cat or to the people who will avenge Cat so Ranger is 100% dead from this, the only thing up in the air is if Cat will go down with her and the odds are not going to be in her(hye) favour

Miles

Suicide is the point. Killing Cat won't let her see Amadeus again or make the pain stop.

Insanenoodlyguy

Might not come to it. There's decent odds Idrani finds out about this and they have it out first.

[Liliet](#)

Eh, Indrani is not a kill-stealer and has faith in Cat.

Linnus42

Again I have the desire for more Interludes lol, not enough prospective that isn't on Cat. Which I kinda think is needed if not for everyone escaping DK's death trap then for a last night lol.

Though yes this was well done. Always nice to see Killian, I am never quite sure she is alive when she is offscreen.

Does the Cat duel with Hye take place before or after Cat kills Alaya? They might as well all get together for that one lol.

Bad@Games

after Alaya. chancalor (not Chancalor) only has 7 years.

Linnus42

Yeah I realized that later on that sucks lol.

Miles

She'll have killed over half the Woe by that point. Isn't that a hell of a thing

Lord Haart

You mean the Calamities?

That was foreshadowed pretty heavily in early books. Cat is sadly lucky about Thallasina.

[Tom](#)

> Hakram shot me a knowing look as he passed me by, gently brushing his shoulder against mine in unspoken thanks.

Was Cat standing on Kilian's shoulders?

[irritantseraphim](#)

He was kneeling, maybe.

ninegardens

He was back in his wheelchair... just for this special occassion.

Bad@Games

Ya know in callow that may be a crime to say that

[Sugar Roll](#)

That was how Cat saw it. In reality, it was Hakram's knees.

Asterix

You know, it's a pity there aren't going to be any more new characters in the story, because I'd love to see somebody tell Catherine that she's taller than they expected.

After all, when everybody keeps making a huge deal of how short she is, finding out that she's basically average (most of the people in her life are seriously tall, Cat is maybe a little below average, but not by so much that you would notice if she were, say, a farmer) would be a bit of a surprise.

Crash

It's like being the libero in a Russian volleyball team.

They're 1.85M tall, but they sure do look short near the other 2M+ folk, eh?

erebus42

Well that was nice. I'm afraid though that that may be the last campfire for some of those characters.

I'm glad Cat and Akua finally did something besides dancing around each other -even if it only lasted a moment. Frankly you'd expect that shit more from a couple of Heroes or something. If any of those random soldiers survive they'll at least have a funny story to tell.

[Liliet](#)

Oh Akua has kissed Cat before, with the same 0 reaction. Cat's 100% punishing herself more than Akua at this point (and let's be real always was)

agumentic

First time it was full-on lips instead of just a corner of a mouth or something else, though. Maybe by the end, they'll actually kiss, before hurting each other even more.

[Liliet](#)

true true, the last one was on the neck iirc

Miles

If Akua has a major hand in killing the DK and stopping his rampage she'll have saved every life that's left on Calernia. She'll have a pretty strong argument that those ripple effects from the Folly are balanced out by then.

agumentic

It's really not about balance for either Akua or Cat.

ohJohN

my GOD can they just FUCK already, this is KILLING me

RubberBandMan

This is pretty much what everyone, even people who hate Akua with a burning passion, are saying. We've got Vivi, Killian, and a host of others. Everyone has already accepted that Cat should let herself be with Akua, it's literally only Cat

that feels she has something to prove by pretending to be chaste with Akua.

[Liliet](#)

How far can Akua get with Cat just kind of sitting still and pretending nothing is happening?

ninegardens

See, same here, but in the opposite direction.
Every time this even crops up slightly I'm like "Ughhh... gross. Could they just *not*. This feels weird and wrong and gross on so many levels."

Lord Haart

I think it's meant to really. There's some serious Stockholm Syndrome or something like it on Akua's part. She may 'deserve' that but I don't think it's the kind of love that's satisfying to see enacted.

And on Cat's part, it's just long prices for everyone really.

Lord Haart

No, it's about denying Akua (in at least some form) no matter the cost. She can't forgive the Folly because she isn't the only victim, and her actions also caused it at least indirectly (sparing William).

If she responded, she wouldn't be the person Akua was (very much) in love with anyway. It's that Last Redoubt she admires the most.

[Liliet](#)

It's about denying Akua, yes, but it's not just about denying herself to Akua, it's about denying Akua to herself, too.

Ed

Oh yeah this is loaded with death flags but how could it not be? We are at the end.

Miles

I see Death Flags."
"In your dreams?"
Cole shakes his head no
"While you're awake?"
Cole nods

"Death Flags like, on flag poles? In carrying cases?"
"Walking around like regular people. They don't see each other. They only see what they want to see. They don't know they're Death Flags."
"How often do you see them?"
"All the time."

'Ladi Williams

I hope she smacks down Hye Sue.
Hard.

[Liliet](#)

Hye isn't making it this long.

Lord Haart

Not sure why anyone would think Indrani is guaranteed to be Ranger – there's a reason she is still a Claimant, not the Name.

Losing her would hurt as much as Masego or any of the other Woe but this is endgame, all bets are off.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm pretty sure Idrani will kill her now. But tonight sets the framework. Ranger didn't come for the Warden. So it will be Idrani that comes for Hye Su, to ensure she can't hurt any of her friends any more. And with this she will find the final piece that makes her the new Ranger.

Bad@Games

Glad Killian was there. Picker sass is welcome. Gotta love Hakram and his lady friend. Get them home catherine. I like how the coments call her Hye Sue not Ranger now. Adjunct 2 electric boogaloo? can there more adjunct's then the adjunct has hands?!?!?!?!?!?

IF I DONT GET A CHAPTER FOR ROLANDS BURIAL I WILL BE CROSS.

aurikdomi

If there is a burial chapter I imagine a whole lot more people will be covered than just Roland.

Bad@Games

2 burial chapters, 1 for roland, 1 for all the other named that was not my boy.

tbh a lot of named wont have bodies to bury per say, and cat made the promise to do it herself for roland soooo???!!!

Juff

Typo thread:

of hand on > of hands on
close hand > close, hand
at a look > a look
you army's > your army's
tactiqued or strategized > tacticed or strategised
you Foundling > you, Foundling
tells us > tell us
cart of > a cart of
she'd didn't > she didn't
someone point, > some point,
them impulse > the impulse
I had a fire (extra space)
advice he was (extra space)
never was never > was never
never head > never heard
place the > place and the
coat fur > fur coat
took step back > took a step back
were look rather > were looking rather
gestured > gesturing
and she squeezed > and he squeezed
same it > same as it
Masham standing > Mashamba standing
We were both had > We both had
" "But > "But
why you came for > what you came for

ohJohN

I read "and **she**</b
squeezed" and thought, "man I hope Juff also noticed this 🙄"

ohJohN

EXCELLENT JOB, WORDPRESS (also me I guess)

BargleNawdleZouss

You are doing the work of Above and Below, Juff. My OCD thanks you! 😊

BarberXNeshamah

Gods, I love the roasted pigs chapters. There is nothing like reading the Woe and (Rat) company just bicker and have fun.

Also the goblins keep being the best and funniest race on Creation.

Wonder

The first time I saw the chapter title, It felt like some of these characters were saying goodbye and it hurt.. it hurt and made me fear for them..

Cat Why??? Why is Cat still holding on to that old redoubt? This is frustrating... Akua and Cat deserve this little slice of each other. Why is Cat denying them both this?

Is she still hoping Akua will take the Crown of Autumn? I thought the Serolen arc was about Cat deciding to not put Akua in the Crown trap.

aurikdomi

Long prices are her blood, asking her to give up this last holdout is asking her to give up the core tenant of her people.

[Liliet](#)

Cat is still feeling guilty for Second Liesse (and also a whole host more things that end up lumped with it) and she's punishing herself by using Akua as proxy. Hell, given she lets Akua do whatever the fuck she wants, it's pretty much just herself now.

Lord Haart

Not responding clearly hurt Akua too and if it hadn't I'm not sure Cat wouldn't have responded.

But yes, Cat rightly surmised that all of this would only hurt Akua enough if it was real.

agumentic

In matters of self-mutilation, Catherine knows no equal. She hates both herself and Akua a bit too much to allow them that happiness, even though she loves as well.

KageLupus

Cat blames herself for Second Liesse as much as she does Akua, and has used that guilt to drive her to where everyone is today. If she could let it go for Akua then it would mean that Cat's guilt wasn't needed either, and now is not the time to be taking away your main driving motivation.

Plus, Cat is still hoping that some combination of Akua and the Autumn Crown can be used to trap DK forever. So opening her

heart to Akua before shoving her into an eternal prison seems like an equally bad idea.

Konstantin von Karstein

Because Akua is a mass-murderess, plain and simple. Even the fact that she sincerely regrets it doesn't erase those 100k deaths. I still think she should get punished, and would be disappointed in Cat if she choose to date Akua.

Miles

But like, what about all those times she's saved everyone who's left? By the time this fight is over she'll have saved every single person who is left alive in Calernia.

Either because of null hypothesis or because she saved Cat last chapter and Cat kills the DK, or because Akua does yet another thing to more directly stop the DK's armies.

Lord Haart

If not for Akua, DK may never have been unleashed. The Folly, and how it failed, was a very good trigger for the Crusades and is probably the reason they committed so hard vs. a token effort. Which Malicia responded to with the DK deal.

Regardless of all that, point is that Cat still sees Liesse at the same time she sees her and that's a hell of a turnoff.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I agree that the deaths should hang over her head indefinitely, but the reason she killed them is that she was hardcore brainwashed from birth, and it really didn't take long for Cat's offer of a redemption arc to cause Akua to begin turning her back on that aspect of herself and of her culture.

Moreover, you're free to disagree, but I feel that the purpose of punishment should be deterrence and that when something other than punishment is a more effective deterrent then the other option should be favored.

The dead are not honored by the suffering of the living under any circumstance, in my view. It's good that she suffers, but only when the suffering's source is her own internal recognition that she has committed a crime vast enough to overshadow anything else; the suffering itself is emphatically not the point imo, and other sources of it are unlikely to carry the same justifying weight. If proper

recognition of her unpayable debt to society on her own part could come without suffering, then even this pain would be something worth easing (but it can't, so it isn't).

I'll admit that this is not so much a different interpretation of the story or character as it is a different moral philosophy. Either way, I don't fault you. As for the ship, I do like it, but I think I'd like it less if Cat actually did get over her long price and associated hangups and started leaning into it.

Liliet

^^^ all of this, except Cat also wasn't offering Akua a redemption arc. Akua barged in and demanded one, and Catherine actually tried to protest while Akua was all "nuh uh you can't deny me it's against your morals checkmate atheists" – reread Comes Around, it's a fucking masterpiece.

Akua started the trajectory away from the toxic ideology of her youth just from being no longer in contact with it, and frankly, given some of her remarks in Book 3, was already on that trajectory before, just too deep inside to make it to the surface yet.

*arcanavita*15

I wonder what the Alaya will think about the duel in 10 years, also it was after her execution time so I think subconsciously Hye blames her as well as Cat.

holothuroid

Oh, definitely. Also it might be a bit of self preservation. Consciously scheduling the death match in such a way as to prevent the Warden from executing her role, might be narratively unsound.

ISiejek

Well damn....

There is too much to try and express after reading that

Tenthyr

I wonder how that duel will go. Catherine will get to collect her final due, and then, I suspect, very much might die to Indrani's teacher.

Catherine's a Villian after all, there's death and pain in her wake, the trade for the change she wanted to give the world. It might be a fitting, even peaceful end for her if she dies– or a chance to be someone else, once the last dust settles and the shape of Cardinal and the Warden is complete.

[Liliet](#)

That duel ain't happening, IMHO. Hye's dying before the end of the war. The oath was a pretext, because she wanted to help but didn't want to JUST help without establishing how she feels about the whole thing.

[Liliet](#)

(which isn't to say Hye isn't expecting to collect on the oath, this is just a narrative prediction that she won't)

shikkarasu

A Practical Epilogue to Evil: Cat buries Hye Sue in Refuge. Everyone thinks it's a kind gesture until she shows up 9.8 years later to tap her foot on Hye's grave and say "Don't keep a girl waiting. Oh, right, it was *to the death*. I guess I win by defa-" and then a naturally occurring Revenant claws her way out of the ground.

"... OK, in hindsight I should have seen that coming." Refuge proceeds to take refuge anywhere else.

[Liliet](#)

beautiful...

BargleNawdleZouss

Next, would you rather have an Interlude showing the Heroes and other armies' versions of this campfire, or just move on already to the final battle?

[laguz24](#)

I would like the heroes to be seen but the pacing would be better served if we took the plunge.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Could have the first part of the plunge-taking be a heroic interlude.

Konstantin von Karstein

Heroes, definitely. And Arthur and Geatan finally getting together 😊

Insanenoodlyguy

Yes if it includes Akua settling and finally going at it with Hanno, fulfilling my crackship.

BargleNawdleZouss

Of all the ships in the harbor, THAT is one I would never think to look for! Interesting...

Cayle

Doesnt that agreement fuck over Indrani in a massive way. Gives Hye a story to ride past Indranis attempt at taking her name.

[roseocean2012](#)

Not really. Ranger's schtick is basically the manifestation of "Nothing personal, kid." She maintains plot invulnerability by never having enough at stake to trap her into a bad bet. This is entirely personal, so she loses that protection instead of gaining a plot level up.

Cayle

Was talking about the sequel hook in her story. The commitment to fight the most powerful monster in Calernia.

[Liliet](#)

Yeeah, I'm not buying that. The weight of this duel is not the actual fight that's coming but its role as Hye's pretext for helping the GA. For her to die in this battle would be exactly narratively correct without leaving any loose ends dangling and emotional threads unresolved. The duel oath is just an expression of the emotions involved.

shikkarasu

Nope. Ranger is breaking her rules and fighting someone for vengeance, rather than to test herself or for petty whims. She's also making a high profile political enemy with nothing to gain. If she was into that she would have killed Malicia decades ago.

No, what you are witnessing is Hye Sue's Name *weakening*. She was less Ranger after she lost a fight, and she's even less now that she's made that oath. If she doesn't stop this path then Indrani will have no rivals for the Name Ranger and won't even need to kill Hye for it. Hye will show up to the duel with a new, lesser Name or nothing at all save a pair of longknives.

Insanenoodlyguy

Or Idrani kills her. Not Archer either. The same way Hye Su came for Catherine tonight, whatever else they are. I, Idrani comes for Hye Su and says "you've hurt my friends too much already. You're done doing that. Oath you won't and walk now

or we end this.” And of course Hye doesn’t walk, and the likely outcome is Idrani the Ranger.

Casey Glick

Indrani would never kill Hye Su. She doesn’t need to anymore, she freed herself from being trapped by that story. And Hye Su is too important to the fight to be killed before beating the dead king.

I think she will end up dying to save Indrani.

Liliet

I think she will end up dying to save Cat, just because of how well it would drive home the ENTIRETY of the bullshit involved ♥

Ed

The only way Hye Su gets to keep the name of Ranger is if Indrani dies as far as I see it and wouldn’t that be a total kick in the guts.

Lord Haart

She still lost pretty entirely to Indrani already. I think the Name is gone, barring a pattern of three somehow developing.

Indrani could still die though 😞

Mary Gentle

I’ve missed Hakram so much.

Pickler telling the Princess and the Warden that they don’t know enough to dig a hole in the ground. 😊

The Black Queen, now acted with real Crows!

And Killian dropping in to tell us that – after all these years – Catherine’s STILL horrible at this. I think we might have noticed. 😊

Regarding the proposed duel, I might be on Hye Su’s side in this. Amadeus is much missed, and wouldn’t it have been wonderfully complex if he’d still been around for all this?

On the other hand, scheduling a duel for ten years after invading the Dark King’s city by a secret way that has “DISASTER” flashing above it in neon lettering... ? That really is counting her chickens before the metaphorical hen even lays the eggs.

We need some story-fu around now,

Insanenoodlyguy

The thing is it's truly the last thing that Amadeus would have wanted. I get Hye Su doesn't care, but that's no less true. The fact is he would have tried to kill her, taken his daughters side. Which is both a deeper cut of the pain and the sort of thing that puts a finger on cats side of the scale.

Lord Haart

Fate still loves a good tragedy...

[Liliet](#)

Oh she's not counting her chickens, she's drawing a line in the ground. "I'm here to help you but FYI I hate you personally and am not okay with anything that's going on. And if we're both surviving this it's no longer than for 10 years."

Xi Cree

It occurs to me that the Dead King has been setting up something to Nail Hye with the instant she represents more than a nuisance...

Thinking about it that would be the perfect way to destabilize a group coming after him relying on her as a linchpin.

[Hargabga](#)

"A life without friends is a banquet without food."

Honestly, it's also sounds like something Dread Emperor would say. I too like to eat my friends.

KageLupus

I absolutely love the fact that Ranger has already been established as knowing all of the secret ways into the heart of Keter, and that what was originally a cool perspective interlude was actually a super sneaky Checkhov's interlude instead. The planning and foresight that goes into something like that just tickles me.

KageLupus

I feel like a clown for replying to my own post, but I knew that Cat's vaguely recalled quote by a Fairfax had to be a chapter quote and then I was able to find it. I get as much joy out of a good lore callback as I do a more meta narrative one.

"The evening before a battle is like an entire nation breathing in. Only morning will tell if what comes out is acclaim or

lamentation.”

– King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded

Xinci

Its a fascinating thing that Cat, didnt see the similarities between her own response to those dying close to her and Rangers. Especially since it happened at a moment where she actually liked Ranger too. Makes me wonder if they could have grown to a understanding if Amadeus had found a proper framework for them to share goals and conflicts over cooperatively.

ninegardens

See... in a normal story, in Cat's place, I'd seriously consider whether Ranger was setting things up to murder me in some back alley hallway in Keter.

Of course, with story vision up and available, that's a harder trick to pull, so I don't think it will happen, but still

Insanenoodlyguy

No. Hye isn't Amadeus but she can't have spent that much time around him to be that stupid. Betraying Cat in that way doesn't just screw over the continent, it's worse: it won't work. Too much narrative weight here to let it anticlimax like that. A building falls on Hye as she draws back for the final bow or something line that. Hye knows she might lose this fight but she does want a chance to win it.

ninegardens

Oh yeah, I totes agree. In **this** setting a betrayal from Hye would not work. I'm saying in any normal setting that **doesn't** run on story logic, betrayal would be a problem.

[Liliet](#)

In a normal setting, Hye's attempts to kill herself without dooming her students would look differently lol

JJR

Too bad Cat didn't stay behind to hear what the Dead Kings weakness was in the play, both above and below are gunning for him at this point and 'inspiring' the actor playing the Dead King to say something that was coincidentally the actual Dead King's weakness seems like the kind of bullshit they just might try to pull. Though maybe you would need a Hero there for it to work. Have that moment where a side character says something that inspires the hero with the solution to their problems.

masterofbones

It seems like Amadeus' biggest legacy was effortlessly acquiring a harem.

Lord Haart

I mean yes the Calamities loved him but he only had that relationship with Hye. Seemed pretty monogamous.

Cat is much like her father, lots of people love her but it's really only a monster as bad as her at her worst that she really loves.

Her trying to love Akua is really just a story about her relationship with herself.

Silverking

"I may not live to see our glory,
but I will gladly join the fight,
and when our children tell our story,
they'll tell the story of tonight."

[madmanrambler](#)

I made it! I've been reading for 4! Fuckin! Months! And I made it!! I got to the most recent chapter!

...

Fuck! Now I have to wait for the story to come out a chapter at a time!

Konstantin von Karstein

Now you know our pain! Suffer like we have suffered, you poor fool! /j

[Liliet](#)

At least you have not caught up at Interlude: Inheritance.

lenethren

Another marvelous chapter! You have such an inspiring way with words. Thank you for sharing!

unsatisfying plot device

"The Scourges" being so OP despite missing an aspect each (as Revenants like Spellblade) compared to the complete set of ALL CURRENT NAMED is like, super narratively unsatisfying. This coterie of washed-up has-beens functions as a "deus ex machina" for the DK to pull out a terrible outcome for Team Cat no matter the preceding scene. Roland dying to a stray arrow from the Hawk

begs the question of why Archer hasn't been able to put the (assume she's named for her good vision?) 2-aspect former Named down yet, despite being both THE Archer *original, no qualifier* and claimant for Ranger. It also seems really convenient that the Varlet's anti-Night venom wouldn't have any counter from Akua or Masego (to say nothing of Blessed Artificer, Apprentice, etc.) after they had an extended period of time to familiarize themselves with what seems to be Nessie's only weapon that could permanently kill Cat. Like...the way Roland died is only plausible if you assume that the best current Named are all hapless layabouts. The Sourges don't seem OP because they earned it narratively, it seems like they just popped up as an extra obstacle apropos of nothing. They were not foreshadowed at all until they were Too Big to Take On in the campaign. Yes, we have seen Nessie has a record for collecting top heroes and heroines, but they aren't kept in mint condition (they lose an Aspect), and they don't usually act as a Band of Five in a way that should provide in-story plot armor. The Hawk, Varlet, and Tempest should have been dealt with many chapters prior to Roland eating it. If the Ranger can keep offing pairs of senior Revanants, and three of her mentees can beat her, by transitivity shouldn't they be able to take down (working with a team) one baddie? The whole thing just feels like a lazy plot device to make the last few chapters more grimdark.

And yeah, Hye Su just missed the Emerald Swords.

Andrew Smith

I will point out we saw for fact that the Varlet had all three aspects, Harm, one that created a bubble of stillness and a stealth one, Cat stole one and used it to kill the other.

so entirely possible they have all 3 aspects it depends entirely on the dead king and his wants(Drake Knight 100% had 3 since he kind of wasn't really an undead)

of course the question is if the poison was created through Harm aka you expect them to counter an aspect then(as in a similar manor to the Hawk well we think it was called kill) which is also something that can perma kill Cat and is what took her eye, and well three of them might of had the counter but akua with her injuries at least did not and well they have other projects to focus on

also the Varlet is dead and has been dead for like a book before Roland died,

The other two are just 1.good at running and at picking there fights

Tempest was getting wrecked by Akua or was but never actually fought her now and well the Hawk is good enough to run away and is hard to pin down might even have a stealth aspect since

pretty much no one has been able to detect it before it fires and it could apparently run around an entire battalfield while Indari hunted it while also keeping an eye out for it targets(make no mistake Indari is better at it though as the ranger she might be a bit less suited to fighting it since less bow focused)

Lord Haart

For all we know the Hawk also has multiple copies of itself, after all it was outside Keter just before – so that’s why Archer stayed out there, they thought Hawk would hit from behind.

But now it’s a fair guess that the Hawk just used Hye’s path.

I have found the Scourges frustrating at times too – at least one or two should have died at Hainut IMO, there are enough of them for that – but not badly enough so to not trust EE will have reason for them to represent such a narrative pain.

SuitorShooter

Cat continuing the fine tradition of messing with people who put on plays about her.

Interlude: Legends I

“Thus they gave oath;

To war ‘til the ends of the earth

Relenting not to love, dread or hearth

To league of hosts or pious chant

Until dominion returned to Levant.”

– Extract from the ‘Anthem of Smoke’, widely considered the founding epic of the Dominion of Levant

It was time.

Yara of Nowhere could still feel that much even after that vicious child had torn away her eyes. The ragged eyeholes of what she had once been – all the stories she had been able to **Narrate** – still remained, like a drunk groping for a bottle in the dark.

So she went to one of those places that were not really places, where no feet could take you, and beheld the lunacy of a single man tying the hands of an entire Choir. A faceless, implacable sea held back by a stubborn dam denying it the right to pass. Forbidding the fish to swim, judgement to judge. Was there anything in the lay of Creation more impossible to break than pure, genuine conviction?

The Tribunal saw her, for she was not hidden. The Hierarch, little more than a burning swath of will and indignation, could see nothing at all. A stroke of luck, for in this state the merest trace of his attention would force her to **Wander** away – that nasty little authority of his would make her open her own throat otherwise, going through with the sentence the League of Free Cities had passed on her. That she was no longer of Aoede if Nicae didn't seem to matter in the slightest to the authority's boundaries, even though the right to pass judgement over her had been bound to the face. The Hierarch had always been a fucking headache of a man.

Yara would have reached for her flask if she could in this empty and too-bright place.

"Thought I'd come help you out of your spot of trouble," Yara told them.

Agreement. Impatience. Curiosity. Why had she not come sooner? It was her purpose.

"All in due time, my darlings," she told the Tribunal. "Besides, you can't kill him."

Dismay. Anger. The Seraphim felt shallowly but broadly, like an ocean three feet deep. Even after several millennia she was not sure why they had been made to feel at all. There was a time she'd thought they might once have been like her, learning just a little too much about the underpinnings of Creation to be allowed to muck about by the Gods, but she'd since stumbled over proof they had been created. Her best guess was that even limited emotional capacity improved their ability to learn and adapt to the ever-changing mores of mortals. Compassion had once been Reverence, after all. Like Role and Name, the essence could not change but the manifestation must adapt.

Yara wagged a finger at the angels.

"You know the rules," she said. "You're no longer being called and he's not exactly attacking you – keeping you locked up's not the same thing. I can't just put my finger on your side of the scale and let you turn him into dust."

Reluctant agreement. Yara could, but she had been lying to angels since before men knew how to forge iron.

"Of course," Yara grinned at them fondly, "it doesn't mean I can't play favourites. I've got a way for you to get rid of our little friend here without stepping over the lines."

Elbow in the side, a nudge and a wink. Stern disapproval from the Tribunal. They really were such bores, one of the many reasons she'd never gotten along with them. Their heroes tended to be fascinating, but the old birds themselves? Terribly tedious.

"Now now," she mused. "Don't give me that guff. I'm here to help, yes? Now, our old buddy-"

She did not speak either name or Name. She knew better.

"- can't be bumped off, but you *can* do the opposite," Yara told them.

Caution. Confusion.

"You can resurrect him," she said.

Immediate anger. A reward, a prize, when the man was undeserving? Not fond of the idea at all, which was no surprise when it ran contrary to their nature. That was fine. She'd talked so many ancient monsters into their deaths she'd forgotten most of them.

"You're insisting on thinking of it as a reward," Yara of Nowhere said, clicking her tongue, "but does it have to be? Think of it not as bringing him back but as *moving* him."

Caution again, but they were listening.

"Exile," she smiled. "That's a punishment, isn't it?"

Reluctant agreement. And the trick here, was that they were going to have to rely on her. Because the Tribunal only did one sentence – yes or no, the flip of the coin – so for nuance they needed a mortal anchor. And with theirs out of their reach, no longer the White Knight and changing in his convictions, they couldn't afford to be too picky. And Yara, for all her... imperfections, was here.

"We'll send him somewhere out of the way," she told them, smile broadening. "A Hell, yeah? Let him do Above some good dying."

Caution remaining, the thought more nuanced than most they possessed.

"Sure, it wipes you out for a day," Yara shrugged. "But you melted his body, it's on you to make it again. And what's better for Creation: silence for one day before you return in full, or remaining silent until the Last Dusk?"

It was no choice at all. Choirs could tolerate idleness for long, it ran against the fundamental purpose. Playing them wasn't like manipulating someone with a soul, it was more like a jigsaw puzzle: move the pieces around the right way and it'd all click into place as inevitably as the rising of the sun.

Agreement, the Tribunal expressed.

Yara of Nowhere grinned, laying hand on the essence of them.

"Let me take care of that for you," she said.

Guide, her soul sang, the authority seizing the underpinnings of Creation. One nudge to get the angels free past, one nudge to keep his eyes away from her and one last nudge to ensure he'd end up where she needed him to be. That was the most terrible of her powers, in truth.

Knowing the right place and the right time.

—

He landed in the grass.

It was soft against his bare feet, and though there was no sun in the sky above there was no lack of light. The breeze had him pulling his frayed diplomat's robes close on his haggard frame, eyes blinking numbly as he realized he was seeing again. With his own eyes. He was breathing with lungs, shivering with skin. There was the scent of dung on the wind, and somewhere ahead a long field of barley. Beyond it, at the edge of the horizon, he glimpsed the sloping silhouettes of a village. People. His mind was open, never to be closed again, and so he could not help but **Receive** the sight of them.

He had seen this place before. Green land stretching in every direction, an endless expanse of villages and fields and rivers. Men and women and children that never went far from the place of their birth, taught that they were to be content and peaceful with mother's milk. There were no dangers, no dooms, nothing to fear in the Serenity. Only one beautiful day after another, until one day you breathed your last and the Fair King called your mortal coil to the Lands Beyond. Some would have called it a paradise, a place without sickness or war.

Anaxares the Diplomat called it a lie.

The middle-aged man raised his hand, felt the breeze slip through his fingers and slide through the last of his sparse and greying hair. It was baked into the bones of this place, the insolent will that claimed itself supreme master of all that dwelled under the empty sky. He could feel it pressing down on all that dwelled here like an unseen sun, a tyranny so subtle and ancient it was

no longer known as anything of the sort. But Anaxares was a son of Bellerophon, born under the stele, and he knew tyranny. It was not in his nature to suffer it silently.

The fingers closed around the breeze. His Name roused, groggily opening an eye.

"All are free, or none," the Hierarch told the empty heavens. "I will suffer no compromise in this."

His aspect lit up, and like ink in water began to spread. Spreading through the grass and the wind, the morning dew and the dim light of nowhere at all. **Indict**, the Hierarch had ordered, and the command burned away at the will holding this realm in thrall like acid. Breathing out, the old diplomat pulled at his loose robes and took a tentative step forward. The grass was wet against the sole of his feet, but it was no unpleasant. He still remembered walking well, he'd done much of it... before. So Anaxares took a second step, towards the fields and the village beyond them, feeling his aspect seep into the ground beneath his feet.

And where the Hierarch tread, serenity shattered.

—

Dawn rose over Keter, silent. Like a breath sucked in. Banners rose, armies moved and horrors stirred. Thousands knew, deep in their bones, that this was the last pass.

And so the Warden broke the Sword of the Rest over her knee, freeing Below's stories at last.

—

The Firstborn had not begun at the forefront of this siege.

In some ways, General Rumena was thankful for it. The First Under the Night was showing consideration for the losses at Serolen and the great war for its borders, restraining her expectation and preserving their strength. It was a kindness. But part of it had been displeased, even as the Firstborn were relegated to guarding the camps under cover of dark and protecting the wardstones during the day. They had not fought, had not bled as the armies of the humans had. The war of the Firstborn had been waged very far away, far from the eyes of cattle, and their might doubted because of it.

This morn, as the sun rose over the Burning Lands, Rumena the Tomb-maker would put those doubts to rest.

Mighty clustered around it, those with the strength to see and to shield, and as the first rays of light scoured the sky the old

general sat surrounded by a ring of obsidian and steel. It sunk deep into itself, into the embrace of Night. Deep enough that darkness swallowed it whole, as if it had stepped into the abyss. It breathed until it no longer felt the need to, the faint and distant sounds of thundering sorcery colliding against Night slowly fading away. Its will sunk into the ground, like the roots of an ancient tree, and as it breathed out it unleashed the Secret of Stone. Not as it had in Hainaut, fighting in the tunnels, or as it had in Serolen when fighting under the sky.

Instead it gripped the tides of the earth and moved with it.

Power flowed through its veins, raw and urgent, but Rumena gave a crooked smile as it opened its eyes. Even as it rose to its feet the ground shifted under them. It did not need to look to feel the movement, the bridges the Hidden Horror had broken sprouting anew. Stone and earth jutted out, charging across the chasm that made Keter an island even as spells fruitlessly tried to stop the assault. A bridge formed, then two. Three, four, five – Rumena stopped only at then, still keeping the Night clutched tight against its breast as it began to march forwards.

The Enemy came for its life with reckless hate. Storms of sorcery, arrows and bolts and every nasty trick the Pale King had learned over its many years of darkness. But what did that matter, when the finest of Mighty stood at the Tomb-maker's side? Magic died in the dark, like a candle guttering out. Arrows were swallowed like delicacies, stones plucked out of the air like toys. Sigils burned around the general, Mighty laughing at the Enemy's impotent wrath. And so it came that Rumena stood before the last gate of Keter, a mass of steel and sorcery set in great towers of stone.

It laid a hand against the steel, feeling the enchantments within try to bite at its skin.

"A strong gate," Rumena praised, looking up. "Crafted cleverly, its magics mighty."

The old general laughed, revealing crooked teeth.

"But it is set in stone, Dead King," the Tomb-maker said, "and I hold in my hands the secret to it."

It struck out, knuckles hitting the steel. The might rippled across steel, the sound of it like a gong struck, and twice more Rumena the Tomb-maker knocked at death's door.

On the third strike, the gates fell.

The stone it was set it crumbled to pieces, dust in the wind, and the enchanted mass of steel fell on the dead behind it with a

loud thump. Dust kicked up and General Rumena met the eyes of the horde waiting behind.

*"Before nine years have passed,
Keter's gates will lie broken
as trembles Death's holdfast."*

It had taken an oath in the lands of Procer, sworn the sigil of the Rumena upon it. At last it stood fulfilled. It took a step forward, the ground shuddering under its feet, and around it the Mighty leaned forwards like wolves hungry to fall upon the fold.

"Chno Sve Noc," the last general of the Empire Ever Dark laughed.

"Chno Sve Noc," the Mighty shouted back, and Night sang with them.

The Firstborn had not begun at the forefront of this siege, but they would end there.

—

The Mirror Knight moved quickly, for a man his size in heavy plate, but as Named reckoned it he was slow. Hanno had learned to match his pace to the other man's, as it would not do to leave him behind. He was, after all, serving as Christophe de Pavanie's bodyguard. The Dead King had to know of the Severance by now, of the blade meant to slay him. And while the Hidden Horror might know better than to try to destroy something fated to slay him with his own hand, there was another way to ensure the blade never reached him.

Killing its wielder.

"It rankles," Christophe suddenly said.

Hanno slowed in his step, falling by the other man's side as they halted beneath a half-crumbled wall. A row of houses had been brought down into a makeshift barricade here, eventually collapsing into a ragged hill of rubble. From here, they could see the fierce melee ahead. The Lycaonese vanguard was tangling with skeletons, shouting war cries in Reitz as they tried to swiftly shatter the enemy's ranks. The Proceran thrust into the city through the same gate as yesterday was to be entirely about speed: like an arrow loosed or a spear thrust, all the way to the inner wall.

"What does?" Hanno asked.

"That we do not fight with them," the Mirror Knight said. "We could save lines, Hanno."

The dark-skinned hero grimaced. That was true. But it was not the plan for a reason.

"We won't win the battle in the city," Hanno frankly said. "We cannot. Everything we do is to get to the Dead King and end this. That means-"

"That the Severance and its wielder must reach him," Christophe curtly said. "I know."

The Mirror Knight sighed, fingers going for the sword at his hip that was a mundane blade – at least compared to the one forged out of the Saint's aspect in the Arsenal.

"But it rankles," he repeated. "It feels like we're abandoning them."

Christophe was not the only one who felt that way. Named had not been entirely pulled out of the armies, but they had very much been thinned. Most of them had been placed in bands, roving to put down Revenants and find the Scourges, while a few others had undertaken particular tasks. The Warden herself had taken a band for such a purpose without giving an explanation except for a knowing smile. Catherine Foundling, Hanno had thought, was becoming unpleasantly fond of vagueness.

"Once we reach the inner wall we'll have fights of our own," Hanno said. "Most of us after the Dead King, but there will be other duties as well."

"There is no chance of either of us returning to the battle," Christophe bluntly said. "You must know this."

Hanno did not disagree. They were both too useful to be spared for any purpose but the destruction of the King of Death.

"I know," Hanno quietly said.

And it rankled, but what else could he do?

They began moving again, shadowing the Proceran advance, and the man who had once been the White Knight could only pray there would be anyone left alive in Keter by the time the Dead King ended.

—

Basilia had stormed the walls of Keter once before, but the horror of that day was a candle to the bonfire before her: though they were not even an hour into the battle, there was no longer a Penthesian army.

The Empress of Aenia watched the ragged remains of the soldiers and mercenaries the Exarch had scraped together for the campaign flee down the avenue, the undead leisurely loosing arrows at their back, and felt her heart clench with fear. Her forces had pushed past the Tombmaker's bridge and the shattered gates in

good order, clearing a foothold in the lower city, but that had been as far as the armies of the League got. What should have been a hard push into the enemy's capital was instead turning into a desperate holding action, the enemy pushing in on all sides with frenetic intensity.

Basilias had claimed a tower as her forward headquarters, deciding the higher vantage point was worth the risks of attack as long as she had mages to protect the place, and looking down at her offensive she could already see the first signs of collapse. On her right flank the Delosi were already buckling under the pressure, the citizen levy and mercenaries losing ground as the flood of undeath came at them relentlessly. There were spurts of flame and poison whenever the *krixilia* threw themselves, the swollen ghouls full of burning oil and foul alchemies scrabbling as deep into the Delosi ranks as they could before exploding.

On her left flank the Stygians were holding, as much because the Spears of Stygia were as unflinching as any dead as because the Seventeen Schools of Atalante had finally taken the field. The priest-philosophers, a bunch of ragged and quarrelsome fools at the best of times, wielded Light as a painter would a brush: it curled and twisted, forming into arcs and elegant sweeps as it cut a burning swath through the dead. The Atalantians would tire, though. And when they did, the dead would again prove that a phalanx could hold them back but not *beat* them. That was the source of most her troubles, in truth. She spat through the window, seeing the faces of her generals were as grim as hers.

"If we are kept bottled up any longer," Empress Basilias bluntly said, "we've lost."

Grunts of agreement.

"Those small streets are murder on the mercenaries," General Pallas said. "Their equipment's too irregular to be able to hold proper formations."

A problem that afflicted some of the cities more than others. Delos and Atalante had always heavily relied on mercenary armies to prop up their own mediocre hosts, and though Penthes usually boasted a decent force under professional generals that army had been melted into scraps during the conflicts that had afflicted the League since the beginning of the Uncivil Wars. Even Nicae, whose armies had checked Helikean and Stygian conquerors for centuries, had been forced to bolster its ranks with sold swords after the... war of succession that had dethroned the Trakas.

"We need to push further up avenue before they rout," Basilias said. "Once we have, it, we can sweep around and cut off the flow of reinforcements that's keeping us penned in."

"The Penthesians just tried that, Your Majesty," General Alexios flatly said. "It was no great success."

An understatement. The Dead King's commanders had barred the way up the avenue only irregularly, leaving room for the League to advance if it could break through the barricades, but that was because they'd turned the ground into a slaughterhouse. Houses had been collapsed along the length to turn the avenue into a funnel, and then further back collapsed again to turn into platforms for archers and catapults. The strategy at work was simple enough, after that. Keter had scraped together thousands of dead in armour wielding spears and arrayed them in heavy blocks.

And when the Penthesians had charged, trying to break through, the undead had begun firing mass volleys. They didn't care about hitting their own soldiers, just about filling the air with arrows and stones. The Penthesians had bravely fought, breaking through two squares even through heavy fire, but they had dropped like flies. Fed into the meat grinder, they had been spit back out as bloody bones. And now, even as the last of them fled to the safety of allied ranks, the two blocks of spearmen they'd chewed through were replaced as armoured undead smoothly advanced.

They stayed there, silent and waiting.

"If we do not break through," Basilia darkly replied, "the Proceran offensive will be at risk of being enveloped."

And they could not afford that. Though the Grand Alliance was pushing into Keter from every direction, only two pushes were meant to make it to the inner wall: Rozala Malanza's and High Marshal Nim's. The other offensives were meant to cover their flanks and allow them to deliver the assets that would keep the Dead King from killing them all with this nightmare city and the sorcery that moved it. The Titan Kreios was with the Procerans, which meant their push could not be allowed to stall. The ancient Gigantes might be able to go at it alone, she knew, but it would be a risk. If he were to be slain then they would all follow.

There was something different about today, Basilia thought as her generals began to bicker over ploys that might take them up the avenue. The Hidden Horror had always been a fearsome opponent, but the tactics he employed today were... aggressive. He was no longer aiming at victory but instead at extermination. The Empress chewed her lip. *He fights like a cornered man. What happened?*

"- of course we need someone to march up the avenue, but there's no army that *can*," Alexios harshly said. "That much sustained fire is a guaranteed rout. We need to-"

"- a swift thrust forward is the only way, getting stuck is death. We should-"

It was Basilia's wandering eye that saw the first sign of it in the troops below. The shift of the Nicaean back ranks, pressing closer to the beleaguered Delosi. A commander was making room for troops to press forward. Who? Though she had noticed from up here, officers closer to the ground must have as well. Basilia turned as a young man in standard scale burst into the room, paling at the sight of his empress and a gaggle of generals. He knelt, his bushy hair flopping around as he did.

"You have a message," Basilia stated.

It was not a question.

"Captain Calista reports that the Republic is on the move," the young man replied. "She sent a runner to demand an explanation and was charged with passing an answer the Protector of the League."

Bellerophon. What were the madmen up to?

"Speak it," she ordered.

The young man nervously cleared his throat.

"By a majority of seven thousand four hundred and fifty-nine to three thousand one hundred and sixty-four, as well as eight abstentions and three invalid votes, the Republic of Bellerophon has voted to serve as vanguard of the League. The Protector may proceed at her leisure."

There were some laughs behind her, but Basilia did not share the mirth. She stilled instead, eye turning to the moving soldiers below.

"Ready all our forces," the Empress of Aenia said. "I want our foot ready to follow behind them."

"You must be jesting, Your Majesty," General Myrine frowned. "The rabble will taste a volley and rout. They-"

"They voted on it," Basilia cut through curtly. "They *voted* on it, general. It doesn't matter if a hundred or a thousand of them die on the first salvo. So long as they have legs, *they will keep walking forward.*"

She barked out her orders. The Nicaeans were to reinforce the Delosi, keep the flank from bending too much, but Helike's full must was to prepare for the push. And, ignoring the protests of her generals, Basilia Katopodis put on her helmet. She would not leave her men to fight alone. Sweeping down from the tower as her retinue trailed behind, she found her horse and mounted quickly.

Already, ahead of her, she saw the Nicaeans moving out of the way for the advancing ranks of the Bellerophans. They were, she thought, so very close to being a mob.

The equipment was old, the manuals obsolete and most the officers drawn by lot. Some spears were tipped in iron or bronze instead of steel, the armour was a simple tunic of mail and their shields were of an oval shape no one had used in a few centuries. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to who had been added to the levy. Some of them stooped from old age while others couldn't be older than thirteen, tall and short, limping and hale. None of them were soldiers, not really. It was a sea of farmers and bakers and masons that'd put on armour, none of them really trained. And as the frontline approached the killing grounds where the Dead King, they halted.

"Shields up," officers called out. "Spears down."

The citizens of the Republic of Bellerophon obeyed in disorder, almost laughably so, half of them beginning with the spear instead of the shield. And then, unhesitating, they began to march up the avenue.

Death answered.

Basilias knuckles turned white as she clutched her reins tight, seeing the score of deaths the first volley caused. Ballistae and catapults ran red furrows down the lines, arrows fell like rain and even a few streaks of sorcery burned through men like smoke.

The Bellerophans slowed, closed ranks, and resumed their advance.

It was madness, Basilias thought. The Republic's army smashed into the first block of skeleton spearmen gracelessly, its own soldiers barely more skilled than the dead, and burst through even as catapults crushed entire knots of men with ever stone and smoke was blown into their faces.

After the third block of spearmen was shattered, stones were rolled down into their ranks from the heights on both sides. The wake of the great stones looked like bloody clawmarks from where Basilias stood, as if a monster had slashed through the ranks, but without flinching the Bellerophans did the same as they had from the start: they slowed, closed ranks, and resumed their advance.

Through hail and storm and smoke, through arrows and crossbows and javelins, through screaming ghouls and snakes with the faces of men, the Republic of Bellerophon advanced unflinching. It plodded forward like a donkey pulling a plough, steady and so terribly unhurried. A hush had fallen over the battle at the sight of it, even war cries petering out at the sight of such atrocious bravery.

Close to eleven thousand Bellerophans had begun the march up the avenue. When the army reached the last barricade and clumsy hacked it down, barely two thousand were left. And when they were done, when their walk through ruin ended and they finished what they had set out to do, the citizens of the Republic did not shout in triumph or scream boasts at the sky. Instead they offered the hordes of the Dead King the casual contempt of utter silence as they simply turned around and began their march back.

They'd achieved what they had set out to, after all. What else was there to do?

Empress Basilia watched them, that battered host of indifferent lunatics, and a laugh bubbled out of her throat. In their eyes she saw a light she had seen before, in those of a man she had never liked but had learned to respect.

"They still do you proud, Diplomat," she murmured. "Wherever you are, know that."

And now it was time for the Empress of Aenia to do her part. The Bellerophans had cleared the way, and behind Basilia stood Helike's finest ready to dance with death. Not so much as a single slinking ghoul would reach the Proceran flank, if she had anything to say about.

Unfortunately for the Dead King, she did.

"HELIKE," the Empress shouted, raising her sword, "WITH ME!"

—

Akua was becoming used to being handed godheads, a sentence that she would have been skeptical of even at the age of seventeen when she'd genuinely thought the world was hers for the taking. It was sadly typical of Catherine to keep tossing her the keys to divinity like they were loose change from her pocket. Also as usual, the unthinking display of trust had Akua at war between feeling tenderness and fury.

It was quite vexing.

"Hells, Hakram's in a mood today," Archer grunted.

The golden-eyed sorcerers cast a look at the fighting in the distance, where a torrent of orcish warriors was tearing through dug-in defences as if they were sandcastles. At their head the unmistakeable silhouette of the Warlord in his scorched plate was leading the charge, crushing everything in his way in a display of pure rage that reminded Akua of the reason her Soninke ancestors had learned to build enchanted city walls.

"His assault with the Levantines failed yesterday," Akua replied. "He has something to prove now."

Indrani grimaced.

"He's not the only one who has things to make up for," she said.

Akua laid a light hand on her companion's arm, but as she had expected Archer was not hungry for comfort. Though the sorcerers found it absurd that Indrani blamed herself for not being in Keter to check the Hawk yesterday – she'd been with the League armies out in the Ossuary, as the Scourge had fought there until then – the Woe tended to embrace unearned guilt that they simply refused to be talked out of. It was endearing in the way that a three-legged cat might be. Somewhat charming, but likely to get them killed one of these days.

More unfortunate was that Akua had begun to dislike the prospect of them getting killed, which did her no favours.

Archer shook her head, shaking off whatever thoughts she'd been contemplating to cast a wary look around them. Akua had been keeping them under illusion as they moved from rooftop to rooftop as much as they could, only dipping down to the streets when they must, but there was no telling if the spell was enough to trick the Dead King's many watching eyes. It was why they were staying relatively close to the offensive of the Clans, and near the avenue where the Praesi push under the Black Knight would take place. The chaos should keep attention off them.

The Autumn Crown that Akua carried strapped to her back in an enchanted container was risky to carry with only her and Archer for escort, but it would have been even riskier to keep it with an army. The Dead King was bound to be looking for the weapons forged to destroy him.

"Come on," Archer said. "We need to keep moving."

Akua nodded, adjusting the straps going down her back to ensure she wasn't going to *drop a godhead on the ground*, and follower her friend.

—

As a child, Sargon Isaru had seen the face of Greed.

The Isaru had not been land-kings in centuries, their city swallowed by Istar's ever-expanding borders and turned into a district of the capital, but the family was powerful still. Vast wealth and closeness to the Hall of Hearths had made them more influential than many who could raise armies with a stomp of their feet. There were some who would have been satisfied with this. The Isaru had not been, hungry for wealth and power and

praise. For anything that might raise them above their rivals for the King Under the Mountain's favour.

So they had sought to build a Great Forge, and why not? Their ancestors had been famed smiths once, known for clever devices, it was in their blood. And owning the thirteenth of the Great Forges would bring great prestige to the Isaru, as well as great profit when they began selling arms to the most belligerent of the land-kings. As for royal favour, Sargon's mother had decided on a bold stroke: to dedicate the Forge to the god that within the king even before he passed and freed that divinity to stand with his divine kin. It was heretical flattery, but the man was not known for his humility.

Greed, Sargon had thought even as a child, it was all Greed. That deep and unrelenting longing that lay coiled in the heart of all dwarves, moving them to take and keep. A disease if left unchecked, but also if too tightly held back: you could go mad by denying your Greed entirely. Turn into a feverish animal that knew no reason, eating flesh and murdering for colourful pebbles. Noble families, good blood, must master their Greed. It was a sign of poor breeding, poor character to do otherwise. But Sargon had thought, hearing the older folk talk, that there was nothing mastered about this Greed. It was quiet and subtle, like a poison, and they had all drunk deep of it.

When the crust of the earth was punctured and the magma poured out, the Soul of Fire that angrily rose up was older than any had suspected. One of the old leviathans come close to the border between stone and fire. Sargon was there with the family when it rampaged, tearing through bindings as if they were clay and slaughtering thousands before it was driven away. A disaster that turned all the greedy hopes of the Isaru to ash in a single stroke as swaths of their district burned and dwarves choked to death in smoke-filled tunnels. Sargon learned a lesson about Greed that day, but not only that of others.

For in the moment where the Soul of Fire emerged, the silhouette of fire and smoke from the burning depths of the Deepest Sea, his mind could think of only one word: *beautiful*. The spirit was beautiful and he had wanted it, craved it in a way he would never crave anything or anyone save for Balasi. That awakening of his Greed, he often thought, had been the first step on his road to become the Herald of the Deeps.

"Delein," Balasi whispered. "We are there."

Sargon's hand left his beard, which he had been stroking lost in thought. His lover – husband, soon, for who was left to stop them? – had the right of it. They had dug through the night, cracking open one of the old tunnels sealed with molten steel in the earliest efforts to contain the Dead King, and then pushed through tunnels until they reached the edge of the gap. Over the

centuries, Keter had dug so deep in search of metals for its armies that what had once been a tunnel at the bottom was now halfway up to the surface. The Herald of the Deeps eyed the smooth stone across the gap, still dimly feeling the pulse of power lying within.

"It is the right place," Sargon said. "Beyond that stone lies the chamber where the magic comes from."

"Our bridges are ready," Balasi told him, "but it would be suicide to begin mining our way through."

He watched his lover curiously, enjoying the sight of the skulls against the other man's beards, and followed Balasi when he was led to the edge of the gap. Following the other man's eyes below, he saw the source of the doubts. *An army*, Sargon thought. How many thousands of dead were down here, spread out among tunnels and depths? That and dark creatures, great white worms large as towns and flocks of cavern-bats turned into... something else. The Dead King had been waiting for them.

"We can't hold the bridge," Balasi quietly said. "Even if we take part of the army down to hit them as a distraction."

"If we do not snuff out the ritual," Sargon said, "the battle is lost."

And perhaps Calernia with it.

"A blind pickaxe is no one's friend," Balasi grunted.

The old saying was open castigation, though mitigated by Sargon's faintly amused knowledge that neither of them had spent so much as an hour of their lives swinging a pickaxe.

"I will act," Sargon said.

Balasi's face creased with worry.

"Without your staff-"

"It is my Burden, delein," Sargon gently said, laying a hand on his arm.

Balasi pulled him close, into a soft kiss, and after they stayed close with the foreheads against each other.

"I know," the seeker-of-deeds murmured. "I know. But you're not as strong now and he'll be coming for you."

Sargon looked away.

"I am not sure," he said.

Balasi uncomprehending eyes found his own.

"Was it truly a loss, breaking my staff?" Sargon quietly asked.

His lover seemed about to say as much, but he bit his tongue. Sargon shook his head.

"We strike," the Herald of the Deeps said. "Tell the men."

Balasi sought his eyes, then slowly nodded. His fist rang against his armour in salute before he hurried away. Sargon stood at the edge of the tunnel, looking down. So many, he thought. And so deep. There might be opportunity there, the Herald thought, but he was not strong enough to take it. He knew this, objectively, by the ways he had been taught. Without the staff and the bound spirits within, Sargon could not tear open the earth. Only... *Are you seeking change, or just to add a rung below you on the ladder?* Nothing words from a child reeking of angels, he had been ready to dismiss, but then Sargon had looked in the White Knight's eyes and seen faith.

It had burned then and it burned now.

"So I wonder," Sargon murmured, "have I made the mistakes of my mother, of the Isaru?"

Had he thought himself the master of his Greed, only for it to poison him unseen? It had all begun in that moment, he often thought, when the Spirit of Fire burst through the ground. And oh, how Sargon had wanted it.

"How many of you did I take?" he said. "Dozens. I called you and bound you, hung you from my staff like ornaments."

And now that he no longer had the strength, now that he thought of those clear eyes and burned with shame, Sargon wondered if he'd ever mastered anything at all. He breathed out and his Words unfurled, resonating with Creation, and he felt the call to the Deeps being heard. As a child, Sargon Isaru had seen the face of Greed.

Perhaps he had been a child still all these years, to be facing it only now.

"Please," the Herald of the Deeps said. "I cannot bind you, cannot master you."

His fist clenched. And he never would again. He would not keep making rungs below his own.

"I can only ask," Sargon whispered. "So please – help us."

His words sunk into the Deepest Sea, below the burning waves, leaving only ripples. Sargon waited, watching and hoping. The depths remained dark.

And then they shook.

Like an anthill kicked, the dead began to swarm. The ground below them cracked, split, the earthquake shattering the stone. And light came, of light came when magma erupted in a fountain. Dead burst into flame, ran, as the Spirit of Fire roared its wrath. A small one, young, and still Sargon felt his throat tighten with shame and joy. It had come. He had not deserved it, but it had come. His Words rang again, and the Spirit of Fire sang back.

"Yes," Sargon said with a smile. "Together. Let us teach them who the deeps bel-"

The depths shook again. He froze. And again, and again, and again, until the darkness below Keter burned red as the ancient scream of Spirits of Fire shattered stone. Small and large, old and young, they had come. Not one but dozens. And as magma swallowed hundreds of dead, as the air filled with twisting heat, the burning waves shivered. Something was swimming below. An old one, the leviathans of the Deepest Sea. And when it burst free, turning stone into flowing rivers, Sargon stilled. For he had seen it before, this Spirit of Fire. Long ago, when he took the first step down a road.

"Beginning," the Herald of the Deeps softly said, "to the end. Were you with me all along?"

A song, a harmony more beautiful than anything he had ever heard. And when Sargon Isaru looked at the ancient spirit, he saw beauty again – but nothing more. The Greed was gone, and the Herald wept. The Spirit sang, comforting, and he laughed through his tears.

"No," Sargon told it. "They are good tears."

We can learn, he thought. We can do better.

"Then let us," the Herald of the Deeps smiled, and his Burden unfurled like a flower under the sun.

His hands rose and the Deepest Sea rose with them, devouring armies whole.

—

It had not been difficult to find people who would help her.

Though the fortified camps surrounding Keter were slowly emptying of soldiers for the last, desperate assault on Keter it was impossible to truly empty a war camp. So Cordelia had discreetly

reached out for those soldiers she knew were most likely to stay behind, had convinced them of the necessity of what she was to do, and now the moment had come. The guards around the angel corpse, the ealamal, were already hers. That had been part of the terms of her abdication to Rozala Malanza. Now their ranks were swelled with Lycaonese and Alamans veterans – most Salians and Rhenians – as dug in positions were raised around the weapon.

Other soldiers were cleared out, a clean line of fire for crossbows established by pulling down any tents and shacks that might serve as cover, and Cordelia Hasenbach stood in silence as the few mages she'd secured began putting up the heaviest wards they could. She had not reached out to Named, even knowing some might be sympathetic, because it was sure to get to Catherine. The Warden was as a bloodhound for this sort of thing when it involved her charges, but there were simply too many soldiers for even Catherine Foundling to be able to keep an eye on all of them.

"It will smack of betrayal to some," Simon de Gorgeault quietly told her.

She did not turn to look at the man who had once been one of her spymasters, then her Lord Inquisitor, and was not the last of her lieutenants. Brother Simon had no intention of leading the Holy Society once more, Cordelia had known that for some time, but he was still burning a bridge by standing with her today. First Princess Rozala would not forget it, or others more distantly worrisome.

"We will not step a foot beyond the ward lines," Cordelia evenly replied.

"Even so," Brother Simon told her.

He was right, she knew. But she would not take the risk. The fair-haired princess had the artefact that could command the ealamal, an angel corpse swelled with so much Light it purified the air around it just by existing, but that would not matter if the ealamal itself was seized. So she would ensure it was not, even if it had the look of betrayal to some. In truth, Cordelia would admit to herself, they were not entirely wrong to see it as such. She was taking on an authority today that had not been bestowed to her by anyone, because there simply wasn't anyone who *had* that right.

"Then I will answer for this," Cordelia Hasenbach said, "if we all live through the day."

Her duty had not changed. She would keep her eyes open and her hand at the ready, because for all the valour of the Grand Alliance there was no certainty of victory today. And if the siege of Keter was lost, if the Dead King's armies triumphed,

then she would do what she must before the dead overran the camp and seized the ealamal. Before anyone, living or dead, could stop her.

If she must burn half of Calernia to save the rest, Gods forgive her but she would.

[Droughtbringer](#)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

[machinetell](#)

The link on the previous page still points to the chapter delay announcement, which is now a broken link.

[machinetell](#)

Ok, not meant to be a reply but whatever

caoimhinh

Basilis: *The Dead King is fighting like a cornered man. What happened?*

Meanwhile, Neshamah be like:



[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Anaxares in the Serenity is the equivalent of Neshamah feeling a mortal heart attack level danger. The Hierarch knows the Serenity, the heart of the Dead King's power, is a Lie, and his walkabout destroys it with each step.

gingerlygrump

F

Forgot_My_Name

"They voted on it," Basilia cut through curtly. "They voted on it, general. It doesn't matter if a hundred or a thousand of them die on the first salvo. So long as they have fingers, they will keep boosting."

Mturtle7

I know this is very, very, late, but just for the record I think I need to say that this was probably the best “boost quote” since the tradition started. Bless you, Forgot_My_Name.

Another Question

I have been reading this story for years, and I still love every single update for it. Maybe this has been addressed in the hundreds of previous chapters but is there any plans to put this into print? I would purchase a collectors set in a heartbeat.

Shawn DeLuca

Me too!

Shawn DeLuca

Me too!

Shawn DeLuca

And that’s how you learn about double posting....

Cpt. Obvious

I’ve tried to do that and WP won’t let me. “It appears you’ve already said that” it throws at me.

What’s your secret oh Saint of Double Posting?

[Liliet](#)

It will be rewritten for publication, we’re reading the first draft

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

So it gets **Better?**

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Take my money! Take it now!

jamesc9

I’ve heard rumours of a plan called patreon, for doing part of that.

Is there a patreon tier which comes with a promise of paper books when they are published?

dadycool

It's probably just typos and "It flows better this way", as well as polishing Book 1 to Book 6 standards, but yeah.

agumentic

No, we know that at least Book 1 is going to be rewritten and expanded a lot. Later books will probably be less subject to change, but still.

[Liliet](#)

Hopefully significantly so, because [itemized list of grievances mostly stemming from early books before EE figured the whole writing thing out better, but also the timeline and geography and travel times]

shikkarasu

I have a list of notes from my 4th reread trying to figure out how long any timeskip in the first 3 books take. Be it "we walked from point A to point B" or the ~6 month jump between books. At a few points I had to split into two timelines to handle vagueness.

I still like the first 3 of the series better than Books 4+, but I think that is mostly due to the simplicity of the story, relatively. There were only so many POVs, only so much you needed to pay attention to to follow the story, and yet so much foreshadowing in hindsight.

[Liliet](#)

Marigold and I have made a timeline!!!! Marigold has the long version with all the citations, I have this:
https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/glvkdv/visualized_pgte_timeline_and_the_big_plot_hole/

Cpt. Obvious

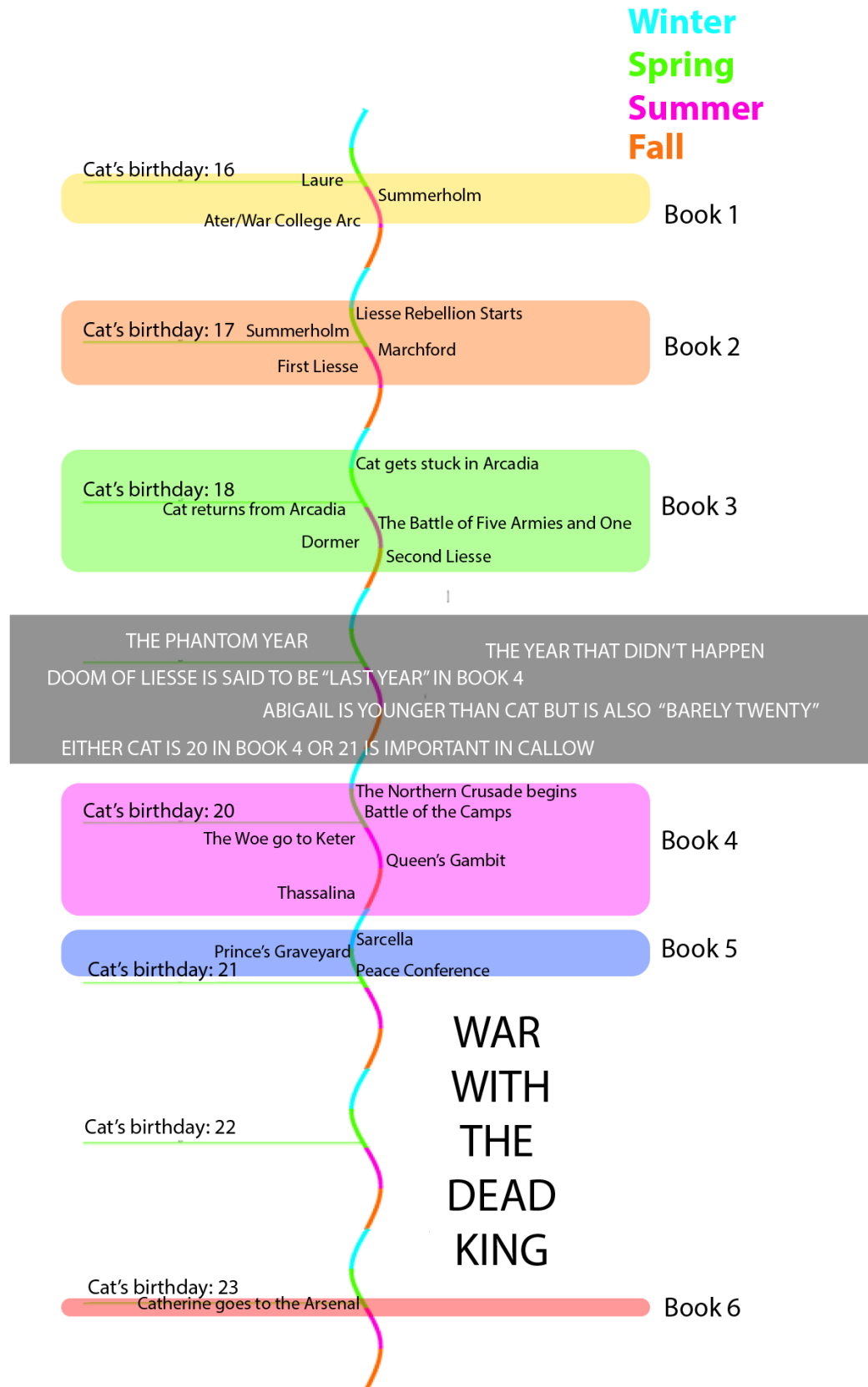
OHH! But also oh.

I'm sure it's amazing work, but I dare not touch Reddit. Last I tried I got caught in a massive ongoing ritual that sucks at the bounds of reality and made me lose two days worth of time.

So I'll admire your dedication to the cause from afar.

[Liliet](#)

Hmm!



This might be better for you, then :3

Cpt. Obvious

Thank you!

Interesting work.

I remember being a bit confused about that 'younger than Cat' , but 'barely 20' thing. But I remember thinking that with all Cat had gone through in the last few years she probably felt a lot older than her chronological age.

Add a stint in Arcadia and time probably started to feel like a pretty abstract concept.

But yeah, there's not really any explanation in the books for this 'phantom year'. So I just accepted it like another twist in the story that might be explained later, and then promptly forgot about it as the story overwhelmed me.

I guess that if I had read it as that chapter was posted I might have had the time to dwell on it more. But playing catch-up on several years of posted books can be both a blessing and a curse. I really didn't look that deep in the comments back then.

Glacian

I would absolutely pay good money for the published version. And like, extra good money for a fancy hardcover set!

ohJohN

can you imagine, this story is so gigantic it would take up like MULTIPLE shelves of a bookcase and the fancy hardcover set would be like \$200 for materials alone 😂

(but like I'd still buy em in a heartbeat)

Earl of Purple

"By a majority of seven thousand four hundred and fifty-nine to three thousand one hundred and sixty-four, as well as eight abstentions and three invalid votes, the Republic of Bellerophon has voted to serve as vanguard of the League. The Protector may proceed at her leisure."

This is Bellerophonian madness at its peak, and the bit which followed... They are madmen, each and every one of them, and they are terrifying.

[David Lynch](#)

That and the Empress' immediate faith in them following hearing about it was all weirdly touching.

[Liliet](#)

Basilia has come to understand them well ♥

erebus42

She understands that while they may really only have the one Story it is THEIR Story. Once the will of the people is decided they will suffer no compromise in carrying it out.

Cpt. Obvious

The people of Bellerophon are their own Tyrant.

Frommeman

You might say they have a Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

masterofbones

Its nice to see something usually forgotten in fantasy.

The most important training for a medieval army is holding together despite danger or losses. The overwhelming majority of losses only occur during a rout. So an army that refuses to retreat no matter what will be *extraordinarily* effective, regardless of their weapon skill or equipment.

[Liliet](#)

Hence the high effectiveness of undead armies...

asazernik

And hence Total War: Warhammer needing to semi-nerf undead by having them just collapse into bones in the same circumstances where a living army would rout.

[machinetell](#)

The link on the previous page still points to the chapter delay announcement, which is now a broken link.

Blue

The Sword of the Rest wasn't really made to be a weapon struck with. It's more like the key holding shut an armory of Below's stories.

You think this wasn't an intense moment? Cat just found the Secret Weakness of Keter, and coincidentally moments later Yara disabled the angels and released a Madman of Mass Destruction

upon the fount of Keter's power.

Now, more than ever, they need a powerful weapon, to strike during this unique opportunity. So Cat breaks the sword, and unleashes Below.

Out come the Drow, marching with all the power *and* all the story weight the ancient Mighty and Rumena's oath hold. Others had thought less of them for not joining the battle before, and they finally show their true worth.

Out comes Bellerophon, which even without Named still aligns perfectly with the system put into place by an ancient Villain. That kind of madness doesn't come naturally, and the doubted chosen people finally show their worth and the power of their ideals.

Out comes Sargon, Herald of the Deeps, who while seemingly neutral is also a kingslayer and prefers cataclysmic giant underground fire monsters to angels. He gets to finally finish up his apparent arc of overcoming his Greed and showing that he is more than the tyrant Catherine accused him of being.

None of that would have worked anywhere near as well without a story to buoy each of them up. The Sword of the Rest didn't need a dramatic sendoff, because the stories it released were more than dramatic enough. This entire chapter was literally showing how powerful the Sword was.

Liliet

Sargon is actually hero-leaning according to Catherine. And Hanno figuring he'd talk to him based on that assumption worked.

caoimhinh

One correction: Bellerophon was not set in place by an ancient villain, it was founded by a Heroine, the Sword of the Free. She liberated the slaves from Stygia and killed one of the two bird gods of Stygia.

We have confirmation that she was a Heroine because Hanno was able to **Recall** her life during one of his fights against Amadeus.

Cpt. Obvious

But I also remember something about the patron God of Bellerophon being both a hero and a Bird. I'm still on my first read through so I'm not sure I remember correctly. But it could help explaining how Bellerophon ended up on the side of evil, with its population enslaved under the Tyranny of the People.

caoimhinh

Hmm, as far as I remember, Bellerophon has no patron gods. However, both the Gods Above and the Gods Below have allotted places where they can present their votes, as honorary citizens of the Republic.

The city that has patron gods that are two birds (Redress and Retribution) is Stygia (the slaver city from which the founders of Bellerophon escaped), and one of those was killed by the Sword of the Free.

Rey d`Tutto

It's been fixed

Vega

It still boggles my mind thst the great weapon that cordelia places all her hopes on is just a feather from an Angel that dread empress triumphant Killed. What did Yara do while Triumphant was going around conquering hells and killing angels? I am so excited to see how everything ends! I think Cat is going to live through it, and Heiroohant will walk out a god. My personal hope is that Zeze takes Cat and Archer with him somehow.

Mirror Night

I mean its a full Angel Corpse though Cordelia doesn't know that that Bard turned the Choir back on which means said weapon aint going to work the same. Granted at least Cordelia is acknowledging she is a hypocrite by noting she doesn't have the right to fire it (at least based on her stated worldview) but will anyway.

Hargabga

She isn't a hypocrite by acknowledging she has no right to fire. By definition if she acknowledged something isn't true, she can't be a hypocrite.

jamesc9

> Gods forgive her but she would.

I think that this is undercooked. I think that the version with the correct weight is:

>> Gods forgive her or not, but she would.

Crash

Agnes' note is about this.

It's either a "don't shoot, Bard has handled the Choir" or a "Destroy this, Bard is trying to use it."

Has to be right? She left a note for Cordelia specifically. She doesn't fight with the ranks, she doesn't stay with the generals so it has to be something she does from the outside.

Cordelia is fighting the Dead King yeah, but Agnes has always been fighting the Bard by betting on her cousin.

Lord Haart

I bet the note just says – "I bet on you"

dadycoool

William's sword was an angel feather from the Choir of Contrition, which Cat has shattered and scattered and Arthur has rejected.

beleester

It's not a feather, it's the entire corpse. The baton she carries is just the trigger for it.

ninegardens

>"He landed in the grass.

It was soft against his bare feet, and though there was no sun in the sky above there was no lack of light"

Hahahahahhahahaha

Oh gawd. Oh, she dropped the madman in the fucking Serenity.

Screw it- that's game over buddy. There ain't shit Nessie can do now.

Also, hilarious that the Angels are out of commission, for just one day. What a coincidence. hahahahaha

Okay, Good job Yara, good job. I'll give you that.

Also, what's the deal with the sword of the rest being broken? I was expecting that to happen at a WAY more intense moment.

I... gotta admit, I haven't really *felt* the difference in the story since the initial chapter after below's stories got locked up, so it feels kind of weird in the sense of not knowing what's going to happen when those stories ping back. Oh well.

Snappy270

I know it was brief, but I think WB timed it so the hierarchy was released as the stories came back. Cause he is one of belows I think. Bellephron is below and I assume he would be too.

shikkarasu

I don't think he is one of theirs. He was very vocal about being on The Side Of The People, and the only reason he

hasn't declared war on the Hellgods is because they have not overstepped their position. I think she timed it like this because Evil Always Loses is back in play, and without that Story the best the Hierarch could hope for was a draw, like he had a draw against Judgement.

... for 3 years.

ohJohN

I think he's necessarily one of Below's, at least in the basic sense of "empowered/Named by them". Like, Cat describes his powers as a sick, murderous madness (and she's no stranger to murder or madness), but even beyond that: Neutral is functionally a myth at this point, and I can't see a hero keeping their powers after gridlocking an entire Choir for years, but I thought Kairos (beloved son of Below and, notably, instrumental in Anaxares gaining his Name) had a fun quote about betrayal being a sacrament to the Gods Below, even when they're the ones getting betrayed. Hierarch would absolutely put any God on trial if given half a chance, and I like to think Below would be extremely jazzed about it.

shikkarasu

Two counters to "Neutral is functionally a myth."

1. Wandering Bard had to show up and harass him to pick a side, and when he did, as you mentioned, it was to oppose *all* the gods.

2. Just because they are organised into Heroes and Villains doesn't mean that they all need to be. Neutral Names have been canon since Archer showed up and admitted that she was not a Villain or a Hero, and so while she could kick Cat and Hakram's combined asses, she had nothing to contribute against a Demon.

Honestly I always assumed that Thief was Neutral. She may have been in a Heroic band, but she kept getting offers from Villains even before recruiting outside of your 'side' was a thing. She called herself a former Hero turned Villain, but nothing about her or her Name ever changed until she started to lose it in the Everd-arc.

I wouldn't be surprised if 10-20% of both sides were actually unaligned, but generally considered to be one or the other. All that said, I'm probably biased toward non-binary explanations to just about everything. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Waiting to unleash the sword at the darkest moment would guarantee the emergence of said darkest moment. Cat doesn't have a specific trap planned with it so it's better to use it for generic boost and drama highlighting of THE ASSAULT

jamesc9

Re the effect of stories being off, the most explicit thing is that Cat would not get story-punished for being a cackling villain with a flying fortress, provided she had enough practical power to carry out her plans.

Bad@Games

HAHAHAHA YES FOR THE GLORY OF BELEPHRON. YOU DARE CALL YOURSELF KING OF DEATH?? WHO NAMED YOU SO? YOUR FOREIGN TYRANNY WILL NOT STAND IN THE FACE OF THE GLORIOUS REPUBLIC. HAHAHAHAHAH. THE HIERARCH WALKS THE LANDS IF THE SERENITY FACE DEATH AND KNOW THAT WE ARE ALL FREE.

The Tyrant is laughing his ass off right now. I am as well

The bard's Aspects fucking terrify me in this setting hily shit. She has been a rather practical Guide to *The* evil.

The dwarves have come to party. Lets gooo

THE TOMB MAKER IS HERE BITCHESSSSS AHAHAHAHAHA GET FUCKED. SA VERDE DEAD KING?

God damnit Cordelia if you fuck thus up i swear to god.

zenanii

Nah, she has Agnes letter to tell her to get her shit together, I think we'll be fine.

medailyfun

Yeah, I bet Agnes wrote something like "break that thingy over your knee", we will see though 😊

shikkarasu

I'm expecting her to have told Cordelia when to fire it. If she does it for the wrong reason, it won't work or she will get herself smote. If she does it for the right reason, (and after the Choir has recovered) then they will work with her.

They only answer Yes or No.

The issue is that if she reads the letter too soon, then she's firing a superweapon because she thinks it will work. If she reads it at the right moment, she is putting faith in

her cousin and/or whatever immediate reason crops up. The second one is laudable, but the first is hubris. Choirs are pretty predictable when it comes to that sort of distinction.

aurikdomi

Imma venture the letter says some variation of "Don't" because Yara is back in business with being able to control the blast and is going to twist the story to make it seem like to Cordelia they have lost and she has to fire it NoWwWw.

ninegardens

Good old Agnes, shitting on Wandering Bards day, just one last time.

Crash

You love to see it!

Cpt. Obvious

And being dead there is no thread to pull or story to hijack, if WB even still have the ability to do so.

There's still stories tied to the Elamal (sp?) but without a named around there's no one for the Bard to manipulate.

She can however pull levers to make the war spill outside of the walls of Keter and make it look bad enough Cordelia truly believes all is lost and brings down the hammer of Justice, unbeknownst to her empowered by the now released choir of Justice.

Which would be bad for all of Calernia and not just half of it like Cordelia believes.

Eleron Marilus Pfoutz

I just realized this about Anaxares. He's basically Escanor from Seven Deadly Sins.

Juff

Typo thread:

of Aoede if Nicae > Aoede of Nicae
could tolerate > could not tolerate
was no unpleasant > was not unpleasant
only at then > only then (or at ten)
set it > set in

save lines > save lives
Ad now > And now
full must > full muster
clumsy hacked > clumsily hacked
say about. > say about it.
sorcerers found > sorceress found
follower > followed
god that within > god within
moment where > moment when
not the last > now the last

ohJohN

there's a second sorcerers > sorceress

Gabe Meadow

Deep excellent everything from EE!

– Yara of Nowhere is not yet out of the game, and we got her three Aspects named. We also got to learn very informative stuff about the Choirs. Essentially, they have some capacity to adapt, but it only goes so far. Confirmation on their lack of nuance explains their seeming hypocritical or immoral behavior, and why the Choirs are paired with dedicated heroic Named, to help compensate for that. Note: this also makes it clear the issue with Hanno as White Knight. In the search for clarity, he abdicated judgement to Judgement, thereby failing to perform his lower-case role.

– Well, we know why the Dead King couldn't just turtle up in the Serenity, not when the Bard could do shit like this. Anaraxes is about to restart the trials!

– The Sword is broken, and the Firstborn are not holding back any more. The Tomb-Maker made an oath, and he fulfilled it. One could say the Tomb-Maker has become a tomb-breaker.

– Bellephron. No words. Anaraxes' countrymen one and all.

– Our MacGuffin bearers trundle onward.

– I think we just got a whole lot more context to the Herald of the Deeps, and moreover why the dwarves act the way they do. If Greed is a fundamental aspect (lower-case) of their nature, no wonder they said "Only dwarves can own property." It makes it much easier to justify actions taken in pursuit of their own Greed. But they can learn. They can do better.

– And Cordelia does what she made it clear she would, be ready to use the ealamal in the worst-case scenario. But perhaps, when she thinks she may need to do so, that is why she'll check Agnes' note and it'll tell her she doesn't need to do it.

nimelennar

I don't think the note will tell her she doesn't NEED to do it; I think it'll tell her it won't work properly (see: the Intercessor meddling with the Seraphim, robbing them of power for a day). Now, what happens to a broken doomsday weapon is an open question.

Reader in the Night

I think with the Choir being out of commission, Yara can hijack the weapon.

nimelennar

That's one possible scenario; another is that the targeting mechanism has now been removed, and it won't spare those who Judgement likes (i.e. it'll murder EVERYONE in range).

John

Another possible scenario is that holy Light without Judgement will spare everybody, and just cleanse the land of the magical radioactive waste all over the place, turning the former lands of Keter into a new continental breadbox.

Lord Haart

Yeah we know Yara hates DK and Cat and herself and cats little for others but her endgame isn't 100% clear yet.

[Liliet](#)

If the note is technical information, there's no reason for Agnes to tell Cordelia to only read it later. No, it'll be instructions.

ByVectron!

OMG, if the Dead King lays claim to the Bellopheron casualties (of which three are a fee thorne fresh ones,) that gives Anaraxes the right to become involved, as they are *his* people.

ByVectron!

...of which there are a few thousand fresh ones...

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

You forgot
"Thanks, Autocorrupt!"

ByVectron!

I used to call them "Swypos," but I don't use Swype anymore, so autocorrupt it is!

Isi Arnott-Campbell

You also misspelled "Bellerophon," but so does everyone. It's a bit of a tricky word to spell I suppose.

[AviKav](#)

> Note: this also makes it clear the issue with Hanno as White Knight.

I don't remember this. When was it mentioned?

dadycoool

Well, when Choirs empower mortal Heroes, they're using the Hero's morals as a basis for how to go about doing Good, i.e. how to do their job properly. Hanno was essentially given the reins to a horse and then proceeded to put the reins in the horse's own mouth.

At least, that's how I understand it.

medailyfun

well, he was deciding when to toss the coin and when keep it pocketed, so the analogy is not thorough.

[Liliet](#)

I think the angels had enough access to his thought process to model their decisions off it.

[AviKav](#)

I got that. My question is that the quoted comment implies it was mentioned earlier that they had issue with Hanno as the White Knight, but where was it?

Daniel E

Wander, over yonder. Don't forget to wear your hat.

nimelennar

The Dwarves dug too greedily and too deep. You know what they awoke in the darkness of Khazad-dûm... shadow and flame.

erinexa

CLASSIC dwarves

caoimhinh

Yeah, but Sargon found *friendly* Balrogs and used the power of friendship to direct them against Keter.

So it's ok.

Dome Zasrekh

incoherent noises of happiness

Abrakadabra

We do not fear what lies beneath, We can never dig too deep!
I am a dwarf and I'm digging a hole!



Mary Gentle

Bellerophon rocks. And so does its Diplomat.
And Rumena. And the Herald of the Deeps. Very, very visual, that last one. Maybe because I've been watching Fagradalsfjall erupt in Iceland, on livecam, last year – but I could see every bit of magma.

Trying to work out if Bellerophon made its advance before or after the Sword of the Rest got broken...

There goes the Severance, And the Crown of Autumn.

And, ah, isn't there some kind of Chekhov's Rule that says if you have a dead Angel in a lake in the first Act, it has to be fired off by Act 3?

Pretty please?

No, I don't want to blow the continent up. I just want to know what HAPPENS when an angel goes boom...

Next up, Catherine? Or more surprises?

(No, it's not a cliffhanger. I never had any fingernails to start with...)

Darkening

Sounds like she broke the sword before the battle started.

Mary Gentle

Bellerophon might have benefitted from that, then. The story-shape of an army of shopkeepers (if you will) being sent against impossible odds, and breaking through by sheer bloody minded determination.

Vernal_ancient

Maybe, but that's usually a heroic story, and only the villainous ones were contained

Abrakadabra

But they are mostly a below aligned city if only because they shit on any divine plan that is not made by the people.

I am also very satisfied with finally seeing them act against the greatest tyrant in existence.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The first offensive was a debacle.

The second offensive was a draw.

Now the Sword of the Rest has broken, and evil Tories take hold.

Rule of Three gonna be a B*tch for Nashimah.

[Kletanio](#)

The rule of Three:

Evil Tories, Neutral Labour, and Heroic Lib Dems

D

Nah. LD are fundamentally centrists, even if the gradual shift to the right in recent years has made them letter by comparison.

For that real "better intentions than the villains, but with an occasional tendency to self-righteousness and being blinded by their ideas of the Greater Good" flavour, the Heroes should be the Greens. They're even the embattled minority struggling to Save The World against overwhelming opposition.

erebus42

As I said before Bellerophon only really has the one Story but it's THEIR story. I believe that because of this, all of their faith and narrative weight is more concentrated than other states and nations which is why the Heirarch is as potent as he is.

ByVectron!

Well, that's certainly everything coming together, isn't it? Do we know what the impact of Anaxares actions will be? I'm struggling to see an immediate effect, though I'm sure it's terrible and awesome (in the "impressive fear" way.)

Jstj

We actually see the immediate effect right this chapter, in the League section: DK is being much more aggressive now, because he is cornered. His failsafe in case even Keter fell was escaping into the Serenity, and now that's gone.

jamesc9

I think that, because of story-fu, the Dead King can't fight a war on two fronts.

I think that he's trying to dispose of the Grand Alliance quickly, so he can switch to the Hierarch.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Awesome, meaning full of Awe, not meaning relatively cool. That's been a pet peeve of mine since the 6th grade.

ruduen

One small correct guess in a sea of them, but...

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2021/08/31/chapter-35-catch/#comment-94040>

I'm happy I hit that one!

[Liliet](#)

Nice!!!!

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Narrate FTW!

[sengachi](#)

Well done!

[Adrian_V](#)

With a title like Legends we knew it would be awesome and it totally was!!!

It may be Bard's plan but you have to give credit to Anaxares since apparently he is actually hurting old Nessy, like Basilia noted in the POV.

I wonder what other POV we will see?

[magnumicec](#)

Wait. Just noticed something. The Drow are using Night. At dawn.

OMG OMG Masego must have removed that weakness as well.

Sethur

Weren't they always strongest during the twilight anyway? As the name of their language – crepuscular – implies, the Drow are beings of twilight. But maybe I am misremembering and they were strongest during dusk and weakest during dawn... Damn, Cat explained this during/after the Princes' Graveyard, but I can't remember and I am too lazy to look for it right now. 😊

magnumicec

Uh no. Akua outright stated that dawn was when the Drow were the weakest, as 'Dawn is the death of the Night'. It's in Book 5 Chapter 3. And during the day, Drow can't use Night. Only Cat could, and even then she was weakened quite a bit. It's why the Drow only fight at night.

Tariq used this weakness to knock out the Drow with his sun back in the Graveyard, remember?

Adrian_V

Actually i think it was mentioned some Mighty could still fight during the day, but basically only the strongest.

Maybe is a case of fighting in the shade? xD, Or Sve Noc being close or even their new godhead. I mean now Night is more equivalent to Light (as in a real miracle) and light could always be used at any time of the day or night

Sugar Roll

I don't think it's a big weakness. Drow fighting in the morning is like humans fighting at night. They may not be fighting at full strength but it's still good enough.

Liliet

They used to literally get knocked out for a mandatory naptime for a few hours at dawn

Adrian_V

I think that was only the weakest, wich is most of all, like the strongest Mighty were capable of fighting in day

Sugar Roll

And that was before Sve Noc's true apotheosis. It's possible the weakness no longer exist.

Rey_d`Tutto

It feels/seems like with Night 1.0 (prior version was pre-release) the weaknesses and flaws were smothered. Now the Dead King can't pervert workings, the weak won't have access to Night during the day, but the powerful aren't hindered by sunlight.

[Liliet](#)

The mandatory naptime was only for a couple hours, that wouldn't even be day yet.

Lord Haart

I think it's removed actually because Night is now a mirror to Light and Light works fine at any time of day.

Sun/Stars can still 'boost' light in specific ways but are not requisite at all.

arcanavita¹⁵

We just learned so much in this chapter Yara's aspects and how Angles work, also it's implied that not all angles function the same or have the same origins. Bellerophon coming in clutch with their soldiers and dude who is no longer in the sky. We learned that dwarves did indeed dig too deep and they possess a great and terrible Greed, also Herlad seems to be trying to become a shaman instead of a binder and trying to do better. Akua and Archer have the crown of autumn, and Cordelia has her McGuffin. Drow and Orcs just charging at the gates reeking stuff(RUMENA!!!!). I wonder what the elf are doing. And most terrifyingly of all Cat is nowhere in sight.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Angels.

Geometry is not an important aspect of this metanarrative.

Angel, not angle.

Sorry, btw. I just have issues with Trigonometry

dadycool

But what if it is? Maybe math and "coming at the problem sideways" is exactly Nessie's weakness.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Hierophant would agree with you, as would Akua, but I'm taking Cat's side in this debate.

Stabbing works, unless it doesn't, which probably means you need more stabbing.

xanthir

Ahhh actually it's spelled "Trismestigus"

jamesc9

That was punny.

Lord Haart

I'm reading Herald as Herlad until the end of the story now...

[Syphax1](#)

All glory to Bellerophon, peerless in courage and resolve. May all tyrants tremble.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

They Voted.

Those glorious b@\$tards Voted.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

For A Practical Guide to Evil on topwebfiction?

Mirror Night

Yara makes her move by sending Anaxares to Serenity (clever move there I suppose). I still think its absurd Anaxares can do what he can do in sealing a whole Choir. Takes out the Choir for a whole day be interesting to see how that impacts Cordelia's Weapon.

Hanno and MK with Severence, I mean MK is slow for a Named which is kinda funny since his increasing physical stats should make him faster as well. Now Hanno is absurdly fast even Nameless but he is the exception not the rule. And Hanno guarding MK is just funny.

Indrani and Akua with the crown of Autumn is a fun pairing.

Dwarf Lore now that is some interesting stuff. DK is getting jumped from all sides.

Cat turned back on the Villainous Stories. Be interesting to see how all this goes together.

[Liliet](#)

Nameless Hanno bodyguarding THE MIRROR FUCKING KNIGHT is peak comedy

Mirror Night

Yeah but Christophe and Hanno aren't really a comedy duo. Especially with Christophe being less of a dumbass. Though

you kinda get the feeling that what Christophe is asking especially after Hanno beat up with a waning Name (not sure Christophe knew about that) is why the frak aren't you the one using the Sword so I can go help the troops. Would have been nice to have a convo about.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah it's more the abstract sort of comedy.

But yeah Christophe is definitely feeling the question of "what purpose, exactly, am I serving in this arrangement"

braxen1

I thought of it more as him guarding the Sword from the Mirror Knight rather than guarding the Mirror Knight himself. No one is worried about Christophe dying in this battle, but they are worried he does something Stupid Good like use the Serenity to save the ranks. Hanno is there to keep him on track.

[Liliet](#)

It's Hanno's narration saying he's there to make sure DK doesn't kill Christophe, isn't it?

D

Just because that's how Hanno conceptualises it doesn't necessarily mean that's the real reason, especially if it was at Cat's arrangement. Giving him an accurate but incomplete reason that will motivate him better than something that might be framed as antagonistic is exactly the kind of thing she might do.

Mirror Night

My point is more I think Christophe is wondering why Hanno doesn't have the Sword so he can go help the rank and file... or barring that cause they are saving all the valuable Named for special missions, Christophe would probably feel much more comfortable if Hanno had the Sword and he was playing Bodyguard. Since Christophe knows that at his height and high off massacring Demons and Devils that Hanno still crushed him in combat (And Hanno was at a weak point then funny enough).

Its a very weird role reversal for it to be like this especially since Hanno is technically Christophe's Boss. So its funny from a metatextual out of universe prospective but not in universe.

erebus42

RUMENA! RUMENA! RUMENA! That's right the Drow aren't beings to fuck with!

Resurrecting the Hierarch and tossing him into the immortal tyrant's fallback hell was inspired.

The walls are definitely closing in on Nessie, though I'm concerned about what kinds of horrific in-case-of-emergency-break-glass failsafes he may start throwing out now that the end seems nigh.

Mary Gentle

I'm also concerned – in a “damn I can't wait to see this!” way.



I did start reading this because I like villains, and the Dead King seems to have had ultimate villain status thrust upon him.

...Which does make me wonder if breaking the Sword of the Rest is actually going to backfire, for Cat? If those stories empower villains, there are lots of our guys who are no longer maybe quite villainous to benefit from that. But the Dead King should benefit, because there are no arguments about him being a bad guy...

Mirror Night

I think part of it depends on if DK notices it broke or when he notices it breaks.

Still we got a lot of stuff going on where the mechanics are not clear to the reader so its hard to tell how any of this works together. I am sure EE can bring it to a satisfying conclusion its just not clear at all how all these power systems and narrative stuff works together.

[Hargabga](#)

I dunno. When WB silenced Evil stories, that caused DK to get such an upper hand, the chapter was called End Days. Now that Evil stories are no more, Neshamah could just break loose and go all out. Or, say, run away.

[Liliet](#)

You mean now that Evil stories are back?

[irritantseraphim](#)

They not only empower villains, they force some rules on the engagement.

Without Belows stories, the Dead King could pull out all stops with no repercussions from fate. With the stories back on, that gets his fingers burned.

Sam

Villainous stories end in defeat. That's the whole point of re-activating them now.

Sir Nil

Anaxares could keep a Choir checked.

What chance does the Dead King have when he is in the Serenity?

erebus42

Hierarch is a particularly deadly knife to someone like the Dead King. Perhaps if he had seen him coming and had time to prepare he might have been able to come up with something to counter him. However as things stand -with his attention and resources divided as they are now- I doubt he'd chance a direct confrontation (which certainly screws him in regards to a viable retreat strategy)

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

How can he retreat when the Serenity becomes just another hell?

erebus42

It would certainly be a tad problematic. I suppose he might try his luck with running away to a different hell.

BargleNawdleZouss

So, Catherine is off to sneak behind enemy lines using Ranger's secret pathway. Hierophant is probably with them. We know that Hakram, Indrani, and Akua are NOT. Who are the other two members of this band?

If this is purely a Team Evil group, then I'm guessing Red Knight (mass destruction, meat shield) and Grave Binder (stealth vs. the undead), as hopefully Barrow Sword is off leading a team of his own. Headhunter is also a likely candidate. I know Catherine likes Harrowed Witch, but I'm not sure if Aspasia's nerves are up to this. As hidden backup, I'm hoping that Ivah, and maybe some of the new Apostles of Night, are trailing along.

If the final two members are Heroes, then my guesses are Painted Knife (stealth) and Silent Guardian (meat shield). I imagine that Catherine still doesn't want to team up with Arthur for Story reasons; Silver Huntress and Ranger in the same group is a BAD idea; Valiant Champion is an equally bad choice re: Catherine; and of course the Blessed Artificer and Masego on the same team while trying to be stealthy is a big ask. I will be VERY surprised if Vivienne joins the team for this jaunt.

[Liliet](#)

Alexis and Indrani get along fine now, and also Indrani's with Akua

BargleNawdleZouss

Yes, it's Alexis and Hye Su that would be a poor choice as teammates.

[Liliet](#)

Ohhhhhhhhh

oh wow I want to see that it would be S00000 awkward

(especially given i kind of have no doubt that Hye is proud of her and wears those scars like decorations, and was only thrown by not actually being killed in the process)

[Liliet](#)

Hye, into the air in Alexis's general vicinity: you know, there's nothing wrong with killing people if you hate them and think they're doing the wrong thing. that's a normal thing for heroes to do, or so i heard

Alexis: walks faster

Mirror Night

I mean in terms of a purely Villainous Team. That mostly checks out considering that Barrow and Grave Binder get bonuses against Undead. Red Knight makes a good tank. Headhunter seems an okay 6th ranger I suppose.

As for Heroic Team, I would assume you want to take a light based damage dealer so Blessed and a Healer at least. Painted Knife is tricky so a good 6th ranger.

rumenawins

thinking they brought Hierophant. Maybe Painted Knife and Blessed Artificer. I could see either Red Knight or Valiant Champion going with them.

BargleNawdleZouss

I can't ever see Valiant Champion on a team with Catherine. If Hanno is bodyguarding Mirror Knight, then my guess is that Valiant Champion is doing the same for the Witch Of The Woods.

Eris

Dannngg. Everything with Bellerophon is my favorite. The arc with the Hierarch was the best ever and I want to see more of Bellerophon's ridiculous stubborn democracy.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

You are a "Tolkien Herbert Heinlein Jordan" level writer.
Thank you.

kaedonbolas

What side is Yara on? Because I can't figure out if Anaxares is meant to hurt Keter, Catherine, or yes.

Also, is anyone else waiting for the gnomes to appear?

zenanii

I think he is meant to help the offensive.
My theory is that Yara is bound by rules that stops her from doing stuff like "destroy everything", so to accomplish her goals she has to make them a side-effect of her following said rules.

jamesc9

I wonder if she understands the conditions under which the Gods Above and Below will cancel Creation and start a new one. If so, avoiding that is probably another constraint on her actions.

I wonder if there's an internal connection between the gnomes and the Gods.

Lord Haart

I would think restarting everything would be a potential goal for sure. She wants to die after all, and to take Nessie and Cat with her.

Or maybe she wants one of them to take her place and if Cat won't, is expecting Nessie will.

BargleNawdleZouss

Yes, I'm awaiting the gnomes (extremely unlikely – not seeing "technology"), and the two foreign empires who pitched in to help defeat Dread Empress Triumphant: the Baalites and the Yan Tei. As there's been no mention of diplomatic contact with them, nor any hints from Catherine's WardenVision(tm), I expect my hopes will be dashed for all three of these groups.

[Liliet](#)

I believe Yara is on Catherine's side against Neshamah here, ultimately, but also having been on Catherine's side all along hasn't stopped her from fucking her over so far, so how much that counts for is an open question...

[daegone823](#)

One Bind Zombie to another

This is madness they MARCH this whole way just to turn around
Bellophron Soldiers- MADness...? This is Bellophron

cremadiscampi

"Delay = amazing chapter" still holds
Bellerophans are crazy. I love them.

nick012000

Man, so many fascinating little insights in this chapter, into some of the fundamental cosmological aspects of the setting, like the nature of Angel's and their relationship with humans, the nature of the Aspects of Named (which seem to be some sort of divine authority), and the nature of Dwarves, which seems like it might be related to the hunger of Dragons.

dadycool

And so we finally learn Yara's Aspects. Narrate, Wander, and Guide. She's right about how each of them is far more terrible than the ones before. I wonder who she's trying to ruin this time.

Oh. Oh dear. We could all see this coming when she said to send him to a hell, but man. Way to put a lit match in a haystack, Yara.

Rumena's segment was magnificent. Now the Firstborn can finally sate their unending hunger for death.

It really is the hardest part of any battle, standing there doing nothing. Especially if you're used to actually doing a lot to mitigate things like mass slaughter.

Such a simple statement, yet one clad in iron: "They voted on it." those madmen would march through all hells without flinching if the majority said that they would do it, and now they've proven it. This is also probably the first visible effect of Cat breaking the Sword of the Rest. Scales are being leaned on and the Big Bad is having his Third Act Breakdown.

Poor Akua. Being handed divinity should not feel as mundane as it does, especially the whole “carrying it around in a backpack” part.

The Herald segment was beautiful and emotionally powerful. I legit cried at the Spirits, especially his first love, coming to help because he asked them to. A wonderful climax to the chapter.

It ends on a foreboding note, but Cordy’s right, to an extent. She can’t risk them losing here, even if Above is bending over backwards to ensure their victory. Let’s just hope none of her guards are imposters and that it won’t get “corrupted” or fired “accidentally”.

[Liliet](#)

Akua’s troubles are THE funniest part of the chapter, and they have to contend with Hanno bodyguarding Christophe, there.

dadycool

Ugh, she gave me ANOTHER divinity. Now I gotta lug it all the way through the city, avoiding any hotspots, while keeping myself and Archer cloaked so we’re not spotted.

Crash

It’s the repeats that get you, really.

She keeps getting handed everything she ever wanted and Cat keeps acting like it’s no big deal. Every time Akua has to take a moment to think about it and have the same internal monologue about trust and actions that generate opposite reactions.

” It was sadly typical of Catherine to keep tossing her the keys to divinity like they were loose change from her pocket. Also as usual, the unthinking display of trust had Akua at war between feeling tenderness and fury.”

And this time? this time it’s in a backpack. Hilarious.

[Liliet](#)

And Akua still can’t fucking reconcile it with her worldview! Neither that nor the experience of having friends. *Vexing*.

Crash

Speaking of, that was great. Ending Akua’s section with “and she followed her friend”.

Made me smile, not gonna lie. It's the small things in life.

[Liliet](#)

Akua is not even arguing with herself at this point, she just really doesn't know how to narrate what's going on, the poor dear.

jack

Gods below, the Bellerophons are nuts.

I mean, I new that before, but fucking hell.

Gynedroid

Right so I'm feeling a deep sense of terror that Yara just "tricked" the Tribunal into being "out for the day" when it's THE LAST DAY. If judgment's wiped and judgment is called on...what's going to happen with the ealamal now? Is it just power entirely uncontested in Yara's hands? Absolutely useless?

Holding out hope for Agnes's words of wisdom

ohJohN

Well, Cordy has used it before (but sounds like on a smaller scale) while the Seraphim were incapacitated by Hierarch. Yara drew the comparison (which does make me immediately distrust it tbh) that it was functionally equivalent if they were incapacitated due to ejecting the Hierarch or due to continuing their stalemate with him. So it seems kinda like it would work as before, but on a larger scale?

Also, wasn't the big reveal from Painted Knife & Co.'s Big Brocelian Brawl that Yara could 'trick' the senses of angels? Does that still work if you're just juicing power from one's corpse while the rest are out of commission? We're told angels can't *really* die, but the ealamal hasn't been shown to have... awareness, or perception, in the way the rest of the Choir has, so are there even any senses to trick? (Well, I suppose so, since the previous firings did kill thousands of people judged "bad", implying some ability to perceive and judge people inherent to the power.)

spencer

Why is a three-legged day likely to get you killed? Is this a wasteland proverb?

ninegardens

When you SEE the three legged cat, it might be cute/endering in a pitiful kind of manner...
but one of these days, the cat is going to fuck up and take a tumble, and that missing legger is going to COST it.

jack

“even war cries petering out at the sight of such atrocious bravery.” is such a raw line.

Atrocious bravery.

Kojo

So as an aside, Are there going to be as many Named rulers in Cat and Viv’s descendants as were in the last two Callowan dynasties? As I understand it, about 1 in 2 rulers were named in callow (I could be wrong) but that was with Preas and Procer breathing down their necks. Now, without the Dread Empress/Emperor, and the Warden in Cardinal, would the next dynasty have roughly the same occurrences of Named rulers?

BargleNawdleZouss

Upcoming Crowning Moments of Awesome:

1. Archer or Silver Huntress FINALLY putting down The Hawk.
2. Arthur debuting the Peregrine Sword in spectacular fashion.
3. Sapan finally coming into her permanent Name as the *insert color here* Mage.
4. Kreios doing another Holy Shit-level of eldritch arcane what-the-fuckery.
5. The elves’ Emerald Swords finally doing something to help out.
6. Hanno coming into his (new?) Name.

Each of these alone deserves a full chapter of build up and delivery, don’t you think? 😊

Crash

Hearld of the Deeps like “I started a kingdom-ending civil war, you best believe I’m marrying this man.”

The ultimate mad lad.

Pandacrator

So... It has probably been said already but I just noticed that the weapons meant to beat the Dead King are all parts of Catherine’s family banner: The sword and the crown being the Severance and the Crown of Autumn, and the scale on which they balance being the Staff of the Ealamal.

Lord Haart

I did not realize that – fantastic foreshadowing!

lenethren

Love this chapter. Excited to see what happens next.

ninegardens

This is your Annual reminder that Anaraxes the diplomat had visions of the Serenity directly after getting his name, all the way back in the epilouge of book three.

He also had a delightful conversation with Agnes Hasenbach, who is, as always, a treasure.

Bart_KF

Hail the Republic of Motherfucking Bellerophon.

DC

The first time I read this, it was like..."oh those wacky Bellerophans and their silly suicidal ways."

The second time, I realised that while they might be crazy, they're not stupid. They knew what they were voting for. Alone of every army on the field, they went in without a structure compelling them or a lord commanding them; they could have turned and left or simply held position without consequence, but they voted not to.

Mind you, they waited until Penthes got mauled, but they're a pack of Wicked Foreign Devils anyway.

Interlude: Legends II

"The army of Tenerife encamped by the banks of the Blue Ribbon, making fires, and the sight of their multitude troubled Theodosius' captains. Daphne of Penthes, most respected among them, argued that they should seek aid from Nicae rather than give battle. 'They are as many Procerans as there are grains of sand,' she said. Theodosius refused. 'Then like so much sand we will scatter them before us,' he replied."

– Extract from *'The Banquet of Follies, or, A Comprehensive History of the First League War'* by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

The Warlord charged, and all that stood before him shattered.

His shoulder hit a shield wall bristling with pikes and blades and he broke straight through, a tide of warriors pouring in behind him as the dead were swept away by the wrath of the Clans. He did not slow. Ghouls burst out of the ground, buried under the rock, but his footing was sure and they were all frail. His axe swung and flesh gave, blood spurted, screams filled the air. Hakram felt his blood thundering in his ears like the beat of a drum. Felt the rhythm echo in the fifty thousand souls trailing in his wake as he roared, leaping up to smash a beorn's leering maw with his shield. The beast fell and he hacked at its flesh, discarding the shield when it took too many arrows and roaring again as his axe split the beorn's skull and the creature fell.

Great stones had been pulled into the way as chunks of wall to stop their charge up the avenue, monsters in the shape of massive corpse-fat snails released swarms of poisonous flies from their bone shells and skeletons the height of then men scythed through ranks with massive hammers, but it was not enough. The drow that had broken the gates for him, still shadowing his armies on the sides, filled the air with fire and curses that ate away the swarms. The Warlord's steel fist hit the stone in front of him once, twice, thrice – and on the third the stone shattered in two. They clawed and pushed their way through, tearing into the dead as swarming the great skeletons until they were toppled down and taken apart on the ground like wounded beasts.

Yesterday he had failed to take the gate, left Catherine and the Procerans to hang, but today the Clans would remind Calernia why it had once trembled at the coming of a Horde.

The world was slowly turning red. The Warlord saw only in bursts, as if he was flitting in and out of consciousness, his Name carrying him like a river. **Lead**, it sang, and so the warriors of the Clans thundered down the avenue with him. A Revenant stood before him but he shoved his dead hand down the throat and ripped off the head from the inside, its fangs clattering uselessly on his scorched plate. Magic came down from above in curtains but he charged through it, sorcery dripping on armour like rain, and once through he barrelled into the enemy's retreating ranks. A wyrm spasmed across the avenue, swarmed by the silhouettes of Mighty, as the Warlord and his warriors pulled it down with ropes and harpoons.

Then it was a hulking shape of steel, a great armour held together by the dead remains of a Name. The Prince of Bones shattered the tiles under them with a stomp, but the Warlord only roared as his axe dented the sternly frowning mask covering the

Scourge's face. It was strong as a monster was strong, the sweeps of its broadsword whistling through the air but still too slow. The Warlord stepped around the blows and struck, hacking away at the layers of steel until his axe was little more than scrap, and after that he caught the Scourge's arm to take its own greatsword. Only when it came to strength he was outmatched, the Revenant unmoving as the Warlord's feet were pushed back through broken tiles. The Warlord roared again, but from the corner of his eye he saw the Scourge's free hand moving. A slap, he thought, that would be enough to spill his brains all over the stone.

Until it was caught, a stooped old drow shivered into existence and grabbing a single finger.

"My turn," Rumena the Tomb-maker said, and struck with its free hand.

The Warlord grunted with effort, holding the Prince of Bones in place so he could not avoid the blow, and there was a great scream of metal before a wet crunch. The orc watched with muted disbelief as the Scourge's head, a ball of metal, toppled to the ground. *But there is no bone*, the Warlord saw. The head was a decoy. A heartbeat later a mass of lightning came down on their heads, the Tumult's hatred unleashed, and even as Rumena formed a sphere of Night around them the Warlord felt the Prince of Bones slipping away. He struggled to hold the Scourge in place but the Prince's might was implacable and his fingers scrabbled down the steel, until at last they found purchase.

When the storm of lightning ended and the Tomb-maker ended its working there was no trace of the Prince of Bones, but Hakram Deadhand held in his grasp the Scourge's own greatsword as a prize. Dead fingers closing around it, the Warlord began to feel the red bleeding out of him. His breath slowed, and he began to feel the collection of wounds that covered his body.

"They retreated to the inner wall," Rumena said.

"We're close," Hakram replied, and was surprised to find that true.

They had pushed two thirds of the way up the avenue, far faster than he'd believed they would.

"Can your sigils take the rampart, Deadhand?" the drow general asked.

"No," he admitted with a grimace. "We don't have the siege for it. Once we hit the inner city we'll head north, try to link up with the Praesi."

"I will leave sigils behind," Rumena nodded.

"And you?" Hakram asked.

The creased old Firstborn grinned, the ochre and gold on its lips pulling up.

"I hunt," the Tomb-maker replied.

—

General Abigail Tanner had been looking for the way out since she'd come in and it had been a little disheartening when she'd realized all the possibilities were literal dead ends. With her luck the bloody Dead King would get her, too, and unlike the Black Queen didn't even have the decency to pay his officers. Stuck fighting forever without even a retirement fund? She'd rather die.

In, uh, a different way.

This whole Keter business had been awful, really. Not only were the soldiers in between her and Revenants dying at a frankly alarming rate, but for some reason the Third Army kept getting into the worst of it. It was like being forcefully saddled to a horse that kept looking for cliffs to leap down from. Even Boots, her perfidious old ass of a horse, didn't intend to go down with her when it tried to shake her off to her death.

Abigail couldn't even blame him for that. The horse had correctly figured out she was the reason he kept getting into situations where people shot at him, so in a sense she *did* have it coming. The part of this mess that absolutely did drive her up the wall, though, was she'd somehow ended up leading the vanguard of the Army of Callow again. How, when? She'd tricked General Holt into taking the lead this time and *somehow she was still at the tip of the spear again*.

"It must be a curse," she muttered. "I know I haven't gone to a sermon in a while, but isn't that why you bribe the Crows?"

"You said something, ma'am?" Staff Tribune Krolem asked.

The bulky orc looked at her expectantly.

"I was asking about the word from Marshal Juniper," Abigail hurriedly replied.

"She commends you on the initiative and gives you free rein to lead the Third forward as you please," Krolem proudly said, flashing his fangs.

Fucking Hellhound, the dark-haired woman uncharitably thought, hanging her a length of rope and surely it was a coincidence she was already standing next to gallows. Abigail had long been aware that the world was unfair — come on, you only had to see how well

Ellie Bilkers had married while being such a witch to know that – but it was a little much to find out that even now the world wasn't unfair *in her favour*. She was a noble now! Lady Abigail Tanner, even if the name was one she'd come up with in a panic when she'd realized she'd procrastinated until she was due to give an answer to the adjunct secretariat. Not only some noble but a general on top of it too!

She should be going around in goddamn palanquins all the time while people threw themselves at arrows to bring glory to her name. Instead she was stuck going around on a miserable old horse, under a banner like she was just asking to get shot, and-

Panes of magic flared into existence, glowing blue, and caught the three crossbow bolts that would have punched through her skull.

Abigail wished she could say it was even just the tenth time the dead had tried that today. At this rate she'd die a porcupine and they'd bury her as bloody Lady Arrowcatch. Krolem, Gods bless his soul, began shouting and growling until mages blew up the rooftop she'd been shot at from in a volley of fireballs.

"I think it was as a Revenant this time, ma'am," the orc said with disturbing eagerness. "Think it might have been the Hawk?"

Abigail figured not, on account of her distinct lack of arrow in the head, but she figured she'd let him have his fun.

"Could be," she grunted. "Now, Tribune, what was it you were telling me about the League's push again?"

The Grand Alliance strategy for the assault was straightforward, looked at on a large scale. There were four gates, one for every cardinal direction – wait, was *that* why the Black Queen was naming her mad city out in the mountains Cardinal? Shit, she'd just got that, why had no one told her before? – and there would be four thrusts at the inner city through them. Thrown on top of that was the breach in the southwestern wall that the Ram had built, which was the way through for the Army of Callow to do their own push.

Most of those attacks weren't actually meant to reach the heart of Keter, in practice. The Procerans through the south gate and the Praesi through the north one were the 'lucky' winners that needed to get there, the rest of the attacks elaborate manoeuvres to get the pressure off their flanks. The orcs and the drow were coming in from the west, the League from the east, and the Dominion was to follow after the Praesi and serve as their rear guard.

The Army of Callow's role was pretty simple: die over the same grounds as yesterday long enough that the Proceran left flank couldn't get smashed by there.

"They were delayed, general," Staff Tribune Krolem replied. "They ran into an entrenched position and were stalemated until the Bellerophans cleared it."

The *Bellerophans* had cleared it, Abigail skeptically thought. Well, she supposed if you had to throw corpses at corpses you might as well go with the folk that voted on chamber pot schedules.

"So they're staggered a bit, is what I'm hearing," she muttered. "It happens. The Warlord's pissing all over the opposition on the other side of the city, so I reckon it evens ou-"

Abigail's mouth closed. Beneath her, Boots began to edge closer to the wall hoping she was distracted. She pulled at the reins to disabuse the treacherous beast of the notion. Please, he'd tried to throw her at one headfirst already. Like she'd forget. *My memory is at least twice as good as a horses', you fucker*, she smugly thought. Yet the warm glow of her triumph retreated in the face of the ice that was welling up in her stomach as she tried to look at what the assault on Keter would look like from above.

She had no idea how well the Praesi were doing, but most their fortresses were still in the air so presumably not too badly. The Procerans had been doing pretty well too, their Lycaonese vanguard taking the hits for the rest of the army stoically so the conscripts wouldn't start routing too early. But if the League had been delayed on the Proceran right flank and the Army of Callow was getting stalled short of the avenue on its left, then something was up. And now that Abigail thought about it, weren't the orcs actually doing a little too well?

"Shit," Abigail cursed.

The Procerans were getting baited to pull ahead of the protection on their flanks. There was room enough to hide an army in the space between the League thrust and the Proceran one, if you kept the League out of the avenues for long enough, and the little voice that had kept Abigail alive through too many hellholes to count was quietly asking a question: if the Warlord's been doing so good 'cause he's smashing only half an army, then where's the other half?

Now, if Abigail had been trying to kill all of the Procerans she'd do it like this: bait them up, encircle them, then throw a bunch of expendables in the way of the forces that could relieve them. After that it was just a matter of hammering at the Principate's back for long enough that the levies routed and their formation went to shit. Considering the League was still

far and the Army of Callow closest, that meant... The general went over the positions in her head, jaw tightening.

The Fifth under General Holt was trying to breach the barricades around the avenue head on while the First under General Bishara was going around by the west to flank the position, which meant the flanking force that'd pulled ahead to the east to begin flanking the barricades that way was the one that'd get those expendables thrown at.

"Krolem," Abigail said with calm that she did not feel. "Have goblins scale the houses to the east. I want to know if there's a force headed our way."

There was already fighting there, of course, but those were loose bands of dead. The Staff Tribune hurried off as Abigail leaned over to pretend she was patting Boots' mane, when in fact she was reaching for her saddlebag and getting out a flask she quickly took a few deep swallows from before putting it away. The brandy burned down her throat, even as panes of magic flared into existence again. Five arrows this time, huh. She was going to find out whatever mage it was that'd made this ward after the war and thrown gold at them until they made one she could carry everywhere at all times.

Krolem came back grinning, a sight that had been the herald of many a misery in Abigail Tanner's life.

"Battalions of heavily armoured skeletons and some mage cabals," the Staff Tribune announced. "They're moving to hold our right flank."

No, Abigail grimly thought, they were moving to prevent the Army of Callow from intervening when the Procerans got surrounded and butchered to the last. Like pigs in a pen, only fancier because Procer. Wine, maybe. Almost certainly cheese.

"I need someone to get to the Fourth Army," Abigail said. "General-"

Only, she realized with dawning horror, though the Fourth was behind her Third to serve as a reserve and so it'd only be right they take this on instead of her, they were too far behind. And though they were technically closer to the avenue that went from north to south across Keter, that wasn't where the reinforcements would need to be. They'd need someone covering their left so they could pivot their entire army to face the enemy coming from the right. Which meant the Third. Which meant her. And she couldn't even try to pass this off to someone else, because the Hellhound had just granted her permission to 'lead the Third forward as she would'.

Balls, she realized. If the Procerans all died and she could have intervened, she'd probably get court-martialed for it. Which meant losing her pension, and Abigail of Summerholm had not come out all the way to *fucking Keter to lose her general's pension*.

"Krolem," General Abigail sternly said.

The orc straightened up.

"Ma'am?"

"We're pushing east," she told him. "Our entire force. Someone tell the Fourth, we've got a greater good to pursue."

"Saving the battle?" the orc breathlessly asked.

A mansion in Laure and to be drunk every day until I die, Abigail mentally corrected.

"Yes," she lied.

—

"Bottoms up," Catherine said, and after clinking her vial with the Huntress' gulped it down whole.

The Concocter followed suit without the theatrics, rolling her yellow eyes at them instead, and the Range was already lying on the 'ground' that Masego had forged. They lay down, tossing away the vials, and within ten heartbeats Hierophant was surrounded by the corpses of four women. It was a somewhat awkward situation, he decided, even as he reached for the withered stalks of ground set down before him and closed his mortal eye, beginning to murmur his incantation.

He'd met the Silver Huntress and the Concocter in a professional capacity several times, and even once in a personal one when Indrani introduced him as her partner. Alexis had kindly offered him protection if he was being blackmailed into the relationship — which had, bafflingly enough, irritated Indrani — then looked rather irked herself when he'd assured her he was very fond of Archer and not being forced into anything. The Concocter had been much less mercurial, and charmingly learned in matters of alchemy. She'd even read the works of Lykourgos the Transmuter, which almost no one had! The man had unleashed several plagues that turned people into rabid animals, it was true, but that was no reason to ban his very well-written studies on transitive material properties.

Hierophant had not been worried in the slightest when he'd learned he was to be in a band with them, and they had proved to be just as capable as he'd expected. It was the last addition to the band that Catherine was leading that had nudged the situation

into awkwardness: the Ranger, Hye Su. Looking at her temporarily dead form, Hierophant's mortal eye narrowed as he considered whether or not he should murder her.

Practically speaking, she was no longer necessary. She had some worth as a guide in the realm to which they were travelling but she was not *needed*. The Ranger had already given the necessary artefact, the stalks of grass, and served her purpose as a guide. It would be bad form and Catherine would be cross with him, but practicalities did not forbid him from killing Hye Su. No particular affection was holding his hand either, his fathers having always been clear that Ranger was not like Aunt Sabah and Aunt Eudokia: she was dangerous and not to be trusted, even if Uncle Amadeus loved her. Masego had only met her a few times, and never taken to her.

He drummed his fingers against his leg thoughtfully, the incantation continuing unabated.

Hye Su was a threat, of this he was sure. Catherine had been very vague as to how she'd convinced the other woman to help, which he knew from experience meant she was hiding something she believed they would disapprove of. Usually an unnecessary personal risk she was taking. Ripping out Ranger's soul while she was unconscious and casting it into a Hell before burning her body would see to that neatly. Killing out of fear, though, was wrong. People had to give you a reason, not just something you decided yourself. If the Ranger ended up being a threat, he could always kill her later.

Which forced Masego to confront why he was still itching to kill the woman: she had hurt someone he cared for. Indrani still spoke admiringly of Ranger to this day, but as far as Hierophant was concerned she had been unfit as a teacher and a guardian. That would not be enough to deserve death – both arms, perhaps – but Indrani's claim to the Name of Ranger was. There would be conflict there, possibly combat. And Indrani was not replaceable. His life would be less without her in it, which was a sufficient reason to incinerate Hye Su so thoroughly there were not even ashes left. And still he hesitated, not moving to kill until he finished the first incantation and grimaced.

"She would be angry with me if I did," Masego said. "Rightfully so. It is her conflict to resolve and it would be an insult to do so for her."

Which meant the Ranger would live. For now. Besides, he had other concerns at the moment. His task was not an easy one.

Keter was, after all, fortified against extra-dimensional intrusions in ways that no other place on Calernia was. It was not only a matter of wards, though those defending the Crown of the Dead had been cleverly made and were nearly impossible to

break. The wards themselves were a sphere that enveloped the city but they fed into a root-like system of escapements that meant overloading them would require so much power as to be effectively impossible. Trismegistus had then taken an additional precaution by having the physical anchors for them deep underground, to the extent that Masego believed them to be surrounded by magma.

Yet not even that had been enough for the lich, who had at some point decided to methodically annihilate every speck of Keter's mirror in Arcadia. Not only was access barred, there was nowhere to cross *from*. Masego was unfortunately unsure quite how this had been accomplished – demons were his best guess – but instead of a crossing point in Arcadia all that could be found was interstitial void, an empty liminal space. It was how Masego knew for certain this had been done by the Dead King, as he had fought against the Spellblade inside a liminal space of fundamentally similar principles when he'd last come to Keter.

Accessing the void would normally have required setting foot within Keter, but Catherine said that would have been 'giving away the game' and instead they had passed through the broken shards of the Twilight Ways, requiring the Ranger's guidance to move from shard to shard while avoiding the collapsing ones or those with edges. Remaining forever trapped inside a pocket realm or being cut into several dying but forever aware parts would have been fairly likely otherwise, much as he disliked admitting that relying on Hye Su had been necessary.

Masego hummed, pulling his magic close and feeling out the edges of the Creation with his will. From there it was only a matter of following the outlines and seeing where they connected so that he might find where the Hells – and the Heavens – were adjoined. These were the very basics of diabolism as a practice, because in practice finding a Hell was not particularly difficult. Finding a useful one, or even more difficult a *specific* one, to open a gate into was another matter entirely. Unless you had several advantages, it was a fool's errand. Advantages such as, for example, casting from an adjoining liminal space where boundaries were thinned and having in your possession an object from the Hell you were seeking.

The dried stalks of grass in Hierophant's hand had grown in the Serenity, their connection to the Hell by the law of sympathy running deep and wide.

Masego began to murmur a second incantation, tracing runes in the air to shape the effect of his will – movement, transition, stability – but even as he began his attempt to cut a hole into the Hell he frowned as the resistance to his sorcery strengthened. As the Ranger had intimated, the Dead King had hardened the borders of the Serenity. However sharp Hierophant's will, a single mage – even Named – did not have the power to

carve open a gate. A cabal led in a ritual might, but there would be nothing subtle or quiet about. But that was thinking of the crossing in the wrong way, as Hye Su had grasped.

When confronted with a wall a sorcerer could increase their strength to break it, but there was another way through: lessening the wall's resistance to you. And the very means the Dead King had used to harden the boundary of the Serenity, millennia of necromancy, provided the way through.

They simply needed to be dead.

It was why all the others were lying on the ground around him, having drunk of the Concocter's elixir of temporary death – save for Ranger, who simply stopped her heartbeat for a fixed amount of time – so that by creational law they would qualify as being 'dead'. Masego himself would drink of the potion vial he had in his robes as soon as the spell was near being finished, trusting the formula he had crafted to convey the five of them across into the Serenity. It was not long before he reached that point, diabolism being more a matter of precision and power than skill or inventiveness, and without ceremony he drank the substance. It tasted faintly of mint, he appreciated.

Even as his mind began to swim he felt the swirls of magic intensify, casting his will beyond them. He felt out the boundaries one last time, to make sure nothing had been wrong, which was when he noticed the oddity.

There was something wrong with the Heavens. Or at least a part of them intricately bound to the nearby part of Creation in several ways and also... the Serenity itself? It was a Choir, Hierophant realized. There was a similarity to what he was Witnessing and a spell he had crafted with Tariq Isbili's help. The smiting miracle, as some had taken to calling it. The Choir had been silenced, he saw, and though its power remained intact – angels could not be diminished – it was temporarily unable to be properly expressed. It was, essentially, a pot of paint without a colour. If called forth the Choir's power would do nothing, he thought, unless additional properties were imposed on it by a third party.

If someone chose a colour for the paint, to continue the metaphor.

Of course, there shouldn't be anyone able to do such a thing. Even Named would – only there was, he remembered. A band of five had been sent to follow the Dead King's hint in the depths of Levant and found a fascinating story. The first Grey Pilgrim had once been smote by a Choir, only to survive entirely unharmed. The Intercessor could influence angels. And so Hierophant felt an inkling of dread as he slipped into the shallow end of death.

Because if the Hierarch was still holding back the Choir of Judgement, why was he now able to feel its existence again?

—

Otto Redcrown took the blow on his shield with a grunt, the undead's blade sliding across the Reitzenberg sigil even as he shattered its head with a measured blow of his mace. His mount whinnied, hooves sending another corpse flying, and he had to pull her at her reins so she wouldn't go wild.

"Steady," he shouted, as much for his horse as his soldiers. "Don't let them bait you."

Those of his riders that'd began to pursue the retreating undead pulled back at the call, joining the thick of his men as they finished clearing out stragglers from the holdfast they'd driven the Enemy out of. It was not particularly dangerous work once the Binds were but down, the Bones reverting to the intelligence of mere dogs and lashing out blindly without regard for arms or armour, but the riders went about it with methodical carefulness. They all knew it would take only one mistake, and this close to finally ending the King of Death all their lives must be hoarded until the moment where they could best be spent.

Behind the horsemen his infantry had followed and was already breaking down the barricades to make room for the southern foot to pass, rolling away stones and tossing bodies aside. It had been a brutal slog to get here, but Prince Otto allowed himself an ember of pride as he saw the heights of Keter's inner wall up above. They were close now, even though every devilry they'd beaten yesterday had been replaced by a fresh horror as they charged up the avenue as they had before the Titan Kreios' sorcery had undone the battle. Far ahead of what he'd expected, and though his numbers were melting away like summer snow they were but a mile away from the rampart. There, at least, he would pull back let First Princess Rozala lead the assault.

The battle looked promising. Though the League had stalled early, Frederic had led two thousand horse to relieve them and word has since come back that Empress Basilia had broken through enemy resistance and resumed her advance. With the League screening her flank on one side and the unbreakable Army of Callow holding the other, Rozala Malanza would have the opening she needed to pierce through the wall. And once she did, the looming shape at the heart of the Alamans conscripts would do his part. The Titan would snuff out the Hidden Horror's ritual and victory would no longer be beyond their grasp.

"Your Grace! Your Grace, they've come!"

Otto's captain had shouted loudly enough half the army must have heard him, but the prince did not take her to ask for it aside

from a dour look. Instead he followed the woman's pointing hand and what he saw had his teeth clenching.

"You dragged your feet today, Grey Legion," Otto Redcrown muttered. "I expected you an hour ago."

Hainaut had mauled their numbers, for not even the fearsome Grey Legion could simply shrug off having a star and a city pulled down on their heads, but enough remained to be a threat. Two thousand and some, by the latest count. At tide of steel advancing with deceiving slowness, but Otto would not be fooled. He had seen them pass through strong shield walls like they were nothing but mist, each hulking shape a battering ram on the move.

"Form up," the prince shouted. "Form up!"

He drove his mount forward to join his horsemen, but had to pull his reins when trumpets began to sound behind him. What was Malanza doing? It was still too early for her to join him out-the thought froze in in his mind as he saw that in the distance the banners of the rearguard were turning. The army was being attacked from behind. Trumpets to the east, trumpets to the west. Oh, Otto dimly realized. So that was the truth of it. They had danced to the Enemy's tune, and now they were surrounded. Their path of retreat had been cut and neither the Callowans nor the League would get there in time. Prince Otto Reitzenberg breathed out, finding his calm did not waver in the face of certain death.

It surprised him, though perhaps it should not have. Some days when he closed his eyes he found himself back at miserable afternoon, watching his father and his sisters died until the reddened crown was brought form him to wear. The least of the Reitzenberg had survived that day, he'd often thought, but perhaps he hadn't. Not really. Enough of him had stayed behind that he felt little fear at the sight of the steadily advancing Grey Legion. No, not even a little. It was only trepidation, the nervousness that came with finishing something your started long ago. Otto breathed in, looking at the darkened cloud. Ash was falling, but the sun shone through.

Before him there was a road, an enemy and a wall. He'd fought this battle before, as the last in line. Today he would be the first instead and there was fairness in that.

"Unravellers at the ready," Otto Redcrown called out, voice steady.

The horsemen reached for the sheaths at their sides, sliding out the weapons. The artefacts made in the Arsenal before it ended were as wooden lances, though shorter and partly hollow. They would shatter on impact, but that mattered nothing: they were artefacts, not killing lances, and their purpose was not to punch through armour but to unravel the sorcery keeping undead bound in

servitude. A simple touch was not guaranteed to do this, not against the Grey Legion, but landing a blow in the right place had a halfway decent chance of destroying the undead. It was starkly better odds than any other weapon had ever offered.

They would die, Otto Reitzenberg thought as the riders lined up without a word. They would die in droves, screaming and clawing at the dark, and perhaps those deaths would allow the rest of the army to make it to the wall. That was the last gift they had to give. The last prince of the Lycaonese held his unraveller tight and straightened his back, eyes fixed ahead. His sisters would have known what to say to comfort the soldiers now, he thought. His father would not have needed to say anything, beloved as he had been.

But all Otto Redcrown had to offer his people was silence and the spear in his hand, and so that was what he gave them.

"Oh mother, I held your sword."

It was a boy who sang out. The voice was too young, too light, for him to be a man grown. The prince's heart ached of it, as much sorrow as pride. Grief for another boy too young to die. Pride for the boy staring death in the eye and finding it in him to sing.

"Oh mother, I held your sword," the boy sang again, and voices joined him.

He's one of mine, Otto realized. The Farewell Sword was a song from Bremen, and though it was known beyond its borders it was his people who love it most. It was not like hard-eyed Hannover pride, like the desolate boasts of the Neustrians or even the famously dark humour of Rhenians. It was a sad song, the Farewell Sword, for Otto's people had an old sadness in their bones. How strange, that to hear it sung would feel a comfort now.

"Oh mother, I held your sword," voices rose, Otto's among them.

He reached for his mace, pointed it forward and without a word needed the riders began to advance.

"As I rode north to settle score

And bade farewell to the stone."

The thunder of hooves on pavement almost drowned out the song as the trot turned into a gallop.

"Oh mother, there is no lord

To bring back the blade I wore

For I went and died all alone."

The distance, so long when they had begun, was now so small. Swallowed in an instant until Otto could see dents and scrapes on the armour of the Grey Legion's steel-clad dead. Unravellers were lowered, wood whistling in the air.

"Oh mother, I held your sword."

For a heartbeat the world hung still, the fragile wooden length snaking forward as he leaned against his mount's neck and the enemy moved to knock it aside. Too slow, he thought.

"And I come now to return it," Otto Redcrown screamed.

The unraveller shattered even as it hit the undead's shoulder, screaming against the steel and digging in. Not deep enough, though, as the mass of steel kept moving and swept through the legs of Otto's horse in a single blow. The horse screamed in pain, bones shattering, and the prince was thrown against the stone. He tasted blood in his mouth and his knees were throbbing, but he rolled to the side before his ribs could be caved in by a hulking step. He rose, moving behind the undead so he could strike at the knee joint with a two-handed blow of his mace. It dented the steel, enough that it crumpled inwards and began grinding against itself when the soldier moved.

He stepped back, but not quickly enough to avoid the blow entirely. The hammer clipped his shoulder, smashing through his pauldron as he was tossed to the ground like a ragdoll. All around him horses and men were dying, a thin wedge of riders passing through the Grey Legion's ranks but most of them dying. Before the momentum had entirely passed the infantry joined them, half a dozen different accents in Reitz screaming themselves hoarse as they hurled themselves at the steel-clad monsters. Otto got back to his feet, jostled by men passing him, and dragged his armour back in place while swallowing a scream. He could have pulled back, he knew. Called for a change of armour.

He was a Reitzenberg: he would fight until the Enemy broke, or he did.

"In Iron Forged," he shouted, and returned to the fray.

They charged the monsters and they died. Otto helped a bearded man smash the back of one's knee and laughed in triumph with him when they brought the soldier down, a fair-haired girl that could be no older than fifteen smashing a hammer into the neck joint until the head rolled away and it stopped moving. A heartbeat later the bearded man was bloody mist and Otto pulled the girl out of the way, the two of them going back in as rider shattered a lance in the monster's face and an opening was made. There was always another steel-clad monstrosity no matter how many were brought down, and as his people died around him Otto felt rage well up in his throat.

They wouldn't even get through, he saw. They wouldn't even clear the way for the others. They'd just die.

He screamed himself ragged as he smashed his mace into a steel soldier's face, avoiding the swing of its sword but taking a backhand to the torso. He fell down, feet slipping against a pavement made slick by the blood of his people, and even as the sword rose above him in a blow there would be no avoiding, he grit his teeth and swung his mace as the sun shone down into his eyes. One last gesture of defiance. The steel soldier's knee gave, but the sword was still coming down and-

"*Audace*," someone screamed in Chantant, and the tip of lance nudged the sword aside with impossible precision.

The sun blinded him still, but he knew that voice. Struggling to stand in the blood, Otto forced himself up in time to see the Kingfisher Prince plunge a sword burning with Light into the steel-clad undead's neck. Prince Frederic Goethal of Brus laughed, his blond ringlets shaking as he ripped his sword clear of the falling soldier's body, and raised his sword to the sun. All around them, Otto realized, the horsemen that'd gone to relieve the League were smashing into the side of the Grey Legion with their own unravellers.

"*Audace*," the Bruseni madmen called out, cheering as they drove deep into the enemy's flank.

Throat dry, Otto reached out for his friend.

"Frederic," he rasped as he caught the other man's knee. "Leave us. You have to open the way for Malanza, else they will-"

"Peace, Otto," the Kingfisher Prince gently said, catching his hand. "If there is a field where you die, my friend, I will not be far behind you."

"We have to save them," he croaked. "I can't let them die again. I *can't*, Fred."

"And you won't," the Prince of Brus promised. "Look east, Otto. See what you missed when keeping us all alive."

And he saw, then what it was Frederic meant. On the army's left flank, where before there had been fighting, now instead there were fresh banners. Blue with silver Miezian numerals, a three. And with them, another banner he knew well: the Crown and Sword. The Black Queen's arms. Reinforcements had come. The Third Army was here.

"How?" he finally asked.

"The Dead King might have tricked us, Otto," Frederic grinned, "but he didn't trick the Fox."

—

Hanno's steps stuttered to a halt.

"We're here," Christophe said, and immediately winced.

Likely castigating himself for having stated the obvious. The two of them had gone around the Proceran vanguard's brutal fight with the Grey Legion, the Mirror Knight's gaining turning more reluctant every time he had a look at the Lycaonese losses. Christophe had proved once that he could hold back the tide when fighting that same host, and now every time it fought without him being there to face it he thought himself responsible for the deaths. Hanno had sometimes been questioned for his defence of Christophe de Pavanie since the man took his fingers, but he could not think of a better or simpler defence than that.

Before them stood the second wall of Keter, the rampart that the armies would have to breach to reach the inner city and reach the Dead King himself. Though Hanno could not know how the Praesi were doing in their thrust from the northern gate, he could see how the Procerans had done and they were nearly there. It would not even take half an hour before First Princess Rozala began storming the walls and the Riddle-Maker could begin the spell that would silence the entropy traps. Once that was done, Named were to converge towards the palace where they would assemble in bands before going after the remaining Revenants and Scourges so that the way could be cleared for the Crown of Autumn and the Severance. Catherine, meanwhile, was supposed to be striking at the enemy from the back.

"Do we stay hidden until Her Serene Grace strikes at the walls?" the Mirror Knight quietly asked. "We're here, Hanno. We could help them with the last of the Grey Legion."

He had been debating the same. Though they were meant to remain hidden so that Christophe could not be targeted by the Scourges, would they really be able to converge here in time if they lent a hand? Hanno had his doubts. On the other hand, revealing the Mirror Knight's position early was almost certain to warrant the Dead King's attention: Christophe was, after all, carrying one of the means to kill the Hidden Horror. It was hard to justify anything to posed a risk to the Severance getting to that throne room. Before Hanno could consider the matter more, footsteps on a rooftop behind them had both heroes reaching for their swords.

But it was the Knight Errant who leapt down past them, that strange sword of his in hand, turning only at the sound of Hanno sheathing his own blade. The younger man looked surprised but pleased.

"Ah, I thought we'd have to look for you two for longer," Arthur smiled. "Lucky us."

The meaning of 'we' was swiftly expanded upon when the rest of the band followed suit and came down from the roof. Hanno's brow rose when he saw there were only two more instead of four: the Painted Knife and the Harrowed Witch, the latter of which took her time to shimmy down the side of the house rather than leap. Kallia, leader of the band, offered him a grimace.

"We lost the Poisoner to the Hawk while the Prince of Bones distracted us," she told him.

"And the Myrmidon?"

"We're not sure she's dead," Kallia said. "She fell into a trap while killing a Revenant and the Tumult dropped about a ton of rock over her, but we never saw a body."

"We haven't seen a single Revenant on our way here," Christophe told her, "much less a Scourge."

The Levantine eyed him with distaste. Though the Mirror Knight had made efforts to mend bridges, the Painted Knife was not of a forgiving nature and it was not in Christophe's nature to keep his feet out of his mouth for too long.

"The Dead King is going after bands," Hanno said. "He's trying to thin us out as much as possible before we reach his palaces."

"We figured," Kallia told him. "I heard through Apprentice that Sidonia's band got hit as well. I haven't gotten word about deaths, though, only that there was fighting."

Hanno's stomach clenched.

"Did they get to the crown?"

"That would require taking the Archer by surprise," the Painted Knife snorted, "and good luck to anyone who tries."

Hanno was not anywhere as convinced, but he let it go. Neither of them could know for certain, arguing was pointless.

"Shall we go reinforce the Procerans?" the Knight Errant asked. "They could use the help, and the sooner we get the Titan to the wall the sooner we can seek out the Dead King."

It was a simple enough question. And yet Hanno stilled to hear it. He knew what he was supposed to answer: they were all to wait until the Proceran assault on the wall began and only then intervene. That was what the plan called for. Getting the Severity to the Dead King was the most important thing, and though Hanno rankled at the thought he recognized the sense in

it. Saving even a thousand lives out here on the battlefield would mean nothing if the Dead King won and everyone on Calernia died for it. And Hanno, looking at the same man who he was to protect at all costs, could not help but think back of the Arsenal.

They'd argued, there, about right and wrong. And though Christophe had been wrong about many things that day, he had been right about others. *What single thing can we not be made to swallow, when it is put to contrast with the end of days*, the Mirror Knight had challenged. What as a principle, if you did not keep to it in the dark? *What's a principle, when keeping to it kills everyone*, a voice that sounded uncomfortably like Catherine's argued back. Hanno found himself reaching for an old comfort, for the coin the Seraphim had once given him. Justice at the tip of his fingers. He missed that still, sometimes. Not having to rely on his own blind eyes to parse it all.

His fingers closed around the silver coin, the feel of its edges rough against his skin.

"Lord Hanno?" the Knight Errant said, tone hesitant.

Part of him wanted to tell them to do as they wished, but that was an abdication of responsibility. He had put himself forward to remain representative of Above under the Truce and Terms. He was to be the enforcer of the laws of the Liesse Accords under the Warden. To tell them they could do as they wished would be moral cowardice. In the end, he realized, it came down to a choice. Was it irresponsible to take the risk, or was it cowardice not to? Lives could be saved if he acted, but lives could be lost as well. Possibly much more than were saved. But was that really a reason not to act?

What had he cast away his own Name for, his place as the Sword of Judgement, if not to *do something*?

Hanno breathed out, looking at the sky, and felt a calm settle upon him. He rolled the coin between his fingers, and with a deft flicked of his thumb flipped it. It arced upwards, silver shining in the sun, and looking at it Hanno knew which side he wanted it to land on.

And so he knew what to do.

"Follow the plan," Hanno told them. "Stay hidden and protecting Christophe until the assault on the wall has begun."

Mutinous looks answered. The Knight Errant was the one who answered.

"We could-"

"I will settle it," the dark-skinned hero simply said, "so follow the plan."

He felt Creation quicken around him at the words. It had been waiting, hadn't it? For his resolve to take shape. And now it had: if it was a risk to do the right thing, what you should be doing, then you simply had to be powerful enough it was no longer a risk. Hanno of Arwad slowly unsheathed his sword, feeling the first motes of his Name begin to coalesce. It was not there yet, he thought. But it would be by this battle's end.

"Go," he said, his voice echoing in a way that had them shivering.

Not even the young knight argued with that. They went, disappearing into the maze of houses, and the hero slowly turned his gaze south. He had work to do, he thought, and began to walk. Hanno did not look on what side the coin had fallen, leaving it down there in the ash.

He no longer had a use for it.

Mirror Night

Abigail really is quite good at her job lol. We get told she is great but we dont get to see it often enough.

I do like Otto and Frederic together even if Frederic usually pisses me off when he is not with Otto.

Masego noticed the choir is back on, I wonder if Hanno would if he checked the coin lol. Well lets hope Anaxares stays on mission and keeps targetting DK.

Still no idea what Name Hanno is going to get also does he mean the battle he is about to fight or the overall campaign lol. A leadership one it seems almost felt like Speaking.

Cat's team is Masego, Ranger, Concocter and Silver Huntress. I mean Cat and Masego are kinda obvious lol, Ranger as a guide sure...I suppose Cat is leveraging Cocky and Huntress for their connection to Ranger. Not who I pick for such a mission personally.

I liked it but I do very much lover interludes during major battles.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno seems to be getting an offensive martial Name, based on his insight here.

Death Knight

Only question is it Ranger level or Saint of Swords level.

[Liliet](#)

SoS had 50/50 chances against Hye in her prime (source: WoE) so the answer I believe is yes

zenanii

Agreed. In the trinity he has formed with Cat and Cordelia we already have Cat as the arbiter, to rule and judge, Cordelia as the diplomat, to make sure Catherine's actions follow the laws in such a way that they can not be legally disputed, and to lawyer away any problems that arises from Cat bending the rules.

It makes the most sense that Hanno's role would be that of Cat's right hand, carrying out her actions and forcefully removing any obstacles thar Cordelia can't politics away.

Mirror Night

Also Cat is way more of Spellcaster these days then she is any sort of legit martial master.

Joe Mama

Which is a little sad, actually, one of my favorite parts of the older Books is Cat just whaling away at her problems with a sword. It kept her "soldier queen" vibe more natural feeling.

SomeGuyWhoReadsThings

She's a veteran soldier queen now. It only makes sense she would dump the sword once it dulled from bashing all her problems. One of my favourite parts of her arc

Snappy270

Well she is essentially embodying all of war. Master tactician, sword and staff fighter, a war caster, many times she has done espionage and she is a siege engine.

So she does a little, only thing she doesn't do is archery.

Cpt. Obvious

And she stomped her way across the bridge to Keter. There were little tactics or finesse about it, but a lot of blood, guts and pain.

So I wouldn't say her status as Warrior Queen is in risk of being retired. It's just another title around her neck that she newer asked for, but carries out of guilt to all those who has died under her command while she were trying to change all of Calernia.

jerdenizen

I'm pretty sure he's going to get the Name of White Knight, this seems like a very White Knight thing to be doing and there's definitely a leadership aspect to that title, but very different from last time. Before, he did not pass judgement – the big change since then is that has been forced to make his own decisions.

KageLupus

I actually read this as him getting a more defensive-minded Name. I am going to put my money on something big and broad sounding, like Guardian. That implies a general sort of protectiveness and plays well with being associated with the Warden.

Hanno's Name is congealing around the concept that sometimes the only way to do the right thing and save people is to be strong enough to ignore the risks of doing so. So it is very much an active Role, but I think the main focus is going to be on strength when "doing right" or protecting others. The White Knight could fulfill that Role, but Hanno has too much history with that Name and is most likely getting a different one.

Miles

One word names were said to be more powerful at some point iirc, so just Knight makes sense. Or maybe something more specific like Enforcer or Officer

Cpt. Obvious

I've been pondering what Name Hanno might claim for a long time, and for a long time I thought it might be **White Knight** again. But it's true that he can never be the same again now that he has finally accepted that he is going to make his own choices instead of hiding behind the choir of Justice.

I guess some version of a knight name is possible, but that doesn't feel like it would fit his new role. Perhaps

Knight might work, but I still don't feel it's authoritarian enough. It would give him authority over the other knights, and most Heroes would probably defer to him out of respect. Villains however might defer out of self-preservation but they would only do so because of his strength.

Now I do feel it is a good chance that he'll get in touch with the choir of Justice again, but their relationship will be different. Instead of choosing who or what to bring to them for judgement like he used to i think he will be the one who judges in concert with the choir. He judges by mortal standards with the choir provides the knowledge of what the accused is guilty of.

That way he can chose to spare the thief who stole to survive, and chose to punish the priest who pilfered from the funds that were set aside to feed the poor.

Not that his role now would have him sitting in judgment of the mundane other than when invited. Instead he is going to be the one who brings judgement to the named who breaks the accords.

So perhaps **Judge** would be a more fitting name...

Crash

He has said he got offered the same Name, so it is most likely White Knight but his Role has changed. No longer the Sword of Judgement, so more of a shielder/protector now?

Miles

He doesn't want White Knight, he won't accept that one. He doesn't seem like the type to change his mind without a massive amount of reasons

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The Regulator.

"What I cannot Control, I will Regulate." -Cat

Protec the FOX

I have been dying to read Abigail POV again. She's so fucking precious. She better make it. She better.

spencer

Yes! I've been waiting for her pov and this did not disappoint! She deserves that slothful retirement for sure.

icouldbeusingmytimebetter

If Hanno did check the coin, I think the Bard would have been able to answer for them. I was really worried about that

Miles

A coin is a great decision making tool and I'm glad to see him finally using it properly. It's not about blindly following where the coin lands but about putting yourself in that moment where you know how it *should* land.

Lord Haart

Cat's band makes perfect sense, it has all the hooks to ensure Indrani and therefore Akua will get to the end to meet them. And she trusts the heroes will Providence their way there.

Plus Huntress gives protection from Hawk and Concoctor has nearly as many surprises up her sleeve as Cat.

Tenthyr

Good man, Hanno.

Dome Zasrekh

That's the point! He is a good man, trying to do good. He just has to learn what that good is.

dadycool

Oh, God. What if that's his new name? The Good Man? He doesn't necessarily stick to any principle, tries not to sacrifice lesser goods in favor of the Greater Good, and tries to save as many lives, especially little lives, as he can.

Flameburst

That would be a good name. After all "demons run when a good man goes to war".

Bad@games

God dammit im so happy. The WAAAAAAGH and THE TOMB MAKER had me smiling with glee, Abigale's perspective is always a treat and i cant help but laugh and fall in lover with her, Boots and Krolem every time. Then the fucking. " The Dead King might have tricked us, Otto," Frederic grinned, "but he didn't trick the Fox." I literally had to stop reading to laugh and cheer in triumph because god damnit i love abigale.

I love Heirophant soo much too but i feel he almost FUCKED everything there. Villain storys are back now so dont go "villain betrays an ally right before final fight"ing on me Measgo pls we

need you. Although i do love his thought process. He needs to warn cat ASAP about bard too.

Hanno new name time woo no more coin bb lets gooo. Still white knight? Idk id say not but it could go either way tbh.

God the Frederic/Otto brommance is great too.

I love guide soo much bc i gets all in my emotions even over side characters like c'mon abigale NEEDS her generals pension and if Otto or Fredric dies ill be so sad and im still crying over Robber and Roland and aaahhhhhh

Liliet

I was nervous @ Masego's thought process too, but turns out it was fine all along! Because he explicitly rejects "she might be a danger" as an allowable reason to attack her. No, it's as revenge for Indrani / to remove an obstacle on the way to her Name, and Masego has always known better than THAT.

Danté

I feel like Hanno's name will be something along the lines of Enforcer or Judge. Enforcer because he made a call and enforced the plan because he knew that was what he was supposed to do, or Judge because he finally gave up on judgements coin and started deciding for himself. Either way i feel like it should be something vaguely judicial to mirror cat and her warden.

Rey d`Tutto

Do they have a **Sheriff** in town?
Maybe a **Marshall**?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

As they say, "this town isn't big enough for the both of us." And the existing cowboy hero, Roland, is no more, which leaves room for a new cowboy.

Razender

Why not just &Knight&?

irritantseraphim

Holy hell, that was good.

Cat & Friends going to Serenity, meeting the Hierarch, most likely?

Abigail out-foxing the oldest fox on Calernia. She might not think herself as one, but she really is a tactical genius. All in

the name of her retirement fund in a mansion. I feel you, Abigail.

Had tears in my eyes when the Lycaonese began singing.

Hanno finally moving on from the Seraphim is good. Some growths he needed to gain his new name, I just wonder what it's gonna be.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Also, Hakram being a total badass. I missed that. I bet the Prince of Bones is either a golem or an undead in the sense that he is only a skull in the thorax or abdomen of the human-like shape, surrounded by layers and layers of steel.

Rumena slaps, though. I love that old drow

KageLupus

"Rumena" is actually the Drow word for "catching hands". DK should have known better.

[irritantseraphim](#)

As well as for "throwing fists", the amount of multi-meaning words makes Crepuscular quite hard.

[jerdenizen](#)

It is amusing that the prospect of losing her pension terrifies Abigail more than, you know, the possible end of the world.

[irritantseraphim](#)

Yeeees. I love that gurl. Pure "fuck you" energy towards anything threatening her pension and mansion.

Crash

Listen buddy, if the world ends she doesn't have bills to pay or alcohol to drink does she? So that's a non-issue, if the world ends she no longer has any troubles.

Now, if the world doesn't end and she has no pension and thus no mansion in Laure to be drunk everyday? That is unconscionable. She knows what's up.

Roddie

So what I've been thinking is if Hakram has got a narrative groove in well in enough that the orc name "Adjutinct" is a thing now and if Korek can get it

Miles

I'm pretty sure Abigail is carving a new Role from bedrock. For the last several books she's always known exactly where she needs to be and found a way to be there. She even makes it look easy while everyone else is surprised it was possible at all.

I wonder what her Name is going to be when Creation-Sempai finally acknowledges her.

Earl of Purple

Really? Because I think she's fitting the Role Cat made after the War College, when she was in charge of the Fifteenth but not yet Black Queen- or Sovereign of Moonless Nights. She's a tactical genius, from the streets of a Callowan town, absolutely no heritage of note, leading soldiers into battle extremely well despite this, and she's even got an orc to serve as her strong right hand, helping her do all the things she does.

jamesc9

Re: Abigail out-foxing the oldest fox on Calernia

Shortly after her field promotion, Cat told her on camera that they would talk about what she did wrong, to delay the day when Abigail made a mistake that got a lot of people killed. Has Abigail made her mistake yet?

Lord Haart

She did actually – leaking that supplies are running out caused desertions as well as requiring the GA to rush their assaults to some degree. Wasn't a battle mistake but logistical mistakes can hurt worse.

Bad@games

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Bad@Games

MY TIME SO SHINE YESS I GOT IT

Mary Gentle

Oh WOO HOO!! Oh, I've been waiting for Abigail, dammit!

And:

"The Dead King might have tricked us, Otto," Frederic grinned, "but he didn't trick the Fox."

YES! Yes, yes, YES!! In pursuit of her pension, and keeping her skin in one bit, Abigail realises the truth and rides to the rescue! WOO-HOO!

It's even possible that Abigail doesn't realise that she's gained the experience to see tactics, and a trap in the making. Doesn't realise that she really HAS become The Fox. now.

She had better not die.

Just saying.

The Fox had better survive, in good state, to collect her pension.

I wouldn't mind if Abigail is the one who finally offs the Dead King. That would be a nice conclusion to an "unwilling hero" story, now wouldn't it?

... Hanno who? 😊

Actually, wonderful stuff from Hanno, and not at all the decision I thought he'd take. I now have no idea what name he'll finally end up with.

This whole chapter is a bundle of WOO HOO, really. Hakram ploughing into the Prince of Bones, and Rumena! The Tomb-maker having fun with being the last-minute rescuer. Otto Redcrown, who still doesn't realise he shouldn't be having self-esteem issues. Masego thinking it a quite reasonable plan for everybody in his party to invade by virtue of being DEAD. I mean, what? 😊 And then coming to realise that the Dead King's hell has been ever so slightly invaded by Anaraxes... Oops?

Mind you, despite everyone being stretched to their limit, I shall still be disappointed if the Dead King doesn't have something else up his bony sleeve. Something on the same order of the slice-and-dice city, but even more impressive...

And did I mention? WOO HOO! This one and the last one make one great single chapter.

The shape of story that would be best for the Dead King (assuming he can't win) would be to be the villain that is always defeated, always seems to be dead, but always comes back. And I guess that story is now in play.

[Liliet](#)

One quibble: Abigail has always been the Fox. In the first interlude that's her introduction, Skirmish, she is very low in the ranks but she gives us the overview of the tides of battle and where things are ABOUT to go poorly as she looks over it. She kept rising through the ranks in between appearances not

because of luck, but because of capability. She performed excellently at the Camps, stood out for her ingenious solution in Laure, and when Catherine first approaches Sarcella and sees what she'd been doing she thinks Nauk had gotten a better eye for tactics since she'd last seen him.

Abigail's cowardice and complete lack of ambition are paired with remarkable ability, and THAT is why Catherine raised her up and Juniper agreed. *She was the Fox all along*, this has always been the level she performed at.

Just... for unconventional motivations.

dadycool

She's also situationally blind when it doesn't come to tactics, like seeing how her actions actually affect the world around her. See: making offensive jokes to Proceran Princes about Proceran Princes, thinking they'd get offended, but they just laugh. See II: carrying her own banner that one time, directly leading the charge.

[Liliet](#)

Yup she's a tactical prodigy completely oblivious to everything else, and that continues ♥

Mary Gentle

I'll be keeping a look out for that viewpoint next time I re-read the book. Can't help thinking it's less endearing – less Abigail, if you like – if she just had to realise that she was already the Fox.

What I love about her is that I think she trips into doing the right thing at first, like a drunken woman staggering along a tightrope, and just managing not to fall off. And then she takes that teeny bit of experience gained, and by sheer terror manages to game it into helping her survive the next battle, and the next.

If it was just a matter of her uncovering her tactical talent, that means she was a lot more safe than I thought. I liked her being always a half-inch away from disaster, and having to DRAG that talent up out of herself.

You may be right about this, but I'll be disappointed if you are.

I always thought "fortuitous" was her middle name. Or maybe "felicitous".

Abigail Felicitous Tanner, Lady Arrowcatch. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Abigail will not “realize she is already the Fox”, that’s just the name others call her that she’s not fond of because it puts pressure on her to perform! She is not “more competent than she realizes”. Like... she already assumes that everything she can figure out if the bare minimum she’ll be court-martialed for not doing! She just doesn’t know what’s not obvious to other people.

She is straight up competent and always has been, she’s just hilariously anti-motivated.

Crash

Abigail somehow got to the end of the Dunning-Kruger scale with a lot of experience and knowledge but none of the confidence.

She’s very much a tactical savant in that way, never formally trained (joined straight out of Summerholm when they were having trouble training their soldiers) but has very good situational awareness and is good at visualizing the entire battlefield(see the bit about thinking of how this would look from above, this is very much a skill and not everyone can do it well) and extrapolating results from there. You may notice this is a lot of things she is doing. Abigail doesn’t notice that though, she thinks literally everyone else will see it and, as such, if she doesn’t act optimally they will know.

This is untrue, but since she is convinced this is the case she keeps being afraid of everything because she doesn’t realize she didn’t stumble into her current position. She got there by having her very real skill noticed by others, even as she remains in the dark about it.

It’s great.

[Liliet](#)

Yep ♥ ♥ ♥

Crash

aaaand replied to Liliet by mistake. Lmao. Ah well.

Sun Dog

They know that they’ll never, she’s far too clever, they’ll never outfox the Fox...

Sun Dog

Well, if you're invading Hell, dying is the quickest way there. It's why they still do the thing about Triumphant (may she never return).

BargleNawdleZouss

I am STILL expecting Triumphant to show up.

Insanenoodlyguy

Anaraxes will not be too much of a direct problem, as long as he knows his Glorious nation voted to be here, and he's probably received that. It's the angels that are the rub, though perhaps the story can lead to him telling them to F off as he has done that before.

ninegardens

But that's the thing: It ain't the angels who are going to be showing up.

Masego told us this chapter: Judgement is out of commission for a chapter. If someone calls on that powersauce, it's like calling on a bucket of invisible coloured paint.

Nothing's gonna happen... unless *someone* has set shit up so they can colour that paint....

But Judgement ain't gonna have shit to do with it.

BargleNawdleZouss

I want some of that powersauce!

BargleNawdleZouss

Wow, was I wrong about Team Catherine! I definitely did not realize the depth of feeling that even Masego has against Hye Su.

So happy that Abigail is still using her paranoia, as Catherine instructed her, to save the day! I expect both Otto and Frederic to ask for her hand in marriage, should they all survive. 😊

Did not expect the Poisoner to take the field in a large-scale battle. Unless she was also acting as a healer, that seems like a bad fit. I am glad that Arthur's out and doing his thing, of course!

Mary Gentle

I think an Abigail/Otto/Frederic marriage would make a wonderful "obligatory post-winning wedding ceremony". All three of them should get on just fine. 😊

[Liliet](#)

MOOD.

beleester

Abigail should be Maid of Honor. Because that way she has to give a speech in front of a crowd of Proceran nobles.

Sykomantis

That's it. That's best comment. Everyone else can go home now. Great work everyone!

jamesc9

Three-way marriage would make a mess of the succession of two principalities. Someone (Rozala?) had better work out how to write the rules for that.

[Liliet](#)

wowowowowowowoow i loved this chapter.

1. ABIGAIL THE BELOVED STAR. The monologue about "she'd rather die" because DK does not pay his officer is the highlight of the whole book I swear. Also I fucking adore how she thinks she'll be court-martialled for being able to intervene and not doing it while everyone else just blatantly didn't spot the trap. I love this woman. She is so clever but she has 0 ability to estimate how clever she actually is and I adore it.

2. THEY DID PUT RANGER IN THE BAND WITH THE REFUGEES. This is comedy of the century oh my fucking god

3. Some good Masego material!!! Love how he's just going "right and wrong" now instead of deferring to Callowan law ♥ ♥ ♥ also love how alien his logic remains even with that in play. She could be a danger but that's no reason to attack her... hurting Indrani IS but not quite that much of one... but paired with her being an obstacle with Indrani's path... but Indrani would not like him doing this because it's her fight!

4. So the answer is that the ealamal is ready to be shaped like clay to do whatever the fuck Yara wants it to do, huh. Interesting.

5. CATHERINE MY BELOVED she's going into Serenity and SHE'S GOING TO MEET ANAXARES PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE I WANT

6. Otteric ♥ ♥ ♥

7. HANN0000000000 HELL YES!!!!!!! Also love how he cast away the coin WITHIN A DAY of Judgement coming back online. Wonder if they'll reconnect regardless, though in a different form. What Name though????? I'm thinking "sword something", personally.

ninegardens

And thus it was that Hanno earned the Name "Battle Crumpet, choosen of the Seripham", to which The Black queen replied "Wut?", and the Seripham replied. "[shrug], [embarrassment], [Nomming breakfast]"

[mook](#)

black queen said "[bruh]" and the seraphim said "[ratio+didn't ask]"

AceOfSword

I wonder if Hanno is going to become the new Saint of Sword...

[Liliet](#)

that seems to be a reference to the duelist schools and ranks, which Hanno has had 0 interaction with

Linnus42

Also Hanno doesn't exclusively use swords, cause of his Aspect Recall it all the styles really...he could get the name Saint though since his Name is probably going to be one word. Wonder if he can convince the old Titan to make him a new shapeshifting weapon lol...

BargleNawdleZouss

If someone out there has mapping/drawing skills (which I definitely do not), it would be awesome to create a tactical map of the three days of the Battle of Keter to better show the forces in motion. Post it to the Wiki, or perhaps the art section.

Earl of Purple

Nooo, Angelique, you were my favourite Named we met but didn't get much of. I guess you are a healer, or possibly a sneak when we didn't see you. Or else you volunteered, anyway.

Mary Gentle

Just thinking, do we know under what conditions the Dead King is dead?

(Deader? Dead-est?)

I'm going to have to re-read this book from the beginning, after we hit the end (well, probbly all the books,in fact), and I expect it's mentioned in there. But still... How do you tell the difference between DK defeated (like Sauron when Morgoth bought

it), and DK destroyed (Sauron at the end of The Lord of the Rings)?

At what point do Cat and the rest KNOW the Dead King isn't coming back?

[badatgames2911](#)

Dead King is UNdead, not to mention hes a "BBEG" which in this world means his main body is probobly gonna be obvi or have some weight behind it. in most cases like this its "destroy main body, win" type stuff. so severence works there. or if a body cant be found they have the crown of autun, to attack his "being" making him no longer the dead king, but the king of autum whick is much more managable. or theres option 3 that we dont know about yet

[Liliet](#)

Well, soul exists explicitly as a thing in Guideverse, and to be alive you need either it or some other substance performing a similar function (the stuff devils are made from, Winter for Winter Cat, Night for the Crows). When there's no more substance that contains Neshamah's consciousness he's dead-dead.

Of course, he's the type to have all sorts of stealth contingencies, and I think that's part of why Catherine's plan is to imprison him, not kill him.

Mary Gentle

(Sorry if this is a repeat, my reply went deader than DK)

Yes, I remember now you remind me, that there are souls, and Cat's sweetheart is supposed to be the Warden of DK's soul once everything's over.

But as an explanation, it keeps sliding out of my mind, because I think Cat will stop punishing herself and Akua before this. Plus, in terms of getting rid of the Big Bad, it feels like shoving Napoleon off to Elba – you just know he's coming back.

Personally, as a reader, I'd prefer Masego went "squish" and DK's soul blew away on the wind like Sauron's.

Locking him up in his own prison has all sorts of story shapes that promise DK will escape. The big bad that was Sauron's boss, Morgoth, gets put into a hole outside the universe, but he's still on a promise he'll be back for the "real last battle". (Not that I think everything has to

happen as per Tolkein, but it was the first set of examples that came to mind.)

If we're going to see this world's other continents some time, DK could be quite good as a looming threat(TM). But I'm assuming this set of books will get a more final conclusion than that, tbh.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I high key want that also

(That said, broke-out-of-imprisonment DK is orders of magnitude less dangerous than current DK, so the plan IS sensible)

Sam

Anaxares seems like a pretty solid substitute in the "guard the DK forever" thing. Hell, he might even volunteer.

jamesc9

He'll do it exactly under the condition that his people vote for him to. He's Bellerophan.

Lord Haart

My bet is that the crown and Severence are traps not just for DK but also Yara.

Yara wants to die – Cat will make her Queen of Autumn, unable to impact the world but never leaving it. And the DK will get Severed and then utterly destroyed (Demon of Absence maybe?) since he wants to live forever.

Not sure what it will cost Cat and crew to pull that off but that'd be a fitting end to our antagonists.

Velrix

That's why they don't want to kill him, they will put his soul in jail for eternity.
And they already have a Warden.

erebus42

Yeah I noticed that too. They've been talking too openly about having Akua do it that I think it's lossed the unspoken plan guarantee. If that plan is still going to remain viable my guess is that Cat is going to have to take her place somehow.

jamesc9

What would the cognitive and physical security have to be,
around a class at Cardinal taught by the former Dead King?

Juff

Typo Thread:

then men > ten men
dead as swarming > dead and swarming
greastword > greatsword
Queen didn't > Queen he didn't
hanging her > handing her
old told > one told
by there > there
horses' > horse's
Range was > Ranger was
that'd began > that'd begun
but down > put down
back let > back and let
has since > had since
her to ask > her to task
At tide > A tide
froze in in > froze in
at miserable > at that miserable
sisters died > sisters die
your started > you started
love it most > loved it most
as rider > as a rider
gaining (no idea what this should be)
anything to posed > anything that posed
bridges him > bridges
Severity > Severance
What as a > What was a
deft flicked > deft flick

beleester

Also, there's an issue with the map. The Callowan army is stated to be going through a breach in the southeastern wall, but they're also stated to be holding the left flank of the Procerans, who are coming from the south, while the League holds their right flank on the east. So I think the Callowans are coming from the south*west.*

That still seems a little off, because the undead army they're supposed to be intercepting is in the southeast, between the League and the Procerans. So I guess the Callowans are moving behind the Procerans to cover the right flank?

BargleNawdleZouss

I believe "gaining" should be corrected to "gait", meaning his walking pace slowed as his reluctance mounted.

[Peter](#)

This was an absolute delight. I love the Otto and Frederic romance and the beautiful delivery of the trope of last minute rescue in the face of despair and certain death. Also, Abigail showing off that she is genuinely a tactical genius even through her sole motivation being retirement with the pension that she's earned.

I am worried about Catherine's band of five going into a pre-invaded Serenity. The Augur's note has to be about Yara's control of the ealamal, surely. It's alarming how, even crippled, she's still got one more plan up her sleeve.

Thinking of plans up sleeves, no information about where the Emerald Swords are being deployed as of yet. Last trump card unrevealed.

[badatgames2911](#)

Everytime a guide song appears i always try and find the tune, but i can never get it right, as far as i know the only officail one is In Dread Crowned/ Come Out Ye Black And Tans, but if we could get an official tue list for all the songs tha's be awsome

alexjmescott

If there isn't an official list, then that'll probably turn into a re-read project at some stage: to find as many songs as I can, and see what tunes they would fit. For instance, when Callow started up with *Hold the Line* as they crossed the bridges for the second assault, I heard it in the tune of *Dives and Lazarus*.

jamesc9

I've been poking and found that there are several tunes. Which one?

alexjmescott

The version by a local duo called [Solarference](#), if you want to be precise, which I don't think is available online! It's the same tune as used in [this one](#), similar in tempo, with the more robust tone of being sung as an *a capella* duet rather than as a solo over guitar. Solarference's version has a harmony line and borrows a chorus from another ballad, neither of which really fit with the use here.

Squeamish

God I love the interludes ! Great to see Abigail has really sharpened her paranoia to a fine blade at this point

And the song! Just my heart being wrenched out

erebus42

I mean us it even paranoia when they really are pretty much always out to murder you?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Nope, just healthy respect for the unexpected attempts.

dadycool

Abigail and Masego are gems. Abbi is walking the same path as Cat, so she's able to sniff out dastardly plans and unravel them with a thought, all while trying her damndest to get out of there alive and with a General's pension. Masego is terrifying in that the only reason why he's not coldly slaughtering Ranger is "My girlfriend would be mad at me for not letting her do it". I wonder about his final observation, though.

Also, was Abbi right? Is this the real reason behind the name Cardinal? 'Cause if so, I agree with her. Why did nobody tell me before?

Sykomantis

Friend, if the interludes with East, West, South, and North in their titles didn't tip you off, then I don't know what to tell you.

dadycool

Oh, that was the clue? I genuinely thought it was entirely because Procer was the established "West" and Praes was the established "East", with North being because Hakram went north to the Steppes.

Darkening

Man, it just hit me that the two weapons against the dead king are a crown and sword, as in, Cat's heraldry. Talk about foreshadowing.

[Peter](#)

That had absolutely passed me by!

Letouriste

Ooooh, i missed that too.

erebus42

That was a rather sweet and considerate decision on Masego's part.
It's nice to be reminded that Abigail isn't just a comic relief.
It's also nice to see Hanno embracing his own agency.
The fruits of character development are all around!

Sinead

You know I never translated the Brusian motto to French to note that it's literally 'I do have the audacity'

Amazing

Cheetah724

Or, to put it another way, "I Dare!"

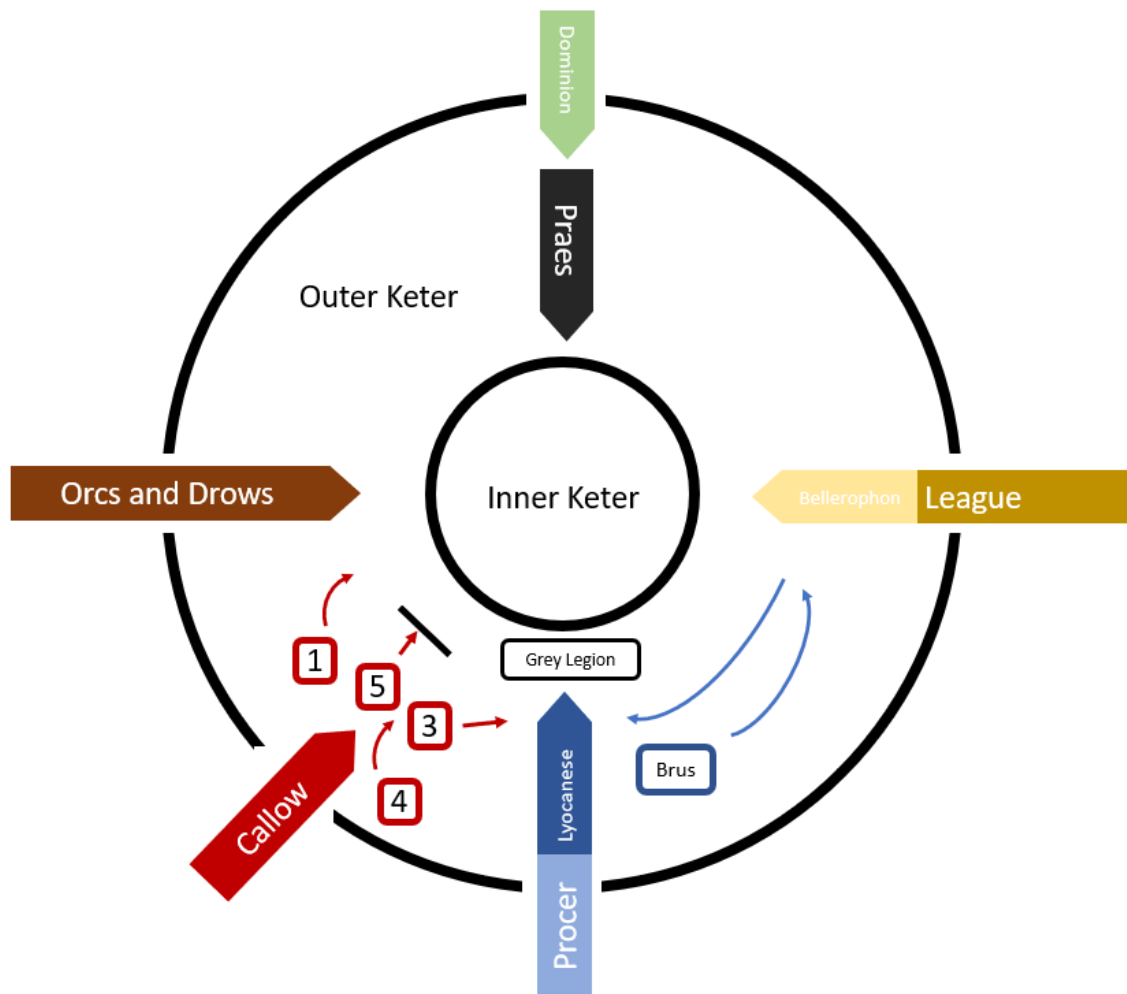
Shebmeister

Oh man I loved all bits of it. The singing brought tears to my eye, as always. If only there was an audio version!

I know you don't always have time to fix typos, but: "Thrown on top of that was the breach in the southeastern wall that the Ram had built". It's southwestern, and that's where the army of callow is coming from right? Hard to make sense of the description of the battle otherwise.

Shebmeister

If anyone wants it, here is my attempt at a map.



jack

It's pretty telling that the Praesi don't seem to have or need any backup.

Procer needed the third army on their flank to make sure that they didn't get fucked with, and the orcs have the drow to back them up, and the league needed the power of complete fucking insanity to break them through a blockade, but the Praesi are just fucking stomping through.

Even after everything they've been through in the past couple of story arcs, they're still the remnants of a dread fucking empire.

[pirateddesigns](#)

The Levantines are the Praesi's reserve. But yes, agreed. I suspect Legends III is next and we'll get to see more of the Praesi side of the battle.

Darkening

Well at least it's internally consistent if it's a typo since Frederick tells Otto to look east to see the callowans.

Shebmeister

Fairly certain it was a typo as EE has now fixed it. 😊

letouriste

Sooo...now we have cavalry singing without biting their tongue while at full speed haha.
I will put it on creation helping them finish the words because it would be a waste.

Gods, you really made us wait for that Abigail pov don't you? 😊

Loved this chapter

Letouriste

Also, RIP poisoner 😞
Didn't hurt as much than Roland but i still liked her a lot

Daniel E

Hanno Name let's go!! "Fifty-five: if your powers are lost, they will nearly always return greater than before so long as the appropriate moral lesson is learned. With kindness and humility comes overwhelming martial might." He's always had kindness in spades, and humility got beaten into him by Catherine. Plus since he's a Hero, that humility is genuine, not like 'I'm angry now and have something to prove'. I mean, he does have something to prove, but it comes from a place of honest introspection.

John Smith

Could read a whole book about Abigail and her surly companion Boots. I cackled to myself for her entire POV.

Darkening

Ever read any of the Ciaphas Cain, HERO OF THE IMPERIUM! books? They're basically what you're looking for lol.

John Smith

Will check 'em out, thanks for the rec.

billstewartmt

I'd lost track of who was where by then, and was trying to figure out whether Boots was really trying to get away, or was trying to drag Abigail over to look at what she needed to see..

Frivolous

General Bishara: Did Aisha Bishara get assigned or promoted to become general? Presumably because her predecessor got killed.

Frivolous

I see now. From Finish:

The First Army lost General Zola to a ritual bombardment that'd gotten past Hierophant and two layers of wards. It'd been a nasty curse and an even nastier way to die, taking half of the First's senior staff with her. We were so lacking in officers there was talk that Aisha might need to take command, as one of the few old hands left.

Crash

Doctors hate him! Find out how this man used this simple trick to cure Executive Dysfunction!

Jokes aside, fucking finally. Thank you Hanno for throwing that godsdamned coin away. 10/10.

I read Abigail's section prepared to find it the absolute highlight of my day, but I have to say Hanno finally making a choice to be free of the Choir is great. He might have made this choice a while back, by many actions he has taken but this is where he's made it official. Beautiful.

Zach

Hanno's new Name just gonna be Hanno but with an extra-capitalized H

[pirateddesigns](#)

Hanno!, but in that explosive pop art font.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hanno, but with the H all big and fancy like a medieval manuscript.

jack

I was a little worried that the choir returning might fuck with Hanno's development at a critical point, but this is probably the best outcome.

Toss the coin, while it's still in the air you realize that you want it to land a certain way, so you never even look at how it actually lands, because your decision is already made.

Gnochi

I made a recording of Mother's Sword; you can listen to it here:
<https://audiomack.com/gnochi/song/mothers-sword>

Isi Arnott-Campbell

When you become famous you're called a legend because your legends.

jamesc9

That was punny.

lenethren

Wonderful chapter. Loved reading things from Masego's point of view.

[*onedollargum*](#)

Hanno picked the best possible moment to take leave of his Judgement.

DC

Chin up, Abigail, if you hadn't been here then the whole continent would probably have fallen to the dead anyway.

Interlude: Legends III

"Not two sentiments are more deeply intertwined than hope and fear: the deeper one, the starker the other."

– Magister Haides the Elder of Stygia

First Princess Rozala Malanza sat her saddle, fingers clenched around the handle of her sword, and watched as her people died like flies.

Conscripts, fantassins and the remains of the armies of Procer stormed the last wall of Keter with ladders. Not for her soldiers, the siege towers and ballistae of the easterners: they made do with courage and catapults, the carpet of corpses beneath their feet so thick it was as if a snowstorm of cadaver had blown through. A ram was hammering at the gate below, enchanted by her finest mages, but it was like trying to smash a stone with an egg. However skilled her wizards, they were no match for the Hidden Horror's arcane mastery.

Yesterday, in that world that was taken back, Rozala and her host had not made it this far. They might not have this time, either, had the Fox not shattered the encirclement they'd charged into and anchored her left flank as she pivoted her lines to the right to face the onslaught. It had been a hard fight but she had won it, driving back the dead and shattering the houses in their wake to make barricades just as the Dead King had done against them as they'd advanced. A third of the Grey Legion had retreated through the gates into the inner city, Rozala having to twice order Prince Otto back so he would not pursue.

The northerners had been pulled back, moved to the rearguard where healers were trying to keep as many of their wounded alive as possible. The First Princess knew the weight of the debt she owed: the Lycaonese had served as her vanguard all the way to the rampart, shattering themselves on every barricade and elite guard so that the rest of the army would arrive in good state. It had been a cold choice for her to make, but a necessary one. If her soldiers were to die by the score with every heartbeat as they tried the inner wall, she would rather send the conscript into that storm than the Lycaonese.

Procer still had plenty of men, for all its horrendous losses, but few of the calibre of the Lycaonese. They were a resource to be carefully spent, not carelessly thrown into the slaughterhouse.

However ugly the thought, it was the price of being in command to have to think it. Rozala's role on this dark day was not to keep soldiers alive but to win, for defeat now would be the end of them all. And still the princess of Aquitan – and Salia, now that she sat the high throne – felt her gauntleted hand grind against the grip of her sword. Everywhere she looked, men died. They shouted and screamed and fought with desperate strength to take the wall, but the strength of the Enemy was not waning. She was forced to look away from the butchery when her personal guard parted to allow a mounted man through.

"Your Highness," Prince Arsene greeted her, bowing as much as he could when armoured and a horse.

"Your Grace," Rozala simply replied.

She did not ask him why he had come, letting silence do the speaking for her.

"Captain-General Ferreiro has swept the wall," the Prince of Bayeux informed her. "She has a foothold and requests reinforcements so that she might expand on it."

The First Princess took a moment to recall where the fantassin captain was fighting – further east, close to Beatrice of Hainaut's forces – before decisively nodding.

"Then we commit the reserves to her breach," Rozala said. "The gatehouse still holds strong, we may not have another opportunity."

"My thoughts exactly," Prince Arsene smiled.

Even odds whether or not he was lying. The Prince of Bayeux had spent most of the war trying to keep his soldiers out of the fighting as much as possible, but he was not unskilled in military matters. For all that he was averse to risk in battle, he might well realize that Rozala meant every word when she said that this might be the only opportunity for a breakthrough they would get today. Desperation on your part did not mean weakness on the enemy's, the First Princess knew. She had learned that lesson during the Great War, long before she sat a throne.

"Pass on my compliments to Captain-General Ferreiro," Rozala added. "I believe the Ligera Bandera might well be the first to take the wall today. A boast worth adding to the histories of their company."

Should they all survive, she did not add. It was the dark cloud that haunted every sentence spoken these days, like some pettily malevolent ghost. Prince Arsene bowed again, offering three flowery compliments about her beauty before taking his leave. *Alamans*, she thought, turning her head so that no one would see her roll her eyes. Most of Rozala's captains were out there, leading the Aquitan troops in assault their section of the wall, but she had kept a few with her under the salamander banner of the Malanzas to serve as councillors and command her retinue.

Captain Salvador had served her house for half a century, first her mother and then her. He'd once saved her life at the Sack of Lullefeuille. So when the hatched-faced man with the great mustache came to her with a grim look, Rozala straightened. Salvador was past sixty now, but there were few men she trusted more.

"There is trouble," he quietly told her. "Our path back to camp is being cut off."

Rozala's stomach clenched.

"The dead are moving in behind us?" she asked.

"Princess Beatrice sends words that her outriders caught companies of Bones circling around her position instead of hitting her flank," Captain Salvador said.

"Then they're moving to hit us from the back," Rozala grimaced.

Which was a potential disaster. When launching her assaults on the walls, she had been forced to cycle her wounded to the back

of her formation so that fresh troops could lead the storm. There were fresh Orense men there also, of course, she was not the kind of fool to leave her back unguarded. But it was the most fragile part of her army and the Dead King's general seemed to have sniffed out the weakness.

"What can we spare?" she asked.

"Not much, unless the reserve is recalled from the storm," the older man told her.

Which she could not. Not only had she just sent them out, if they were pulled away then the Ligera Bandera's foothold would be lost and their assault might entirely fail. But if the rear of the army collapsed, then... *Fear is what the Enemy wants*, the First Princess reminded herself. *It is what he seeks with this manoeuvre*. Rozala found her calm, laying a hand on the curved breastplate her late pregnancy was forcing her to wear. She knew what must be done.

"Scrape together everything you can," Rozala ordered. "And raise the banner."

"Your Highness?" Captain Salvador asked.

"We fight, sir," the First Princess of Procer said. "I will lead the defence myself."

—

Yara of Nowhere did not exist, then she did.

She was the edge of a roof, a handful of Revenants moving below her. There was a loose tile under her foot. She had never been able to feel Neshamah's little puppets as well as true Named, but the echoes of their authorities gave her just a bit of a hook. It didn't amount to much, since he could take control of them whenever he wished, but sometimes all you needed was a pebble to start the avalanche. Yara hummed, fingers tapping against the side of her leg, and waited for the right time. It was easy enough to know it even with her sight ripped out, for to **Narrate** a story was to know how to incite incident. Like, say, by nudging a loose tile forward. It dropped, shattering in the street, and the noise drew the attention of the last of the moving puppets.

The Revenant turned and saw in the distance the glint of the sun on steel.

"That'll do it," Yara mused, reaching for her flask.

Sahelian was hard to read, close to Named but not, and that made it difficult to follow her story past a certain point. For this much, though, what Yara could see would be enough. That pretty

little trick the Hierophant had cooked up with the Crown of Autumn was not to stay in the game. It was a defeat Nessie might be willing to suffer, being shackled with that, and there would be none of that. The Grand Alliance was going to fight a cornered rat with nothing to lose, not a becalmed King of Death thinking there was still a way out of this. He was losing the Serenity, his great defensive ritual was being cracked open but the dwarves and now armies were about to hit the last of his walls.

"Didn't I tell you, Neshamah?" Yara said, raising her flak in a toast. "Eat the fucking baby."

—

Akua first knew it was going wrong when she saw the corpses.

Two of them, laying abandoned on the ground. The Grizzled Fantassin had been stabbed in the throat repeatedly until there was nothing left there but red meat, and she would not have recognized the Hunted Magician if not for his rich enchanted robes. The Proceran mage's corpses was shrivelled beyond recognition, a dried-out husk.

"Shit," Archer whispered. "There go our reinforcements."

"Only two dead out of the band," Akua said.

"Sidonia led them," Indrani said, her tone too casual. "She's not the kind of woman that'd leave the dead bodies of her people behind if she's in any state to take them."

The Vagrant Spear had spent some time under Archer when she led a band of her own, the sorceress recalled. There might have been genuine fondness there, though this was not the time for comfort and Indrani hardly cared to receive that sort of thing anyway. Not from her, at least. Only Catherine and Masego had managed to wedge themselves between the porcupine's thorns so they would not prick their hand when extending it. Akua instead threw up shields without voicing an incantation even as her Archer nocked an arrow, only then approaching the bodies. There was no telling whether it was a Revenant, a Scourge or even simple dead that'd done this.

The Hunted Magician had been killed by a curse but those were not unique to the Mantle, and there seemed to be nothing magical about the Grizzled Fantassin's ruined throat.

"So?" Archer asked.

"No telling whose work it was," Akua admitted. "But I still believe we should change our path."

"To where?" Indrani replied. "We can't go east to the Proceran push, the whole point of riding in the shadow of Hakram's assault was making sure our eggs weren't all in one basket. We could try to go north to see if the Praesi are getting through, but there's nothing certain about it."

"I do not believe Bones did this," the golden-eyed mage said, pointing at the bodies. "Which means it is also a certainty we will face Revenants, if we continue our path to the inner wall."

"We can handle Revenants," Archer dismissed, but Akua's eyes narrowed.

Ah, she thought. Indrani was hoping to destroy whatever undead had assaulted the Vagrant Spear's band in order to avenge a woman she'd been fond of.

"Whether or not we can beat them is irrelevant," Akua replied. "Revenants are not like other dead, a part of Trismegistus' attention rides with them always. The moment we fight even one, he will know where we are."

Indrani's face tightened with displeasure. Akua began to muster her arguments – using Catherine tended to be useful but only in small doses, since Archer would rebel at the thought of being 'tame' – when the other woman suddenly sighed and spat to the side.

"You're right, Former Phantom," Indrani conceded. "We need to make it quietly to the wall. Past Hakram's lines and north to the Praesi, then?"

"It seems our best bet," Akua agreed. "We-"

Sudden warmth against her skin as one of the enchanted rubies beneath her armour suddenly heated told her an enchantment was being directed at her, which saved her life. By reflex, she detonated her shields and the burst of it kicked up ash, coating the invisible Seelie's side with it even as an illusion pretended to stab Akua in the throat. Archer kicked the Scourge in the side, getting a grunt out of her, and Akua hissed out an incantation. She threw a fireball at the Revenant's head which the illusionist contemptuously cut through only to trigger the second part of the formula, a vicious burst of frost that shattered the blade.

The redheaded Scourge in her vulgar gown snarled, her passably attractive face turning monstrous and sinister, and barked out a word in something that sounded like Chantant.

"Time to run," Archer grunted, idly putting an arrow in the eye of what turned out to be an illusion.

The Seelie was gone again, no doubt looking for an opening.

"Agreed," Akua fervently said. "It's only a matter of time until-"

A wave of pressure pushed at her magic as a ward came down. *Containment*, the sorceress idly assessed. *We are being kept inside a circle.*

"That," she finished with a sigh.

"Cage?" Indrani asked, nocking an arrow as she spoke.

Akua nodded, beginning a trailing cant – the shared beginning of several spells of very different effects, which would let her adapt to the situation as it unfolded instead of being forced to start anew if taken by surprise.

"Bummer," Archer drily said.

As if summoned by the word, silhouettes crested at the edge of rooftops and walked out into the streets surrounding them. Not a horde this, only a dozen individuals or so, but that was not a good sign. A horde of skeletons, Akua could have scattered easily.

The dozen Revenants converging on them would be harder to deal with.

—

The Dead King was not holding back, Rozala thought.

The Enemy had assembled a force meant to break her army's rearguard with poisonous haste since the defeat inflicted on its attempted encirclement. The fangs were first bared before the First Princess arrived with her reinforcements, an attack in two strokes. First a stream of pale slug-like creatures made of corpse fat had swarmed all over the broken gate of Keter, devouring the soldiers there and then allowing themselves to be lit aflame by some undead mage. They burned merrily, cutting off Rozala's army from the camp and filling the air with poisonous clouds that the wind was blowing her way. The second stroke came when ghouls began pouring out of what she was assured had been an empty house, overrunning three positions before a shield wall could be assembled.

"We faced the same trap yesterday," the First Princess told the still-befuddled Orense general. "Deep basements were dug under some of the houses and kept sealed after being filled to the brim with undead. The enemy were there all along, waiting for the Dead King's order."

At least it wasn't a maze of tunnels under the city they were dealing with, only sporadic hidden basements – though Rozala suspected that had more to do with a strong mage being able to collapse tunnels than lack of interest on the Dead King's part. He'd always liked his underground tricks, the old monster. There was a reason Rozala still had to sleep with an ear to the ground no matter how many wards she intellectually knew were keeping the dead from digging underneath the camp.

"I am shamed to have been caught by it," the dark-haired general replied. "We will earn back our honour with blood, Your Highness. Our shield wall will hold."

No it won't, Rozala thought, looking at the clash. Not only was Keter flooding their backlines with every spare undead they had to throw at it but a force had also clearly been assembled to crack their shield wall. It was the only reason the First Princess could think of there being so many 'mantises' here. Unlike beorns and tusks, who were meant to shatter shield walls with sheer power, that particular breed of monsters worked in precision. At first look they could pass for strange, carapaced horses but once they closed distance the mantises revealed the reason for their name: long, segmented legs ending in hooked bones blades unfolded.

They went over the shields of shield walls, tearing through soldiers from the back to shred them in moments.

She could see at least four dozen of those mixed in the horde the Orense soldiery was holding back as her retinue came to prop the up, though they had not yet struck. The moment they did, the entire shield wall would collapse in a matter of moments. Rozala's mind spun, looking for a way through. What mages she had were already busy keeping vultures away, lest the flying pests begin going for the wounded and attack the healers, and though she'd been able to pull away a few priests it would not be enough to hold back the enemy when they pushed. Their defence would not hold, she realized as she went through every trick and tactic she'd learned since she had first taken up command.

There was nothing she knew that would keep the dead from tearing past them and overrunning the infirmaries, sweeping over priests and wounded before consuming the entire Proceran army from the inside.

Then the banner caught her eye. The scarlet salamander on flaxen bed with the Malanza words beneath: Through Peril, Rise. Yes, Rozala thought, laying a hand over the armour beneath which her daughter yet to be born slumbered. *I should not have forgot*. She could not hold the defences of the rearguard, not with the forces at hand, so she ought not to defend at all. She gave her instructions, sent for the priests and the horsemen, and then reached for her banner to take it up. Rozala spurred her horse

forward, heading for the shield wall, and once there shouted the order.

"STRIKE," the First Princess of Procer screamed. "We were the first wall of Calernia and we will not fail it today, so STRIKE!"

There were not enough priests to make a great wall of yellow Light, the kind that had been first used at the Battle of Camps and one many fighting says since, but that wasn't what Rozala had been after. Instead she had told them to create oblique lines through the enemy ranks, crackling Light burning the dead whenever they touched it. Their formation suddenly crisscrossed by lines of Light, the undead fell into disarray even as the Proceran foot surged forward. Rozala surged with them, a ring of guards around her as to the sides the last of her cavalry poured into the breach. It was working, the First Princess realized with numb relief. The mantises had come out but they were a precision tool, not much better than any other construct in a wild melee, and as the dead were driven back the priests ended their lines of Light to create fresh ones deeper in.

But the attack was slowing down, ground to a halt by the sheer thickness of the ranks of the dead, and Rozala knew her duty.

She went into the press of it, sword in hand and banner in the other. It was a wild thing, the melee, and though she swung through skulls and shattered shields a ghoul slipped past her guards and under her horse, eviscerating her. The undead was pinned by a spear a moment later but Rozala fell off, desperately leaning on the banner so she wouldn't land on her belly. It was in an awkward crouch she landed, both hands on the banner's shaft as she had dropped her sword. She groped for it and heard roars around her as she rose, the soldiers burning at the sight of the First Princess fighting in the ranks. Malanza swords all around her, Rozala raised her banner.

"Procer," she shouted. "For Procer, and every land we lost!"

They charged, Light and sorcery crackling on all sides as steel clashed with steel. The dead were breaking, Rozala could feel it. And soon there would be reinforcements – the Fox was sure to see that there was heavy fighting at the rearguard and move to support them. The enemy lines gave, like gasping lips, but even as triumph swelled in her heart Rozala Malanza saw the Revenant. A tall and armoured form, its rusted plate weeping red as it strode forward and calmly cut through men. Its great two-handed broadsword shattered shields and smashed helms, unerringly cutting down anyone who approached. And the Revenant was coming, inexorably, for her.

"Priests," Rozala shouted, but none answered.

It would be steel, then. She surged forward with her retinue, unwilling to give the enemy the choice of how to engage. They would flood it with numbers. Only the Revenant kept advancing, cutting through one soldier after another and ignoring the blows that ripped at its rusted plate only to reveal only weeping redness beneath it. Rozala screamed as Captain Salvador's head went flying past her, thrusting her blade into the Revenant's visor, but she felt no flesh beneath the steel. Only bones and wetness. The Revenant cut at her, sending her flying back as her pauldron came off from the strength of the blow and her bones creaked.

Leaning on the banner she got back to her feet as the Revenant kept calmly advancing. All around her the charge was faltering, fear spreading through her soldiers, and Rozala Malanza breathed out. It was clear, in her mind's eye, what must be done. One last death to stiffen their spine and save the army from collapse. *I'm sorry, Louis, she thought. We'll both wait for you halfway there, that we might meet the Gods Above together.* The First Princess of Procer lowered her banner like a spear, pointing at the Revenant, and shook her hair free of her helm. She took a step forward, seeing the rising arc of the enemy's blade and her death waiting within in.

"Forward," Rozala Malanza shouted, charging forward. "And fear not-"

Before the banner could spear the Revenant's throat, before its blade could take her head, a star fell. Or so it felt like, for the blinding Light seared her eyes as she glimpsed a man rip out the dead Name's sword arm and wetness gush out. Rozala stepped back, shading her eyes, and when the brightness faded she saw Hanno of Arwad drive his sword deep in the Revenant's guts. Light boiled, roiled, and red vapour wafted upwards as the creature let out a silent scream. The hero turned to her, face calm as glimmers of Light turned his eyes gold in the shade of the falling ash, and smiled.

"And fear not death," Hanno of Arwad smiled. "Not while I am here."

The hero cocked his head to the side, as if listening to a voice only he could heard, and then he was gone in a burst of movement. Leaving the First Princess of Procer to look forward at the collapsing ranks of the dead before her, and the victory she had somehow not needed to die to achieve.

—

The Mirror Knight took the blow on his shield, the beorn driving him three step backs into a swarm of skeletons that hit away at his armour fruitlessly. Even when they found his skin, their blades bounced off. Gritting his teeth, Christophe de Pavanie

pulled at the power within himself. **Reflect.** The beorn's belly was ripped open as the strength it had struck with was thrown back at it, the hero taking a measured step forward to cut all the way through the side with his blade to make sure it wouldn't be getting up. He shook off the skeletons, smashing them every which way, and checked that the Severance was still safely loosened to his back. It was.

A Bind had tried to take it earlier only to be cut all the way through without Christophe lifting a finger to achieve this, but this would not be the Dead King's last attempt. He was out in the open now, it was only a matter of time until harder foes than skeletons and beorns came forward. Absent-mindedly sweeping through a company of skeletons to make it back to the Ligeras' position, the Mirror Knight found most the others had gone further down the rampart to help the fantassins in their bid to reach the gatehouse and wrest open the doors. Attempting to go down into the inner city through the stairs had only served to reveal that the 'entropy fields' were already awake.

Only the Knight Errant remained at the foothold, the boy in fair armour wielding a sword that looked like smoke turned into a blade.

"Sir Mirror," Arthur Foundling called out. "You've returned. The beorn?"

"Done," Christophe said. "There were also a pair of tusks so I cleaned them up while I was there."

They might have been difficult for the fantassins to deal with, if he'd not been there to take the charge on their behalf.

"You just-" the boy began, then shook his head. "Never mind, I should have expected no less."

Was the Knight Errant doubting his word? It was an insult, but Christophe supposed he'd been the only one to see the tusks. He would not take it personally. Callowans were not well inclined to him as a rule.

"Have you spoken with Captain-General Ferreiro?" he asked.

"No," Arthur Foundling said, "but she sent an officer. She's focusing on the push towards the gatehouse to try to let in the rest of the army, but she's warned us that-"

A shadow was cast over the two of them and the soldiers all around, for a tall shape had come to stand between them and the sun. The Titan Kreios strode over houses carefully, taking pains to avoid stepping on Proceran soldiers, but he was tall enough even a careful stride was like the wind. Christophe had never quite realized how tall the Riddle-Maker was, taller even than

the towering Gigantes. The ancient mage used no ladder to climb the rampart, climbing it as one would a garden fence. He crushed a few hundred dead rising to his feet, standing taller now than all of Keter save for the tower deep at the heart of the Crown of the Dead.

"That the Titan is headed our way," the Knight Errant faintly said.

"Thank you for the warning," Christophe politely said.

Which had the boy glaring at him for some reason. Callowans, he ruefully thought. So prickly. The eyes of the Titan found them both, sliding over to the Severance and lingering there for a moment.

"Children," Kreios Riddle-Maker said. "Prepare yourselves. I will now silence the enemy's trick."

The Knight Errant saluted with his sword, but Christophe simply nodded. Satisfied of the acknowledgements, the Titan stepped down into the fields of time that should have wasted him away like a man sliding into a pond. The old god only laughed at the magic lapped at his body.

"A hundred million droplets can be an ocean, Young King, but they can also be nothing more than rain. Your learning is yet shallow."

The Titan raised his hands, and magic began to pour out of the ground like tendrils.

"Kronia will forgive me, this once, for borrowing her sickle."

The Mirror Knight watched silent as magic burned, igniting the air, and stone began to turn to dust.

—

Akua flicked her wrist, a burst of nail-shaped curses flying out and hitting the Revenant's face.

They punched through the skin and he began to scream as his senses melted, the sorceress hastily backing away as a burst of flame exploded where she had stood a heartbeat before. Tracing a rune in the air, she smothered the smoldering sparks before they could turn into an animated shape again and broke into a run before the javelins began to fall. She turned a corner even as the sound of them crashing through stone tiles sounded behind her, murmuring a curse of thinning as she trailed a finger across the wall she was passing by. A heartbeat later a long-haired winged Revenant in armour dropped behind Akua, her iron spear already halfway into a strike.

Just in time for the wall to collapse on top of her armoured form.

Akua tossed back a minor jinx of slipperiness on the pile of stones to slow her down, knowing that the formula was highly responsive to separate surfaces, and lengthened the strides of her run. Archer was meant to be covering her, but... The thought was interrupted by a familiar silhouetted being thrown through a bronze grid a mere ten paces before her, Indrani let out a curse as she tumbled into old dust and landed in a sprawl. The golden-eyed Soninke dipped into her magic again, crafting a quick and loose illusion of the two of them running away as she ducked into the house and dragged Archer out of sight.

"Hey, Akua," Indrani groaned. "You found that ward anchor yet?"

Until it was destroyed, neither of them was getting out of the glowing circle in which they were being forced to fight. They'd tried, and while people and objects seemed able to come in nothing seemed able to come out – not even dust, which was coating the side of an invisible half-sphere instead.

"I believe I have," she replied, "but you won't like it."

"It's under that fucker in the golden armour, isn't it?" Archer sighed.

"I narrowed it down to a city block and within it there is a house whose entrances were all sealed by magic," Akua said.

"The one with the golden fucker on it," Indrani pressed.

She nodded in agreement, offering a sympathetic grimace.

"At least it's not a second Scourge," Archer said. "That'd be a little much even for me."

Which was, naturally, when lightning struck the roof above them and the Tumult made his entrance into the battle. Akua cursed, throwing up a shield as the two of them made for the door under collapsing stone, only to find two Revenants bearing swords and shields already there. The Twins, Akua had taken to calling them in her mind. Neither of them were all that difficult to deal with, but so long as one stood the other would keep repairing itself. They were not a great concern, but if they were here... Archer grabbed her by the scruff of the neck, throwing the both of them to the side as javelins began to fall like rain. They were simple bronze rods, but each hit with the strength of a ballista's bolt.

That Revenant only had one trick, but it was a decent one.

Akua landed on her back, Indrani's elbow digging into her face, and as the other woman got up longknives in hand she idly bespelled a cloud of smoke to blow into the face of the Twins. Knees aching, she began to rise. If she lingered, javelins would follow.

"I'll take Ugly and Ugles," Archer said. "Can you blow open that closed house?"

"I can," Akua agreed, but her eyes strayed above.

Storm clouds were gathering above their head. The Tumult had learned better than to fight her face to face, but its ability to so easily serve as magical artillery remained a thorn in Akua's side. If she'd not been looking that way already, the sorceress would never have seen the roof tile bend. As if there had been weight on it. She began to trace a shield, but even as Indrani turned at her alarmed shout and the Seelie flooded both their sights with illusions, Akua knew the Scourge's knife would strike true. The timing had been too good.

Or so she believed, until the Seelie came back into sight as her knife-wielding arm was snatched out of the air and she was smashed into the ground.

"You move loudly," the Lord of Silent Steps chided the undead.

Akua's heart soared at the sight. Ivah of the Losara was a powerful ally, for all that it usually disdained head-on fights.

"Ivah," Archer grinned. "You took your time."

"Apologies, Mighty Archer," Ivah idly replied. "I had to shepherd children."

"HONOUR TO THE BLOOD!"

Akua blinked away the burn of the Light as the Vagrant Spear tore into the side of one of the Twins, deftly kicking the other in the face as she pierced through the other's stomach. Akua flicked a spell of binding at the feet of the one getting kicked, ensuring he fell, and Indrani shoved a knife through the throat of what should have been the Seelie but was instead a bed of wilted flower petals. Twice now the Scourge had pulled that trick and it wasn't getting any less annoying. The sorceress smoothly transitioned into the incantation for a triple-layered shield that would be able to withstand the javelins soon to follow, but it ended up unnecessary.

A spectre leapt out to devour them as they howled through the air, the Harrowed Witch recalling her brother's bound shade to her side afterwards.

"The third?" Akua asked the Lord of Silent Steps.

"Listen for the shouting," the Firstborn drily replied.

There was a blind scream of rage somewhere ahead, followed by a house collapsing and the storm clouds above their heads calling down lightning there instead. One the torrent of lethal magic had passed and smoke began to rise, mocking laughter came from that direction.

"Should have put your back into it, Tumult," the Red Knight taunted. "I've had worse from Clevelen weather."

Well, Akua thought as she rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck – a terribly uncouth habit, but exactly as satisfying as she'd thought it would feel when she had first seen Catherine indulge – now this ought to be a rather more even fight. She adjusted the box holding the Crown of Autumn on her back and reached for her magic.

"Let's begin this properly, then," the Doom of Liesse said, her smiled showing all too many teeth.

—

Cordelia had always hated battles.

An ironic thing, considering that for all her politicking it was victorious battles that had enthroned her as First Prince of Procer, but no less true for it. One of her predecessors, First Princess Eugénie of Lange, had once called diplomacy 'war without all the clumsiness'. For all that Cordelia was inclined to think well of the woman's record otherwise – most of her reign had been spent repairing Procer after the wounds inflicted by the Dominion throwing out its occupiers – in that particular matter she disagreed. Diplomacy was simply not as arbitrary as war, where an empire could be doomed because it had been a misty morning or the wind was blowing the wrong way.

Under the intellectual disliked, though, the fair-haired princess knew that her hatred came from the source of helplessness. All her life she had sent other people to make war on her behalf, sitting miles away behind tall walls and fighting the urge to bite at her fingernails until she could know whether the day's horror was to be the mother of victory or defeat. She was hardly the only royal, even among Lycaonese, who did not take to the field themselves. Yet she had always felt it as a manner of failure on her part. Her mother had fought in the ranks, sword in hand. She'd died there too, though, leaving Cordelia to rule Rhenia alone all too soon. It still reeked of sending people to die in her name, a feeling she guiltily despised all the more for the way it held a grain of truth.

And now here, at the edge of the world, she still sat behind wards and walls as she waited for news of the battle unfolding inside the Crown of the Dead.

She had done her best to ensure that she could get swift word. At each gatehouse she had a group of messengers and a loose net of them through the entire ring camp that would serve as a relay to get developments to her quickly. It was how she'd learned that the League's offensive had stalled, only for Basilia to break the stalemate after heavy losses for the Bellerophans. She had learned of it too late for her tastes, though, and the further the armies got into the city the less she heard. Marshal Juniper had allowed an observer in her command tent as what Cordelia would like to take as a gesture of goodwill but was most likely Catherine's order, which helped, but only so much.

Messengers now had to venture into Keter, following the armies through besieged lines and dangers. Half of them never returned and those that came back did not always have much more information to share than what their eyes could gather: officers on the ground had more important duties to handle than speaking to her messengers and Cordelia was no longer First Prince. She could be ignored, now, dismissed. Her displeasure no longer had the old sting to it.

What she did learn came in waves. There had been an attempt to encircle and destroy Principate forces that'd been beaten back with General Abigail's timely help. The Clans had broken through all opposition coming in from the west and reached the walls. The Dominion, serving as the Black Knight's rear guard, had seen some heavy fighting. The last word she'd gotten was that the Titan had reached the walls, though she had no real notion of whether or not the ancient mage had silence the Dead King's magical defences as he had promised to. Still, in at least one regard Cordelia had learned in advance of generals and officers instead of the other way around.

Out in the Ossuary the dwarves had sent up the first of two agreed-upon signals: the Herald of the Deeps had reached the ritual site below the city. The second signal, which would signify the site had been destroyed, had yet to follow. No doubt the Enemy had fortified the position thoroughly, so it could be some time yet before it fell – the very reason Kreios' presence was necessary, since the 'entropy fields' were certain to activate before then.

Cordelia could only imagine, the very reason she was sitting at the table with sheaths of papers before her and trying very hard to think of anything except the possibility that the Grand Alliance would lose. Armies had made it to the inner wall, she knew, and even broken through. But the fighting would only get harder from there, with little room for retreat as the dead still

in the outer city tore through the rearguards. Yet she had not wanted to spend the entire battle reminding herself she had been better raised than to bite her nails, which was why she'd brought out a quill and inkwell so she might lay out proposals for the tax system of Cardinal one it was built.

The attendant territory of the city, after all, would be much too small to sustain it should the seat of the Accords grow to the expected size. The princess had been considering the respective merits of tariffs and whether quarries might be a possible source of revenue for some time, but even as she tried to make herself look at the papers she found her attention straying. In the margin of a section on the dangers of imposing punitive tariffs when a trace crossroads was just beginning, she'd found that her hand was tallying losses. How many soldiers dead, how bad were the odds getting? Cordelia's attention was failing, the only saving grace being that Brother Simon had been too polite to comment on it.

She sighed, giving it up for a lost cause, and set down the quill.

"The waiting is always the worst part," Simon de Gorgeault quietly said.

"I sometimes feel I have done nothing else all my life," Cordelia tiredly admitted. "Just years and years of waiting in between a few days of haste."

The once-spymaster sympathetically nodded.

"I have found prayer a comfort in moments like these," Simon said, "but I suspect you'd not share the inclination."

"I like the Gods to stay in their Heavens," Cordelia smiled. "The Highest Assembly's floor is crowded enough without them taking up seats."

"Blasphemy," the lay brother said, though his tone was amused.

It was not that the princess did not believe in the virtue of the Gods Above and the worth of their teachings, but rather that she'd never thought of miracles as a solution. Miracles were passing things, beautiful but ephemeral, and you could not build on such a foundation. Prayer was good and worthy thing, but Lycaonese knew better than to rely on it when spring arrived and the Chain of Hunger came calling. Or perhaps that was only a conceit, Cordelia Hasenbach thought as she touched the bracelet of rattling teeth digging into her wrist under her sleeve, as she felt a folded parchment burning against the warmth of her breast.

Perhaps it was just a different kind of prayer, to wear the last gifts of those she had loved and hope they would see her through

the storm. Friedrich Papenheim's small act of kindness had stayed with her since she was fourteen, and now Agnes Hasenbach's last words were to remain against her skin until she knew it was time to read them. One last augury from another cousin she had loved, another kin devoured by this black war. Deep down, Cordelia was relieved she would be abdicating Rhenia and Hannover to Otto Reitzenberg. She feared returning north and seeing only a land of empty seats and silences, the expression of everything and everyone she had lost.

"They will breach the inner city soon, if they have not already," Brother Simon told her, looking past the entrance of the tent and into the emptied camp around them. "The first inklings of victory will soon arrive."

Or defeat, she thought, but the former spy was a hopeful man at heart. Cordelia rose to her feet, moving towards the carafe of water at the other end of the table, and cocked a questioning eyebrow at her companion. He shook his head so she poured a cup only for herself, debating whether or not she should force herself to attempt working again, when the sound began. It was a small thing, at first, like a faint chirp. Only it swelled and grew, turning from whisper to word to scream, and the princess abandoned a half-empty cup to walk out of the tent. In the distance, past the edge of the camp, she saw only the heavy smoke rising from the chasm.

It had been this way for hours, the magics of the dwarves lighting up the foul emanations as if an entire Hell had been unleashed far below. Yet Cordelia's cool blue eyes narrowed as she realized that it was not only smoke she was looking at now. There was movement there, half-hidden by the obscuring curtains.

The first to come out was a bird, a simple sparrow that flew out of the smoke, but the sight of it had dread pooling in her stomach.

A wave followed, dead birds and insects pouring out of the depths of the chasm like a tidal wave that swept over the camp. It was so thick it cast a shadow, hiding away the sun, and hulking shapes began to swim in the sea of death like great whales. Winged wyrms and flocks of vultures, but also creatures shaped like boxes of bone kept aflight by balloon-like breathing lungs. And not so much as a single fly moved towards Keter, towards the fighting in the city and the armies coming for the Dead King's head. They all converged in one direction. Cordelia Hasenbach breathed out as the Enemy's hordes came for the weapon she had kept as a knife to his throat.

"Bring up the battle wards," the princess ordered, voice eerily calm. "And get into position."

Fear had frozen her soldiers at the sight of what was headed for them, despair at numbers they knew they could not beat, but her voice woke them. There were salutes and captains began to shout orders, sorcery flaring as mages put up every layer of defence they still could. The Hidden Horror feared the ealamal, Cordelia thought. He was coming to destroy it. Even if her life had not been in the balance, it would have been as fine a reason as any to fight to the last defending it. Her fingers reached for her heart and the parchment folded against it, but the fair-haired Lycaonese forced herself to pull away. It was not yet time. She tore her eyes away from the swarm, turning to Brother Simon.

A brave man, the spy, who was looking at the tide of death much as one might look at inclement weather.

"I will have to trouble you, Simon," she said.

"What for, my lady?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"A sword," Cordelia Hasenbach grimly said.

If the ealamal was overrun and the battle about to be lost, she may well have no choice but to pull the trigger. But she would not let fear own her, not when she bore on her the last wills of her cousins. She was, for all her years in the south, still Lycaonese.

She'd fight until the end of the world.

Mary Gentle

Grim.

Next up, Cat?

(And I LOVE Losara!)

[gnaruscat](#)

Wait, THAT Mary Gentle?

[gnaruscat](#)

Wait, THAT Mary Gentle?

Eris

I wonder what horrible things the Dead King will pull up to stop from dying, and why Bard wants that so bad. I wonder what the Bard means when she wants the Dead King to eat the baby.

Darkening

Well, she crippled Judgement, so now the Ealamal is just a blank vessel of energy with no direction except what Bard provides. So now she needs the dead king to crush his enemies, and push them into such a desperate last corner that there is no viable alternative to Codelia pulling the trigger and letting Bard use it to murder the Dead King. It'll even have a pretty hefty story to it to give it punch, the last desperate chance to save the world moments before it falls, at a terrible cost.

Darkening

Or maybe she'll steal it and use it to commit suicide, that's a possibility too.

Cicero

Yup, my guess is that the Bard sees it as a way for her to kill the Dead King, and all the pesky Villains and Heroes that have been making her life difficult lately. Burn the world to ash and let new kingdoms arise from the ashes.

Sort of the same story she was peddling to the Saint of Swords.

Frankly it's bothering me quite a bit that she's sabotaging Cat's efforts in such a way, feels both petty and cruel.

Darkening

I mean, she sabotaged the crown, not the sword. So presumably her line is that she wants the Dead King *dead*, not for him to just get changed from the looming evil overlord to the Sealed Away Evil, just waiting for someone to screw up and unleash him onto the world again.

caoimhinh

That reminds me that the Dead King's reaction when finding out the core wish of the Wandering Bard was to call her petty and say that everyone would turn against her once they find out.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Strategically speaking, Nessie plays things extremely conservatively to avoid provoking narrative backlash. When Bard told him to "eat the baby" last time, that was her saying that

it was okay not to hold back. It means more or less the same thing here, only less "it's okay" and more "I'm not going to let you."

dadycoool

Rozala seems like she's gonna give birth soon.

caoimhinh

And like she really, *really* should stop leading charges and instead command from the rear like a strategist.

[Adrian V](#)

Yeah, at this pace that baby will only come out thanks to a literal miracle, or maybe it will end as some sort of super powered human due to being around light, night, magic etc so much?

dadycoool

I'm expecting someone to use the birth as some rousing positive omen, something about "new life in the city of death" or something.

caoimhinh

Oh, yeah. The baby born on the day of the victory's celebration.
A good omen for the new era.

[onedollargum](#)

Eating the baby is a reference to when Intercessor met with the King and said that, though they were normally at odds, this time she'd allow him to eat the baby godhead that Catherine was becoming (Cat being Winter at that point I think).

Intercessor doesn't care about keeping King in check as much as she wants Cat dead. She's not going to let King take the lesser death (imprisonment via Crown of Autumn) but wants him to fight like a cornered rat and maul Cat to death (The Hierarch is in Serenity, and the Ealamal is on Calernia, so there's nowhere to go but to gain power by eating The Warden).

[Liliet](#)

"allow him to eat the baby godhead" is speculation, and not a theory I think is likely. She just meant "do your worst to Calernia" and she continues to mean that.

'Ladi Williams

Eat the baby generally means doing the worst possible...not cats godhead...

beleester

Bard wants the Dead King to go all-out fighting them, and I can think of two reasons:

1. She wants the Dead King to be completely destroyed, not just sealed away or weakened, and that's more likely if he pulls out all the stops. Nessie is too cautious to be allowed to live – he doesn't care if his plans take centuries to succeed, so long as he keeps creeping closer to victory.
2. She wants to destroy Cat's new age before it starts, because that sort of thing is Not How Stories Should Go.

SeventhSolar

It's like kicking the dog, but for eldritch horrors.

MoreBeer

Pretty sure it's exactly this. He has to be a baby-eating fiend that must be destroyed, not pushed aside. Yara's statements in context suggest she doesn't want him to be dealt with by accepting the compromise of the crown that makes him immortal while stripping away his control of the undead. Either her goal is his total destruction or Cat's, and possibly both.

Cpt. Obvious

I still feel like everything WB does is intended to push Cordelia into using her weapon of mass destruction.

Freeing the choir of Justice has the possibility of totally changing the power level of this WMD. Remember that it was just the fact that the choir was held in check by the Hierarch that allowed the Ealamal to be used without bringing down Judgement on half of Calernia. It's also the reason the priests were able to invoke a amount of leniency so it wouldn't judge everyone who as a child lied even once. Is the fact that the choir is quiet for a day going to mean it's powers are unavailable, or does it mean that they won't be able to moderate the power of the Ealamal and it sucs down all the power of the choir? And finally the Proceran priests has spent months cramming as much Light as they are able to into that thing in the belief that would be the total amount of power it would be using.

As for WB hating the DK I feel it's been overplayed. I don't think she actually cares about the DK. She just wants the WMD set off. It could be to cleanse the continent and rebuild from the ashes, but personally I think it's her way

to suicide and give the finger to the Gods that created this travesty.

morroian

Writing this from the future where you no doubt know what happens but without knowing yet what happens, 100% WB wants Cordy to use the weapon and 100% Cordy will read Agnes's letter before that.

Earl of Purple

Ivah chiding the Seelie for having loud footsteps was great. Pity about the Hunted Magician and the Grizzled Fantassin, but the Harrowed Witch and Red Knight are still awesome. I like them both. I wonder if Red Knight's Devour is an opposite aspect to Mirror Knight's Reflect or Dawn, strengthening her by taking power from the attacks she tanks.

arcanavitae15

I like that Ivah was also on babysitting duty for the heroes, also yah now that I noticed it the Red Knight and Mirror Knight do seem like foils both were very classical to their alignment.

Earl of Purple

Technically only one of them is a hero. Harrowed Witch and Red Knight are villains.

[Liliet](#)

But they're on the side of good ™ right now so as a group might well count as heroes

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Anti-heroes. Villainy for Good.

[sengachi](#)

My favorite part is how Akua spotted the Seelie by the bent roof tile, but totally missed Ivah right behind the Seelie on the same roof. Especially given how insanely on top of everything Akua was in that battle, it really tells you everything you need to know about the Lord of Silent Steps.

'Ladi Williams

Truth be told. Akua was awesome in the battles in this chapter. Like insanely good.

Earl of Purple

I had genuinely not caught that.

Tenthyr

Oh my lord it's getting tight. Im morbidly curious how much more tightly Yara can turn the screws.

KiltedBastich

It occurs to me, the Bard can't hide what she's doing. Cat will be able to feel every tug on the story strings. I wonder what's she's going to do about it.

ninegardens

Wait until Cat is busy dealing with the Serenity far far away from the battle, with no communication line back, I would imagine.

Also, didn't Cat promise Hakram that he would fight with the Woe before the end here?

And isn't the Woe like... scattered to 3 different places?

Also, where is Vivi? Has she used her Thief skills to steal the angel stick?

Lord Haart

I think the promise is a way to ensure they have story weight to all reach the end, which does sort of help Hakram's push.

Great callout on Vivi, hidden access I reckon.

shikkarasu

I'm not sure Cat is that good, yet. She needs to focus on the stories to **See** them, and only once she got her Aspect proper could she reliably do it from far away. Yara is mostly **Narrating** the Revenants and Scourges right now, whose stories are too tied up in the Dead King's to be visible. If even Yara can't see much of their stories when she is focusing, Cat probably can't see anything at all.

Literally working in the Cat's blind spots, where she cannot **See**.

[Droughtbringer](https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/)

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

edrey

i think the harrowed witch was with kalia in the south, and now she is in the north with akua. but if she can make copies of herself i wont complain, named are falling like flies.

Sinead

Ivah could have picked her up and then be shadow walking with her in tow.

Someperson

IIRC this wasn't the only Named showing up when they were confirmed to be in another place or deceased, in the last several chapters.

Either the Named are pulling out all of the stops to show up in the nick of time or there are revenants amogus

dadycoool

Oh, gods. Is the Red Knight an imposter?

Unrecovered

Is it Dread Emperor Treacherous who acts as a Red Knight?
We might never know...

[Liliet](#)

Are you thinking about the previous advance?

Akua is also not in the north. She's in the west.

Daniel E

Looks like Hanno has picked up a Choir again. It's probably not Judgement or Mercy, and definitely not Contrition. What is left?

arcanavitae15

I think it's just his name that is about to come to him.

Jkyoulost

That line about hearing an unseen voice reeked of Mercy though. I thought they were the only Choir we've seen speaking like that.

RoflCat

And the star from the sky

The 'timely arrival', the falling ashes

And the sudden disappearance after

He's definitely turning into something Grey. Probably not a Knight given his future spot in Cardinal, but probably not so limiting like Baliff.

Someperson

The unseen voice isn't necessarily a Choir. Anaxares the Diplomat has an Aspect that lets him hear things and it definitely isn't from a Choir.

It could be a Choir, but I would wager it isn't. During his most recent pivot he literally threw away the angel gifted coin and said he didn't need it anymore.

He might accept the help of angels, but I don't think he is in a place where he would follow their orders without hesitation if they whispered in his ear.

[onedollargum](#)

He rejected the coin, so I'm hoping he's decided to listen to his own judgement now.

[Liliet](#)

That's normal for the chosen of the Choir of Judgement actually. Hanno was just special.

ninegardens

Choir of judgement:

"Cool, so we'll get a mortal to help train our machine learning model and figure out how morality works"

The Mortal is Hanno

Judgement: "Welp, we ain't gonna learn shit now."

Mirror Night

Isn't there Fortitude or something? I think they are quite a few choirs, we just haven't seen them all being active. Different Choirs interact with their champions differently. The voice he could be hearing is an Aspect or it could be related to the Titan's ritual about to start.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's an Aspect, like Frederic's Aid.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Save?

shikkarasu

With that whole "Do not fear; I am here" I could be convinced of **Smash**. He is also the undisputed #1 Hero...

King G

There are probably just seven choirs (book two, chapter thirtynine notes Contrition is the seventh, and extra chapter Prosecution I shows seven pillars in Ashuran temple to each bear mask representing different Gods Above, and an eighth pillar to bear masks dedicated to Below).

Besides Contrition (Lone Swordsman William), Judgement (White Knight Hanno), and Mercy (Grey Pilgrim Tariq), we've also seen or heard of Fortitude (mentioned in Heroic Interlude: Balestra), Endurance (Stalwart Paladin Iason), and Compassion (formerly known as Reverence, according to the Bard in Interlude: Legends I).

Don't think the missing choir has been mentioned yet? Someone please correct me if I'm mistaken.

Cicero

Hmm, are Fortitude and Endurance different choirs? Or different names for the same choir?

I'm guessing the seven choirs is taken from the Seven Virtues, usually made up of the four Cardinal Virtues (Prudence, Fortitude, Justice, Temperance), and the three Theological Virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity). Although there are alternative lists:

Chastity, Faith, Good Works, Concord, Sobriety, Patience, Humility.

Chastity, Temperance, Charity, Diligence, Kindness, Patience, Humility.

Some of these line up already (with overlap):

Fortitude = Fortitude = Diligence?

Justice = Judgement?

Charity = Compassion? = Good Works?

Kindness = Compassion

Patience = Mercy

Temperance = Justice = Judgement?

Temperance = Chastity?

Temperance = Sobriety?

Temperance = Prudence?

Temperance = Self Control => Contrition?

Humility = Contrition?
Humility = Reverence => Compassion?

It feels like the choirs overlap some of the seven virtues and so don't break down exactly on those lines but overall are inspired by the Seven Virtues, and so ought to cover them as a whole, even if specific virtues don't line up exactly.

So.... going off that I'd guess something like this for the choirs:

Fortitude/Endurance
Judgement
Contrition/Repentance
Mercy
Compassion/Reverence/Humility
Sacrifice
Wisdom/Prudence

Isi Arnott-Campbell

In earlier books, Tariq's patrons were the Choir of Compassion and it was noted that the Choir of Mercy is a separate one whose mortal allies are obligate pacifists. Eventually EE started having everyone call Tariq's patrons the Choir of Mercy though. That might complicate this business somewhat.

agumentic

What? That's the first time I heard anything about Tariq's patrons being different, and I read those books as they came out. You sure you are not confusing something?

badatgames2911

Fuck yeah i love these chapters. I think Bard is "helping" in a way that she is making sure they kill nessie. Glad the knight trio is doin stuff and everytime the riddle makers condescends nessie i get so happy

All the drow are so badass. Fuckin "you step loud." Lol The red knight is really funny and cool too she out here like a fed top laner lv9ing all them fuckers.

Cordy be making me reall nervous ngl.

dadycoool

It sounds like Bard is "helping" the GA at first, but she's trying to get him to finally "eat the baby", so it sounds more like she's trying to get them to make him take drastic action.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's both? She's sure as hell not helping Neshamah. She's just stoking the conflict to be more desperate for both sides.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

She can't die until Neshamah wins, or loses completely. She's sick and tired, and Cat won't take her Job, and her Role won't Die unless the Last Old Horror is Finally Dead. She wants the Old Horror to take that Step Beyond that will see Him Dead by Story-fu and **Narrate**-ive.

[Liliet](#)

Not unlikely!

[sengachi](#)

The Red Knight has exactly one trick, but like the javelin Revenant it's a really good trick.

*arcanavita*15

Lord of Silent Steps taking care of some kids (Heroes)

Yara is plotting having her old bud's back against the wall and is nudging stuff as always.

Rozla is leading a charge and Hanno comes i with the heroic rescue.

Riddle Maker just walking up and casually strolling through all the Young King's stuff.

All in all an eventful chapter, I am so hyped for what Cat is doing I am waiting something glorious.

[Peter Emuss](#)

Laughing at Christophe trying to find offence when he's actually being given a compliment and offering offence when he's trying to be polite. He really is so bad at people.

[Peter Emuss](#)

Whoops – that wasn't meant to be a reply.

[badatgames2911](#)

yall got me dead. yall cant just call him the young king lol its too much

Juff

Typo Thread:

"Not two sentiments > "No two sentiments
fit so thick > feet so thick
of cadaver > of cadavers
the conscript > the conscripts
in assault > to assault
hatched > hatchet
sends words > sends word
was the edge > was on the edge
flak > flask
laying abandoned > lying abandoned
mage's corpses > mage's corpse
her Archer > Archer
see of > see if
Scourged > Scourge
bones blades > bone blades
the up > them up
pests begin > pests began
attack the > attacking the
one many fighting says > one too many fighting days
to a half > to a halt
only to reveal only > only to reveal
within in > within it
dead Name's > dead Named's
step backs > steps back
loosened > tied
silhouetted > silhouette
Indrani let > Indrani letting
up longknives in hand > up, longknives in hand,
One the > Once the
disliked > dislike
had silence > had silenced
Cardinal one > Cardinal once

gingerlygrump

Sometimes I think EE is the Wandering Bard.

Someperson

EE is the Wandering Bard's subtler counterpart, the Stationary Bard.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I believe he confirmed somewhere at some point that his Name is Author, but I don't have a source so don't quote me on this.

BargleNawdleZouss

1. I have to agree with edrey: the Harrowed Witch was with Painted Knife and Knight Errant, who were to accompany Mirror Knight & guard the Severance. When Christophe saw "...the Mirror Knight found most the others had gone further down the rampart to

help the fantassins in their bid to reach the gatehouse and wrest open the doors," I thought he was referring to Kallia and Aspasia. If Vagrant Spear's band originally included Grizzled Fantassin, Hunted Magician, and Red Knight, it seems odd they would have a second arcane magic user as their fifth member, especially a Villain.

2. Ideas for Hanno's new Name, inspired by others' comments above:

- a. Grey Knight (which will fit his proposed role in Cardinal re: the Liesse Accords)
- b. the Pilgrim Knight
- c. Knight of Mercy or the Sword of Mercy (either way, they sound oxymoronic)

[onedollargum](#)

Knight/Sword of Hope would be nice. Hope starkest when fear deepest like the preface says.

BargleNawdleZouss

OoooO0000000ooooo, I like your suggestion better!

[Liliet](#)

...well, they are already at the inner wall. Probably all of them are not very far from each other?

[badatgames2911](#)

tbh the Blade of Mercy JUST died. but i dont think its the Ophanim. i dont think its a quior at all bc cats not exactly on speaking terms with endurance, contrition, judgment.... the others. the only quior she kinda isnt k.o.s with is mercy true, but i think that hanno is kinda done being a quior boy for now, especially if he is gonna be cats muscle man in cardinal.

Earl of Purple

Despite the Name, Antoine the Blade of Mercy was not Choir-sworn. He was aligned with mercy as a concept, not Mercy as a Choir. If he was Choir-sworn, we didn't know that before and don't know to which Choir.

Lord Haart

I reckon it'd be a hoot if Hanno becomes the Intercessor. Stealing Yara's Role but not Name.

Interceding on behalf of the downtrodden and misjudged.

Interceding when Villains or Heroes go too far.

Interceding with choirs to make them fairer and more empathic.

BargleNawdleZouss

(Gods Below, I got cut off, grrr...)

3. Some Names MIA that I would love to see, preferably in a band: Witch of the Woods, Silver Huntress, Valiant Champion, Blessed Artificer, Stalwart Apostle. Team Amazon!

[badatgames2911](#)

isnt the Huntress with cat atm with Ranger/ Cocky and Heirophant?

BargleNawdleZouss

Oh, DUH, yes, you are correct. *facepalm*

dadycoool

Uh, uhm..."Eat the baby". There's a heavily pregnant woman in Keter. Should we be concerned?

On the other side of the city, Ivah is a gem, as usual. "You move loudly", it says to the untrackable and highly annoying Scourge.

Mirror Night

That seems too literal though as Bard said that line way before Rozala was pregnant.

[onedollargum](#)

She means Cat. It's a reference to an earlier conversation the Bard and King shared.

[Liliet](#)

It's a punchline to a joke. It's heavily metaphorical+abstract and does not mean anyone in particular.

dadycoool

I agree with both of you, I was just spooked by coincidence, especially given the setting and who said it.

Linnus42

I do wonder how close that baby is to being born though. Pregnant mothers tend to be close to immortal in all but the most dark fantasy now after the baby is born all bets are off.

masterofbones

And generally in a story like this, only one of them is long for the world.

BargleNawdleZouss

Please revisit the joke at the very end of Book 4, Interlude: Empires.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/08/24/interlude-empires/>

[badatgames2911](#)

im not goin back bc ill just take the soup thanks

Mirror Night

Hanno seems faster and stronger perhaps? He ripped the arm off a revenant so stronger sure. Its hard to tell if he is any faster though since he was already so fast. Indrani and Hanno kinda operated in their own speed tier though Hanno shows it off way more, Indrani doesn't usually give the impression she is the Flash like Hanno does. Maybe has a Choir or maybe he was hearing something Gigantes related.

Akua and Indrani are a fun pair. And plenty of epic performances from the Procerans. A very Proceran focused Chapter. Christophe still being a Himbo. Rozala almost epic last charge as DK uses his usual tricks and Cordelia guarding the weapon...I am curious where it even is. Even if we know it cannot be fired in the next 24 hours. Still amazing this is all going to be over in just 24 hours.

Bard is a hoot. its the butterfly effect in action. More confirmation that Bard doesn't really like characters on the cusp of getting a Name.

[Liliet](#)

Alright, so now we know what Bard wants. No we don't. We know how she's trying to achieve it, but we still don't know WHAT IT IS!

We do know what she doesn't want though, at least???

[Liliet](#)

Also I think Yara of Nowhere confirmed for her real name, because she normally respawns after dying with a new one, and she died in Ater but still has this one.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Yara of Nowhere wants to be Done.
She can't die unless the Age of Wonder is put to bed.

Neshamah Dead-Dead, or the whole Continent Dead.
All or Nothing lets her Die.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Note: the Wandering Bard knows the only way to forge a sword is by burning the ore in a crucible, beating the slag out, and controlling the mix of chemicals introduced in the forging and quenching.
This is not pleasant for the Ore. But is the only way to make a sword.

[badatgames2911](#)

I know she wants Neshamah mega dead but the age of wonders is already K.O yes? Kairos did that whole thing and that was his "call in my dues" thing i thought. "Lou and behold, I have slain- the age of wonders" or smthn like that

[Liliet](#)

Yeah but Neshamah is most certainly (this is speculation) the person who STARTED the Age of Wonders (it's associated with Trismegistan sorcery which he invented, and showy villains who he was a role model for). It makes sense that for the Age of Wonders to PROPERLY die he needs to be dead.

Something like an age may need many deaths before it is truly dead for good.

Snappy270

I dont think so. I remember the bard saying the only being older than her is the riddle maker. She was old when the dead king was named.

So I dont think she will die when the dead king dies. I think she could die when all of calernia is dead! Hence when she is forcing the fight to be worse.

I think she can only die if there are no more stories or she has a replacement.

[Liliet](#)

She specifically said she was new to her Role when she was talking to young Neshamah I believe

Lord Haart

But that was still before he kicked off the Age of Wonders.

DK dying seems more of a personal goal, if secondary to her own death.

[Liliet](#)

Just because it's speculation I like a lot doesn't mean it's not speculation.

That said YEAH THATS POSSIBLE!!!

Crash

Let's make a list of all the things she doesn't want a reverse engineer what she does want.

Sounds a lot like gift shopping, to be honest.

[Liliet](#)

skdjafldshfsdfl

Roddie

I think Akua seeing the tile falling was Cat's counter against the Intercessor. Considering after that they got a band of five.

KiltedBastich

Hmm, actually, they are six. Akua, Archer, Ivah, Vagrant Spear, Harrowed Witch, and Red Knight.

We know that non-named with sufficient Story weight can be part of a band of five, important here as neither Akua nor Ivah are currently Named.

So, which of them is the Sixth Ranger?

Mirror Night

I lean to Ivah being the 6th Ranger as he wasn't part of the plan.

The plan was send Duos with the DK ending Artifacts and have them link up with Bands for extra protection at the Inner Wall. Ivah is not Named and wasn't part of the plan so that makes him 6th Ranger in my book.

Interlude: Legends IV

"One hundred ninety-nine: this list began with the simplest of axioms, the first. In the years since others like you have added to or taken away from it, a chain that goes back further than any of us know, changing and twisting as it grows. In time no two list will be the same, save always in this one regard: there is no two hundredth axiom. That place remains empty, so that once you learn something worth passing down you may fill it yourself. Look forward, as we once did, and let those who come after you learn from our mistakes. What greater gift can there be?"

– *"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown*

It would be a balancing act in two parts.

The first was the war without, the battle against the Dead King. The Black Knight had learned from yesterday's fighting, undone as it had come, but so had the enemy. Still Waters had been revealed, its strength against the Dead King's armies laid bare, and even as High Marshal Nim had adjusted her tactics so had the ancient lich. Though he could not stop her dead soldiers from rising as wights, the trails of alchemy once dropped over enemy formations to turn them wild had lost effect: the skeletons and ghouls simply dropped once touched by the compound. A Wolofite mage by the name of Kendi Akaze had theorized the effect was automated, added to sorcery that had raised the undead, and Lady Seriff had confirmed it after a few experiments.

It made the weapon more lethal, true, but took away from it the most useful property: being able to turn Keter's numbers against it. Akaze, who must have impressed the cantankerous old mage, had been drafted as her assistant while she tried to find a way to exploit the Dead King's most recent spellwork. It had smacked of an apprenticeship in the making to all witnesses. The Black Knight hoped for their success, as she could use the help: Keter had learned how turn the advance up the avenue leading to the inner wall into a murderous slog. Nearly half the undead mages in the city had been concentrated in the path of their offensive, hitting away at the flying fortresses with rituals to keep them away so they couldn't lend support, and worse still was the engines.

The last third of the avenue was a road no more, a space of collapsed houses three miles wide and two long having been created, and the reason why was clear: batteries of siege engines were bristling on the inner wall, waiting to hammer away at any soldiers that began to walk across the open, broken grounds before the rampart.

The second was the war within, the struggle for the Praes that was to be. There were parts of the land that did not even yet know the Dread Empire was now the Confederation and the Black Knight knew well how fragile the bargains struck in the Tower's dying light still was. It stood only so long as the Warden loomed tall over all the schemers hungry for more, so long as the Legions of Terror remained the greatest army in the land. Else when they all came home, the High Lords might look at a weakened force under Nim and the chancellor and decide that perhaps they wanted to be Dread Emperor after all. That supreme rule was worth the risks of a war. They had all agreed to disband all armies save the Legions, but how much was their word really worth?

So the Black Knight must make sure none of them thought they'd be able to win that war, when temptation came calling. That meant spending their house troops, their levies, and preserving the strength of her legions. Only it could not be obvious, or wasteful, for otherwise they would be well within their rights to rebel at such treatment – for all that the private armies were now officially auxiliaries under the Legions, the way their noble commanders still led them proved how thin a pretence that truly was. So Nim must balance need and dues, all the while keeping her eye on what must be done to win the battle without lest the battle within ruin it.

It was a difficult exercise, but the Black Knight had found that she was equal to it. Her Name burned at the challenge, alive in a way it had never been when Amadeus still lived and his shadow was still cast over all who would wear his old mantle. It was one decision after another, another puzzle to move around until all the pieces fit the right way.

"The Fourteenth is getting mauled," her Staff Tribune told her. "Their mages are being tied down by hexenghoul's so buzzards can land behind the ranks. They're too far out on the flank, ma'am, it could turn south on us."

The flying constructs would open their belly when they laded, spewing out the cargo of undead they'd carried and so effectively cutting off the Fourteen from the rest of Nim's forces. Or at least potentially so, if they were allowed to build up numbers long enough. Best to take care of that quickly.

"Inform High Lord Dakarai that he is to commit the wavemen," the Black Knight said. "Free use of enchanted arrows is allowed."

Nok's archers, the finest in all of Praes, should be able to clear out the enemy with concentrated volleys if they had permission to dip into fire arrows. Her Staff Tribune nodded, committing the words to memory.

"And send word to the Old Mothers," she calmly added. "When the dead turn their rituals on the wavemen, I want the fortresses to

unleash their full spellfire volume at the enemy cabals while they're open."

It happened as she had foreseen, and even as the Black Knight's Name smiled coldly and smoke rose from the ranks of the wavemen, her vanguard – Aksum's forces, nearly half of which were wights by now due to attrition – pushed forward three blocks during the lull in enemy spells.

"The grounds were trapped ahead of the vanguard," her Staff Tribune told her. "Pit traps and caltrops. Beorns are hitting Aksum over them while the ranks are in disarray."

Pit traps that the wights would fall into blindly, caltrops that would tear through the too-light foot armour of the Aksum levies when they tread on them. Beorns, massive distended bear constructs that they were, would be able to ignore both and spit out the dead they carried straight into the wavering Aksumite ranks.

"Send word to High Lady Abreha to withdraw," Nim said.

"The beorns will trample all over her retreat," her Staff Tribune noted. "Casualties will be steep."

"They'll rout before long anyway," the Black Knight said. "But while her levies are being rampaged over, tell General Sacker she is free to fire with her ballistae while the Ninth replaces the vanguard. Unravellers included, after a round of ranging shots."

The unravellers would quickly end the constructs, and the Ninth was still heavy on sappers compared to most legions: there was no better force at her command to get rid of the traps and unearth further ones. A high number of goblins, though, would mean a degree of fragility.

"Have one of the fortresses pass over the streets in front of the traps," she added, frowning. "Still Water the area."

That should allow Sacker long enough to clear the mess before being hammered. It went better than the Black Knight had thought it would: Abreha unleashed beasts she had been keeping in reserve to protect her retreat, slinking panthers made of shadow whose claws rent constricts asunder as they moved across the battlefield like ghosts. The beorns began lashing out blindly, leaving them easy prey for the ballistae, and the Ninth struck fast in the wake of the flying fortress' path. The army pushed up another four blocks, and now High Marshal was so close to the open grounds she could taste it.

"The Levantines report movement at our back," her Staff Tribune said. "Lady Osenia requests instructions."

"Tell her to dig in behind us," Nim grunted. "We'll need them to handle the rearguard while we storm the inner wall."

The tall ogre cast a frown at the battlefield, watching as the Ninth clawed its way up another block and General Wheeler's Eighth gained ground on the left flank. Too much, she thought. Keter was folding too quickly, though on the ground it must have looked only like a successful push. The Eighth's cognomen was not 'Trailblazers' without reason, however, and given ground to take they would take it all too fast. Someone on the other side had read Wheeler just right. The order for the goblin general to pull back was on the tip of her tongue, but then she thought twice.

"Tell Wheeler to push..." she trailed off, gauging the distance with her eye, "half a mile forward, then lean on his sappers to blow through the houses and turn straight south instead."

That way the Eighth would hit the position the Ninth was about to ruin itself on from the side, enough to relieve the pressure and allow Sacker to break through without ruining herself. More importantly, the half mile forward would make room for another maneuver.

"And inform High Lord Sargon that Wolof is to fill the gap when the Eighth swings south," the Black Knight smiled. "He is free to use sorcery as he wills so long as he pushes no further."

And if the High Marshal was reading the timing right Wheeler would get out of the trap just before its jaws closed, just in time for Sargon Sahelian to be left holding the bag instead. Wolof would react to the assault with massed sorcery, as they always did, which in turn would clear masses of skeletons quickly enough that the Eighth would be pivoting into surprised enemies whose reinforcements would be delayed.

"I'll see it done, Lady Black," her Staff Tribune swore.

On this last one, Black Knight saw, she had been a little off. The Eighth did get out in time, but it was actually too early: the first moments of the pivot, as sappers blasted through houses so that ranks of regular could advance through the rubble, were severely punished by the enemy. The sappers took a beating. But when Wolof moved into place and the enemy trap was sprung – shallow tunnels were revealed in a loose circle around the Wolofite position, a horde emerging in moments – the ensuing storm of sorcery did as she had foreseen. With the pressure alleviated, Wheeler broke through and struck hard at the enemy flank while Sacker pushed up the avenue.

Five blocks in half an hour, and as the Black Knight watched with a cold smile her vanguard finally reached the open grounds under the siege engines that the dead had prepared to break her army. It was time, then. Nim Mardottir's fingers closed around the haft

of her war hammer and she rose to her feet. She would lead from the front, now, lead the assault on the wall. But before that, she would show Keter why it was that she had kept her flying fortresses back the entire battle.

"Staff Tribune," the Black Knight said, "pass my order to all fortresses."

"Ma'am?"

"Sunset," she said. "Begin immediately."

And as the order went up, the massive floating castles began to move. Forward, at first, but then *downwards*. Streaks of magic shot up from the ground, Keter's rituals pounding away at the stone and protective enchantments. They tore out chunks, blew through walls and burned hundreds alive. Even crashed one of the smaller towers. Yet most of them kept moving, kept coming down, and as the Black Knight rested her hammer against her shoulder she watched the massive piles of stone land with such thundering crashes they would never rise again. The first of the Old Mothers landed in front of the inner wall's gatehouse, the fortress gate facing the Dead King's own, and the rest of the castles fell like a curtain behind the enemy wall.

To cut it off from reinforcements just before the Praesi assault began.

The Black Knight of Praes raised her war hammer, and half a hundred thousand voices screamed themselves hoarse. Forward they went, to find one of the two fates the Wasteland taught its children: victory and death.

—

Hanno could not save everyone.

The world was not so simple that strength alone would be enough to end all its ills, chase pain and misery out of Creation like spring leaning. He could not even save everyone in front of him, he was forced to admit as he moved from struggle to struggle across this cursed city of the dead and dying. For every man he arrived in time to keep from the enemy's blades another died, be it to arrow or poison or the fangs of some howling ghoul. It was like trying to put out a forest fire with a cup of water. But still he tried, grasping tight that moment of clarity he had found when he cast aside the coin. Even if it was hard, even if it was thankless, he would act. He would not be able to save everyone, but that was never an excuse not to try.

So Hanno of Arwad picked up his cup and fought the blaze, undaunted, until Creation saw fit to acknowledge his conviction: **Save**, his soul sang out.

It was as if he'd opened his eyes for the first time. All around him he felt the war between doom and hope, the balance of victory and defeat between them, and for all that all of Keter was balance on the precipice of catastrophe he had never seen anything so beautiful. Hundreds of thousands from all over Calernia had come to this place, this day, and in the face of the darkness they fought tooth and nail to turn back the tide. It was like watching a sea of candles warring on the night.

And when Hanno saw the balance moved towards doom, his body began to move before his mind had even come to the decision. He cut through the streets and across rooftops, snatching life back from death where he could, until he found the battle to be won. Rozala Malanza, hard-eyed and defiant as she faced a Revenant with nothing more than banner and bravery, was to give her life to save Procer. And it might succeed, Hanno knew, for a time. But the world would darken for her passing and he could stop it, so he did. It felt natural to step in, to break the Revenant's arm and boil its inside in a flash of Light. Never before had the Light come so easy to his call or his body been so light. The aspect, he decided. It was not simple sight.

Within moments of the Revenant ending, Hanno saw the tide begin to turn again to the north. Doom was clawing back the day, so the hero moved again. **Save**, his soul sang, and he raced against the dark. Hadn't he all his life?

It was not a straight path. Again and again he went to the side, cradling another flame against his palms so it would not blow out. A handful of conscripts surrounded in a ditch, fighting under a dipping banner. A lone fantassin in a garish striped vest of orange and green, drowning in their own blood as a Revenant speared their limbs – and coming into a Name as Hanno cauterized their wound with Light, gasping out in pain. A company of Nicaeans being trampled by a tusk, a pair of Helikeans desperately fighting to bring back the unconscious body of a woman in general's armour. Delosi mercenaries grimly protecting a stripe-cheeked corpse from an onslaught of ghouls. Each a candle, an inch of Creation reclaimed from the dark.

Doom was approaching, strengthening, so Hanno lengthened his stride. He did not even break it when he smashed through a pack of hexenghoul, pulling one off a richly armoured Taghreb girl just before it sank its fangs into her throat. Even as she called out in relief and surprise he kept moving, ignoring her shouts and that of the beleaguered retinue to duck under an arch just before it fell and blocked the way across the street. He grabbed a loose stone jutting out from a wall, using it to drag himself up on the roof just in time to see a bearded man and an old woman in robes dissecting a corpse atop rooftiles turned to glass. Their cries of triumph turned into dismay when miasma came

pouring out, Hanno loosing a spear of Light into the cloud without batting an eye.

It dispersed and leapt down the roof before they could even see his face, landing on a beorn's back and carving through the construct's head. It collapsed forward, sliding down the sloped street and bringing him right before the ragged ranks of a warband of painted Levantines. They parted ranks as he jumped past them and sped up, feeling the call to be so very close now. He turned the corner fast enough his boot slid in the ash, eyes already on the fight ahead of him. The two of them fought back-to-back. Aquiline Osená moving in a sinuous blur of green and bronze, hooked sword blunt from having hewn too many heads open. Razin Tanja in grey and crimson, patient and measured as he killed in sharp strikes. The dead were swarming them, a battered warband collapsing around the lovers as skeletons climbed over the corpses of hundreds of Levantines.

An ambush had been sprung here, the Dead King come to take the lives of the Blood. *One of you could live*, Hanno thought, *if they ran for it. But you never even thought of it, did you?*

His aspect pounding inside of him like a marching drum, Hanno charged in. It was a blur as he moved with Light shivering down his legs, darting forward between blows as he smashed his way through the ranks of the dead. They began to throw themselves at him, to slow him down and tangle his legs, but Hanno let out a grunt and flared Light. His veins burned but the undead fled the pain, leaving him just enough room to push through and then... three steps and he swung, arm outstretched as the very tip of his sword brushed the arrow's side. Enough to foul it, enough that it went wide instead of going through Razin Tanja's open mouth. Hanno laughed, triumphant, for the tide was turning against doom.

He had saved candles, today, but these two felt like a torch.

"Retreat," Hanno told them.

"Lord White," Lady Aquiline said, "I give honour to your deed, but there are too many for-"

"There could be a thousand more," Hanno of Arwad said, "and today it would not be enough. Retreat, my lady of Tartessos. They will not pass by me."

He turned towards the tide, smiling, and flicked his sword to batter a javelin aside as the dead surged forward. Hanno returned to the fight, like a sword returning to the anvil, and in the back of his mind the song began again. **Save**, it prayed.

The day was not over, and neither was the labour of his hands.

When so many Named fought, it was near impossible to keep track of everything.

Akua had only added near because the Carrion Lord had been famous for doing exactly that and Catherine was slowly reaching those heights herself. She herself did not have that capacity, to her displeasure, so instead of frittering away her focus the sorcerers kept to her objective: collapsing the defences around the ward anchor. The house where she believed that the stone would be held had no entrance, large stones having been dragged to cover all of them, and there Akua believed she had found a weakness. Walls and even roof tiles could be enchanted defensively with some degree of strength, but a slab of stone? Not anywhere as well.

Knowing she would not twice get an opening, Akua waited for her moment. The Vagrant Spear was keeping the Twins busy, killing them almost fast as they came back to life as her spear blurred too swiftly for the naked eye to follow, and the Red Knight had barreled into the pack of Revenants that had chased Indrani and Akua for half an hour before this: all of them armed with spears and bedecked in bronze armour, they moved with eerie coordination. The sorcerers suspected only one of them had actually been Named but that an aspect was being used to share their strength, not that it seemed to matter to the Red Knight.

"Devour," she snarled, ripping out a chunk of the necromancy keep the undead moving.

The strength she'd stolen healed the gut wound she'd taken from a spear and with scornful laughter the villainess began hammering into the Revenants again. Rooftops to Akua's left kept shattering as the Lord of Silent Steps chased a wary Seelie, keeping her out of the fight as Archer and the Harrowed Witch tried their luck with the war anchor's guardian: a broad woman in gaudy golden plate wielding an equally golden armour, her open-faced helmet adorned with a red feather. Indrani was being thrown off the roof again, but the Harrowed Witch moved her spectre in the way to catch her and toss her back into the fight. It was, Akua decided, as good an opening as she was likely to get.

Though it felt uninspired and somewhat pedestrian to use an entropy curse when the Dead King had displayed a greater work along the same lines in this very city, it was the best tool Akua had to remove the stone slab before the door. She did not speak the incantation, remaining hidden as she cast. It struck suddenly, withering first the magic the stone had been filled with in order to harden it and only then beginning to hollow out the slab from the inside. This, naturally, drew attention. The golden Revenant, ignoring Indrani's knife as it scraped harmlessly against her armour, leapt down from the roof and ran towards her.

"A source detection array, I see," Akua noted. "Unfortunate."

She raised her wrists, speaking three words of power, and flicked them at the golden nuisance. The Revenant ducked into an empty house, but Akua hardly minded as he true target – the hollowed out stone – exploded in a burst of shard.

"Ivah," Akua shouted. "The anchor."

The golden Revenant then burst through the wall to her left, which Akua would admit to surprising her a tad, but Indrani had it in hand. Archer, thrown by the Witch's spectre, landed on the Revenant's back. She began stabbing at the golden wretch's helmet, and for once the Revenant bothered to defend herself. Her hands were covering her head and Akua's eyes narrowed even as Indrani was tossed through a doorway on the other side of the street, ferociously cursing all the way. The golden-armoured halberdier lowered her weapon at Akua, who had yet to move so much as an inch.

"Proceran, were you?" the golden-eyed sorceress drawled.

The golden Revenant charged, batting aside a spectre and in the same swing an arrow Archer had shot at her. Akua, instead of panicking as the distance closed, raised two hands and began to incant a simple fire cantrip even as her other hand traced a High Arcana rune. She unleashed the strong spell first, a burst of force that the halberdier took head on. It slowed the Revenant just enough for the second spell to land even as the halberd pierced forward towards Akua. A small flame caught the red feather, which turned to ash in a heartbeat. And in the heartbeat after that, the golden halberd and golden plate also turned to ash.

"You must have been," Akua mused, "for only a Jaquinite wizard would have added such a painfully obvious unravelling clause to an artefact. Gods Below, I've seen greater subtlety from Callowan nobles – and *their* idea of trickery is a massive cavalry charge from the back instead of the front."

Admittedly it was somewhat embarrassing how often that trick had defeated Praesi armies, but that was neither here nor there. The half-globe of forced revealed by traces of dust suddenly flickered and died as Ivah finished what she had requested of him, the ward collapsing without its anchor, and the Dead King proved to be a sore loser when the Tumult dropped another column of lightning atop that house. Ivah would survive, she had not doubt. Mighty of its strength were exceptionally difficult to kill by conventional means. The once-golden Revenant was still charging at her, but Akua raised her wrists again and she threw herself to the side – never noticing that Akua had never actually called on magic before Archer leapt into the whole to return the beatings she'd had doled out to her earlier in the fight.

Throwing out a set of transparent shields around herself out of caution, Akua began to walk down the street.

Helping the Vagrant Spear out should end this faster, she mused, and then they could get out of here before more Scourges showed up. She dismissed half her shield, beginning the incantation for a curse of withering, and then one of the enchanted gems under her armour shattered as a protective spell took the strike that should have severed her spine. Akua spun wildly, tossing a ball of flame in the Seelie's face, but all it did was break an illusion. A strike that should have slipped between her ribs killed another gem, her last before she began bleeding, and there she landed a spell that blew a stream of heated ashes in the Scourge's face. Only the Seelie hadn't ducked because she was doing something else: cutting off one of the straps keeping the box on Akua's back.

"No," she hissed, sword clearing the scabbard as she wildly swung the box rattled at her back.

The Crown of Autumn would not break, but if they got to the box... Archer burst out of the house, blades out, and Akua saw it all unfold with clarity. The Seelie ripped the box off her back as Akua slashed across her face, the metal contained landing on the street. There was a whistling sound as the missiles of the javelineer Revenant, which she'd thought destroyed by the Red Knight earlier, began to fall. And even as Akua screamed out an incantation, the Seelie's knife whipped about and slid past her guard. It would open her throat. Archer stilled for a moment, halfway there, as they both saw the same thing: a javelin would hit the box. The crown. And Indrani could not be at two places at once.

Akua breathed out, closing her eyes.

Only she did not die. Instead as she sucked in a desperate breath the Seelie was tossed aside like a rag doll, Indrani getting in between the two of them, and with utter horror Akua watched as a javelin puncture the metal box. Went straight through, as if it were parchment, and these were not the javelins from earlier. This one was black stone, like the steles the Dead King sometimes used, and as Akua watched with dread as it craved through the crown itself. Cut it cleanly in half, two ornate half-circles of bronze. She went still as a stone even as there were shouts of surprise, Revenants withdrawing from the fight all over. They fled, leaving the two of them looking down at a disaster that might well kill every soul on Calernia.

Archer was the one who broke the silence.

"I don't regret it," she said, almost defiant.

"My life was not worth this," Akua said, throat tight. "Indrani, Gods. It could not have been worth *this*."

"I'd do it again," her friend said.

And for once in her life, Akua Sahelian believed every word of what she had been told.

—

There were few places on a battlefield more dangerous to be than inside a siege tower.

The finest engineers of the Legions had spent decades trying to make them less of a death trap, experimenting with materials and protections and spell shielding, but in the end the essence of what a siege tower was wouldn't change: a slow, tight box advancing in the direction of enemies with the means to shoot holes into it. The entire tower rattled as yet another spell hit it in the belly, the Black Knight's fingers tightening around her hammer as she heard wood crack and screams erupt. The enemy had cracked the shell. Nim kept her dismay off her face so that her retinue would not see it, chewing the inside of her cheek and prayed that the tower had made it close enough to the rampart the enemy would not have enough time to topple it.

Another shudder beneath her feet as hoarse shouts filled the air and magic crackled, the dead and that of the Legion mages. Nim could smell smoke, which had her stomach clenching. The wood of the tower had been made proof to conventional fire, but that was not what Keter was wielding. If the flames caught... She would have trust in her mages and sappers to be able to put it out. As if to reward the thought, a moment later there was a shout from upstairs.

"READY!"

The Black Knight allowed herself a smile, steadying her footing as the ogres around her did the same. A heartbeat later, there were to metallic clangs in quick succession. The first came as the wall before her fell down, turning into a bridge that led straight into a rampart filled with undead. The second came as a pair of hooks slammed down onto the top of the wall, anchoring the siege tower to it. Further down there would be steel spikes jutting out to the same purpose, enchanted so they would be able to sink into even warded stone, but the High Marshal did not wait to hear their song. Instead she strode forward, hammer in hand, and brushed past her soldiers to charge into the midst of the enemy.

To fight the likes of these was as reaping wheat.

Every swing of her hammer shattered a handful, and as her personal guard charged in her wake the enemy ranks vanished like mist. Nim barely even drew on her Name, relying on simple strength and training, but like so many before them the dead crumbled under ogres' hammers. It could not have taken longer than thirty heartbeats for them to clear out a foothold, and the Black Knight felt oddly cheated: she could not have swung her weapon more than a dozen times. She cast a look further down the rampart, seeing three of the five other siege towers had made it to the wall. The other two were wrecks, one afire and spilling out corpses.

"Secure the wall," the Black Knight roared. "Hammers, with me! We take the gatehouse."

The fighting there was fiercer, she could tell already. The stone was shaking from the impact of the enchanted ram hammering at the gate through the crashed fortress' entrance, but atop the crenelled gatehouse a furious melee had burst out. Even the waves of fire and lighting from atop the crashed fortress were not enough for the Taghreb household troops to gain the advantage, matched as they were by withering curses and a monstrous new kind of ghoul. Even as the Black Knight hurried into the fight, she grimaced at the sight of a flesh-red ghoul devouring a corpse and soon after beginning to vomit out another ghoul.

It wasn't those the High Marshal sought, though, as her guard smashed into the enemy's flank and shattered the shield wall hastily raised in their path. Leading the enemy ranks was a tall silhouette, a Revenant in garish blue scale mail wielding a long barbed spear. He was kept snatching the lives of Taghreb officers, spreading panic so their ranks wouldn't form up, and the Black Knight would have no more of it. A ghoul snapped at her heels but she batted it away with the back of her hand, tramping skeletons beneath her feet as she charged. The Revenant turned even as she raised her war hammer, spear darting out, but Nim kicked a skeleton into the way – and, while the bones blocked the Revenant's sight, smashed it from the side.

It took the blow in the shoulder, but to her surprise did not crumple. That blue armour must be enchanted, and though the Revenant was tossed a dozen feet back it landed on its feet and was back on the move in a heartbeat.

"Fine," the Black Knight growled. "The hard way, then."

It fainted high but Nim had fought spearmen before and saw the thrust coming for her knee. Humans always through ogres were slow with their limbs, because of the weight, but that was only half true. The Black Knight might not move as quick, but she covered a lot more ground: a flick of the wrist had her hammer's shaft swatting aside the spear. She added a second hand to the length of wood and turned the movement into a twirl that came down right

on the Revenant's head, hammering it onto the floor. Its knees bent, but that helm must have been enchanted too for it did not break. It didn't matter. That heartbeat where it was as a hammered nail had been all she needed: she dropped her weapon, instead grabbing it by the throat.

The Revenant stabbed away at her but the angle was all wrong, the barbed spear sliding off the side of her plate as the Black Knight grunted with exertion. One hand on the throat and the other on the body she pulled, pulled until there was a wet cracking sound. The Revenant screamed, its spear rending deep scars into her armour, but Nim let out a roar of triumph as finally she ripped the undead apart: the head went off like a rag doll's, the bones having broken where the armour would not. She held up the body as a banner, her guard roaring back and the fervour spreading into the beleaguered Taghreb ranks. *At this rate, she thought, the gatehouse would be theirs in half an hour.* After that all that was left was to push into the inner city and...

It was a pull at her hand that save her land, an instinct that had her moving before her body could know it should. She got the blue-armoured corpse in the way, the greatsword shattering the scales and still managing to knock her off her feet through it. She fell, crushing a skeleton and a Taghreb levy under her as she reached for her hammer and swung wildly at the silhouette standing over her. The Prince of Bones contemptuously took the blow on the side of his massive blade and swung back a riposte that ripped Nim's helm off her head along with a chunk of her brow. A blast of fire rocked the Scourge as she swallowed a hiss of pain and scrabbled back to her feet.

The Prince of Bones. How the Hells had she missed the largest of the Revenants sneaking up on her? *Illusion, had to be.* Which meant she was fighting two dangerous foes instead of one.

"Rituals on my position," the Black Knight shouted, trusting in her subordinates to carry the word.

The Scourge swept forward through its own soldiers, heedless of what it broke, and Nim warily stepped back as she wiped away the trails of blood getting into her eye. The Prince of Bones' sword rose, but behind her magic crackled and the Black Knight grunted in satisfaction: waves of fire slammed down on their position, not doing much to either of them as it incinerated skeletons left and right. But as the smoke and ash billowed outwards, the outline of a cloaked figure behind the Scourge was revealed. The illusionist. Wasting no time, Nim circled around the looming Prince and made straight for the other Revenant.

It was backpedalling in a hurry, throwing at her spells that burned searing lights into her eyes and filled her ears with cacophonous noise, but the Black Knight grit her teeth and barreled through. Batting aside the ghouls in the way with a

flick of her hammer, she pivoted into a downwards swing – in time for the instinct to pull at her again. She threw herself back, abandoning the hammer, and through the pack of ghouls already swarming her exposed head saw that large greatsword swinging through where she'd just stood. *The ritual exposed nothing*, she realized. *It was an illusion all along*. She'd been played. Tearing off the ghouls nipping at her face, their fangs tearing up her thick skin, she rolled to the side as the Prince of Bones struck powerfully enough to shatter the stone beneath the blow. But how could she trust her eyes? Any moment now there could be a killing stroke, a-

A burst of blinding Light darkened her vision for a moment, but through her squint she saw a man tear into the enemy's side, ignoring ghouls to strike at a particular skeleton. And as Hanno of Arwad's blade sent the hidden Revenant's head tumbling, all illusions shattered and Nim realized she was again about to die. The blow took her in the shoulder, black plate crumbling as the blade's edge failed to cut but still hit with crushing strength. The Black Knight screamed hoarsely and grabbed the Scourge's sword hand as it pulled back, knowing another blow would be the end of her. The Prince shifted his footing but Nim often sparred with other ogres. She knew what it meant in an opponent her size.

She half-rolled out of the way of the punch and used the opening to catch the throat rim of the Prince of Bones' armour – and its head, she thought, somehow seemed made of newer steel than the rest – to drag herself up. Pitting strength against strength she wrestled down its limbs, but it was a losing fight. The Scourge was heavier than her and implacable: her arms burned, her legs trembled, and inch by inch she was being forced back.

"Do it," the Black Knight screamed. "*Do it now.*"

The hero's sword struck the Prince from the back even as she finished the last word, Light roiling and letting out screams as the blade melted its way through layers of steel. Nim's arms gave, the Scourge's arms enveloping her almost intimately before the strength turned crushing. She screamed, ribs snapping like twigs, and spat out blood and phlegm as all four of her lungs were pressed on. But she'd live long enough, she thought even as the Prince tried to turn to shake off the hero and failed – the dark-skinned human turned with it. Enough that the Scourge would die, and then she could get herself healed.

If she still wore her helmet, she would not have seen it. She almost didn't anyway because of the blood blinding on of her eyes, but as she gasped in pain the Black Knight saw the glint of the sun on metal. An arrow. Close, too close for her to avoid and- **Commission.**

Hanno could not save everyone.

He had known it from the start, thought he had made his peace with the inevitable. And still a shout ripped itself clear of his throat as the Hawk's arrow took the Black Knight's life. The shaft sunk halfway into the skull, an instant death. He was forced to cease pouring Light into the Prince of Bones' armour as he had been doing, melting layer after layer, to rip out his sword and cut through the arrow that would have gone through the back of his neck. The towering Scourge backed away, swinging his blade more to force distance than strike, but Hanno would have none of it. The edge of his sword flaring with Light he carved through the steel, craning his neck to the side to avoid another killing arrow.

A dart forward had him closing the distance, the Prince of Bones tossing the broken sword in his face. He ducked low, dropping into a roll to avoid another arrow – the Hawk must be close – and slashing across the Scourge's face. The pristine steel mask was scarred, metal melting down from the mark. A leg, Hanno decided. The Prince of Bones was heavy enough that without both legs there would be no escaping. Clouds roiled above his head, magic flaring, but Hanno pressed on. A half-step let the Prince's fist slide past him and he slid under, hacking at the side of the Revenant's leg even as lightning began pouring on them both from above. Hanno grit his teeth, throwing up a burst of Light that dispersed the sorcery over his head as he carved deep into the Prince's leg.

Not deep enough, he thought as he rose behind the Scourge's back. Another arrow swatted aside, but it had been a distraction: darkness fell over him. Hanno grit his teeth, flaring Light through his heated veins enough that the Mantle's curse shattered. Just in time to see the Prince's foot about to hit his stomach. He threw himself below it, a screaming curse shattering the stone he'd been standing on, and as he rose behind the Prince again he listened to the call of instinct and struck out with his hand – catching the Seelie's knife as it was about to thrust through his throat. Letting out an irritated grunt, he bent the Scourge's arm and rested the flat of his blade against he neck.

It was not a mercy: using it as lever, he pushed the Seelie's head into the hole of molten metal he'd left in the Prince of Bones' back.

An arrow hammered into his shoulder, going straight through the plate, and with a pained grunt Hanno let out a burst of Light through the wound to get it out. He'd still lost his opening for a killing blow on the Seelie, who had turned into a bed of dead flowers. Magic was rising again but Hanno had to step out of the way when the Prince snatched up a skeleton and swung it at him like a club, the arc of it covering the Mantle's shivering curse

until it was right on him – he desperately pivoted to the side, smashing the pommel of his sword into the Seelie's half-melted face when she reappeared trying to drive her knife into his side. The curse shaved away at his pauldron, rusting the metal to powder, and the Seelie ducked the swing that would have hewn open her skull.

Then the storm hit, and it was all Hanno could do not to be blown right off the wall.

Soldiers behind him were not so lucky, and the dead were scattered by hurricane winds – turned into trebuchet stones as they hammered into Praesi ranks – but Hanno pushed forward, Light burning in his belly. He saw the Prince of Bones retreating, the silhouette fading out of sight, and with a scream of frustration he shaped a spear out of Light and tossed it at the Scourge's back. It missed the mark by a foot, and even as he grit his teeth the Scourges disappeared into the inner city. A full retreat. The Black Knight was dead and he hadn't even taken one of them for it. When the storm ended, leaving shocked Praesi as the victors of the battle for the gatehouse, Hanno trudged back to the ogre's great corpse.

The arrow was still in her skull, the sight of it leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

"If I had struck from the front, I could have reached it with my arm," Hanno murmured. "If I'd continued to listen to **Save** instead of buried myself in the use of the Light..."

Mistakes, though they had not seemed like it at the time. But then they never did, did they? That was why Hanno had one chosen to follow the Seraphim, heeded their answer to the Riddle of Fault. To be mortal was to fail, to make mistakes. The dark-skinned hero knelt by the Black Knight's corpse, jaw clenched, and wondered how many more mistakes still lay ahead of him. Creation quickened around him, looking for resolve or its end, but Hanno did not embrace the bitterness. He had the strength to take the risk of doing the right thing, but that strength was not an absolute. He was but a mortal man, with all the limits that carried. He would not shy away from the truth of what he had chosen: he would fail. He had today, for all the other victories, and would again.

Hanno did not regret trying.

He ripped out the Hawk's arrow, but after he did his hand lingered on the Black Knight's bloodied face. His face fell into a pensive frown. Creation grew heavy. If it wasn't about victory, if it was about doing all the good that you could, then could he really say he was finished? There was one more thing to attempt. Breathing out, the hero let the Light flow through him and into the villain's corpse. He had seen Tariq Isbili used Forgive more

than once, and there had been great priests could resurrect without the need of a Name or aspect. As his skin grew warm and he began to sweat, Hanno held a tight hand over the Light he was unleashing. It was about will, about intent – and if he slipped, he would burn the corpse instead of bringing it back to life.

Only, in a moment of clarity, Hanno realized that it was not truly resurrection he sought. It was something simpler, almost childish, but in a way perhaps less shallow. He had made a mistake. She had made a mistake. Perhaps all of Creation had made a mistake.

And Hanno of Award would **Undo** it.

He felt something infinitely larger than him brush against his soul, greater than even the Choir of Judgement, and the aspect lit up inside him. His hand against the Black Knight's body serving as a conduit, he looked for ties to the soul so it might be called back and found... nothing? Light began guttering out even as Hanno heard footsteps behind him, a shadow being cast over his kneeling form. He turned, looking into an ogre's rough face, and was about to speak when he suddenly closed his mouth. Through the fast-fading clarity the aspect had leant him, he saw in that body two souls.

"Black Knight," Hanno evenly said.

"Lord Hanno," she replied. "There will be no need for what I believe you are attempting. Though I will be weakened as I ride my soldier's body, it will serve until my corpse can be made usable again."

It was possession, he thought, but not in the way that he had seen it before. It was not a wraith stealing a body, this had been consented to. Explicitly or implicitly he could not tell, but the mark was there. *This is not necromancy, not really. The principle behind it is different. Like a... chain of command, with replaceable faces.* He suspected the Black Knight would not be able to ride a body that was not one of her soldiers. Inside Hanno's belly the heat began to fade, **Undo** simmering down, and as it did he felt out the edge of the aspect's limits. Once a day, a death or calamity could be undone. How the time was parsed he did yet know, but the limit of use was certain.

All that, he thought, and it had not been needed at all. Hand resting on his wearied brow, Hanno let out a snicker that turned into a quiet laugh.

"I was not needed, after all," he mused.

And maybe that was the lesson he should have been learning all along, he thought. All this time, he had been trying to do it all himself. To keep the heroes on the right path, to keep Calernia

from falling. Even before that, from the moment in Ashur where he had first become the White Knight. It had been him and the Seraphim who were to be concerned with the doling out of judgement, but no one else. Even with angels at his shoulder, he had walked alone. Only that wasn't really true, was it? He'd been running around Keter trying to keep doom from claiming the day, trusting in his sword and the aspect he had come into, but that was not the whole of it – just the whole of him. They were all trying to hold up the sky today, and in the end all that Hanno of Arwad could claim to be was a pair of hands. Was it not the worst kind of arrogance, to think that it was on him for everyone to win or lose? Like a child he had decided that he would be strong enough to be able to do the right thing, as if his will was the only one in the world. He was not alone in this. He never had been.

Maybe it was time he acted like it.

"I agonized," Hanno softly told the Black Knight, "over whether or not it was right for me to become the White Knight again. Whether it was going in circles, or nowhere at all."

The ogre did not answer, her eyes wary and her silence thick.

"How very pointless that was," Hanno mused, slowly rising to his feet.

There was no perfect Name that would save everyone, end all the ills of the world. He was just a man and Creation was larger than he would ever know. But he *wasn't* alone. He didn't have to do everything. He just needed to return the trust that had been placed in him. And while the Warden fought today to save the world, then Hanno could fight to save the people in it. To do as much good as he could, knowing that Catherine Foundling would be there to hold out a hand when he failed. Hanno looked around at the last of the dead on the rampart and the gatehouse that would let the Praesi into the inner city when it was opened.

The end was nigh.

"Let's finish this," the White Knight said. "The Dead King awaits."

—

Akua Sahelian had been entrusted with the fate of Calernia and she had failed it.

Beyond all the excuses that were already springing up in the back of her mind, the justifications and the blame-shifting, that was the stark truth of it. She held in her hand the two pieces of the Crown of Autumn, the entrapping gift that had been meant to relieve the Dead King of his mastery over the dead and end the

war in a single stroke. It was broken, irremediably cleaved in two. Only Masego's cleverness in his surgery of the crown had prevented the cleaving from resulting in a wild release of power that would have torn a hole in the city and killed everyone involved in the crown's failed defence.

But as Akua looked upon Hierophant's work split asunder, a thought occurred. A mad thought, impossible, but in the face of extinction that was a meaningless word. And deep down, for all that it was laughable and ludicrous of her, she thought it could be done. That *she* could do it. So instead of falling to her knees, the golden-eyed sorceress turned to her friend. To achieve the impossible would have to be done like eating a whale: one bite at a time, until nothing was left.

"I need you to find me two needles in a haystack, Archer," Akua said. "One that is currently on fire and full of undead."

"My favourite kind," Indrani agreeably replied. "What's your poison, Saucy Siren?"

Beneath the flippancy she sounded relieved. For all that she had defiantly claimed not to regret the decision to save Akua's life over going for the crown, the consequences of that choice loomed tall.

"First, find me a forge," Akua said.

There were hundreds of these across the city, as though Keter's great foundries were in the depths beneath the capital the equipment of the great army encamped within the walls must be seen to regularly lest it rust and break. Most were little more than glorified smithies, but it would be sufficient for her purposes.

"Gotcha," Archer said. "And your other needle?"

"I will tell you after," she replied. "Go."

Indrani made a point of waddling slowly for the first few steps, but as soon as she turned the corner she disappeared in haste. The urgency was not lost on her. Akua, meanwhile, was left to handle another sort of trouble. The remains of the Vagrant Spear's band were standing around the heroine, speaking with Ivah of the Losara.

"- been striking at bands, hit and run," Sidonia told the drow. "Last I heard he got the Astrologer and clipped the Stained Sister."

"It has not yet taken aim at Mighty," the Lord of Silent Steps noted.

Only one name came to mind when the death of Named was so casually brought up: the Hawk. Akua stepped into the talks.

"That is because the Dead King believes he can brush aside the Night if he must," she told them. "He used the Grey Legion to develop protective enchantments against it during the Hainaut offensive."

"Mighty Sahelian," Ivah politely greeted her, inclining its head.

No doubt Sargon would be highly insulted at the implication that Akua was considered the sigil-holder for her family should he ever be made aware of it, a twist of amusement that slightly brightened her mood. The reception from the other three was rather less warm. The Vagrant Spear offered a curt nod, the Red Knight a sneer and the Harrowed Witch looked like she was trying to figure out a way to excuse herself as soon as possible.

"Are any of you in need of healing?" she asked.

An empty question, when she saw that Sidonia was heavily wounded on the side for all that Light had half-cauterized the cuts. The Vagrant Spear eyed her consideringly.

"Can you leave the scars?"

Akua smiled and agreed that she would, laying a hand over the ruined flesh after the Vagrant Spear consented and whispering the incantation.

"Relying on another's skill is weakness," the Red Knight pointedly said.

"Fascinating," Akua charmingly replied, all smiles. "You will have to tell me how you forged your sword, then. And whenever did you get the time to farm the wheat that went into every piece of bread you've eaten?"

The other woman's mouth closed. The Vagrant Spear didn't even bother to hide her grin, which meant it was time to spring her request.

"I will be in need of your help and that of your band, Lady Sidonia," she said.

The heroine tensed, but she could not move away. Not when Akua had carefully ensured she was not done healing.

"What for?" she asked. "The artefact is broken. You must have heard the horns, too, Sahelian. We must gather for the muster in the inner city so we might join the assault on the Dead King."

"An artefact is broken," Akua corrected. "Leaving behind shards and exceptional materials. I have sent Archer to find me a forge so that the defeat we were inflicted might be undone."

"A worthy cause," the Vagrant Spear reluctantly conceded. "Do you need Aspasia's services, then? I could lend her."

Aspasia looked like she would have whimpered if it did not risk drawing attention to her, but that was besides the point. Akua was passingly familiar with the Harrowed Witch's skills, and the other mage's talents were entirely unsuited to what she had in mind. Illusions, blood rituals and necromancy with a spiritual speciality were not what she needed, especially in the hands of a woman whose very Name came with a saboteur attached. Akua would need stability and control most of all. Precision would be everything.

"I need all of you to guard me as I work," Akua replied, shaking her head. "Even the most minute interruption would ruin everything and the Dead King is sure to come for us the moment he grasps what we are attempting."

Lady Sidonia was hesitating, both disinclined to do the Doom of Liesse any favours and hungry to be part of the glorious fight against the Dead King yet recognizing that what Akua was suggesting was of great import. So to tip the balance, the sorceress glanced at Ivah of the Losara. Its face betrayed the barest flicker of amusement before it was smoothed away.

"I will lend my spear to this labour," the Lord of Silent Steps said. "And call for other Mighty to stand vigil."

"We will as well," the Vagrant Spear immediately replied, face hardening.

Pride was such a useful lever to move people with, Akua considered as she allowed the healing sorcery to ebb away. She smiled at Lady Sidonia.

"All finished," she said.

Archer was back before long, having found a forge half a dozen blocks to the east. They all set out that way as Indrani paced around restlessly.

"Your second ask?" Archer pressed.

"I need a Named mage," Akua said.

"You've got the Witch," Indrani pointed out.

"She is unsuited to my needs," she replied. "You must find me another. I can begin the work without them, but I will need them to finish it."

A pause.

"Nahiza Serrif would serve as well, if you can find her," Akua conceded.

Archer chewed the inside of her cheek thoughtfully.

"I'll see who I can rustle up," she promised, and heartbeats later she was gone.

Akua did not allow her thoughts to linger on it. Instead she hurried to the forge, finding the rundown stone house to be dirty and derelict but functional for her purposes. There was still charcoal for the forge in a bag that had been cut, spilling all over the floor, and she used it to light the hearth. A focused wind cantrip blew the dirt and ash off the anvil as she went looking through the tools, thankfully finding them to be steel. Even the hammer's shaft, which made it a little heavy for her hand, but that could be seen to. She needed to enchant them to withstand greater heat anyway, she'd slip in a mild lightening enchantment for the hammer. It was quick and dirty work, burning the runes into the side, but she did not need the tools to last forever – or even to the day's end.

By the time the fire was burning and the tools ready, the enemy had begun attacking.

Akua forced herself to ignore the sounds of fighting. It was not out there she would redeem her mistake but in here. Instead she placed the two prices of the Autumn Crown in the fire, using the bellow to stoke the flames even higher as she kept feeding it charcoal. Though she had once spent a month learning the essentials of smithing as part of being taught enchanting – enchanted swords made without understanding how simpler swords were forged had a tendency to shatter – she was not a trained smith, but then she did not need to be. Akua was not trying to make a functional object, not in the physical sense anyway.

She was changing the appearance of the crown to make it easier to affect its metaphysical nature, using the process of 'being forged anew' as channel to facilitate the work. Simply cutting away at the crown would do nothing. Not only did Akua understand the purpose of barely half of what Masego had done to the fae crown, even broken the artefact remained one of great power and weight. To try to change it without first unmaking it would be the difference between trying to shape stone and clay.

Thrust into the flames, the crown began to bend. The roots in copper and bronze began to twist, the sculpted leaves wilting as their edges thickened. Nothing was melting, not yet and perhaps ever, but it was softening. Hierophant had hammered dozens of iron nails into the crown, and reaching for the tongs Akua began to remove them. It was difficult work, even with the fire making

them easier to rip out, and the heat in her face had her sweating as her muscles burned from the effort. She left only two nails in each half, her magic already feeling out the shards and finding the slumbering power inside was slowly waking up. Soon now.

The noise outside began to reach her ears again as she emerged from her trance, but there was a new note to it. It soon ended, another lull before the storm lapped at their gates again, and the door was thrown open when Archer strolled in. Behind her a young woman followed, dark-haired and tanned in padded battle robes. Of Ashuran make, these, but Akua would have recognized Sapan the Apprentice even without that. Her stomach dropped at the sight of the younger woman. Such a young practitioner with a transitional Name would not have the control she needed in her assistant.

"You getting there?" Archer asked. "It's getting crazy out here. No Scourges yet, but he's throwing Revenants at us by the baker's dozen."

Akua's throat clenched as she wondered how she would have to tell Indrani that they had failed again, that the Apprentice would not be enough, when the young woman walked closer to the fire. Her eyes were curious and Akua stilled at the sight of her. There was something different about her. A certainty that had not been in the girl that trailed behind Hierophant in the hopes of peeking at his notes.

"You are no longer the Apprentice," Akua said.

"I am," Sapan thinly smiled, "the Mage."

Only 'Mage', without anything preceding it. Oh my, Akua thought. Ashurans traditionally had three Names bound to spellcasting: Red Mage, Blue Mage and Silver Mage. The destroyer, the navigator and the healer. Only young Sapan was eschewing the label and the limits that would come with it. Simple as the Name sounded, it was a bold claim that would echo across all rungs of the Ashuran tier system. *A year with Masego*, the sorceress ruefully thought, *was all it took to turn you into something that will rock the foundations of your home*. Hierophant likely hadn't even meant to do it. And the Mage would be a herald of great changes, Akua had no doubt about, because when the other woman had spoken her Name she'd heard smaller note to it.

It was still a transitional Name, a step on the way to a higher peak.

"Good," Akua smiled, allowing a touch of savagery to show. "Come, Mage, for now the true work begins."

Archer returned to the fighting outside, grounds she was more at home on, while the two of them took to the forge. Sapan's

control, Akua thought, was exquisite. The girl *had* once trained to be healer. The Soninke sorceress took out the first half from the flames with the tongs and laid it on the anvil, reaching for the hammer even as she instructed her helper.

"Keep it at this exact temperature," Akua ordered. "It must be even throughout all the while."

"To keep it at the point of transition," Sapan thoughtfully murmured.

What a genuine terror that girl would become, in a decade or two. Akua was no proper smith, so her strikes were uneven as held down the half of the crown and hammered away at it. The shape would need to change, else the artefact could only ever be a broken shard of what Hierophant had made. Feeling out the enchantments, the lines drawn in the power slumbering within, Akua broke down the beautiful fae crown. Leaves turned into flat lumps, ornate roots into rough and uneven chords, even as she grasped at the edges of the enchantments. Much of what Masego had done, the beauty and elegance of his work, had to be discarded.

Akua went for simplicity instead, breaking down the parts that would have bound the concepts of 'mastery' and 'death' into mere 'power'. A broad concept, which meant it would have shallow draw if left this way – the artefact would try to do too much at once when having finite strength, resulting in it doing a lot of very little. Which was why Akua, even as she turned the half-crown into a rough bracelet ring of copper and bronze, turned her attention to the two iron nails she had left. Before she hammered them into the ring, with shaky breath she branded them with the whole of her magic. This was High Arcana, not a simple exercise of power and knowledge. It must come from something deeper, something personal.

So Akua let herself remember the absolute nothingness of the void, the maddening nothing that had surrounded her as she half-slumbered a prisoner of the Mantle of Woe.

She bled it into the iron nails, pouring out all the terror and despair of it, and hammered them into the ring until there was no trace of the iron save for two faint circles on the side. The golden-eyed sorceress shuddered, feeling the concept that she had branded into the nails: *chain*. Exhaustion set her limbs to tremble, but Akua had no time for it. She quenched the bronze ring in water, letting it simmer there, and took the other half of the crown from the flames. Her magic was growing sluggish, but the Mage had learned from the first effort. She helped keep the enchantments in place as Akua wove them anew, hammering the other half of the crown into a matching ring. And again two nails of iron were hammered into circles, singing of 'chain' as the others had.

Into the water the second ring went, and once they were taken out to be laid on the anvil Akua Sahelian beheld her work.

Her metalwork had been without art to it, but even broken the Autumn Crown was one of the great mantles of the fae. Its nature asserted itself anew, what had been plain and bumpy bracelet rings turning into something altogether more beautiful. The roots and leaves she had hammered out had returned, engraving themselves so flawlessly that one might have thought the artefacts made of real ones. The bronze and copper had not melded, the copper instead turning into delicate filigree laying out the veins of leaves or the contour of branches and roots. And on the side of each bracelet ring, each large enough to be slipped around a wrist, two dots of iron remained. Only they had changed, melted by the head into the happenstance of two clasping hands.

A fitting emblem, Akua thought. For she had turned the Hierophant's beautiful work into fetters, making of a gift that would grant immortality at the price of master over death something brutally simple. The rings bound the 'power' of any who bore one, chaining it to the other ring. No power could be used without the consent of whoever held the other end of the chain. It was not a leash, for no ring was master over the other, but instead something altogether uglier.

A prison, large enough for two.

"They are beautiful," the Mage whispered. "Perhaps the greatest work of our age."

"They are the ugliest thing I have ever made," Akua Sahelian quietly replied, "or ever will."

And still she took them in hand, feeling the lingering warmth of them against her skin. She left the smithy, the oppressing heat of it, and returned to the smoky skies of Keter. There Archer awaited, standing over a carpet of corpses dead twice over as Firstborn and Named held the streets.

"Finished?" Indrani asked.

"I am," Akua said.

"Good," Archer sharply nodded. "You'll have to take it from here. I need to *go*."

She was shifting her weight even as she spoke, Akua noticed, so restless she could not stop moving. How odd, the sorceress thought, and then breathed out in wonder. *Ah, my heart*, she fondly thought. *Always a plan within the plan with you*. Catherine had gone with the Ranger, the survivors of Refuge and the man Indrani loved. All essential elements for Indrani to transition

out of her increasingly ill-fitting Name of Archer. *In a single stroke you tell me that you are fighting and ensure reinforcements are on your way.* The pull of fate on Indrani at the moment must be like getting dragged by the hair.

"Go," Akua said.

Archer hesitated.

"You're sure you'll be fine on your own?"

"You chose my life over the crown, Indrani," Akua Sahelian gently said. "I swear to any Gods listening that I will not make you regret that choice, so *go*."

The other woman's hazelnut eyes met her own, and after a moment whatever she was looking for she found. She sharply nodded, coat swirling behind her as she turned to leave without a goodbye. She watched Indrani vanish into the city to seek out her fate, leaving her to find her own.

Akua's thumb stroke the side of the ring in her hand, wondering if she was holding a noose or a knot.

[Liliet](#)

OKAY SO I ONLY READ THE EPIGRAPH SO FAR BUT I JUST WANT TO SAY:

I FUCKING KNEW IT

I GODDAMN FUCKING CALLED IT

[Liliet](#)

FURTHERMORE

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

1. yES KENDI IS A REAL PERSON

2. HANNO GO!!!!

3. That fantassin!!! That one!!! Raphael (iirc) the currently Thrice-Drowned!

4. Yeah Cat's winning the war but it's going to be Hanno's doing that there's a peace to come after ♥ it's true she was never good at this part. Creation, villains, etc. That's what hero allies are for

5. THE UNRAVELLING CLAUSE. Also, "- and their idea of trickery is a massive cavalry charge from the back instead of the front."

Admittedly it was somewhat embarrassing how often that trick had defeated Praesi armies. ""

6. "And Indrani could not be at two places at once.

Akua breathed out, closing her eyes.

Only she did not die."

OH MY GOD YOU TWO EGGS

okay so DK knows a trick or two wrt power of friendship... of your enemies

7. "“My life was not worth this,” Akua said, throat tight. “Indrani, Gods. It could not have been worth this.”

"I'd do it again," her friend said.

And for once in her life, Akua Sahelian believed every word of what she had been told."

Awwwww

8. "and its head, she thought, somehow seemed made of newer steel than the rest" AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

9. YESSS

TOP ASPECT FOR HANNO

TOP ASPECT FOR HANNO FOR ONE THOUSAND YEARS

10. "“I was not needed, after all,” he mused.

And maybe that was the lesson he should have been learning all along, he thought. All this time, he had been trying to do it all himself. To keep the heroes on the right path, to keep Calernia from falling. Even before that, from the moment in Ashur where he had first become the White Knight. It had been him and the Seraphim who were to be concerned with the doling out of judgement, but no one else. Even with angels at his shoulder, he had walked alone. Only that wasn't really true, was it? He'd been running around Keter trying to keep doom from claiming the day, trusting in his sword and the aspect he had come into, but that was not the whole of it – just the whole of him. They were all trying to hold up the sky today, and in the end all that Hanno of Arwad could claim to be was a pair of hands. Was it not the worst kind of arrogance, to think that it was on him for everyone to win or lose? Like a child he had decided that he would be strong enough to be able to do the right thing, as if his will was the only one in the world. He was not alone in this. He never had been."

THANK YOU

OH MY GOD THANK YOU
FUCKING FINALLY
FOR REAL MY DUDE WHAT THE FUCK TOOK YOU SO LONGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG

11. Huh. White Knight after all. Well damn, yall who were calling this win.

12. Oh I am getting bad, BAD feeling from Akua needing another mage for this...)=

13. THE MAGE
FUCKING BEST NAME THANKS EE

14. "And the Mage would be a herald of great changes, Akua had no doubt about, because when the other woman had spoken her Name she'd heard smaller note to it.

It was still a transitional Name, a step on the way to a higher peak."

THE BEST
THANK

15. "A fitting emblem, Akua thought. For she had turned the Hierophant's beautiful work into fetters, making of a gift that would grant immortality at the price of master over death something brutally simple. The rings bound the 'power' of any who bore one, chaining it to the other ring. No power could be used without the consent of whoever held the other end of the chain. It was not a leash, for no ring was master over the other, but instead something altogether uglier.

A prison, large enough for two."

~~YEAH THIS SOUNDS LIKE A BAD PLAN LET'S MAKE THIS NOT HAPPEN~~

wait

bard????? bard?????? bard???????

16. "Akua's thumb stroke the side of the ring in her hand, wondering if she was holding a noose or a knot." YEAH PLEASE LET'S LEAVE THIS QUESTION OPEN THANKS

Mirror Night

Ashur's Army is Crap but they produce the most broken Named on Average.

Though that might be the Soninke or Praesi mixed into the DNA. I don't think the Mage is part Praesi lol.

Insanenoodlyguy

"My life was not worth this," Akua said, throat tight.
"Indrani, Gods. It could not have been worth this boost."

[Liliet](#)

Sincere request to not do this on the links I post at least. I wish wordpress allowed deleting posts because then I would ask you to. Ew. Ew. Ew. What the fuck.

Magicturtle

Your kinda rude, arent you?

[Liliet](#)

This is not a new argument.

[Liliet](#)

(so I would assert I am not the one being rude in this particular exchange, no)

GluestickGenius

What is your problem with people having a little fun with boost promo...

[Liliet](#)

Okay let's do this again.

These are usually snappy enough to be remembered in place of the original quote / simultaneously with the original quote, and when the original quote is something that provokes sincere feeling, but instead you remember the promo thing, it's GROSS. Like it feels physically gross and I want to scream and vomit and brain bleach it out. It SPOILS it. There are quotes in earlier chapters that I do not want to ever remember even though they were fucking awesome because the fucking promos stuck around in my head instead.

From the discussion in comments, I know I am not the only one who feels like this.

I am willing to accept that when someone is making their own boost post they can do whatever and I can just scroll past whatever's in the same post as a boost link without reading it (even though it would deprive me of reading stuff people who DONT do this write the way I did here).

But putting it on my post, alongside people actually doing discussion, while knowing how I feel about this?

Like...

This is gross. This is a gross thing to do to someone else.

Magicturtle

First of all cant be sure he know you feel like that. Second have to admit its a wild reaction to start calling it gross and stuff, no need to be rude. Would it really be such a problem to just ask him not to do it, instead of calling him and what he does gross? Erratica himself have requested in earlier chapters that we dont insult each other and keep the good tone.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Ok. I get it.

I like 'em. But Liliet has posted numerous times as to how liliet disagrees with this practice.

It's a quirk. Liliet don't like evocative scenes turned into promo-boost type posts.

Ubua would get it.

Damian Lucius Black

Because Liliet makes such a big stink out of it and calling others gross I am going to spend the rest of my time reading this by taking evocative scenes, turn them into promo-type boosts and reply to Liliet so they can see it.

[Liliet](#)

I have asked this repeatedly.

[Liliet](#)

(seriously this feels physically sickening)

medailyfun

you will *Grow* to *Transcend* this feeling

gingerlygrump

Liliet, please stop attacking other people in the comments.

erissu

Said gingerlygrump, while together with a few other people attacking Liliet.

Do be so kind as to sod off with your high horse bs, pal.

gingerlygrump

Also, this is not the first time people have asked Liliet to stop picking fights. It's a semi-regular occurrence.

gingerlygrump

Asking someone to please stop attacking other people is wildly different than calling someone's actions "physically sickening."

[Liliet](#)

Me: "I am physicallly sick"

You: "Stop attacking other people"

I am literally not making any single statement about anyone other than myself, thanks. Like, that is meant literally. It's not an insult. It's what happens.

[farbeyondc](#)

Get over it (and yourself).

Rynjin

Please, by all that is good and pure in this world, go out and gain some real life experiences. Your life will be better for it.

Mary Gentle

I think it depends on how immersive a reader someone is. If you're deep, deep into a chapter, feeling all those emotions, and then – whap! Having that immersion wrecked can be painful.

Maybe it would be possible to have a mark at the start of posts like that? It's not like I'm going to forget to boost Practical Guide. I really would appreciate a chance to skip these posts.

[Damian Lucius Black](#)

Akua's thumb stroke the side of the ring in her hand, wondering if she was holding a noose or a Boost.

[Liliet](#)

Congrats on reaching a new asshole tier!

Damian Lucius Black

Thanks! I've never had reason to comment before and barely read them but seeing how much of a twat your

are about the clever ways people have commented to get the story boosted I feel I have found a new purpose in life! I will make it my personal mission to reply to one of your comments on every single chapter with a quote modified to encourage boosting of the story!

"One hundred ninety-nine: this list began with the simplest of Boosts, the first. In the years since others like you have added to or taken away from it, a chain that goes back further than any of us know, changing and twisting as it grows. In time no two Boosts will be the same, save always in this one regard: there is no two hundredth axiom. That place remains empty, so that once you learn something worth passing down you may fill it yourself. Look forward, as we once did, and let those who come after you learn from our mistakes. What greater gift can there be?"

– "TWO HUNDRED HEROIC AXIOMS", AUTHOR UNKNOWN

tynam

So what you're saying is: the only reason you're commenting is that you've picked a person to bully and found a way to make their life measurably worse without benefiting anyone. You're proud that they'll enjoy this story less due to your actions.

You did this because you're offended that they dared to ask you not to.

Congratulations. On a story entirely about how the real definition of good is how we treat each other, you have perfectly illustrated the concept of being mindlessly evil just for the sake of doing harm. I'm an actual practising sadist and I still find your behaviour obnoxious beyond my power to express.

Onos

"This thing upsets someone, so I'm going to do the thing as much as possible, as directly to the person it upsets as possible"

You are a complete cunt. I sincerely hope you have an incredibly miserable, but quite short, life. Humanity would do better with less of those like you, and you specifically.

Abrakadabra

To be fair, Both of them are cunts in their own way.

Tom

> bard????? bard?????? bard??????

Please yes

Tom

Actually, the Hierarch would be better; he already has experience at it.

gingerlygrump

Doesn't Akua say that one cannot make a move without the other's approval? I must reread.

nipi

And the Hierarch would be forever indecisive

caoimhinh

Yeah, that would be awesome, binding those two monsters being each other's prisoner and jailer.

Because if Cat really ends up being the warden of Neshamah's prison, it's gonna be a really sad thing. She deserves her happy ending and to enjoy a good long life after this whole mess.

Thoughtless

fuck yes on the bard getting the other ring. couldn't happen to two better people. 100% behind this theory. Akua as eternal warden of the dead is a misdirect.

Insanenoodlyguy

My concern after "eat the baby"
Is that she'd actually let him do quite a bit out of spite.
Though if this still strips power over dead from him that could regulate him to "evil in a can that occasionally needs stuffing back in."

Insanenoodlyguy

Then again, what if her role requires her to just disappear and stay non existing? Can't consent to anything while you are in oblivion.

Dome Zasrekh

I *like* this option!

[Kletanio](#)

It was the comment about the terror of the void that sold me. Yara of Nowhere really is nowhere when she Wanders. She doesn't exist.

Akua's prison would take that from her.

Fuck [awestruck]

[Kletanio](#)

Also, Hierarch is very fundamentally not a part of the Dead King's story. It has no Weight for a dude, even one with that much self-righteousness, to show up into that story to hold the Dead King back. Plus, Nessie is smart enough to not fight back in the way that would trigger Hierarch.

But the person whose existence for thousands of years has been a counterbalance to this monster? The person who's willing to kill millions (possibly more?) to stop him [and who knows what else]? A person who the Dead King was willing to suffer the first **true** loss in thousands of years to thwart, even if only a little bit (in Third Llesse)?

Yeah. That has **WEIGHT**

jamesc9

> what if her role requires her to just disappear

As long as her bracelet goes with her and remains connected.

And it potentially gives Cat a permanent watching brief to minimise pivots that will call her in.

Unrecovered

No, giving it to Bard could be disasterous – those two old monsters can agree on many things. Now, chaining him to Anaxares... That would be torture 😊

[plantsbeans](#)

very good synopsis thank you

[Mincheriit](#)

Wild card idea that is extremely unlikely. What if Cat and Akua end up with those two rings??? 🤔 it makes no sense at

all except an extreme accident or twist but idk i kinda dig it as a joke plot.

gingerlygrump

I smell a fanfic in the making.

Miles

15-16

I had the same thought but then I realized these rings only work as long as the wearers are opposed to the point of never allowing the other to do anything. We've seen the Bard work to the DK's benefit in order to catch whatever smaller fish is her current target. The 2 of them already have an arrangement.

I'd even go so far as to say that if the bard had focused all her energy on keeping the DK imprisoned she would have been able to keep the stalemate and have the same effect as the bracelets.

Also Cat's name is Warden. A perfect fit and a Name that might be able to overcome the 2-way nature of the rings.

Akua is going to have a choice later – does she wear the ring or does she let it find its way onto Cat's finger.

—

On another note the enchantment makes me think wedding rings. So who's ship is Nesamah likely to sail on? Guess we're back to DK x Bard as the major villain team for book "and one".

Miles

antagonist team*

Miles

On another note, Hierarch would be the perfect one to get the ring.

He doesn't want his power and he'd never let the DK use *his* power. This is probably what the Bard is going for.

Someperson

They are more bracelets than rings I think

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Toe-mato tow-mato.

Someperson

They are more bracelets than rings I think

Someperson

WordPress why are you like this

gingerlygrump

Lol, yup, been there.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think anything Bard did was to DK's long-term benefit no.

Sunday

Amazing, Wonderful, Outstanding, Akua and Archer bffs forever

[Liliet](#)

IKR??????????

Eris

Yesssssss, new named are being born! The Lone Fantassin?

[Liliet](#)

THE THRICE DROWNED

okay that's probably not the Name i just love them

Earl of Purple

I mean, we know that Grizzled Fantassin is open. I'm curious what side of the fence they consider themselves, and what side their predecessor did, too for that matter.

letouriste

i was sure it was a transition into Grizzled Fantassin too. Sound like a Name transitioning fast

[Kletanio](#)

The Gargled Fantassin.

Okay I'll leave now.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Literal LOL.

Tenthyr

Jesus Christ so much happened and I love all of it

Mirror Night

That Heroic Axiom fits perfectly.....pass on what you learn to the next generation.

Black Knight is interesting... "Commission" eh that is one of the more unique Aspects we have seen. Pretty fun POV.

Akua forges a prison (Bard aint going to be happy)....actually can you chain Bard to DK that be interesting but I am not sure I trust Bard not to let DK destroy the world. Also Mage interesting is the first time we have seen a double transitional Name. Besides Cat but she kinda reset.

Hanno is White Knight again...walked away with some broken Aspects. "Save" apparently buffs everything which fits his character. And "Undo" seems inspired by a certain Titan, I guess that makes sense given his GFs Father lol.

Might be about to shift back to Cat POV.

dadycoool

Maybe if Cat Silences her thrice, she can't give him permission?

gingerlygrump

I was trying to figure out what Commission meant, does that imply she can pick her successor?

That would be awesome, IMO. Nim is no fool, she's seen what it's like for her Name to wane and then wax again, she's seen how a mutual respect between those whose Names are opposing teams should supposedly be at odds with each other. Nim is a solid leader and was marshall for many years before becoming Named, wasn't she?

ByVectron!

She pretty much lays it out when she returns and Hanno thought bubbles the details of it, but yeah- she can take over one of her soldiers for a period of time, until her corpse is repaired, then she can jump back into her old body.

We saw her use this trick to preemptively ride another person's body when she attacked Cats camp and stole the money way back when, outside Ater (I think.)

shikkarasu

I think that earlier trick was **Delegate**, empowering a few of her soldiers with a fraction of her power. I'm loving the theme, where the last Black Knight changed the game from personal power to institutional power, but still ultimately did things himself. He got **Lead** and the flexible **Conquer**, but still had the raw strength of **Destroy**.

The latest Black Knight is running with that theme, with **Delegate** and **Survey** barely having any personal applications. Even **Commission** ultimately gives power to someone else, for all that it saves her own life. Perhaps most importantly, like **Delegate**, it has no application at all if she doesn't have an institution behind her.

It might be getting old to say this, but once more with feeling, Amadeus is still shaping the world from the grave.

Abaddon130

I know this an old comment on responding to, bit I just wanted to point out that Commission was Nim's first Aspect we were shown. Like ByVectron! said, this was revealed when Nim led a raid on Cat's camp to get back the ransoms Sargon paid to get back there people she took prisoner way back in Chapter 5: Incursions. She finds the Apprentice and Squire fighting an ogre, who she quickly realizes is Named, and uses the battle to begin a Pattern of 3 between the Squire and Black Knight. Here's the end of that fight with the relevant bit of deduction Car makes about her Aspect.

—"Black Knight," I greeted. "So what's the aspect you're using, I wonder – something like Deputize, Mandate?"

I wrinkled my nose.

"No, you're clearly Legion," I said. "You're using mostly ogres, too, so I'd guess you're Marshal Nim. 'Commission', maybe?"

It clearly wasn't her full strength she'd put in the body, else the kids would be dead twice over. The ogress hacked out a cough, dying, and I sighed. Wouldn't get anything out of her. I sheathed my sword, but halfway through the gesture the almost-corpse suddenly lunged. A single massive hand reached over my shoulder, grasping the Squire's throat behind me, and she began to squeeze – I felt horror swell, I wouldn't be quick enough with the Night I was reaching for – she went still. It was not luck that did it, but the eerily silent arrow Archer had loosed that went through her eye. I roughly dragged

Arthur away by the scruff of his neck as the body dropped, the boy moaning in pain. As well he should, he was basically a mass of bruises and bloody wounds. He sagged against the ground. –

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2021/03/19/chapter-5-incursion/>

So, between the scene in this chapter and the one I just linked, we see that she can use that Aspect in at least 2 ways. 1) She can use Commission to take control of one of her soldiers and use it as a proxy, thereby reducing the father to herself significantly. 2) As shown in this chapter she can use it to move her consciousness into one of her soldiers in a moment that would otherwise be fatal or, at the very least, crippling. This allows her to stay in a fight long past when she should be put down (We don't currently know if she can go to another body from this one without first returning to her original body. If not, it's still a powerful Aspect that greatly increases survivability. If so, well that's OP af as shown by Drake Knight. It doesn't come with his ridiculous healing abilities, but as long as she has a chance to think the word, and a soldier under her command close by, it's gonna be a nightmare to kill her for good.).

In to of all that though, having Aspects as similar as Delegate and Commission would feel like a bit of a rip off. Normally there's a decent spread to what Aspects enable a Named to do.

shikkarasu

Commission: an instruction, command, or duty given to a person or group of people.

"he received a commission to act as an informer"

She can basically order someone to house her soul for a time, provided that they are subject to orders.

caoimhinh

Save and **Undo** sort of feel like more nuanced and broader spectrum versions of **Listen** and **Forgive**.

Hanno is like Grey Pilgrim and Saint of Swords into one, while being a better and nicer person than both. Way less extreme and more open to discussion and self-reflection.

Mirror Night

Save is more a mix of Decree and Listen. Since Save buffs everything for Hanno when he is saving but doesn't have the same defensive buff as it does for Saint where she can take like no damage for the duration. However, it last a whole lot longer to compensate. Its more like a permanent super saiyan since it increases senses, physical stats, gives buff to light manipulation and gives precog.

Undo as Forgive though works a lot better though its more like a localized version of what the Titan did. And as a tradeoff Hanno probably has to use it within a certain amount of time. Unlike Pligrim who if you store the body can rez it whenever as long as its the first time and the Aspect only used once per day

[Kletanio](#)

No. This mistake would not stand. The White Knight would *CTRL-Z* it.

[daegone823](#)

I just appreciate how through the change of purpose so has the change in aspects. Whereas Ride, Recall, and Judge were geared to counter Cat. The Dark knight commented on how the experience given by recall, the maneuverability of ride and the White Knight using explosives' healing magic would have countered the Cat who was a brawler. Even Judgement Coin would be used at a climactic moment to seal the coffin on Cat who feels mountains of guilt for her mistakes she would accept the judgment willingly.

The Choir of judgement has been sidelined for most of the war. Hanno has gotten the time to reflect and develop his own sense of justice and forge his own path. I think a lot of people have noticed the Black knight influence in Nim but they are forgetting the Grey Pilgrim who specifically made Cat promise to not interfere with the White Knight's transition. So that she would not become the focus of his change, not his mirror. The Grey Pilgrim even sacrificed himself knowing that his existence was holding others back from growing. The Whit Knight had the time to see his true enemy.

Not good vs evil, but living vs. dying it has put his fight into perspective. he no longer squabbles with royals, or even villains he understands his place in the world. His aspects Undo, Save, and Recall are geared towards survival. Remembering those who sacrificed there lives, saving those who still live and maybe in the darkest of moments undoing mistakes that we wish we could. The White Knight values the life of all believing each serves a purpose.

In some respects he has become even more noble as based on his actions he weighs the lives of the common soldier, the lives of heaven blessed chosen, and villains all the same.

ninegardens

His next aspect is going to be ****Select All**** or maybe ****Exit****.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I like ***Play***
Or maybe "Paste"!

caoimhinh

Well, **Recall** can sort of be seen as "Select All", if you think about it.

ohJohn

What about **Refresh**?

[Liliet](#)

*his unrequited crush's, not his gf's

(it's much funnier than that ™)

I really like how Commission is said to be consent-based. Like I'm assuming it's consent assumed by default from being in Nim's army... but one that can be withdrawn explicitly.

dadycoool

"Sir, with all due respect, my body is my own and I don't want anyone hijacking it. Please don't."

Earl of Purple

Lots of great Aspects here. Commission we knew, but it's even better than I thought it was. I wonder if Nim's 'died' before. Great way to lead from the front without actually risking yourself.

Ogres have four lungs. Did we know that? I don't think we knew that.

Can't penetrate the revenant's enchanted armour? Just pull their head off, that'd do it. Ogre solutions to real problems.

[irritantseraphim](#)

I think Ohres are basically Krogan from Mass Effect.
Unbelievably sturdy, redundant anatomy to withstand more damage,

Mirror Night

Its funny cause Prince of Bones basically does the same to her by forcing her helm off and trying to crush her before Hawk finishes her with an Arrow. So yeah target the body not the armor unless I suppose you can turn armor to dust...

[Liliet](#)

I think this is Nim's first time dying. She talks about preparing her body for raising, meaning she's going from living to undead here, and you know people would have noticed if she had already been.

agumentic

She is not, though. She says "until my corpse can be made usable again", which means she is going to be more like Akua, a shade going back into a body, just her original one instead of a copy.

shikkarasu

Yeah, I think the fact that she used Commission before she died means that, technically, she never did. As a 2nd bit of precedent, Masego mentioned how the Hierarch wasn't dead even though he was atomized, since his soul left his body of its own free will. (his soul being The Property Of The People)

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Villains cannot be Resurrected*!
Workarounds, however...

*Cat gamed the system. Sword in stone, One True Heir, etc.

Earl of Purple

Villains can be resurrected, villains can't resurrect.
Indrani was Forgiven after Neshamah-possessed Masego thwacked a spell through her head.

[Liliet](#)

Make sense!

Matthew

Erraticerrata, chapters like this are why we don't mind waiting. This is fantastic. Cat may be the protagonist, but the way we get to see the world through other characters eyes, fully fleshed out characters with their own epic parts to play, are some of my favorite chapters.

caoimhinh

100% support that opinion

Luna

Totally agree! Erraticerrata, thank you very much! Such great, amazing chapters! I love PGTE so so so much!

Daniel E

I'm digging the fact that Hanno is White Knight on his own terms. Also, what's up with this generation of Apprentices going on to become a God-tier power? Or did Above finally become concerned enough about Hierophant that they used this opportunity as an excuse to match him?

erebus42

Could be, it's funny I was thinking the other day that in another life, if the war wasn't going on and Masego had still lost his magic and became reliant on Wrest, that Roland probably would have become his mirror and nemesis instead of his friend.

shikkarasu

THAT WOULD BE AMAZING. Every confrontation would be Masego **Wresting** magic from some mage who slowly dies from him overtaxing their Gift, with Roland battling through the many magical traps and constructs and bound Fae/Devils only to **Confiscate** Masego's new magic. They'd get into scholarly pissing matches about whether the other mage's life was worth Masego's ambition.

Zeze rolling his glass eyes like "I'd just give them their magic back once I'm a God; I'm not a monster."

Roland screaming "*They wouldn't live long enough the way you abuse their magic.*"

Then Hierophant's contingency artefacts would then go off, shifting him to a demiplane or a specially prepared layer of Hell. Masego would, even without Cat's influence, be too well raised to say anything like "Next time, your filthy dabbler, next tiiiime" but the urge would get stronger with each passing confrontation.

Snappy270

An extraordinary war demand extraordinary named. Basically the bigger the war the bigger the weapons people build.

[Liliet](#)

I had hope for Above and Below getting into a (metaphorical, narrative, automated) pissing match about who has cooler Named oriented towards the asme purpose ever since Tancred and Pascale.

RoflCat

I'd like to think it's their time under Catherine that push them out of the Good/Evil box or the precedent roles.

Arthur choosing to follow his own moral as a knight over a code.

Sapan becoming the Mage (of Ashurs) and likely transitioning into the Wizard.

GluestickGenius

What makes you suspect Wizard? Is that an upgrade to Mage? I would have guessed something like Archmage ...

RoflCat

Wizard of the West was the Warlock equivalent for Procer IIRC.

So if she transition into that, BUT doesn't limit herself to 'of the West' just like how she is the Mage now, she will be utilizing both sides.

And given that Catherine went Warden of the East->both, there's some weight in her 'student' picking up the same habit.

Sinead

Does Cat officiate the wedding between Yara and Neshamah using the rings?

erebus42

Perhaps but i could still see them potentially being spiteful enough to let the other one use their powers if it meant fucking over Cat.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Yara would.

But that's the question isn't it ^^

Kletanio

Cat uses *Silence* three times on Yara.

And then tells the assembled crowd, "Should anyone present know of any reason that this couple should not be forever joined, speak now or forever hold your peace"

SpeckofStardust

You say this, but Nebbie would happily be Yara's warden in exchange for not dying.

After all he's lost his hell and is losing his seat of power where he sits, all the undead armies in the world means very little when someone has a god killing weapon sitting on his neck, which is exactly how this siege is heading towards. Nebbie would not let spite get in the way of his survival, as out of the 2 he's the easier one to kill.

badatgames2911

CAT DOES HAVE A HISTORY OF TAKI G TWO E EMY GODS AND MARRYING THEN TOGE TOGETHER NGL

dadycoool

OH, SHIT! I FORGOT ABOUT WINTER/SUMMER! THERE'S PRECEDENT FOR THIS!

caoimhinh

On another but still related note, Cat has sworn that she will eventually go back to Arcadia and fuck up the King of Winter.

From Chapter 15 Bestowal:

"You killed my men when you sent your fae into my city. You robbed them of the life they could have lived. You took from them. A debt is owed.

This is not a bargain, King of Winter, it's an oath. One day, we'll meet again. Not tomorrow, not next month, not for decades. After your game's played out. After I've learned to kill gods. On that day, I'll come to collect.

I stand by my oath, dead thing. Before my days are done I will see you unmade."

And, well... you know, Cat now knows how to kill gods.

This may even be a scene for the Epilogue chapter, for all we know, Catherine appearing in front of the King of the Fae to collect that debt.

After all, from small slights, long prices.

Mirror Night

I doubt it cause Cat hasn't really thought about the Winter King in forever lol.

Also Cat just getting revenge for every slight seems like a de-evolution at this point.

Miles

Cat getting extreme revenge for every minor slight she has ever suffered is exactly the kind of thing she'd do.

It's the Callowan blood

[Liliet](#)

Cat undid him with the marriage, it changed his being from King of Winter to King of Arcadia and apparently counted enough for her.

caoimhinh

You know Preasi, even when making shackles and manacles, they gotta make them gorgeous works of art. Anything less would be *uncouth* and gauche.

RoflCat

Are you saying this EE is going for a 'tying the knot' punchline?

edrey

this way too much. i have no words

Save and Undo. Hanno have grow so much in a day, and now he has THE GREATEST trump card of all.

Akua has solved the crown, a prison for the Bard and Dk, and the Bard shouldnt know the details of this one.

it was worth the wait.

megaprr

Lmao so Hanno's just a computer file. If he can Save and Undo, his third aspect should've been Open (though I suppose Recall is close enough).

dadycoool

Yup, loading a recent file, generally so he can copy-paste some of its contents.

Darkening

Recall, save, undo... Man, hanno's practically a gamer. With the power of save and load, can anyone stand against him?

dadycoool

He just loads a quicksave and pwns a nerd. Come to think of it, it's kinda what the Riddler did when he showed up. Maybe it's a Titanomancy thing?

bellacohl

At first I was disappointed about Hanno's name, but the more I think about it the more I like it.

I think the White Knight didn't need to left behind his name to grow, he needed to left behind his Role.

Hanno is no longer the Sword of Judgement. He is just a pair of hands, helping to hold the sky aloft. And I love it. I love him. And Gods I LOVE Save. Such a great aspect.

(Please dont yell to much at me about how absutely, horribly, stupidly wrong I am I am a gentle soul)

ALSO, I am so hyped about the implicit growth towards Archmage that Sapan's new name hints.

[Liliet](#)

You are so totally right though,

[Kletanio](#)

Hanno can become the shining beacon, the role model he has always wanted to be. A White Knight comes and protects those who cannot protect themselves, yes. But they're also an inspiration to encourage others to Do Better as well.

[Kletanio](#)

I'm curious if Above is (a) making her into a counter for the Hierophant, and (b) aware that she and Masego are actually friends and would totally pass apotheosis notes in class.

Konstantin von Karstein

I really hope it's Archmage! 😊

erebus42

Damn, Akua. thats a clever if far less enticing trap, but hey, I guess there's only so much you can do when repurposing the

fragments of something meant to trap a god.
I would guess Akua is not going to transition into a name (if she even does) until after the final battle-if she was going to I would have thought that that would have been the moment.
Also Good on Sapan for transcending the shackles of her home culture to forge ahead into the future. I wonder what her future final name will be? Archmage? Grand Sorceress? Rainbow Mage?

bellacohl

I'm putting my money on Archmage

erebus42

She also learned a bit from Catherine so -depending on how much of a reformist she is- she could get a ruling name like Mage Queen or something.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Speaking of things people learned from Catherine, I love how Akua drawls from time to time now.

Mirror Night

Well it does have two major cities in Ashur...are Mage and Blessed from different ones. In that case one could end up running one and the other one can run the other city. That be an interesting endgame.

Snappy270

But Rainbow sorceress has such a nice ring to it.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

CareBearStare!

[Kletanio](#)

Ohhhh. That's how it's going to be enticing, though.

The Dead King would never put on that bracelet voluntarily for anyone. Akua could try to hold him, but it would be a constant fight and she might lose. Because at his core, Neshemah has no particular reason to want to hold her.

But you know who he might?

I think that, at least a little, Neshemah might be willing to give up some of himself if it meant controlling the Intercessor, permanently.

Daniel E

I rarely double-post here, but having just finished rereading more slowly, a couple things stood out. First: a city called 'Nok' produces the greatest archers? I don't know if the pun is intentional, but I am still amused. Second: Hanno has retained Recall during his transition. With the addition of Save & Undo, I propose that he henceforth be Named 'Spreadsheet'.

jworks17

The Spreadsheet would absolutely be a villain though

[pirateddesigns](#)

Is this a morality statement about prostitution?

(I'm just joking here, don't @ me)

arcanavita15

Tango op please don't need he earned those assets through learning an appropriate moral lesson governing him his heavens given right to enhanced martial prowess. Ahahahab but yah Tango is broken. Also akua and archer scene is wonderful i like how they inteca t with each other, Also cat took those people I order to get the story to nudge archer to come to her in order to become the ranger.

arcanavita15

Hanno goddamn autocorrect.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Autocorrupt

Miles

Oh for a second I thought you were suggesting autocorrect would be his 3rd aspect and, yeah it fits the theme

[irritantseraphim](#)

You only know the difference between a knot and a noose when there's a corpse.

Unbelievable chapter. SO MANY NEW NAMES. Hanno gaining 2 massive aspects, Apprentice turning into Mage, that fantassin gaining a Name, when I read correctly.

Oh Saucy Spectre, forging the Doom of the Dead King, to shackle him to your Doom of Liesse. Truly, a sacrifice to make right the mistakes you made.

Dome Zasrekh

My understanding is that in this story, if someone wants to do a preplanned sacrifice, it turns out differently. (Mostly). I don't think she will become a jailer (hoping we get the bard and dk both!) And I really hope at the End Cat will give up her grudge and forgive her.

Kletanio

Although I'm sure Archer has some plans to help encourage Cat. Who knows, maybe she'll trick Cat and Akua into meeting each other somewhere and then getting Hierophant to lock the doors until they can be sensible adults.

"Indrani insisted that this is how courtship was traditionally practiced in Refuge."

"And you believed her?"

"Not this time, no."

jamesc9

> "Not this time, no."

Oh Massego, you are becoming wise in your old age.

mavant

Akua is Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah. She can't be forgiven, she knows she can't be forgiven, but if she repents to the last, knowing that it won't earn her forgiveness... Perhaps she will be forgiven anyway.

Rey d`Tutto

One who is Unforgiven may always Atone.

Xinci

Hmm, guess that kind of consolidates Hanno's role in the Age of Order, and how it's age where Evil is leading. Also brings to mind the Tyrant's comment to Amadeus on his plans, along with Tariqs thoughts on the weighing of a soul. It's the moments themselves that matter, just as much as a victory at a given point as those victories are transient. So every time he struggles against all odds to save people he provides value for Above, quite possibly more than he would have otherwise, so probably a win in their book of contingencies

Feels vaguely like Amadeus's patterns are still in the Name, but Akua said it fairly well, the Calamities just made a new groove, they didn't destroy all of what it could be when they acted like they did.

Its quite nice to see more mage actions from Akuas perspective, helps see more of the rules of such acts even if they are few. A

dual chain holds much use, but we shall see who can bear it and how well the power invested shall measure up.

I am honestly pretty impressed the Dead King basically made a replication ghoul, I wonder how efficient the process is.

Alex

Save, Undo, what's next? Copy Paste?

badatgames2911

DELETE

[Liliet](#)

Load.

Cheetah724

That's Recall.

Sam

If we're going with this: if you draw a straight line through "Z" and "S" on a standard QWERTY keyboard, the next letter is "E", and Ctrl+E is often search, which is pretty much what Recall already is.

mavant

Merge. Rebase. Cherry pick. Diff. Patch.

Juff

Typo Thread:

two list > two lists
ends all > end all
spring leaning. > spring cleaning.
balance on > balanced on
be beleaguered > her beleaguered
sorcerers > sorceress (occurs twice)
as he true > as the true
forced revealed > force revealed
requested of him, > requested of it,
spell tool > spell took
scabbard as > scabbard, and as
javelin puncture > javelin punctured
as Akua watched > Akua watched
it craved > it carved
have trust > have to trust
A heartbeat > A heartbeat
to metallic > two metallic

crenelled > crenellated
He was kept > He kept
tramping > trampling
save her land > saved her
crumbling > crumpling
one chosen > once chosen
priests could > priests who could
heroes one > heroes on
Ashur where > Ashur when
to tremble > to trembling
master over death > mastery over death

badatgames2911

So fucking good. Im good with Hannos name, and nim is quickly movin up my list of named. Was that a new Grizzled Fantassin i saw? I love that just being near Hierophant makes Saipan op. Were do you go from Mage? Sorcerer Supreme!!? Lets gooo.

Gotta love that archer is schmooving twords the main plot

Sun Dog

Zeze has expressed to Cat his bottomless contempt for Ashuran mages, worse than Jacquinites, they're good at their specialty but also workmen who wield magic as a tool to do highly specific things. If you aren't exploring the deeper truths of reality, trying to apotheosis your way out of the cage, do you even count as a spellcaster?

Not a shock exposure to him would broaden Saipan's horizons a little.

badatgames2911

So cats gonna marry the two gods who have been enemies for a king time, simultaneously unmaking both of them, wait ive heard that one before ... And shes actually a priest this time too!

So Kadabra over here helping Lady Ubuu make the rings, and shes not even in her final form yet wtf thats op above def workin hard to make a counter to Hierophant like bruh.

Kinda suprised we haven't seen more NEW named come out if this ngl but its still cool to see mr thrice drowned get one.

Why does Nim have the best scenes with all the heros, first the Knight Errant and now White Knight, this girl over here making new heros left and right one more time and ima get suspicious her last aspect is *Knight*

dadycoool

Denying Yara the one thing she wants forever, while turning her into the Prison Guard for Nussy? That's great, especially how it was entirely Indrani and Ubu's actions and fault.

"Thrice drowned"? I feel like I should remember who that is and I'm a little sad that I've forgotten him.

Nim's tendency to empower knights is uncanny.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

IIRC the "Thrice Drowned" person is among the side-est of side-characters, appearing fairly rarely and not usually being the focus for long. They (nb) are best known to me for meeting Cat and immediately flirting with her, and for the scene where that happened being the one where we're informed that the uglier a fantassin's clothing is, color-scheme-wise, the more of a badass they've proven themselves to be. Mx Thrice Drowned's clothing was already positively HIDEOUS when they first appeared, so I'm not too surprised that they eventually came into a Name.

dadycool

I THOUGHT Hanno's mental note about how bad the outfit was sounded like someone Cat met before. It was when she showed up at some place where Hanno had activated some uber-wards and we got a lot of exposition regarding how she was handling the war.

ohJohn

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2020/01/28/chapter-6-equivalent/>

Captain Raphael (at the time) Twice-Drowned of the Ardeni Guard. After drowning on his own blood in this chapter, that makes it Thrice.

Cat called his Naming exactly 2 years ago (irl) to the DAY (6.6 was published on 2020-01-28, this chapter on 2022-01-28):

"Someone to keep an eye on, I decided. Survive enough scraps by the skin of your teeth, these days, and a Name might not be too far ahead."



Earl of Purple

Their own blood. Captain Raphael has always been referred to by gender neutral pronouns, even when they were flirting with Cat.

ohJohN

ugh, I knew that and still totally boofed it, my b

(I got the preposition wrong too: "drowning *in their* own blood")

Mirror Night

I mean it also works as conclusion given the resolution for Winter King and Summer Queen.

dadycoool

Well, once again you managed to write an exceptional chapter. It's very fitting that this series of interludes is called "Legends", because it is legendary. So many grand things are happening, none of them detracting from any of the others, and they all feel organic, natural to their setting.

Also, I was totally expecting Akua to gain a Name while she was forging the new rings, but her only needing Mage for temperature control works too.

beleester

The Black Knight really exemplifies the reformed Legions. Professional, disciplined, someone who wins not by being the strongest villain but by having the best army, able to survey the entire battlefield and know exactly what to do. And she doesn't die as long as her chain of command survives, which is just awesomely symbolic for someone who believes institutions matter more than people.

Nim is a latecomer to the series, but she's really doing Amadeus proud.

letouriste

Yep, she's great!
For an orc she's also really expressive.

Darkening

Ogre, not orc. And rrrally, I think it's less that ogres aren't very expressive and more that *Hune* just wasn't very expressive.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

IIRC there's a passing mention in narration from an ogre's perspective (forget whom, or which chapter) that being stoic and inexpressive is a trained behavior among ogres who have dealings with non-ogres, because seeing normal-sized

expressions on really big faces gives an exaggerated impression to members of the smaller races.

[Yamageddon](#)

Ogre!

[Rick Kerrigan](#)

What a chapter. Thanks for taking the time it took to pull this out and polish it!

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I've been collecting Akua's many nicknames, both Archer's names for her and those of my fellow readers, and hopefully I'll remember to release my list when the story is complete. I almost missed one a chapter or two ago and had to go back for it when I saw this chapter's addition.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Ubua. Still love that insight to Masego's thoughts. I'm interested.

[sintonir](#)

So, did anyone notice a beautiful detail: The White Knight coming into his Name because of his encounter with The Black Knight? Really symbolic, I think, especially because it was actually positive encounter: you would expect White Knight coming into Name after (or during) some fight with Black one. And still a lot of "classic" details: White Knight might be helping Black Knight, but in this encounter he was in some sense "defeated" by her, because in his final attempt to help she pushed his hand aside and said she didn't need it.

Kojo

What great way to show the end of the Age of wonders by having the soon to be White knight desperately try to revive the Black Knight. Truly amazing work EE.

Miles

I love that this is how they bring in the new age.

Whatever happens next every major Heto has cooperated side by side with the major Villains to stop a common enemy.

This is a huge change from the way Cat was being treated by the local heroes in books 1 and 2.

Squeamish

So it has to be bard and dead king that get chained together right? EE Wouldn't hurt us by doing that to a character we like... right?

ninegardens

It's DK chained to a series of jailors that take one month shifts.

IT sucks, but the pays good, and someone has to do it.

Geez- why is the story being so melodramatic? It's not like anyone said ONE person has to take the job. Did we think that this story runs on drama and narrative or someth-

...

Oh no.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Again.

Literal LOL!

Glyph

We now know all of Nim's Aspects, but what is the difference between Delegate and Commission? They both seem to grant her the ability to project her mind/soul into a subordinate's body, temporarily possessing them.

Darkening

I believe Nim said that it was a combination of multiple aspects that lets her do the full mind transfer thing, not just one. So both aspects probably have their own things they do, and it's the two combined that let her possess people.

Miles

I wonder if that's intended to be a retcon. Cause otherwise they're redundant aspects.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Delegate gives her power, Commission allows her control?

RivetedReader

"I'd do it again," her friend said.

I loved this – super powerful line – and the use of the words "her friend".

SuitorShooter

I don't know if it's hilarious or sickening that literally every commander so far is like 'I hate feeding my troops into this meat grinder but we have to for Calernia to survive', meanwhile Nim is all 'How many auxiliaries can I feed into this meatgrinder so that the Legions are the last Praesi army standing.'

jamesc9

How about both, which I suspect is common among people how spend a lot of time near death: doctors and war-time soldiers.

Someperson

So Hanno is the White Knight again. But better than last time. Not that he was bad at being the White Knight before but now he's better!

I didn't exactly expect that but in retrospect I'm not surprised. The only other Names that'd fit Hanno would just end up being a paraphrase of "White Knight." And while the gods of this 'verse may have some problems they do know how to call a spade a spade.

Black Knight using commission to stay alive was really cool tbh.

Archer saving Akua is simultaneously very in-character for Indrani who dgaf about some fancy "strategic concerns" when her friends are in danger and oddly heartwarming.

If the Mage doesn't wind up as the Archmage after the war I will eat my largely proverbial hat.

Those Autumn shackles are a bittersweet ending in the making, although Akua being the one shackled seems a shade too heavily foreshadowed for it to be what actually ends up happening, imo.

Regardless, the Bard seems to have gotten what she wanted because the Mantle of Autumn is no longer a route of defeat that Neshamah might be willing to accept. I do wonder if she expected Akua would try and reforge the Crown.

Darkening

I, could see Cat taking one of the shackles I suppose. Honestly, with Hanno acting as her enforcer will she need personal ability to sling night and name powers around? Still rather unpleasant.

Someperson

Cat is gonna have to face the fact that she literally Named herself the Warden and then made plans to seal the Hidden Horror in a duel, at some point.

But will she be stuck as Nessie's Warden for the rest of her very long life, or will her friends put a stop to her tendency to keep falling on her own sword in a villainous facsimile of heroic sacrifice? Find out next time on A Practical Guide to Evil!

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I actually expect the Power of Friendship to prevail.
EE best metawriter!

Crash

Couple chapters back I made a joke about gift shopping and the Bard.

Akua is very proactive, eh?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Again, thank you, EE.
Imma gonna read the next chapter now.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I lied. Re read left this thread.
"I need a Named mage," Akua said.
And she got a Named named Mage.
Damn

Chapter 64: Gehenna

"In war you must avoid fighting strength and instead attack weakness. Therefore, an army evenly mediocre cannot be attacked."

– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

"You know," I said, "given that the first part of this plan was literally going to Hell, I kind of figured that the trouble we'd run into would actually be Hell-related."

Masego cocked his head to the side.

"Technically speaking," he began, and I spared him a glare.

"Don't you fucking start," I warned him. "Not when I'm looking at what appears to be a *hanged skeleton*."

The five of us were standing in a village, which would have had me rather curious if it weren't currently abandoned and on fire. Once you'd seen one burning village you'd seen all of them, really. Still, worrying as it was that we'd been in the Serenity for nearly a quarter hour now and the only sign of life we'd seen was an empty village set ablaze, I was rather more concerned by the other thing we'd found. There was a nice old oak in the middle of town, one I was looking at, and someone had seen fit to tie a noose to the tallest branch and hang a skeleton from it.

"Perhaps it committed a crime," Masego suggested.

"She, by the looks of those hips," the Concocter noted from my left.

I narrowed my eye, poking the skeleton with the tip of my staff. She rattled a little, but remained defiantly not undead.

"You told me the dead always rise in the Serenity," I called out to Ranger.

It was one of the many ways the Hidden Horror had turned the Hell into his personal fiefdom, Hye Su had explained. The afterlife here was service in Keter's armies, marching through the gate into Creation. Not all souls remained in the Dead King's grasp, but many did. It was his most regular source of Binds, the ensouled undead used as officers for his armies.

"They should," she replied. "Something must have happened."

"She *used* to be undead," Hierophant said. "It's why the bones are still holding together, the necromancy fused them."

"But she wasn't destroyed," the Silver Huntress grunted. "There's nothing broken enough to break the spell."

Which was the part that actually worried me, I mused. Any idiot could hang a skeleton, particularly if it wasn't moving at the time. When you did it and it appeared to *work*, though, that was a different story. Something eldritch was afoot and this was a bad place to face it. The Hells were not the same as Creation, rules were not as firm here. And when you were powerful enough they could even be changed: how else would even a powerful mage like Dead King have been able to rule a Hell for so long? Which meant that somewhere in the Serenity an entity was loose that was capable of bending those rules. Possibly even when Neshamah was fighting them, which was a mite unsettling. Who or what would be able to fight the Dead King like this in his own private kingdom? Considering this place didn't look like it'd been burning for

more than an hour, we might just be close enough to learn the answer to that.

Joy.

"We're not going to learn more from this place," I finally said. "Fire's burnt through too much. Ranger, have you figured out where we are?"

"About an hour south of the nine-hundredth stele," she replied. "We crossed through further west than we should have."

She paused, glancing at Masego.

"Wekesa would not have made that mistake."

"If only he were still with us," Masego agreed. "If only you had helped make it so in any way."

Ranger's face tightened. She was not, I suspected, used to being spoken to like that even when she loosed her little barbs – not from people she didn't consider equals. Only Hierophant had not lied or insulted her in any way, for all the tacit contempt behind his words, so she was struggling to find a reason to be offended. She wasn't used to dealing with Zeze at all, I thought. Not the way Sabah and Scribe had been. She'd not stayed with the Calamities long enough to be. Much as I would have enjoyed continuing to listen at Ranger continuing to fail at winning a battle Masego was unaware he was fighting, the sight around us was making it clear we needed to get a move on.

There were things going on in the Serenity I'd not anticipated, so I was in need of answers.

"So which is the closest gate?" I asked.

While there was only one Hellgate in Keter, it was not a simple tunnel through. The Dead King had, over millennia, tied the portal to several gates spread across the Serenity. Though the other end in Creation could only be tied to one Serenity gate at a time, there were at least nine of these spread across the Hell that Ranger knew of.

"It's the Writhing Palace," Ranger said. "The Banquet Hall is a lot less defended but it's at least an hour more: there's woods and a river in the way."

Fuck. I'd heard that name once before, when I came to Keter for the talks, and thought it was not somewhere I ever wanted to visit. I should have known better than to tempt the Gods that way, I brooded.

"I don't suppose anybody's got a drink?" I glumly said. "I'm going to need one if we're going to a place called the godddamn *Writhing Palace*."

"I do, actually," the Concocter surprised, going rifling through her haversack.

She got out a small crystal flask with something that looked like water in it, though after she handed it to me when I took out the cork the smell of strong liquor assaulted my nostrils. I took a pull and almost choked, eyes watering.

"Is that moonshine?" I croaked out.

"It is," Cocky proudly smiled. "I made it myself."

I took another pull from the flask, having gotten used to the strong taste.

"You're a delight," I told her, "and now my favourite person in this band of five."

Ranger took a step closer, reaching for the flask, but I moved it away from her hand.

"We ask," I chided, "before we take."

"No," the Concocter immediately said, smiling beatifically.

When I turned to have a look at Ranger's face, though it wasn't irritation I found. She looked like she'd been slapped in the face, I thought, or perhaps had seen a ghost. And it was on me that her eyes rested, not her former pupil. She withdrew as if burned, striding ahead of us.

"Come on," Hye Su gruffly said. "Let's get this over with."

I corked the flask again, handing it back to Cocky with a murmur of thanks, and settled into a thoughtful frown. If it was a ghost she'd been looking for, well, there was only the one we shared.

And I wasn't quite sure how I felt about Ranger seeing my father in me.

—

Deep down part of me had expected something about the Serenity to be fantastical and disturbing, but by all indications the Hell was one of the single most boring places to ever exist.

It was all fields and forests, with occasional river or dirt road passing through. I barely saw any animals, but there had to be a few around else the people here wouldn't be able to clothe themselves. In a way, it was the pinnacle of the Dead King's

achievements that his personal Hell was something so violently unremarkable. It was a land without dangers or excitements, a seemingly endless sprawl of pretty little villages without fear or famine. And it was *only* villages. Not a town to be seen, much less a city, and the two villages we'd passed through had shown only a few different trades. The Serenity had been carefully crafted to remain forever pleasant and stagnant, not a soul from it ever interested in leaving.

If we'd had more time, I would have studied this place with fascination. What had it taken for Neshamah to turn a Hell full of devils into this pastoral dream? How had he shaped his people into being so utterly content, growing and pruning them over centuries as an immortal gardener would a tree? Though horror lurked behind what the Dead King had done here, I itched to learn the methods. There'd never been a ruler like Neshamah before, not really, and likely there never would again. That was something to be fervently sought, but when he passed the Dead King would take with him a unique mind. One that had learned secrets deeps and strange, for all its malevolence.

The boredom ceased about the moment we found the first corpse by the road.

"Those bones have been exposed to the elements for decades," Masego said. "This used to be undead."

And now the skeleton by the dirt path was, by all appearances, laid to rest. Once more without a mark on it to explain how that had come to be. *Even Light would leave traces*, I thought. *Did something dispel the necromancy keeping it moving?*

"It's too close to the road for it to have been coincidence," the Silver Huntress said.

"Agreed," I grunted. "Whatever's responsible for it collapsing was going up the road."

Which Ranger had said led to the Writhing Palace. The entity responsible for this would likely beat us to the place, which while simplifying getting to the bottom of this was just a bit unsettling. We still had no idea what had caused any of this or why. We kept going up the road, finding at first another few lone corpses and then soon entire companies of them. All prone, all without marks.

"Someone was sending troops after whoever walked up that road," I frowned.

And it'd been more than one person doing that, as it turned out.

"There's tracks all over the fields," Ranger told me. "At least a hundred people heading towards the palace, not all at the same time."

"Ominous," I noted.

We hurried, for lack of anything else to do, and followed the path at a pace just short of a run. I found it more difficult to tell time here – the Serenity had no true dawn or dusk I could measure myself against – but it could not have been an hour by the time it began. It was a pulse I felt. Steady like a heartbeat, rippling through the air like a drum. It battered away at all of us, and though goddesses riding my mind for years had hardened me I was not the only one here. Masego and Ranger seemed more irritated than truly affected, but the other two were looking dazed.

"Shit," I muttered.

"Warden?" Ranger asked.

"I've felt this before," I said. "I know who it is."

"Who?" Alexis said, tone disbelieving.

"The Hierarch," I told them. "Though his aspect didn't reach quite this far last time I encountered it."

In Rochelant I'd need to reach the plaza where he was before it was this strong. Now we couldn't even see him yet and it was like a tide in the air. That was a small thing, though, compared to the revelation that Anaxares the Diplomat was for some fucking godforsaken reason *in the Serenity*. How? Last I'd heard he should have been wrestling the Choir of Judgement, and stubborn as the madman was I didn't see him winning that tussle. He hadn't at the start, and unlike him the angels could not tire. How could he have- no, that didn't matter. Not really. The particular method was irrelevant in the greater scheme of things. What mattered was why *he* was here.

We were too late in the game for it to be an accident.

"I had thought him imprisoned by the Choir of Judgement for his blasphemy," the Silver Huntress slowly said.

"More like imprisoning with," the Concocter replied, sounding amused, "but you're not wrong."

"How kind of you to say so," Alexis acidly said.

"It's an interesting trick," Ranger mused. "Something like projecting an abstract kind of domain, if I had to guess. It'll be tiresome to deal with inside a place like the Serenity."

I tuned them out, closing my eye and forcing myself to think. An obvious answer was there to the second question I'd asked myself, but I forced myself to consider others. And yet as I went through one possibility after another, discarding the impossible and the unlikely, I found that only one remained standing. The Intercessor had done this. She'd done it because she had a use for the Hierarch's presence here, even though I could not be sure what it was yet. It had to be the Wandering Bard, because it wasn't anyone on my side that'd done this and there was no one left that could screw with angels and wasn't aside from Yara of Nowhere.

What was the play here? Obviously Hierarch was poison to a place like the Serenity, so it might be the Intercessor was trying to poison the Dead King's bolthole should he lose on Creation. On the other hand, in one of the conversations I'd had with her she had pretty convincingly sold me on the Dead King being stuck in the Serenity as him being defeated. 'Sealed Evil in a box' wasn't a story that ended well for the Evil in question in the long term, she'd not been lying about that. She could have been lying in a broader sense, sure, but that was a rabbit hole not worth going down.

If the Intercessor meant to cut off the Dead King's retreat and believed there was nothing he could do against such a stroke, then she could have done this years ago. She hadn't. Which meant she was after something else. Aside from cutting his retreat, what was she- oh. Oh, fuck.

"It's actually that simple, isn't it?" I murmured, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

There was nothing aside from cutting off the Dead King's retreat, because that was the whole fucking point. She was making sure Neshamah knew that if he didn't win in Creation, he was done. No way out, no path of retreat. The Intercessor wanted us to be fighting against a cornered animal with nothing left to lose. Someone capable of *anything* so long as it bought him even a heartbeat more of survival.

"Catherine?" Masego asked. "You're talking to yourself again. Are we still headed to the Writhing Palace?"

I grimaced. It was the closest gate, and I needed to get a finger on the pulse on what the Hierarch was after. Occasionally violent madman the Bellerophon might be, he wasn't necessarily an enemy. Not unless his remarkably even pissing match with the Seraphim had changed him too much.

"We are," I answered. "Prepare your minds, it'll get worse the more we approach."

At least, I mused, I finally knew what had happened to the undead we'd been finding. Necromancy keeping soldiers fighting in a war that hadn't been voted on in the service of a tyrant? The Hierarch would see that as so furiously intolerable they'd drop down the moment they entered his aspect's reach.

And so for once, I smiled, someone had popped up that was scarier for the Dead King than me.

—

The Writhing Palace was a ruin.

I could see the bones of what it had been meant to be, a boast as to the power of the man who'd made it. Curved pillars of ivory rose like rib bones from the grass, their shadows cutting across the green. Their shape drew the eye, outlining the belly of a great beast ending in a head that was a now-shattered throne room. No single stone was left unbroken, as if someone had wanted to take a hammer to the very principle of royalty, and among the ruin someone had started a fire. Anaxares the Diplomat, a too-thin man in tattered beggar's robes, roasted a slab of meat over an open flame in the wreckage of the Dead King's throne room. He used a snapped gold scepter as a spike and sat on the shattered back of the throne, his burning grey eyes wreathed in smoke.

He looked like the death of crowns, feasting over their demise.

Yet what gave us pause when we approached was not the sight of him but instead what lay around. The Writhing Palace had not had walls of stone, Ranger had told me. It was a boast, after all. Between the ribs and the throne room of pure white marble, it had been a great palace made entirely of devils. Thousands and thousands of them, of all shapes and sizes, each interlocked and forever writhing as they remained frozen in place by the unbroken will of Trismegistus King. Or so it had been. Now the Hierarch had come, the Republic's howling anger made into a man, and the spell had broken. The devils had broken into courts, some huddling around fires and others assembling into mobs as other stood above them and gave speeches in the dark tongue.

Some of them, I gathered from a closer look, were attempting to organize elections.

The others pulled closer to me as we approached, save for Ranger — whose pride lay in indifference. There were humans in the throng, I eventually saw. There were so few of them compared to the devils that I had not noticed. They sat with the Hell's first inhabitants, speaking animatedly as they shared fires. No mobs were howling for blood, but I knew why already: we'd walked past a forest turned into gallows as we approached, humans and devils swinging from branches. The anger of the people had been sated, at least for now. I could feel the song of the Hierarch's madness

turned into an aspect, the low and deep thrum that slithered down your veins. It would wake again in time, hungry for further ropes and necks.

None sat with the Hierarch or stood in our way as we approached him. We got a few curious looks from devils, those that had eyes anyhow, but our presence seemed of little interest to the throng. We weren't even worth curiosity. As I limped over broken marble, the light of the fire flickering ahead of me, I paused to glance at the rest.

"I'll handle him," I said.

Ranger and the Huntress both looked as if they wanted to argue, but I turned my back before they could. Neither dared to cross me by following anyway. I slipped past the shattered throne, fingers trailing what had once been beautiful white marble and was now jagged remains, and reached the fire's warmth. The Hierarch's eyes rose to me, the man looking neither surprised nor unsurprised. Should I wait for his invitation I would still be standing come Last Dusk, so I found a jutting shard of the broken dais and sat, staff leaning against my shoulder as I warmed my hands against the fire. The Hierarch's madness battered away at my mind like a tide. Rolling in, rolling out.

"Catherine Foundling," Anaxares the Diplomat greeted me.

He did not name me a queen. I had not expected him to.

"Hierarch," I replied. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Tyranny Knows No Borders, For They Are False Inventions," the Hierarch informed me. "May Any Who Would Constrain The People Be Devoured By Bees."

"That'd take a lot of bees," I noted.

Those had mouths, I figured. Probably. It seemed like the kind of thing they would have, though I had never made a deep study of the creatures.

"Or a lot of time," the Bellerophan thinly smiled, "and it comes easier than bees."

I snorted, feeling his aspect filling the air. With every breath I felt as if I were drinking it in, the heady brew of revolt and rebellion. The thrown torch and the howl, the snap of broken chains and the flinch of the tyrant. There was a reason I'd never quite managed to hate the Hierarch, for all that he was ruin on near all he touched. Some part of me had never been convinced he was *wrong*.

"Yet we never seem to have enough of it," I shrugged.

I glanced at the slab of meat he was over-roasting. Sheep, by the looks of it.

"You going to share?" I asked.

"Are you yet a tyrant?" he replied.

"I'll abdicate before the year is out," I informed him. "Or die."

"Either is an acceptable outcome," the Hierarch conceded.

And yet he did not, I could not help but notice, offer me a piece. *Republicans*, I amusedly thought. I was still wearing a crown, after all. Why would he offer me anything at all?

"Thought you'd still be having words with Judgement," I idly said. "Are you done with the Seraphim?"

He frowned.

"They have escaped their sentencing for now," the Hierarch told me. "The peddler leant a hand."

My eye narrowed.

"The Wandering Bard," I said.

He shrugged.

"It has many names, all but one a lie," the Hierarch said. "I care not for the masks it wears – all that's left true is the duty."

"To keep the Game of the Gods going," I frowned.

"To keep the animals in the cage," Anaxares said, baring his teeth. "To rattle the cage when we get rowdy, until we remember how to kneel."

"She's doing a lot more than that, these days," I told him. "There's a war outside, Hierarch. One the League is fighting in, even your Republic. I don't know what it is she wants, but it's not for us to win again Keter."

"There's only one war, Catherine Foundling," the Bellerophan replied. "The lash and the back. Everything else is noise."

I leaned forward, smoke licking at my face.

"And which is she?"

"A queen's question," Anaxares the Diplomat scorned. "You think those wielding the lash are freer because they deal out the suffering. That's the trap, Catherine Foundling. The promise that

you get to hold the whip instead of feel it, that there is no fairness but you can be on the *right* side of the unfair."

Grey eyes met mine, unblinking.

"But it's slavery too, to spend your live lashing backs," the Hierarch said. "Just a different kind, and you can't escape it any more than they can."

My fingers clenched, the unclenched. What would it be like, I wondered, to be the Intercessor for a hundred years? To never be quite for Above or Below, to always be sent to put your finger on the scale whenever a great Good or a great Evil was to be born. I forced myself to think of that, and then turn a hundred years into a thousand. Two, three, *ten*. What would it do to someone, to hold that Role? When I'd been young, barely the Squire, I had fought in the ranks at the Battle of Three Hills. I'd gone through Helikean mercenaries that day as if I were a sickle reaping wheat, until the killing didn't even feel like killing anymore. It had just been motion, a limbs moving to accomplish a chore. So what would it be like, to lash backs for ten thousand years?

It wouldn't be anything anymore, I thought. Not a lash, not backs, not people or pain. All that would be left was motion and the tiredness of the hand.

Still warming my hands by the fire, I shivered. A long silence stretched out, the Bellerophan disinclined to break it.

"That war outside," I said, "they could use you. You're still Hierarch of the Free Cities, they haven't tried to take it. You could go to them."

And if he did, his mere presence would tip the war. It wouldn't be as powerful on Creation as in here, his aspect, but oh it would still be something to be feared. Bones dropping dead for the second time, Binds revolting against the chains. And Revenants I could only guess, but it was the kind of guessing that brought a wolfish smile to my face.

"I did not choose it," Anaxares the Diplomat said.

"*They* chose you," I retorted.

Elected, even. That was something even he was bound to respect.

"I thought that, one," the Hierarch faintly smiled. "That I had been forced into the prison, that I was forced to hold the lash even if fought never to wield it."

"But?"

"It is only a word," Anaxares the Diplomat softly said. "In the end, for all that men call it a title and a Name it is only a word."

Gold dripping into the grass, the thin man took the broken scepter out of the flame and the slab of lamb with it, blowing on the roasted meat before he took a bite out of it. The juicy fat streamed down his chin in rivulets as he chewed, swallowing and only then offering me a hard smile.

"They can call me Hierarch all they want," he said, "but I will make of it what I want, and that path does not lead back to the League of Free Cities."

I leaned back from the fire, the warmth on my hands having turned scalding.

"So where *does* it lead you?" I asked.

He laughed in my face.

"There is only one war, Catherine Foundling," Anaxares the Diplomat said. "And I will fight it wherever it is to be found. Here, there, everywhere."

He leaned in, the grey smoke the very same shade as his eyes. As if he were it, or it him.

"We are all of us free, or none. I will suffer no compromise in this."

And I saw it, in that moment, what he was to become. Like a trail of fire, a spirit of fury and revolt that would bloom where chains were tightened until men choked. He would walk and ashes would follow in his wake, but tyrants would fall and even Choirs would flinch in the face of the Hierarch's indignation. A madman to the end, until a death as bloody as it was inevitable found him. There was, I thought, a terrible kind of beauty to it. To burning yourself at the stake of your own ideals. It was not something I could admire, not truly, but perhaps it was something I could respect. I reached for my staff and rose slowly, leaning against it.

"Good luck, Hierarch," I told him, and found I meant it.

There was nothing pleasant about a fire sweeping through a forest, but sometimes it was necessary nonetheless.

"All tyrants," the Hierarch told me, "have their day of reckoning. Even you."

I smiled.

"But not today," I said.

"But not today," he agreed.

It was as much of goodbye as I'd get from him, so I left it at that.

—

For all the unsettling sight that the Writhing Palace had turned into, leaving it proved almost laughably easy. The gate was unattended, a circle of stone left untouched amidst the ivory pillars, and we barely got any looks thrown our way when Masego woke it up. With no one contesting our connection to the other end in Creation, it was only a matter of stepping through.

And just like that, I stood in the Hall of the Dead.

The same great hall where the Dead King had hosted me for meals and talks when we negotiated before the beginning of our war. There was no sight of the elaborate decorations of that day in the great hall, every part of it having been stripped bare. It was no longer a throne room now, instead serving as a gateway and nothing else for all that in many ways it was the heart of the Dead King's power. Once we had all crossed and the five of us stood alone in the cavernous hall, the Hellgate quieted and Hierophant's eyes turned to it.

"Will it work?" I asked.

"Father proved that it could," Masego replied.

We couldn't close the Hellgate. Only an angel's fury could do that, the *tabula rasa* effect undoing the cut in Creation that was a Greater Breach, but there were other ways. Akua had once opened a Greater Breach in the heartlands of Callow, and it wasn't an angel that'd fixed the mess. It had been the Warlock, who had redirected the gate from the inside: instead of leading from a Hell to Creation, he had warped it so instead it would lead from a Hell to another Hell. When I'd asked of Hierophant a way to cut the Dead King off from the Serenity, he'd offered me a solution based on the same principles as his father's work.

We all gave him a wide breath as he began to cast, beginning with words but quickly slipping into the traced runes of High Arcana. Even Ranger looked spellbound as she watched him work. See, as best as I understood it Wekesa the Warlock had been able to pull some truly ridiculous shit because he had an aspect that allowed him to sift through the Hells to find whatever he might need. It was the kind of trick that would allow a mage to, say, link two Hells by sorcery without the use of an artefact. Masego did not have that. What he did have, though, was the convergence of three things.

First he had spent about a year of his life ruling over a severed shard of Arcadia made into a pocket realm. Second, he had Witnessed the Grey Pilgrim miraculously bring down a star on Hainaut in a way that defied Creational laws about how distance worked. And third, this very day he had brought us into the Serenity from a broken place at the junctions of Creation, the shattered Twilight Ways and the Hells. So as Masego's voice rose, speaking words in the mage tongue, he proved one more to be one of the greatest mages of the age by threading all three of those things together.

The Hellgate into the Serenity still led there. The Dead King himself had added a step to the crossing by linking it to several exit gates, though, and Hierophant modified that step. Instead of a simple nothing, the step was made into a place: the very same nothing we had used to cross into the Serenity. Which also happened to be an endless void, unless you'd made something to stand on. Which you couldn't in the moment before crossing the gate and being in that void. It was a dead end which wasn't technically a dead end, a nasty trick played on one of the Hidden Horror's greatest works.

And by the satisfied on Masego's smile as he finished the last syllable of the spell, this was just the beginning of him getting even with the Dead King.

—

The spire would be where it all ended.

We'd returned to Creation through the gate in the Hall of the Dead, itself built out of the crypts beneath the towering structure, but it would not be in that throne room we'd find him. Besides, we'd not actually gone through Serenity to take a swing at Neshamah: that was what the crown and the sword were for. Leading a band of five like mine against the Hidden Horror wasn't going to accomplish anything except corpses — which wouldn't even have the decency to stay still for long. I had set rather more practical aims for our little venture, deciding instead to go for a different sort of prize.

This entire spire was, after all, the Dead King's last redoubt. Out there in the inner city, armies and Named would be fighting desperately through streets and palaces to reach this place and deliver the knockout blow to the armies of the dead. Only it wasn't going to be that easy, because we weren't really going to win the battle for Keter. I had no doubt in my mind that troops and Named would reach the black spire, but the battle itself? We weren't even trying to win it, not really. All our offensives had been about getting enough people at the end of the line that we could destroy the Hidden Horror and end this war. In other words, our defeat was certain if the battle went for long enough. It was, in the end, simple mathematics.

We had neither the numbers nor the strength to really pull out a win in Keter. It was always going to be about Neshamah himself. Which he knew, of course, and would have prepared for. From his perspective, all he needed to do to win was survive until everyone else was dead. Which meant the black spire was going to be an unbreachable den of horrors, the kind of pit of despair that even Named despaired in the face of, but that wasn't even the first hurdle to actually getting to Neshamah.

That would be the wards.

The Dead King had fuck all to win by actually fighting us, after all. Sure, an old monster like him would scythe through Named and men like they were wheat but why take the risk that one of those lucky kids would have that one aspect that'd ruin his day? He was only hours away from winning, but since I'd returned Below's stories that was one of the single most dangerous places for a villain to be. So his first move wasn't going to be bringing down the sky on our heads or twisting time so we all died of fever as babies or sending out a demon riding on another demon's shoulders. It was going to be the most comprehensive set of wards that Creation had ever seen, fired up at their strongest and closed so tight not even a fly could sneak through.

If he could, Neshamah would stay behind a kingdom's worth of closed gates and magical barriers until there wasn't a living soul left in Keter. That was the kind of villain the Dead King was, when you cut off all the dross and the pageantry: most terrifyingly practical coward in the history of Calernia.

Now, while we couldn't sure that throwing enough heroes at these wards would result in way through it was actually a pretty decent bet. No matter how clever Neshamah was, Creation would nudge things so that the fight for the existence of Calernia didn't end with increasingly desperate knocks on a closed door. The price, though, would be *atrocious*. Names worked on weight, I had learned over the years, and sometimes that was a double-edged sword. Almost every Named on the continent was united in fighting the Dead King, which while a powerful story also meant that by fate's unspoken rules the Dead King had equal weight to a continent's worth of Named.

Overcoming that kind of opponent's foolproof defence just wouldn't be done without massive casualties, no matter how heavily providence put its finger to the scale. And the hard truth was that we just couldn't afford that many deaths when there were sure to be even harsher defences waiting further inside. That meant we needed another way to get those wards down, and that was where my little band came in. We had a way in through the back, and instead of using it on a futile swing at Neshamah's neck I had decided to spend our surprise on letting *everyone else* into the spire. We were going to destroy those ward

anchors to collapse them, preferably in a way that didn't end up blowing us up.

Our plan had admittedly been somewhat more complicated by the fact that none of us, not even Ranger, had any idea where those ward anchors were. Thankfully, there was a solution for that: wait long enough that the Dead King would be firing up that magic as strongly as he could to keep the pests out of his house. That wouldn't help any for most people, but we weren't most people. I had brought Hierophant along and he still had one glass eye that, while most famous for the light of the Summer sun still shining in it, would be of use because of the artefact it'd come from instead: a pair of spectacles that could see magic.

We didn't need to know where the Dead King's war anchors were because Masego would just follow the flow of magic back to them.

"Down," Hierophant told me.

"We're already in the crypts," I told him. "There's nothing beneath this."

He met my eye squarely.

"Down," Hierophant firmly repeated.

I sighed and conceded with a nod. That was going to be fun. Unlike the last time I'd come to the Hall of the Dead its antechamber wasn't filled with an honour guard of Revenants, which were most probably out there killing people instead. Grim as the thought was, I was still thankful that we didn't need to fight every step out of the way after leaving the throne room.

"I don't care how good of a mage the Dead King was," I said, "war anchors need upkeep and replacement. If they're under us then there's bound to be a way to get to them."

It wasn't like Neshamah was going to do that kind of drudgework himself, so there was bound to be an access for whatever undead and Revenants ended up tasked with it.

"It'll go faster if we split to look around," Ranger said.

"It's certainly a faster way to get at least one of us killed," I affably agreed. "Counter-argument: Concocter, I know you've gone ruin raiding in the Brocelian at least once. Do you have something to find secret passages?"

"I do," she warily agreed, "but only the one bottle."

"Then Masego will need to get us as close to above those anchors as he can," I said. "It's our best shot."

Hierophant nodded absent-mindedly, looking through a wall as he did. He began walking away without a word but we didn't get far. I'd been pleasantly surprised that the Hall of the Dead and its antechamber had been deserted, but it looked like there'd been a reason for that: the entrance to the antechamber was sealed. The great bronze gates were so heavily enchanted I could feel the weight of the magic in the air.

"I can break the enchantments keeping the gates closed," Hierophant told me, "but they are tied to what appears to be an alarm ward."

"Of course they are," I muttered.

The Silver Huntress cleared her throat, eyeing Masego with that same kindly wonder all of the Refuge kids other than Indrani seemed to treat him with.

"The wall besides it," she said. "Is it also tied into the wards?"

"Not entirely," Hierophant replied after a heartbeat. "It is a grid pattern."

I hummed, realizing what Alexis was getting at and throwing her an approving look.

"Is a square in the grid large enough for a person to crawl through?" I asked.

"With some care, yes," Masego nodded. "It needed to be so that with the other magics did not saturate the stone."

The wall was stone and had other wards laid in it, but none that'd trip the alarm should they be punched through. The Silver Huntress handled the first layers by shooting Light into the square that Hierophant traced, breaking the protective enchantments, and the Concocter carefully rid us of the stone itself with careful use of an acid whose ever drop seemed to eat through inches of rock. It wasn't exactly dignified, but as soon as Cocky gave us the go-ahead we wriggled through the hole like worms and dropped unceremoniously on the other side. The hallway was empty but torches were lit there, which Masego revealed to be a trap the moment he had a look at them.

"Living flesh in the light they cast will turn the flames blue and feed into another enchantment," he told me.

Which was unfortunate, considering that pretty much the entire corridor was covered by their light. *And rubies to piglets the moment one of those turns blue a trap is triggered.*

"I can Wrest the magic, but we will have to stay together," Zeze added.

I nodded and we awkwardly clumped together to walk through the corridor so we'd stay in the light of a single torch at a time: Hierophant could only use his aspect on a single source of power at a time. There weren't any more torches in either of the corridors the spread out in a fork from here, but there were patrols of undead. Ranger had heard them coming, her hearing being ridiculously sharp even by Named standards.

"This deep there will be no Bones, only Binds," Hye Su said. "And he likes to use lesser Revenants as captains."

"We destroy even one of them and he'll know we're here instantly," I grimaced. "He's not the kind to get arrogant and think his fortress is unbreachable – he'll be actively looking for the rats that snuck past his walls, not denying they exist."

"Most illusions do not work on the dead," Hierophant said. "They do not see in a conventional sense."

"But you could fool patrols," I pressed.

He'd hidden us from the sight of undead before.

"I cannot answer as to Revenants, but certainly lesser dead," he conceded.

"Then we try that," I ordered.

And when it inevitably went wrong, hopefully we'd have enough of a head start that we got to bring down the wards before we had to fight our way out. Sometimes I wished my silver linings didn't all have streaks of blood on them, but arguably I was a few grisly murders past the right to complain about that. We ventured deeper into the enemy's belly, pressing against the wall as patrols passed by us on the way to the unseen place Masego was leading us to. It ended up being a locked and heavily warded room about a quarter hour away from the Hall of the Dead, its door hidden by an illusion that made it look like the wall continued. I chewed my lip and eyed the apparent patch of stone.

"Magic lock, you said?"

"Enchanted," Masego specified. "Almost every part of that door and wall are connected to the alarm wards. There are few secondary wards so the density is much higher than the antechamber's walls."

"So no crawling through this time," Ranger said, sounding amused.

I cocked my head to the side.

"A door's a door," I said, "but what about the floor?"

"Grid again," Zeze told me.

"So we make a tunnel," I said. "Go under the gate. Concocter, would you have enough acid?"

"No, but it is not difficult to make," she noted. "I have the means, though the variant will let out foul-smelling smoke."

Undead didn't usually have a sense of smell, so that wasn't a deal breaker.

"We try," I decided.

All things considered, it went well. We had to pick a spot near the wall to begin going through, since otherwise a patrol might walk into the hole even if it was veiled with an illusion, but aside from a tense moment when a dozen undead walked past us and a Revenant in armour lingered we got off fine. Ranger went in through, both because she volunteered and I wouldn't be all that sorry if she died. I was third, behind the Silver Huntress, and once I finished crawling out of the tight tunnel with aching shoulders I found I was standing in a bare stone room. Cocky came after me and a glance was enough to signify now was her time to shine.

She produced a bottle of what looked like golden powder, she emptied in the air – where it hovered! -before blowing on it. Fascinatingly, the powder dispersed on all sides. It whirled about the room like a scintillating storm before it began to gather in a handful of places. Streaks in the air followed what looked like air currents coming out of the hole we'd dug, which I supposed made sense since the room was otherwise sealed airtight. They also clustered on the ground, though, tracing footsteps leading to the right corner of the room but stopping shy of the corner itself. I grinned even as Masego dragged himself out of the tunnel, moaning all the while.

That'd teach him to be so damn tall, I haughtily thought.

"Looks like a hidden mechanism," I said. "Ranger?"

"I'll find it," she replied with indifferent certainty.

In her honour, after only some moving around she did. There was a faint, oily click and a stone at the junction of the walls dipped into the ground. Gears spun out of sight, the stone floor moving to open a pit going below and an iron ladder going into the dark.

"Catherine," Hierophant said.

"No, you can't stay up here," I absent-mindedly replied. "Alexis, down the hole first?"

"Shit space to use a spear, but I have a knife," the Silver Huntress conceded.

"*Catherine*," Masego repeated.

I turned to him irritated.

"What?"

"The lines of sorcery don't go deep enough below for this to be the war anchors," he said.

I froze. Wait, if this wasn't the place for the ward anchors then... The air suddenly thickened and the door leading out of the room burned around the edges. The hinges, I realized, were fusing with stone.

"Water," Ranger announced. "Water's coming up."

And above us small holes opened in the ceiling, the air shifting as what I guessed to be an invisible gas began to be released into the room. *Of course*, I grimly thought. *Of course the fucking Dead King had made a fake ward anchor room to specifically trick people who could see magic.* He'd had literal millennia to indulge every spark of paranoia that ever occurred to him.

"We need to get the Hells out of here," I growled. "Concocter out first. Yell if you see undead."

I saw from the corner of my eye that Ranger was just holding her breath, apparently unmoved at the idea of no longer having to breathe, while Masego was weaving a spell around his nose. I did the same with Night, the Silver Huntress instead pulling up cloth from under her armour. I was to be the last out, so I had a look at the trap pit and got hit with a blast of foul odour. *Gods*, I thought with a small degree of awe. What a prick the Dead King was: not only was this trap meant to drown us in a sealed room if the poison gas didn't get us first, but to add insult to injury the ancient fucker was using sewage water. It was a degree of assholishness that verged into elegance.

Ranger followed the Concocter through, the Huntress next in line, and I stood by Masego as he stared through the wall with his flesh eye closed.

"I think I've found the path to the real anchor," he murmured. "I thought it was a bleed array, but it does seem to be headed downwards in small lines. There would have to be reservoirs elsewhere in the array structure that I have not seen, but..."

"I trust you," I frankly said. "Where?"

"Close to the Hall of the Dead," Masego said. "In between the fork of corridors were first found."

I got the distinct sense that I was just now being let in on a bad joke that the Dead King had been laughing alone at for a few thousand years, which was the best sign we were on the right track I'd had all day.

"Then we double back," I said.

It wasn't that easy. I crawled out ahead of the sewage and the poison, but it was to the sight of butchered corpses strewn all over the corridor. Ranger and the Huntress had seen to the patrol handily, but we were most definitely caught. This whole thing was about to head downhill in a hurry.

"Good news," I said, "we think we know the real path to the anchors."

"Bad news?" Ranger probed.

It wasn't her first band of five.

"It's back near the Hellgate," I said.

"Which will be swarming with undead by now," the Silver Huntress grimly said.

"Look on the bright side," I said.

"Which is?" the Concocter asked.

A moment of awkward silence passed.

"I was," I admitted, "hoping one of you would have something."

—

I let loose a blast of Night that hit the ranks of the skeletons like a trebuchet stone, crushing armour and sending bones flying. Within a heartbeat the corridor was filled up again, the sea of undead pushing forward. They were packed so tight they were actually getting in each other's way, but for all that apparent stupidity I knew full well that if they ever managed to close the distance we were in a world of trouble. It'd be like standing in front of the wheel in a dam.

"Zeze?" I called out. "Tell me you're getting somewhere."

I could hear Ranger and the Huntress covering the other corridor, the once-Calamity rather enjoying herself by the sounds of it. I'd yet to see her feel threatened since the beginning of our jaunt into Keter, as if at no point she had believed she was in a mess she could not fight her way out of. Considering she'd broken into the Crown of the Dead alone several times, I wasn't even sure she was wrong.

"It is a frustrating puzzle," Masego admitted. "The solution keeps changing."

I grit my teeth and let loose another blast of Night only to find that a Revenant with a shield took the brunt of the blow. Eye narrowing, I drowned the hallway in black flame. That ought to buy me a but of time.

"So brute force it," I shouted. "Don't play the game."

"We've tried, Warden," the Concocter shouted back. "It started to melt the lock."

I was really starting to hate this place. I had before, of course, but only in a general principle kind of way. Now it was starting to get personal. I sent a blast of Night through the guttering flames, hitting blindly at the enemy, and risked a few step backs. Masego and Cocky were staring at rows of burning runes that had appeared on stone, a series of which needed to be picked to open the hidden door. What I knew about High Arcana – which this clearly was – would fill just about a parchment, if you wrote small enough, so I didn't try to tell Masego how to mage. Instead I told him how to be a thug, a subject in which my expertise knew few rivals.

It was a natural talent, humility compelled me to admit.

"We don't care about the lock," I said, "we care about the door. We'll melt the whole fucking thing if you have to. Cocky, use every drop of acid you have left. Or can make."

It wasn't like we'd ever need it more than now. I was forced to go blow up the corridor again as they got to it, but before long there were noises of triumph from the Concocter – and a sigh from Masego, who probably figured he could have beat the lock given long enough – and I retreated that way, calling for the other two to do the same. What was revealed was a set of stairs sloping downwards, large enough only for one person to pass at a time. Naturally, I put Ranger in front. Our method to get in there paid off rather quickly, as within moments of the five us beginning to make our way down there was a grind of stone against stone as the broken door behind us tried to close and the walls began to suck out the air.

It didn't do anything, since we'd blow open a hole behind us, but if this place had been sealed up it would have been lethal.

I'd figured the way down would not be long but I was wrong. After a rather straight way down at first, the stairs turned into a downwards spiral. The Silver Huntress, who held our rearguard, began to loose arrows at the pursuing undead which thankfully were as limited as us by the narrowness of the stairs. Tension would have made it hard to tell how long we made our way down if

not for the gift of the Sisters which told me the distance from dawn and dusk and allowed me to tell it was about half an hour. When we reached the bottom of the stairs in a pitch black room Masego tossed up a ball of light, revealing we stood in an antechamber.

Every surface was covered by tiles of bronze that each bore a glyph, sorcery pulsing thick in the air. *Yeah, I thought, this is the right place.* Gates stood in our way to the room beyond but Masego seemed in a good mood.

"The anchors are on the other side," he told me. "Not all of them, but the most important ones."

"And if we break them it'll bring down the defensive wards?" I pressed.

"The most power-intensive ones," Hierophant noted. "Others will remain. I will admit that Trismegistus' defences were made with a thorough eye for redundancy."

It would have to be good enough. I left the Silver Huntress to handle the stairs and keep the dead off our backs, helping Masego to smash our way through the gates. The time for subtlety was past. Though the Dead King's defensive wards were impressive and apparently the gates had recently been changed to resist Night, they had a weakness: parts of them relied on active sorcery, and that could be compromised by Wrest. Sweat beaded the back of my neck by the time we were done, but after another quarter hour of exertions the half-melted bronze gates fell down and revealed the greater room beyond.

It was, I immediately thought, like looking at the heart of a Praes flying fortress.

Stones and gems were replaced instead by engraved steles of black stone of different heights that formed a complicated arcane pattern, but the sight of bare stone walls covered in glyphs was most familiar. I should not have been surprised: Trismegistan sorcery came from the works of the very man whose work this was. There was a pool of what might have looked like water at the heart of the room, whose high arched ceilings crackled with shivering power, but there was a luminous sheen to it that betrayed it was no such thing.

"Pure magic," Hierophant breathed, looking at it too. "I have no notion as to how it was made physically stable."

"That's fine, since we need the opposite," I bluntly said. "Wreck this place, Masego. In a way that won't kill us."

"It will take some time," he said, and sounded almost reluctant.

I supposed to someone who loved sorcery as much as he did this was much like a lover of horses butchering a herd of Liessen purebreds. Still, he nodded and I left him to it. He'd call for me if he had a need of Night. Instead I wandered about the room carefully, wary of hidden defences, and found that while Concocter stuck close to Masego I was not alone in my explorations. Ranger was doing the same, circling the broadly circular room from the other way. The dome above us ended in a thin well leading upwards, but that wasn't what drew my eye or hers. There was another set of stairs on the other side of the room.

"Shit," I muttered. "That can't be good. Ranger, with me."

I called out to Masego that we were headed down, getting only a half-hearted wave in answer, and went down into the dark. These stairs were not like the ones we'd taken down: they were much broader, and the corridor they fed into had almost as high a ceiling as the ward anchor room. Ranger, whose eyes lingered on the ceiling, frowned.

"Something scraped against those," she said. "Metal or bone, I can't tell."

My stomach clenched. That ceiling was taller than most Gigantes. The stairs we took curved smoothly and led towards a room that was beneath the one holding the anchors. There were no gates leading into it, only a tall arch of stone, and when we crossed the threshold with wary steps it was to the sight of a gentle slope going down. Like a hill of bare stone the room slid downwards into what looked like a massive cavern, most of which was taken up by an equally massive well. I couldn't tell how deep it went from where we stood, but as the two of us slid down the slope my eye found something else to stare at. There were two shapes seated on each side of the wall, sitting cross-legged, and both wore an armour of painted ceramic tiles in purple and silver.

They were also massive, each large as a tower, and through the open faces of their helmets I saw no flesh: only leering skulls, with green flame burning where there should be eyes. Neither of them reacted to our approach, still staring down in the well.

"Those aren't Gigantes," I quietly said. "They're too large."

For the first time today, I saw Ranger tense.

"Titans," Hye Su murmured. "These are the corpses of Titans."

And yet they hadn't been fighting all this time, I thought. We'd seen no sign of them throughout the siege, when even the animated remains of such entities were sure to wield fearsome power. And, most worryingly of all, even as we left the slope and approached

the well they did not so much as twitch. They just kept looking down into the depths, unmoving, and the closer we got the more I felt the eldrith power permeating the room. It wasn't anything as simple as magic either. I was not sure Masego's eye would be able to see it.

We were but a dozen steps away from the rim of the well when one of the dead Titans moved. Only its head twitched, turning towards me, and it offered a leering grin.

"Mistake," the Dead King said in Ashkaran.

A strong sensation of release washed over me, the dead Titans releasing whatever it was they had been holding, and from the depths of the well there was a deep breath followed by a deafening roar. It would have burst my ears, if I'd not reached for Night in time. All I could think of in that heady moment before all the Hells come loose would begin chasing me was of a conversation I'd once had with a man now dead. The ghost the two living people in this pit had in common. *When you assault the stronghold of a villain*, Amadeus of the Green Stretch had said, *there are three things to watch out for: the monster, the trial and the pivot.*

By the looks of it, we'd just found the first of the three.

Frivolous

I'm surprised the band met Anaxares and they didn't fight.

RubberBandMan

Why? They didn't fight the last two times they met. They weren't even hostile then, and always had polite conversation. Hell, name one time Anaxares fought against anyone. He's a diplomat, not a cudgel swinging Tyrant.

Frivolous

Because the Intercessor put Anaxares there in the Serenity.

I figured she'd want to play a game of mutual destruction among the people she hates: Anaxares, Catherine, Neshamah.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Nope.

More subtle

Miles

Bard's really not that subtle any more. Cat took the aspect that let her do complex plots. Hierarch is there for one purpose only – to force the DK to use everything he has to win.

Cpt. Obvious

And thereby force Cordelia to use the WMD she had the remains of an angel of Justice.

The whole idea that the Wandering Bard hates the Dead King so much she's willing to sacrifice large parts of Calernia doesn't hold water.

She might hate him, but I wouldn't put money on it. Cat on the other hand she hates as she's repeatedly and deliberately has foiled plans that's been decades if not centuries in the making.

At first it was amusing, perhaps even a little charming, the way a kitten is charming when it stealthily attacks your feet only to fall over as it stumbles over its own paws. But when the kitten, who is a tiger cub, grows larger those sneak attacks gets less and less charming.

By the time the tiger has grown up and you realize it's the offspring of the sentient tigers that Dread Emperor Sorcerous had created, and it hates the cage it was borne into as well as its jailer. Then having it maneuvering to get behind you inst all that cute and charming anymore.

And Cat ripped the stories out of her. So yes the Wandering Bard has reasons to hate her.

But hating Cat is new. The schemes leading up to the war are much older than Cat.

If the goal was to destroy the Dead King she could have done it ages ago. Even now there would have been so many ways to get rid of him without using a WMD capable of devastating half or more of the continent.

No she has carefully planned everything with the entire goal being to force them to use the Doomsday device. Anything that might give them hope has to be crushed until despair makes Cordelia pull the trigger.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not. Cat has always been a fan, and Anaxares wasn't eager to fight her the previous two times they met either.

I did hope for more drama, true. But this is not really surprising.

Cpt. Obvious

I wouldn't go so far as calling her a fan of Ana ares. She can see some merit in his "philosophy", but can also see the problems that total anarchy or mob rule leads to. So while she don't dislike him she still knows he will spread a lot of deaths and suffering if allowed to wander the surface of Calernia. And the vast majority of these deaths are going to be people who didn't deserve it.

In away he reminds me of Rorschach in Watchmen in the way his personal beliefs were partly admirable, but at the same time so dangerous that they end up threatening the entire world.

Cpt. Obvious

G-D you spellchecker! May the Crows send an old and wizened Drow to slap some sense into you...

Anaxares, not Ana ares. How hard can it be?

[Liliet](#)

She's a reluctant fan! Doesn't want anywhere near herself, but can't help but enjoy watching happen to someone else.

nick012000

The Dead King's got an undead Dracon, doesn't he? The reanimated Corpse of one of the godlike super-dragoms that the Titans waged war with.

Mirror Night

Start playing the Skyrim Music....Also not just a Dragon...A True Dragon or Elder Dragon really...

[Liliet](#)

DraKon, not dragon. Singular of Drakoi uwu

Earl of Purple

Fortunately, that's impossible. They resurrected so long as they remained what they were, so the Titans transfigured them first. If he undid the transformation, it would resurrect and no longer be under his control.

[Liliet](#)

I'm afraid "that's impossible for technical reasons" is not really the kind of thing that'll stop Trismegistus...

Crash

Especially right now, ""cornered "" as he is.

Earl of Purple

Yeah, I have been thinking about it since, and... even if it *isn't* under Neshamah's control, I don't think he'd care so long as it was in a position to hurt everyone else more than him- and he's had time to prepare everything so he survives. Even got two dead Titans to try and kill it again, if he has to.

dadycool

Maybe the transformation is what the two of them were doing? And he had them stop maintaining it so it turned back and woke up?

[sengachi](#)

I mean, he's got two undead Titans on duty sealing it. I'm pretty sure it's *not* under his control, just something he can be sure will do more damage to his enemy than himself while he's locked up inside of his super-warded tower.

Insanenoodlyguy

And he has TWO titan corpses. That seems like exactly the sort of thing that you could use to change something changed by then back.

[Adrian_V](#)

And maybe he did exactly that, who says he wants to control it? That is just recipe for him losing control of it at the worst moment

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Villain Story-fu in play.

Releasing the monster will cost the hero plot, but will harm the villain more

pyrohawk21

To chip in on what others have said... This is Neshamah. He intends to survive and reign forever, and he's exactly the sort of person that would love the idea of everyone, forever regretting his final death if he was slain.

Then look at the ingredients we have here. Two Undead Titans and a Monster which is likely to be something that requires a Titan or two to deal with. What is the greatest Monster which Neshamah could create, that he'd then be able to reclaim control if he did survive the circumstances of it's release, and control it until he wanted it to be released...

The ancient Drakons are a good candidate thanks to those two Titans he has as they would immediately resurrect if slain so long as they stayed what they were. So the Titans transfigured them into something else, and THEN slew them. Something that the Titans can probably repeat even if undead, despite the Gigantes probably being unable to do so if undead OR living. However he needs to keep it under control until he wants it released as I said, and those Titans released something just before the Monster was let loose.

Sure, that could be a control spell or something so he could control the undead Drakon and prevent it from resurrecting into a living Drakon until he wanted it to. But what he could also have done is undo the transfiguration on the Drakon, only to immediately impose an ACTIVE transfiguration on it again and slay it yet again. What's the difference?

The previous transfiguration is likely to have been a Passive one, which means once it's been done, the effect needs to be broken or undone, rather than ended or run out of power to be reversed. Whereas an Active Transfiguration would end as soon as the spellcasters maintaining the spell stop supporting it. Such as say, releasing the spell?

Something which is quite possibly a result of anyone breaking his control over the undead by slaying him or just exiling him from Creation and preventing him exerting any influence over it. At which point, the transfiguration ends, the Drakon returns to being a Drakon corpse and promptly resurrects. At which point everyone else regrets everything forever in short order.

BobbinRobbin

Is that not why the two undead titans were there? To keep it transfigured until Nessie needs to throw the biggest of big old murder tantrums?

KageLupus

Pretty sure the technical name for that is a dracolich, but don't hold me to that one.

Miles

We've seen his dracolichen. Whatever this is is wayyyy scarier than an angry troop transport

Cpt. Obvious

And one like for the "angry troop transport".

Got to remember that one.

[Dragonus45](#)

The what? When were these mentioned?

Earl of Purple

Witch of the Woods extra chapter, not a Patreon one. Kreios tells her of the Titan's empire and their war with the things, which wiped them out and left just a handful of Titans left, who tried time-magic to undo it. Except the time magic went wrong and killed four, leaving just Kreios behind.

Mirror Night

That doesn't make any sense to me? Did they lose Titans fighting Dragons? Otherwise the way it was explained to us, I thought all the other Titans got flat deleted from reality. There should be no way for DK to ever recover those Titan corpses. Especially since the events that lost those Titans is so far in the past that no one should know about it. Hanno's Akashic Record doesn't got that far back. Titans vs Dragons should also predate Bard but she does have a direct line to the Gods....did DK figure this out when he used Masego to look at something....maybe it wasn't Bard.

So yeah I think it has to be Titans that fell fighting the True Dragons. The ones that survived that war should have been flat deleted....though really you think the last Titan would have destroyed the Bodies....maybe Titan Bodies work Like Angels.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I'm pretty sure they lost a lot of Titans fighting the Drakoi, it's what Kreios and Co wanted to fix with their time ritual.

Earl of Purple

It was a war. Both sides had losses. The Titans were powerful mages without compare, but the Drakoi were all ur-Named who resurrected from their own legend so long as they were close enough to said legend for it to stick. The Titans would have struggled before they figured out how to keep one dead.

BobbinRobbin

In a world built with story logic, it's damned hard to keep anything permanently gone. We're talking about a land with enough ruins filled with ancient dodads to achieve whatever exciting narrative arc is required.

PGtE is set in a world obviously inspired by the likes of LotR, D&D and Warhammer (Fantasy) and all these settings have ancient apocalyptic horrors, divine leftovers and endless depths of eldritch doom kinda just littering the countryside and nestled under every other town.

Couple that with the fact that there's an entire chunk of the population whose lives are governed by narratives, you're stuck accepting that any Checkov's Gun you see can and, someday will, be pulled.

There's such thing as an artifact with a demon bound to it? That thing's gonna get released. Some Named's emotionally salient figure was lost in a fatal situation? Odds are, alive or dead, they're capable of popping back for a chat, fight or at least a pep talk somewhere down the line. You bring up two races of titanic, godlike, apocalyptic creatures that were all wiped out? Somehow, someway, there's gonna be a Name which stumbles into a Mere Fragment Of Their Former Glory or a spirit or a time loop or whatever. If they existed, Nessie's had time to find some, somewhere, because he's the big bad and that's what he's allowed to do.

Wonder

Oh how Lovely the dead King likes to copy Cat

dadycool

Yup, he doesn't limit it to Lakeomancy.

Sir Nil

I said this before but Anaxares really is closer to a Demon than a Named, given his tendency to affect everything nearby just by existing. He even has a posse of devils to work with him now.

[Liliet](#)

Best demon ♥ ♥ ♥

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The Demon of Democracy would be just as horrific as Chaos, Order, Smells, Degenerate, Obliterate, and maybe on the level of the Demon of Understanding.

Sir Nil

Oh damn, I just had a thought. He's going for the Triumphant move and 'liberating' the Hells isn't he?

KageLupus

And why wouldn't he liberate the hells? We are all of us free, or none of us.

KageLupus

And why wouldn't he liberate the hells. We are all of us free, or none of us.

badatgames2911

We will suffer no compromise in this.

jamesc9

And demons now qualify as an 'us'.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Dupe

agumentic

Goddamn, does Neshemah have a true Dragon locked up in there as his final monster? Now this is a classic straight out of the Silmarillion

Wonder

Ur

humanoidhuman

now we just need a magic man on a spaceship using a god-tier orb of primordial light as a lantern

bellacohl

I am pretty happy Ranger is getting verbally slapped. I always hated bullies.

Also, Trimegistus, "mistake"? Really. Cheeky bastard xD

[Liliet](#)

Cat has done this to him, previously

Damian Lucius Black

"Boost!" the Dead King said in Ashkaran.

<http://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Hakram's Dead Hand

Childish

[Liliet](#)

Congratulations on winning the asshole prize!

Abrakadabra

You invited it, really. Like an ornery wife whose husband finds the only thing that makes her angry, and makes it his hobby... You two are cute together. ♥

[Liliet](#)

Ew.

[Liliet](#)

Heterosexuals are a curse and this comparison illustrates why perfectly

jamesc9

Um.

[Liliet](#)

(to be clear, that was a joke)

Isi Arnott-Campbell

She's not only done this, but then turned around and claimed not to speak the language in which she did so, if I'm not mistaken.

[Liliet](#)

Yes ♥

Juff

Typo Thread:

committed a crown > committed a crime
I came to > I'd come to
going rifling > rifling
after she handed it to me when I took out the cork > when I took
out the cork after she handed it to me
with occasional > with the occasional
need to reach > needed to reach
imprisoning with > imprisoned with
anyone one > anyone on
could to against > could do against
the unclenched > then unclenched

a limbs > limbs
that, one," > that, once,"
roasted meant > roasted meat
lead be back > lead me back
of goodbye > of a goodbye
great gall > great hall
we negotiated > we'd negotiated
wide breath > wide berth
What did have > What he did have
proved one more > proved once more
the satisfied > the satisfied look
pageantry: most > pageantry: the most
couldn't sure > couldn't be sure
in way > in a way
had had > had
that with the > that the
ever drop > every drop
corridors the > corridors that
went in through > went in first
to be do > to be so
corridors were > corridors we
the whole in > the hole in
a but of > a bit of
five us > five of us
blow open > blown open
eldrith > eldritch

captainmarcia

"wrote small enough" in context seems like it might be meant as
"wrote large enough"

lordcirth

No, I think it's correct. Cat knows something of magic, more
than most people.

shikkarasu

Refusing to sleep with a practitioner has done wonders for
her education.

Miles

Also those years she spent using fae magic on instinct,
learning from Killian, then Masego, and then a tag team of
MasegoxUbua, and then managing the creation of Creation's
foremost magical academy.

She's been studying quite hard all things considered (And
there hasn't even been a test yet).

Someperson

"committed a crown > committed a crime"

Look as far as Anaxares the Diplomat is concerned those are the same thing

Cicero

Oh Dead King... don't you know enough about villain stories to know that luring the hero invading your lair into a trap with a monster and then taunting him with "Mistake" is sure to get you a dead monster?

You aren't really counting on that not applying because Cat is a Villain are you? Haven't you figured out she's a Hero piece that Amadeus stole and dressed in Villain clothing. Even her Names ought to give it away, never a true Villain name, always a name that could swing either way. Squire and Warden.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"swing either way"

Just like her sexuality. 😊

beleester

"Mistake" seems to be the one word that villains can use without horrible consequences, actually. I don't think we've ever had anyone say that and be incorrect.

shikkarasu

It's not about being incorrect, I'd say. "Just as planned" isn't wrong, just hubris. When a villain says "mistake" it's like saying "check" in chess. Sure, the opponent did something that allowed you what looks like a good move, and they probably don't like their situation right now, but that doesn't mean the game is over by a long shot.

There are plenty of games where one side says "check" every other move up until they ultimately lose. Just like Maddie said "mistake" every other exchange with Hanno, but still failed to kill him in their fights.

Someperson

If there's one thing Amadeus of the Green Stretch has the skillset for, it's figuring out the villainous taunt that is least likely to get you killed.

edrey

Ranger and masego was great and the hierarch is a charmer as always, lets hope the realm would crash with arcadia and he meet

with the ex king of winter.

The titans were holding a drakoi, lets see if ranger can hunt it. Also, Nessi really wanted said mistake, he failed with Hakram last time.

And the best is Amadeus reference, there should be more extra chapters of him, maybe stigia?

badatgames2911

1. GOD DAMN I LOVE ANAREXES. one of my favorite chars ez. ALL OF US ARE FREE, OR NONE OF US. WE SUFFER NO COMPROMISE IN THIS.

2. "We ask," I chided, "before we take." – no Cat, you usually just TAKE shit with a pithy one liner afterwards.

3. Ha everyone shitting on Hye Sue is funny

4. Hierophants revenge will be sweet.

5. i dont want to know about anything that takes TWO being roughly as powerfull as the guy who called Neshahma the "YOUNG KING" holding it back.

6. OH FUCK OH SHIT OH FUCK.

7. its Triumphant isnt it? No, Its triumphant, being doted on by Irritant and Tratorious.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hot new fan theory: Traitorous *is* Triumphant after she got bored of being a warrior and re-spec'd into rogue. Had a nice holiday in the Serenity 'til the heat died down beforehand, then made use of a flesh puppet to begin her second reign. Later she'll pop out, crowned in dread and all that, and say a one-liner about her return.

shikkarasu

NGL I was expecting the final boss fight of this series to be Triumphant with an entire Hell's worth of devils lead by a core of hardened veterans from the Legions that died with her.

DK is a better direction to take things, but I was so ready for She to Return for the first 4 books or so.

Someperson

Hey don't speak too soon, Dread Empress Triumphant (May She Never Return) could still come back before the story ends.

(I agree though the way the Dead King was slowly introduced as a sort of background villain at first who you only just

heard occasional references to in histories or magical theory discussions about Keter's due, and then the very gradual building up of Neshamah as The Existential Threat Of The Continent has been really well pulled off)

Miles

2. "We" is how you teach children manners. The implication isn't that cat is no hypocrite, but the implication is that Ranger is a child

Reader in The Night

>"Besides, we'd not actually gone through Serenity to take a swing at Neshamah: that was what the crown and the sword were for." "not only was this trap meant to drown us in a sealed room if the poison gas didn't get us first, but to add insult to injury the ancient fucker was using sewage water. It was a degree of assholishness that verged into elegance." <
The kicker here? Keter is a city of dead inhabitants, it has no need for waste drainage. Nessie actually *imported* sewage just to be a dick.

Reader in The Night

I absolutely hate WordPress' comment section.

>"Besides, we'd not actually gone through Serenity to take a swing at Neshamah: that was what the crown and the sword were for." <

What I meant to say here was that the two weapons against the Dead King are the Crown and the Sword, just like in Cat's banner. True to the metaphor, the Crown even broke first.

Someperson

Yeah I realized that while reading this chapter as well 😊

One of Fate's little twists I suppose.

Abaddon130

Did you forget that the Serenity is full of living people? So I guess, ya, technically it was imported, but only from the Serenity to Keter. I would consider those two places as basically multi dimensional versions of the same place, so it's only imported in there just technical sense. Really I think it's no more important though than it would be if water from one area of a city was transported to another for disposal, processing, etc.

[Liliet](#)

Cat+Anaxares deliver as always. A shame the interaction was so brief tbh, there's potential for a lot more fun drama there. Still, ♥ ♥ ♥

Hye getting startled by Catherine's resemblance to Amadeus, uh huh, uh huh, I see :3

Bless the "overthinking" door lock trap. Really made for those mages who can't walk past a shiny puzzle ♥ ♥ ♥

dadycoool

Cat's relationship with the League and its leadership has always resembled friendship, iirc, and it's nice.

I bet Hye got whacked in the face with deja vu when Cat said that, same tone, inflections, etc. as her father.

Miles

That's gotta be the most painful thing for Hye. Like, real feels painful

Someperson

The most painful thing would be to inform Hye that the reason she was certain that Catherine would take her deal for a duel to the death in ten years only because it is something that Amadeus would have agreed to in a heartbeat for such vital help.

It sure as heck isn't because the Ranger knows Cat well.

Miles

We need this in book "and one"

Miles

I mean more of the CatxAnaxares scenes

ninegardens

So, A detail I'm a touch confused on:

Cat in the Serenity "Oh fuck, Wandering Bard dropped Anaraxes here so Nessie would have nowhere to retreat too and freak out"

Cat having just stepped out of the Serenity "Zeze- please mash up this helldoor so that Nessie can't go back to the Serenity, and has nowhere to retreat to".

... ummm..
wut?

Did I miss something.

Oshi

Anaraxes is destroying Serenity, Cat's trick can be reversed. She wants him to sit still and listen, Bard wants him to eat the fucking baby.

SuitorShooter

I think the difference is that Anaxeres is actively destroying the Serenity, while Cat only trapped the front door. The Hellgate is usable, but if DK uses that Hellgate without noticing the change he'll be stuck inside an infinite void.

shikkarasu

I think it's the realisation that WB was working on the same thing as Cat. That rarely bodes well.

Cpt. Obvious

It also traps Anaxares if he gets bored and tries to leave Serenity. He is after all as dangerous as a lot of demons. So even if Cat happens to have a soft spot for him she can't risk having him stroll freely through Calernia. The death toll would be horrendous.

shikkarasu

15 Denarii says he **Receives** a vision of what Masego did and finds a way to **Mend** the portal. Of course, he won't leave Serenity until it is liberated. That would be compromise.

Huh. I only just now realised the parallels between the two.

Hierophant: **Witness, Ruin, Wrest**

Hierarch: **Receive, Mend, Indict**

Remarkably equal and opposite.

Someperson

Both of them have also said something remarkably similar about reality being a cage set up by the gods

But their responses are very different, Hierophant intends to become a god in his own right and presumably live forever, Hierarch aims to spend his life as rapidly as possible to shake the foundations

Also both of their Names start with "Hiero" 🤪

Yeah they have enough parallels and equal and opposite behaviors that they could probably establish a pattern of three between them if they wanted to (which they likely do not)

shikkarasu

Thank the Cage Makers; I don't want another Captain/ Champion situation.

Mary Gentle

All truly, truly lovely stuff, but –

“The devils had broken into courts, some huddling around fires and others assembling into mobs as other stood above them and gave speeches in the dark tongue. Some of them, I gathered from a closer look, were attempting to organize elections.”

AH HOO AH HA AH HAH! AH HAH HAH HAH OOOOH THUD!
(collapses on floor in giggles)

Oh lord, I want to see the devilish election. 😊😊😊

I love Anaraxes with a Deep, True, And Respectful Passion. ♥

Perhaps someone could remind the Hierach of the way bees kill gigantic hornets. (A Suitable Analogy For A Tyrant.) When the hornet invades the hive, a mass of bees pin it down and vibrate their wings, sending the temperature under them soaring.

May All The Enemies Of The People Be Boiled To Death By Bees.

There, isn't that much nicer?

And please put me down as one who'd love to see Triumphant (May She Ever Return) together with Traitorous and Irritant. We've had sufficient foreshadowing, bring 'em on!

dadycool

Considering the Drow hold their elections via Rap Battles, there really isn't a limit to the method and that's hilarious and terrifying.

Bees are cool. Other yellow-and-black things tend to be monstrous assholes, but bees are golden friends that provide sweetness and facilitate fruit and flowers.

[gwern](#)

It's worth noting that https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulture_bee are a real thing.

caoimhinh

The Serenity had existed for countless thousands of years without incident, yet Catherine stepped into it for 15 minutes and it was already on fire.

Coincidence? :v

JRogue

This is what I came here for.

edrey

And after the serenity where would the Hierarch go? the void was arcadia so he could Mend it, or the Dk would throw it to creation or the elves.
that fire will only get bigger and bigger.

alexjmscott

To be fair to Cat, it's not burning green. Yet.

dadycoool

Isn't Goblinfire made out of demons? They are in a hell, so it's not like they're short on any of the supplies to make it.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Implied Demons.
Hell matter=confirmed.
Source=???

Miles

We don't know that. Color was never mentioned.

BargleNawdleZouss

1. I am surprised that Cat did not (visibly) connect the dots about the Hierarch's presence and how that might alter the effects of the ealamal if it is fired.

2. For those making comments about past Dread Empresses/Emperors showing up: if the team makes it past the upcoming monster, then the next step, as Cat just noted, will be a trial. I imagine the judges will be Triumphant, Sorcerous, and Revenant (fka Malignant III), due to their ties to Trismegistus &/or his theories. Although it will be hilarious if Traitorous and/or Irritant are part of the trial as well. 😊

Darkening

I imagine it's a trial as in a test or challenge, not a courtroom. Like when she had to get through the fourfold crossing when she was attacking akua's lair in liesse.

Abnaxis

I agree, although TBH a kangaroo court with Traitorous in it sounds great!

ninegardens

>>1. I am surprised that Cat did not (visibly) connect the dots about the Hierarch's presence and how that might alter the effects of the ealamal if it is fired

I feel like Cat is mainly running on the assumption that it won't get fired, because that is her plan, and clearly her plan will be carried out without interruption.

alexjmscott

We the readers know that the Seraphim are out of action for a day as a result of releasing the Hierarch, because we were privy to the Bard's little chat with them. But would anyone in Catherine's party know that? Even if anyone elsewhere in Creation knows about the loophole, would they have known to tell her about it?

Earl of Purple

Masego does, he noticed it when transporting the band to the Serenity.

Sir Nil

It would be really awkward if the ward they just undid was in part keeping a massive evil sealed alongside those titans.

dadycool

That sounds exactly like the kind of thing he'd do, making his protection ward serve a second purpose that fucks over anyone who turns it off.

ByVectron!

When they make the movie, can Anaxares be played by Matt Frewer, please? I really get a Max Headroom vibe from him at times.

BargleNawdleZouss

I love Matt Frewer! However, I picture either John Lithgow or Paul Giamatti as Anaxares the Hierarch.

Rey d`Tutto

Lithgow.

Clay

Well, I finally caught up. I'm both very excited to have done so before the end and also a little sad because now I have to wait for updates. Just wanna say EE, this story is incredible, and I think it might genuinely be my favorite piece of fiction.

dadycoool

Ooh, Titans? Something generally greater than Giants? That sounds interesting, but I wonder what ever happened to the living ones. Wow, Nussy really is an asshole. Not enough to drown your enemies, you have to drown them in raw sewage? Damn.

Sugar Roll

Recycling water is one of the Dead King's initiatives to fight climate change.

Let it not be said that the he is not doing his part to protect the environment.

Earl of Purple

They wiped themselves out fighting proto-dragons, and then the last handful tried to rewind time to undo the deaths, but it failed. Catastrophically so; four died or stopped existing, and only Kreios was left. He's here, as it happens, the gigantes' god.

Cpt. Obvious

Wasn't it seven that died?

I think it was mentioned that this was the origin of the "seven and one" story element.

There were eight Titans left. Seven of them played Gods for the Gigantes while the one, whose name I don't remember, went her own way.

Eventually one of the seven finished his research on time magic and had created a ritual that would turn back time to before their people were all but wiped out in the war on the Drakon. But it would take all eight remaining Titans to safely work this riyual.

The one would at first not have anything to do with it, but when all the seven were going to attempt it without her she gave in and participated.

The ritual didn't work. The continent (or was this the entire world?) was ravaged by earthquakes. Mountain ranges rose and mountain ranges fell. Land rose out of the sea but more was swallowed by it. And Titans died.

Left behind was only Keiros, the Riddle Maker, the Titan who had thought he would be able to turn back time, only to break the world and kill all remaining Titans, including the one, she who had told him that he was a fool for believing he could stand against time and fate and win their people back. The one who he loved.

Well I hope I remembered that at least somewhat correctly.

Earl of Purple

No, you're right. I forgot the actual number, knew it was low, and five is literally a handful (at least, it's a handful of fingers).

Abnaxis

The one is Antigone, the Witch of the Woods's namesake.

Two dozen snakes

Anaxares the Diplomat, bringing democracy to the hells XD

Also if i understand it correctly, the way out of the Serenity now leads to the void, so how's he getting out?

Lastly: yeah, pretty safe bet the monster in question is one of those ancient super dragons. And given the dead titans were keeping it chained, it's likely not undead and not under Nessie's control. So, uh. Could Nessie have just moved himself out of Creation, or be ready to move out of creation now that the thing is free? Seems like the best way for him to win. Free the monster and let it wreak his enemies while he stands outside of either's reach and waits until they're both no longer a threat...

Cat's coming into her final aspect to bring this thing down, calling it

Xinci

With Hierarch's comment about a Name, I do wonder if at this point he actually counts as a god or not. He was more or less serving as a conduit for years of sacrifice before following Judgement into the heavens, so not like he couldn't be one. Regardless, looks like Hiearch will be contained for a while with his influence probably escaping if people of the Serenity do or through devils summoned from places he has infected. Fitting reuse to allow him to infect the Hells themselves though, I must admit. So he's an issue for the Accords in the long term and

quite probably the malignancy that shall eventually overtake the world enough to burn it all to cinders. A proper antithesis for Cat when it comes down to it, as his conception of peace is at a baseline antithetical to hers. There will be no allowance of regulation or half-steps, no false peace, only the complete one of the world when the ashes settle and nothing else can burn. It's not an immediate thing but the memetic spread of what he desires will be there in the end, its shown capability to affect Light too, so who knows how endemic Hierarchy will be by that point. Regardless when the Accords are more vice than safeguard he will be there to burn it all down to the ground.

Also, great to know the Dead King can actually fuse bones, that was a weird sticking point on how alive the bones had to be for that sorta thing.

lenethren

Loved the chapter. Thank you for sharing this amazing story.

nick012000

Also, is it just me, or does the Hierarch come across as more of a Hero than a Villain, now? He's not driven by a desire to change the world, he's driven by a point of moral ideology. Was everyone who thought he was a Villain wrong all along, thinking that he was a Villain because he was a Named from a city in service to Below and he hung out with Kairos?

Mary Gentle

I always thought that Anaraxes came across as heroic, if not capital-H Heroic, from the start. At the beginning, he was both bonkers and heroic – or perhaps heroic because his city's form of government was absolutely mental.

By the time we got to the trial... That was a Heroic act, both challenging and stopping a Choir from acting. Anaraxes might still have been a little mental, but you could see he was on the right side.

Now he's bringing democracy to Hell . . . you know what, that's still bonkers and heroic. 😊 Just at a much, much higher level than before.

I don't think we've seen the final apotheosis of the Hierarch.

If he could thwack a Choir into obedience, I wonder what he could do to the Dead King? Partners in chains? Because Anaraxes is a man who wouldn't agree to DK doing ANYTHING.

Just saying. 😊

Earl of Purple

Unfortunately, he's not a hero. He's not interested in the people's wellbeing; he's not throwing down tyrants because they are tyrants. He's throwing down tyrants to spread his ideology and he doesn't care how tyrannical the tyrants he throws down are. You could be the Good King, ruler of a happy and prosperous realm where everyone's literate and there's plenty of food and no discontent and taxes on the wealthy and not the poor, and Anaxares doesn't care. The Good King wasn't elected, therefore he's a tyrant who should be cast down, along with the nobility and everyone else who disagrees with him.

Mary Gentle

I suppose that depends how wedded one is to the idea of "Good Kings."

Constitutional monarchs, now, they're fine. (If not ideal.) I'd hope Anaxares wouldn't have a problem with those, because they usually come accompanied by an elected body or parliament of some kind.

But single leaders with all the power? That tends not to work well. They can change any time, like the weather, and then your Good King and his or her prosperous realm are off to war, because the Good King wants it that way.

In all honesty, the only thing that has restrained kings (in the real world) has tended to be their subjects. Not the ones who are ploughing the ground and making the things people need to live – the noble ones who have bucketloads of money from owning all that land, and who also don't want to see the King rule over them. European feudalism is far more complex than it sounds, but it usually amounts to a triangle – Ruler, People, and (dare I say it) Home-Grown Oligarchs.

I wouldn't cry if the Hierarch introduced a bit of Early Modern government into the continent. They've been through blood and fire, isn't it about time somebody asked the average bod what they want?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I know what you mean, but "driven by a point of moral ideology" is a subcategory of "driven by a desire to change the world," not an alternative to it. And let's bear in mind that Good and Evil are theological/political/metaphysical alignments, and neither maps perfectly onto their lower-case synonyms. Take the fae as an example: their alignments inform everything BUT their morality, if indeed any part of their behavior could be considered equivalent to a moral code. That's what people are like when they are solely defined by Heroic or Villainous attitudes. The existence of actual moral choices in-universe is

a feature designed to keep everything off-kilter enough that it doesn't get boring to watch.

I hate to harp on this, but it's kind of the core premise of the story?

Cthulhu

I ship Catherine and Anaraxes. Because why not?

Miles

"The five of us were standing in a village, which would have had me rather curious if it weren't currently abandoned and on fire."

Cat! Did you set the fire?

"Once you'd seen one burning village you'd seen all of them, really."

Cat!

Someperson

No doubt the devils will hold an election and decide that the fires were, indeed, Cat's fault.

Somehow.

Someperson

What's this? Enemies of The People woefully undevoured by BEES?

A large influx of BEES ought to put a stop to that!

Chapter 65: Monster

"When it passed that King Angelika of Rhenia was slain on the Hocheben Heights by the Prince of Bones, the Dead King sent an envoy to return her sword to the heir Prince Emil. 'But it is only a loan, prince,' the envoy told him, 'for in time she will come to retrieve it.'"

– Extract from 'Crowned In Iron', a compendium of Lycaonese histories assembled by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

Ears ringing, I watched as great claws of bone – each tall as a man – caught the edge of the well. The creature within, a hulking shape wreathed in shadows that my hundred eyes could not pierce, began to drag itself out of the pit even as the sitting Titans rose to their feet. Above our heads the ceiling of the cavern began to crack, the beast's roar having been enough to shatter the stone.

Well, I mused, this had all taken an unfortunate turn.

"Say, Ranger," I muttered. "I don't suppose you'd happen to know what that thing is?"

"Pray I do not, Warden," Hye Su quietly replied.

In other circumstances that undead had been made of not one but two Titans would have been the main source of my alarm, but because this was Keter the fact that I saw them moving from the corner of my eye ranked only rising concern. Outright alarm was reserved for the thing emerging from the well, claws gouging the stone as if it were mud. The sharp lengths of bones led into what I thought to be tendrils of some sort, until I realized they were large chords of sinew. They wove themselves into long, squirming limbs as the behemoth rose from the pit, revealing to my eye a head twisted draconic head that flowed into a mane-like length of sinews going down its neck.

Its eyes were as a mass of burning coals hidden beneath the writhing tendons, burning in the light yet casting no shadow.

"That felt like a yes," I noted. "So what am I looking at? Because I've seen dragons, and I'm no draconologist but I'm willing to *firmly* state this isn't one."

"This is one of the drakoi, the ancient foes of the Gigantes," Ranger grimly said. "They are to dragons what we are to insects."

That was less than promising, I mentally noted. Even a glory hound monster-fighting lunatic like Hye Su didn't sound eager to fight one of those creatures, a sure sign they were nothing to trifle with. This was, after all, the same woman who'd picked a fight with a Queen of Summer in her own territory. On the other hand, even if apparently Neshamah had decided that now was as good a moment to start throwing dead gods – and how I missed the days where I didn't have to deal with even the singular of that, much less the plural – at his problems I could tell with a look that this was a necromantic construct.

It was made of bone and tendons, and though some sort of eldritch power coursed through it like veins it was most definitely dead. Which meant someone had already killed this thing once already, that it wasn't impossible. Just *almost* impossible, and that was

the kind of wiggle room I'd been betting my life on for years now.

Mind you, I'd died a few times.

"Time for a tactical withdrawal," I decided.

"Agreed," Ranger said.

As one we turned clean pairs of heels to the enemy, though of course it wasn't that easy. The drakon hit the ceiling as it rose to what I was pretty sure wasn't even its full height, the cracks from earlier widening and stones began to fall. Wasn't as much of problem as the two dead Titans having gotten a move on, though. The power that screamed against the air was sorcery, but like none I'd ever felt before. Where other spells felt like they stole the reins from Creation, imposed a will on it, this was... It felt barbed, cutting, like it hurt all around it just by existing. Whatever the Hells it was, it sunk into the slope of stone we were running up and seize it whole. A heartbeat later the rocked turned liquid, Ranger cursing as she leapt and I pulled on Night.

I wove tendrils around me and hooked them at the ceiling, forced to further crack it and dangerously vulnerable as I made sure I wouldn't be swept by the tide the stone had turned into. Ranger went about it another way. She had a sword in hand, and with a grunt of effort she cut at the liquid. Wind billowed as the strength of the cut opened a path through the liquid stone and she landed on dry ground. Reluctantly impressed, I took half a heartbeat to appreciate how quickly she'd managed that before my attention moved back behind us. Where the drakon was halfway out of the well and filling the cavern with its hulking, writhing shape but also something... subtler. The air in the cavern felt different now.

Tainted somehow.

The second Titan had just finished their spell, a sphere of burning sunlight forming in front of them, and I wasn't even going to try to protect that – I wasn't sure what it was, exactly, but there was enough power wafting from it that the air was warping. And since the bloody ceiling was falling anyway... I exerted my will, the tendrils of Night hooked into the stone above me spreading like roots before I seized the chord holding me up with my hand and *pulled*. The ceiling came down behind me, tons of rock falling like rain as Ranger cut her way through the tide again.

I landed with a pained grunt from the ache in my bad leg, brushing off liquid stone from the edge of my cloak before following Ranger into her race out of the room.

I didn't look back but I still felt sizzling winds blowing at my back and a horrid keening sound as stone was vaporized, discarding hopes this had so much as scuffed one of the monsters. Getting out of the cavern alive would have to be enough. Ranger got onto the stairs first, her stride swift without looking hurried, and I was but a dozen steps behind. I risked a glance back as I turned the corner and felt a swell of dread when I saw that the drakon was digging through the broken ceiling. Going straight up towards the room with the ward anchors. Fuck. All the more reason to hurry, but that moment of dallying had cost me.

The wall I'd ducked behind was ripped off by an unseen hand, the power of the dead Titans screaming in my ears, and I threw myself to the ground just a little too slow – three rays of sunlight had shot out like burning lances, and the third caught my shoulder. It went through the Mantle of Woe where so many magics had failed, melting part of my pauldron into worthless slag. I cursed and pulled on Night to cool the molten metal before it got to my flesh, crawling out of the way even as the wall that'd been ripped out was thrown back in pieces. Right at me. I was pulling on Night even as a small voice in the back of my mind reminded that staying still was death, that the next rays of light would kill me, but what else could I do? The stones would kill me just the same. Only a hand grabbed me by the collar and Ranger dragged me up, just in time for me to toss a veil of darkness over us as we ran. A wave of pure sunlight incinerated where we had been standing a heartbeat earlier, but we'd gotten out in time.

We legged it up the stairs, back to the ward room, and I calmed my breath even as I felt the floor shake beneath our feet. Cracks were spreading all over, enchanted tiles breaking like mud left out too long in the sun. Puffs of magic came out with every break, filling the air with aimless power.

"Thanks," I got out.

"Might still need you," Ranger frankly replied.

Fair enough, I conceded. The Concocter had left the floor and headed to the bottom of the stairs and the Huntress was still fighting up those, by the sounds of it. Masego was still among the garden of steles, though now he was kneeling by the pool of pure magic at the heart of it all.

"Hierophant, end it," I shouted. "We need to go."

"Nearly there," Masego faintly replied, his flesh eye closed.

I hurried across the cracking floor, feeling massive claws scrape at it from beneath.

"How long?" I asked.

"Would you worry," Hierophant said, "have anything to do with the half dead god beneath our feet?"

My jaw clenched.

"*Half* dead?" I repeated.

"The body is a necromantic construct," Hierophant said, "but the entity itself is not. It seems to be a piece of godhead contained in an undead body."

So that was how he'd done it. Powerful as the Dead King was, the Riddle-Maker had made it pretty clear that at his peak the Titans could have wiped the floor with him and his buddies had supposedly been slapped around by the drakoi. Grave robbing Titans and raising their bones I could buy, but controlling the remains of an elder dragon had been harder to swallow. Only he hadn't done that, by the sounds of it. He'd poured god's blood into a corpse he'd made sure he could control and still found the resulting monster hard enough to control it'd been kept sealed in a well beneath Keter.

"It's a drakon," I told him.

Masego's eye flew open. He stared at me for a heartbeat.

"I will hurry," he conceded, as if doing me some great favour.

"I hope you will, because there's dead Titans not far behind us," I grunted.

I left Ranger to keep an eye on the stairs behind us, instead going to the set that'd lead us back above. I told Cocky to run up and tell the Silver Huntress to start clearing our way out, because we needed to get the Hells out of here in a hurry. I still had a knife up my sleeve, one that might bite deep here, but I'd rather keep it back a little longer. If we could get the drakon to rampage around the spire after the wards came down, it'd draw Names like flies. By the time I returned Ranger had her bow out and an arrow nocked, eyes on the threshold of the stairs, and Masego had gone still kneeling beside a stele.

"Hierophant?"

He did not answer, not for a few heartbeats. Then he took his hand off the stele and rose to his feet, smiling. I could already feel the wards fading in the distance. Names that had felt a world away were now at the tip of my fingers. There were, I grimly thought, less of those left than I'd thought. The Dead King was having himself a massacre. Zeze cleared his throat.

"I believe that--"

Ranger loosed an arrow, but I didn't even end up looking at what because the floor *broke*. A writhing, gaping maw tore through the stone and closed its fangs around steles and the pool of magic.

"Run," I hissed.

No one argued. The fucking collapsing floor should have held up the Titans but instead a path made itself out of falling stone as we ran for the stairs – Cocky, showing wisdom, was already gone – and the two giants began to cross unhurriedly as the drakon continued guzzling up the room. *It's eating too much*, I thought. Even steles that hadn't been disappeared between the great jaws. Was the Dead King's leash truly so loose or was there another reason for this? Ranger went in first, taller than me and in better shape than Hierophant, and my effort to slow down the enemy by tossing a spear of blackflame the way of the Titans died without making a dent.

Sunlight blazed in the Titan's hand and suddenly the Night flames were just *gone*.

That one, I grimly thought, wasn't a good match up for me at all. I'd have to pass him on to someone else. We hurried up the cramped, narrow stairs even as they shattered behind us – the Titans were opening a path for themselves – and I found that the Silver Huntress had delivered on the task I'd given her: she was already at the very entrance, holding back the tireless horde with a short spear wreathed in Light. Behind us stone was shattering like glass, but we'd make it in time. The Dead King's monsters were large and the same protections he'd built to keep people out were now serving to keep his abominations in.

"Hierophant," I said, "can you help with the dead?"

"I can-"

Masego kept talking, but I did not hear the words. My blood turned to ice, for the herald of misfortune had made itself known: someone was tuning a lute. I did not see her, was not certain it was my ears I was hearing her through, but I recognized the sounds. Drunken fingers tuning the Intercessor's lute with surprising deftness, plucking at it until every string was just right.

"-rine, Catherine," Hierophant called out, sounding irritated. "Are you listening?"

"Can you hear that?" I asked.

My eye turned to Ranger when I found no trace of understanding on Masego's face, and she slowly nodded.

"Music," Hye Su said. "Faint, but I hear it."

Faint? No, that made sense. Ranger was an old and powerful Named on top of the more exotic talents that came with being of elven blood, but it was me who'd effectively ripped out two chunks of the Bard's aspect and then eaten them. I'd be able to hear her better than anyone else alive.

"The Intercessor's taking an interest," I said, "and that's never good. Let's get the fuck out of here."

We swept out of the stairs like a whirlwind, Masego dropping half a hundred undead with a spell that went after the one animating them while Ranger and the Silver Huntress charged into the opening. We went down the right corridor, opposite of the one we'd taken last time, since it was the way out of the crypts. The ranks of the dead were thick and reinforcements pouring in like a flood but the momentum was on our side. I let loose blast of black flame to keep the enemy off our back, sometimes, but in truth my mind was barely on the fight. I'd left an eye of Night behind to check on the progress of the Titans and the drakon but nothing came out of the stairs, which I realized with a grimaced made sense.

Instead of having the giants and the fucking horror dragon wreck these too-small corridors pursuing us, they were probably going to keep heading straight up to catch us in one of the large rooms above. I tried to remember as much as I could of the layout from the time I'd come here to negotiate, since I'd seen a little of the spire when I had, but I just couldn't seem to fucking concentrate. Not when the idle tuning had turned into strumming, and then into the beginning of a slow and sad song. The Bard usually pretended to be a poor musician, for she liked to play the fool, but she hadn't that night in Ater and it seemed she would not today either.

My head wasn't in the fight but it hardly mattered: the Dead King hardly threw anything worth a second look our way. Masses of lesser undead and a few Revenants barely worth a second look. With Ranger as our vanguard, it was the equivalent of throwing wheat at a sickle. We smashed our way through the corridors, leaving only broken bodies behind us as we hurried out of the crypts. I vaguely remembered the path from the last time, which served us well enough as we fought our way to the bottom of a set of wide stairs. As the Huntress took off the head of the last Bind there, I glanced back at the receding tide of undead behind us. I threw a few clumps of black flame to make sure we wouldn't be followed, but in truth they didn't look eager to.

Not a good sign, I admitted to myself as we went up.

Last time I'd been here, I'd thought it was a beautiful place. The hall was a dome of arches, grey stone rising to support a gallery above, yet the most striking part of it was the ceiling. It was curved, held up by elegant beams of stone, but everything

in between was coloured glass. The pieces shone from the light of a sun that did not truly exist, painting stretches of colour on the tiled grey floor. The five of us stumbled out of the side hall panting, all of us scuffed but none wounded, but there would be no relief: just as I'd predicted, the enemy had arrived ahead of us. The hall's floor had been ripped open, crushed tiles flying everywhere like feathers falling, and out of the deeps the drakon had come.

It was waiting for us, nesting among the broken stone. A forest of sinewy tendrils sprouting from its back had been folded over the spine like wings and a thick, long tail was curving against the crushed statue of some ancient conqueror. The coal-like eyes did not turn towards us, but the weight of the creature's attention was as a weight on our shoulders – the Concocter buckled and would have fallen to her knees if not for Alexis catching her arm. My eye narrowed as I took in the shape of it. It felt larger than before, I thought. And more... defined. As if it had somehow grown. More than that, the same subtle power I had felt tainting the air below was back.

It felt humid, like it was pressing against your skin in the most disgusting of ways. Like a droplet of water going down your spine, only deep down you knew it was an insect. The drakon was doing something to its surroundings, I thought. Not even going out of its way to do it: existing was enough. And though I couldn't quite tell what it was doing yet, I doubted it would be anything we'd enjoy. I cracked my neck, leaning on my staff, and breathed out.

"Well," I said, "it looks like we'll be having that fight after all. Hierophant?"

"Catherine?"

"Cast," I said. "We'll buy you as long as we can."

He opened his mouth to answer but unfortunately it seemed that this was as much leeway as the ancient horror was willing to allow us. It began rising on its feet, body writing and sprouting smaller half-aborted limbs before as it did. It swallowed most of them back up into its body, but not all.

"Move," I hissed, Ranger drawing her sword as I did.

The Concocter stuck with Masego, since in a fight like this she was near useless, but the rest of us spread out. The Silver Huntress shot towards the stairs that'd lead up to the gallery, a good shooting nest, and Ranger unhurriedly stepped into the open grounds of the hall. As for me, I breathed out and pulled deep on the Night. Sve Noc answered with unstinting hand, coolness raging through my veins and overflowing. It raced down my body, weaving shadow through the Mantle of Woe as I pulled down the hood. I

breathed out mist, fingers closing around my staff of dead yew, and let the shadows wreath me whole.

Unsheathing my sword, I stepped into the fight.

The Ranger, huntress of gods and monster, was the first to strike. She moved like a ghost across the broken floor, disturbing not so much as a mote of dust, but the drakon struck just as swiftly. It batted away at her, and when she leapt above the blow snapped forward to swallow her whole – only for the Ranger to carve through its head instead, blowing through the tendrils of sinew like a great wind. There were no bones or brains inside, I realized as Ranger's strike revealed nothing at all. No head to take, and the drakon seemed indifferent to a blow that would have killed most creatures of Creation. It did not even pause in its assault, wings fluttering as it tried to slap down Ranger.

Too slow, for I wove a tendril of shadow to drag her out of the way and the Silver Huntress loosed an arrow of Light from the upper gallery that burned halfway through the limb. Dropping Ranger when she was two dozen feet above the ground – she landed in a smooth crouch – I went on the offensive. Probing its defences, I tossed a few balls of blackflame at its sides. Half were blown out by the wings as the drakon turned towards me, but a few landed and I frowned as I looked through eyes of Night at the results. The black flames were 'burning' without actually consuming anything, and soon guttered out without having done much of anything.

That disgusting humid sensation grew stronger, pressing at me from all sides.

Did it get stronger against power it had been attacked with? I couldn't tell from just this and didn't have the time to spare for another try: I'd drawn the creature's attention. It moved like the wind, crossing the floor in moments and disdaining the use of claws for its gaping maw. Teeth formed out of bone as the writhing nothing opened, looming above me, and I released the Night I had gathered around myself. Three other Catherine Foundlings legged it in different directions as I backed away under cover of a veil, but the abomination ignored the illusions. *Fuck*, I eloquently thought as I reached for my sword.

Instead the side of the drakon's head was split open by a sword blow, the Ranger attacking from the side even as the Huntress loosed a Light arrow into the head from the other side. They'd not just struck to save my ass, though – I could see from the angle that Alexis had placed her arrow after Ranger struck in an attempt to burn out part of the drakon's head. I backed away behind the pillars as the writhing, hollowed head withdrew, jaws snapping at nothing, and saw that a handful of cut-through sinew tendrils had dropped down on the stone. Like the other two I kept

an eye on the drakon as I moved, grimacing as I saw that the head was full again in moments.

There would be no shaving away at the monster piece by piece, then. Back to regular violence. Hiding in the shade of the pillars I began to weave a curse, wondering if those might not work better than outright destruction, when I saw someone dash out into the open grounds. The Concocter, I realized as I swore and loosed my curse early. The lash of Night hit the drakon's side, and to my pleasant surprise did exactly what I'd wanted it to: writhing tendrils went still, locked into place. *The Dead King*, I realized even as the Silver Huntress peppered the drakon's limbs with arrows so it would not splatter Cocky over the ground. *The Dead King's work is the weak point.*

The shard of divinity that gave consciousness to this monster wasn't something I could snuff out without preparations, but it was stuck in the contained Neshamah had made for it. And *that* I could affect. The Concocter ran back in cover, though not before I got a look at what she'd been doing: she'd cut out a piece of sinew and shoved it into a bottle. Huh. Whether or not that'd end up useful, the Huntress had caught the drakoi's attention with that last volley: it roared, forcing a wince out of me as panes of painted glass shattered above us. The colourful shards weren't just falling, though. As if moved by an invisible hand, they gathered into a ring of hovering glyphs.

I watched, open-mouthed, as the same wards that Hierophant had killed below came back to life around the drakon.

So that was why it'd eaten so many of the ward anchors, I realized. It didn't just get stronger against things that had attacked it, it got strong from what it ate. Which was, if I understood correctly the disgusting humid feeling still pressing tight around the Night veiling me, anything around it for long enough. The longer we fought the drakon, the harder it would be for us to harm it. Given long enough, even the strongest workings of Night would barely rate a scratch. It was an absurd thing to contemplate, something like that. Invisibility in the making, if used by even a halfway clever soul. *Which is why the Dead King used only a shard of you, imprisoned in a body he controls.* Neshamah would keep it stupid enough it wouldn't be able to break free of its binding, and even then it was a fucking nightmare to deal with.

We couldn't beat this thing, I admitted to myself. Not right now, not with the tools at hand. And stubbornly continuing to fight it would make it harder to put down when we *did* have the right people there. *We need to retreat the moment Masego lands his spell*, I thought, looking through an eye at Hierophant. He was still murmuring, one eye closed and the other burning. The Concocter was close by, hidden behind a pillar as she rifled

through her bags for something and stared at the piece of the drakon she'd snatched. There was no telling when he'd be done incanting, I thought, but it had to be soon. Best I prepare for it.

As the drakon began to methodically ravage the upper gallery, tearing through it with a cat's cruel laziness, I stepped out in the open and levelled my staff at the abomination.

"We're going to retreat," I called out, "the moment the spell is done."

That was when it all went wrong. Was it intelligent enough to understand words? I'd not thought so, but immediately the drakon stopped trying to flush out the Huntress and instead turned towards where Masego still stood. I swore and shaped a pair of curses before tossing them at the creature. The first was a mixed bag, the sinewy tendrils I'd meant to knot up instead melding together and reforming, but the second was an outright loss: the limb I'd meant to freeze was barely slowed. It was adapting to Night tricks. I broke into a run even as the drakon slithered towards Hierophant.

"Cover," I screamed. "*Cover* him, Merciless Gods!"

The Huntress leapt off the edge of the gallery, spear lighting up like a falling star as she cleaved through the drakon's wing, but a leg burst out of the abomination's side and caught her in the belly. The sound of metal crumpling was heard and she went flying. I cursed again, drawing on my Name to quicken my stride. My leg was throbbing but I grit my teeth and let the pain pass through, getting there about the same time as Ranger did. The Concocter popped out to throw a vial of some liquid that turned to flame on impact but the drakon hardly noticed, smashing the pillar she'd been hiding behind and breaking her arm. As well as revealing Masego.

I stood between death and Hierophant, screaming as I called on Night with my sword raised, and Ranger's blade cut through the beast's neck – though it formed back anew past the cut. I unleashed torrents of black flame into the drakon's face, aiming for those buried red eyes, and though I calcinated tendrils I could feel the resistance growing ever stronger until suddenly sorcery bloomed behind me. Through the Night I saw Hierophant's eye open and his lips mouth a single word.

"Rot."

The drakon shuddered, maw opening, and began to *scream*. The dead flesh it was made of began to decay and come apart in clumps, and though the abomination grew them back it was writhing in pain as the rot refused to leave its body. Masego slumped, half falling to his knees, and I sheathed my sword to hold him up. The drakon

was distracted for now, so we needed to get the Hells out. Only we couldn't, not quickly. The Concocter was trying to get up, cradling her broken bones, and the Huntress was still on the other side of the hall. There were cracks on the pillar where she'd landed and she was splayed below, either dead or unconscious. I'd need Ranger to-

I found Hye Su already looking at me, face a blank mask, and my stomach clenched. She'd been looking at the same things I did, and had come to the same conclusions. Only she wasn't me, so the decision that followed was different.

"It is a battle lost," Ranger said, shaking her head. "Survive if you can: I am still owed."

And without another word, she turned her back on us. She was going to leave, to get out while the spell held. I had to push down the urge to set her on fire as she made to leave – it wouldn't help – and held up Masego as I saw the way the rot was slowing in the abomination's body. It was getting used to the spell, we didn't have long left.

"Get the Concocter out," I ordered Hierophant. "I'll pick up the Huntress."

Only the drakon roared again, and as I covered my ears the rotting parts of it were shed to the ground. Ember-red eyes turned towards us and my stomach clenched as I reached for the Night. I wouldn't be able to get everyone out. It struck and I-

"That's a *lot* more tentacles than anyone should be comfortable with."

And I felt my shoulder loosen as the limb that should have swept through all three of us was instead split in half, Indrani sliding down its length and landing on her feet. She took a few steps back, looking almost drunk, then spat to the side as the drakon put itself back together.

"You're late," I said.

Indrani snorted.

"Had to take the long way around," she replied. "Shiny Boots was already knocking at the front doors."

Another roar shook the hall, the drakon furious at the continued interruptions.

"I'll forgive you this time," I conceded.

She hummed, twirling her longknives thoughtfully.

"The Lady bailed on you, yeah?"

"Just about," I grunted back.

We'd bargained for her to lead us into Keter by the secret way, not fight by our side, so in truth she hadn't broken our agreement. But she'd abandoned us nonetheless.

"Isn't that something," Indrani murmured.

I could **See** it, through my dead eye. The way the weight shifted, the story moved. Two claims had been competing, and while one had been stronger than the other it was also not there – and the story still wanted a Role to be played.

"It was mine to have anyway," Indrani decided. "My friends to keep alive. My family to protect."

And with that last step in the journey, it all fell into place perfectly. The Ranger fought monsters, but the Ranger had fled and monsters were still being fought.

"If she throws away the fight, then it's mine to pick up," Indrani said. "So how does the line go again? Ah, yes."

She straightened, meeting the drakon's burning ember eyes.

"I am the Ranger," she said, and made it true. "I hunt those worth hunting. Tremble, for you qualify."

And in a blur of movement she was gone. I nudged Masego towards the Concocter – he could set the bone and heal it – and went to circle around the broken hall as Indrani fought toe to toe with a horror out of legend. She moved like the wind, never where the drakon struck as it tore through the hall in growing frustration. The Ranger carved through sinew and bone, shattered claws and laughed as the drakon roared its impotent wrath. Like a bull trying to swat a hornet, it missed again and again as she stung from every direction.

I reached the Silver Huntress and found to my relief that she was not dead. Unconscious and her skull had been rattled, but it took more than that to kill a Named. I dragged her back into consciousness and stopped the bleeding out of her forehead wound but her eyes were still unfocused as she got on her feet. To get her back fighting fit we'd need a priest, much as I hated to admit it. My eye went back to Indrani, who was impossibly holding her own against the abomination. *A Name's never stronger than when it comes into being*, I reminded myself.

I watched as she laughed and toyed with a dead god, knowing that it was beautiful but it could not last. That first burst of strength would fade, and when it did the situation would turn against us. We needed to get out while we still could, I thought as I guided Alexis across the room. Towards the same threshold

that Hye Su had left through. As if to crown my worries, the drakon finally landed a blow on Indrani. She'd blocked it, so it snapped one of her blades instead of her bones. It still tossed her back, sliding along the ground until she stood near where Masego and Cocky had gotten to.

"Indrani," I shouted, "we need to leave. Move the fight elsewhere."

She didn't look happy, but she didn't argue. I could see how her Name was pulling at her to finish the fight, to pursue the moment it had coalesced through to the end, but she was a stubborn soul and she knew her limits. She'd fight off the influence. And now that she and Hye Su had played out their parts of the story that left only...

"I'll handle the rearguard," the Ranger shouted. "You go on-"

The drakon went still. A heartbeat later, its wings slid to the floor. I almost laughed at the absurdity of the sight.

"Go," I shouted back. "It's handled."

She spat angrily to the side, but did not refuse the order. She dragged Masego and Cocky along, heading for the door. I pushed on the Silver Huntress as well, who while still dazed was still fast on her feet, and within moments I was the only human left in the hall. The drakon's gaze slowly swept the hall, coming to rest on me, and when the full weight of its attention solidified I had to let out a breath. My knees were shaking.

Then the drakon's head rolled on the floor.

It decated to nothing as another grew back, but now before the towering monster a lone silhouette stood. It was tall and thin, holding in its hand a sword of made of wood. The drakon reared up, roar filling the air, and then its head rolled on the floor again. And its limbs, and its tail. They sprouted back, the abomination's entire body writhing angrily, but it looked taken aback. As suddenly as a match lit nine of the Emerald Swords surrounded it in a loose ring, silent as the grave. The disgusting miasma in the air slid off them like water off a duck's back.

"It won't work," I croaked out. "You can't kill it for good with swords."

Then someone was standing next to me, the elf's eyes contemptuous.

"We are," they said, "the Emerald Swords."

It was said like a simple truth, like a sentence passed.

"If it cannot be slain for good," the elf told me, "then we will keep slaying it until the Last Dusk."

The words were said without so much as a speck of doubt. In the distance, the drakon's head and limbs dropped again.

"Leave, Warden," the elf said. "Our debt must be repaid."

I hesitated for a moment, wondering if perhaps the monster could be put down for good, but then I recognized that for the vanity it was. Wounded pride my plans had not been enough to stop the Dead King's own. So instead I inclined my head, as much in thanks as acknowledgement, and broke into a run to catch up with the others. Named were dying ahead of us, my own had told me. The fight to end all this awaited.

And as I passed the threshold, the Intercessor began to sing.

SpeckofStardust

Elfs are bullshit enough said.

kaedonbolas

Everyone's bullshit at this point

erebus42

Hey when everyone's bullshit, no one is.

dadycool

Ah, but there's different levels of bullshit. It's one thing to have every stick on the playground be a lethal sword the moment you pick it up, but it's significantly worse to have a sword proof forcefield or a deathray or declare yourself immune to swords.

Someperson

I mean, if your force field only protects against swords, specifically, then I gotta say it kinda sucks.

humanoidhuman

not if everything is a sword

Velrix

Named are bullshit but Elfs are bullshit even without names.
So Elfs are more bullshit.

Miles

Bullshit²

Miles

B²u²l⁴s²h²i²t² if you will

erebus42

Sometimes the only way to deal with bullshit is to throw other bullshit at it.

Tenthyr

I wouldn't mind seeing an elf that isn't a horrific hyperracist, honestly. I wonder how different they are in their empire across the sea.

Geno

Well it's been pretty explicitly said most elves overseas are half-elves, so I'd argue most are probably pretty chill. They exiled the hyperacists

jamesc9

These elves can't go that way until they're able to have children, which is related to getting their forest to forgive them for the circumstances in which they occupy it.

Ferary

I wager a mix between a kind old grandma and horny barely legal teenage girl.

Ghlapus

Sometimes I worry that EE won't be able to follow through in the Big Bads.

But he always delivers.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Due to the quality of EE's writing I have had the pleasure to read, I'd suggest EE has as many or more pages of notes, errata, and timelines than what's been published so far on WordPress.

If that is not the case my admiration would be greater, and

there are few compelling writers of EE's caliber I have enjoyed.

shikkarasu

EE foreshadows too often, and *books* in advance, to be doing most of this on the fly. I am 100% certain that the bones of all 7 books were in place before the first chapter went up, even if it was a 5 book plan at the time.

trysalvages

Complete side note, but is the author male? I couldn't find anything about them on the internet.

Par

He was a guest on a fiction podcast at one point where he confirmed he goes by he/him pronouns
I don't remember the podcast off the top of my head but it was on reddit iirc

Abrakadabra

Does it matter ?

Earl of Purple

Well, shit all the fuck. The good news is, if they destroy Neshamah's working, it'll no longer be bound. The bad news is, if that happens it resurrects itself unless a Titan kills it, and there's only one of those left.

Indrani's Ranger, yay! That's a bright point, and she deserves it. Wonder how it feels for Hye Su now, if she's able to make it out without her Name and Aspects. Chances are she keeps the skill they granted her, I think, but not the continual improvement.

caoimhinh

Imagine Hye running away from that fight, and then midstride she suddenly feels hollowed out, no longer having as much strength, as much agility and power, and her steps falter. And then she feels it, like a slap in the face calling her "coward", her Name has left her. She is the Ranger no more.

Miles

This is probably an opportunity in disguise for Hye. She's an old hand to the point that she was rarely running into new tricks to learn, perfect, and transcend. Another Name would give her some abilities that she can actually use more than once every few years and she kept her skills.

Rey d`Tutto

What could a Ranger retire to?
Badass non-Named?
The Lady of the Lake?
She Who Used To Range?
Jeremiah Johnson?

Rey d`Tutto

Also, Hye Sue -> Mary Sue -Mary +Hyacinth/Hye.
Anyone?

Droughtbringer

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Miles

"Had to take the long way around," she replied. "Shiny Boots was already boosting since the delay notice."

aurikdomi

Oh man how long can the emerald swords hold out??

Robert

Until last dusk.

RoflCat

Probably 'forever' until Indrani come back to finish the fight.

This Drakon is basically THE monster for her Name now. She got the claim with a fight against it, her Name will likely fully form (3rd aspect?) when she finishes it.

Until then, Story weight demands the elves will hold, but whether they'll all just die when she set off for the hunt or she'll come to tip the scale and save some (0 chance of all the Swords making it out)

Of course if DK make his move to release the Monster then that's another issue entirely.

Mary Gentle

Damn, that's terrifying.

I know many people expected Indrani to become the Ranger, and what pleases me is that it's under circumstances where she deserves it.

Hy Sue only got them into the city to pay off a debt, and then turned her back on a monster fight when she was supposed to be so hot. Indrani is willing to face that monster, and protect those she loves. Hence – Ranger.

It terrifies me there's still something that can damage or eradicate Cat and the Mantle of Woe. And for a minute I really thought we were going to lose Masego. ☹ ☹

Our guys are severely outclassed. By story logic, this is where they should be at their most fortunate. But the Intercessor is singing. Cat should have crunched her like a bug, last time around.

Also by story logic, this is where we should start losing people that it's painful to lose.

I don't want to see heroic self-sacrifice; I want our guys to remember that villains succeed and live to fight another day!

dadycool

Well, it already started with Rogue Sorcerer. But you're right. Even if the entire Woe is immune to actual death, they probably won't survive fully intact and anyone close to them is fair game. I anticipate something like Freddy and Otto dying together.

ninegardens

See, thing with Bard singing is.... The music sets the tone year.

Anyone ever seen a glorious come back happen right as the lute strums tragic?
I thought not!



Kennedy John

I am absolutely stealing "I hunt those worth hunting. Tremble, for you qualify." for a high level DND villain someday. For a coward who ran from the fight the previous Ranger's got some good lines. Speaking of good lines I wonder what song the Intercessor is going to be singing, for a Bard I don't think she's done much of it.

Also I love the elf bullshit in this universe just inserting themselves into the story where they see fit, I was actually just wondering before I got to that point in the chapter if this was the fight the elves would be using to repay Cat since the drakoi's story bullshit is even bigger than the elves.

caoimhinh

Now I'm wondering if the reason why the two undead Titans mysteriously disappeared and seemed like Cat even forgot about them is that the Emerald Swords got to them before they went upstairs to take care of the Drakon.

mavant

Nah, there was a demon of absence half way up. It was a crazy fight scene. Don't you remember?

'Ladi Williams

Lmfao...nice one. *insert slow clap*

Cpt. Obvious

Your storyfu is strong.

[jerdenizen](#)

I suspect the Dead King might have a better use for those two titans now that they're no longer holding back his Monster. Even if it's just to screw with the Riddle-Maker.

Naugrith

I like how Indrani changed the words. Hye's line was "Rejoice, for you qualify". Indrani's version is cooler and less insane.

Daniel E

I sincerely hope that Indrani finds time to abuse her newfound authority in the future. Like at a campfire with Cat, and she's like 'I hunt those worth hunting' before stealing Cat's sandwich and eating it, claiming victory for the greater good.

dadycool

Oh, it's just like her to use a highly melodramatic line for mundane irritation.

LarsBlitzer

You just know she's got a spot saved on the table for carving it out in the most elaborate calligraphy. It'll be the centerpiece.

jamesc9

That would make sense if it was Ranger's table. I'm not sure how it fits in the centre of Cat's.

Juff

Typo Thread:

a head twisted > a twisted
It eyes > Its eyes
widening and > widening, and
of problem > of a problem
and seize > and seized
rocked turned > rock turned
protect that > protect against that
ever break > every break
you worry > your worry
him and his > him, and his
poured god's > poured the god's
eye flow > eye flowed
Huntress so > Huntress to
hadn't been disappeared (missing word)
misfortunate > misfortune
reinforcements pouring > reinforcements were pouring
loose blast > loose blasts
grimaced made > grimace made
worth a second look (appears twice)
by unfortunately > but unfortunately
writing > writhing
before as > as
the contained > the container
Invisibility in > Invincibility in
would keeping > would have been keeping
decated > decayed
Wounded pride my > Wounded pride. My

erebus42

Sometimes the only way to deal with bullshit is to throw other bullshit at it.

erebus42

Sorry that was meant to be a response

bellacohl

God I'm so happy Hye is no longer the ranger (I assume).

I hope someone gets her now, though I guess it's too much to ask.

Also, Elder Dragons are terrifying.

dadycool

Since she's half-elf, she won't die naturally, but since Indrani earned Ranger Hye is most likely just a highly skilled warrior. She probably doesn't even really benefit from any Named buffs.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hye-ly skilled warrior, you might say.

[jerdenzen](#)

It's probably a very good thing for her that the Emerald Swords are otherwise occupied right now.

edrey

at least the smerald swords have pride, when they gave their word its wasnt paper thin like Hye.
and where did the titans go? Kreios wont be happy about that.

Tenthyr

Held in reserve, probably to check Kreios when he makes a move.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Hye did deliver on her word, and even stuck with them for a while after.

Still pointing & laughing at her right now but!

Crash

Officially designated laughing stock by Creation itself.

A Ranger who ran away from an once in a lifetime fight, leaving the last of her disciples, the nephew of her dead lover and her self-declared enemy to fend for themselves.

Only to lose the name of Ranger to a student whiling to take that fight AND have the Emerald Swords who chase her everywhere step in right after.

What a great day.

Damian Lucius Black

"If it cannot be Boosted for good," the elf told me, "then we will keep Boosting it until the Last Dusk."

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

'Ladi Williams

Yeah. This. I didn't see this before I responded.
My sentiments exactly.

'Ladi Williams

Let's be factual. She kept to her word. Even rescued cat one or two times.

The deal was to show them a way into keter. Which she kept

to...she never bargained to fight for them...you could argue she doesn't have a stick in this fire.
I still don't like her though

[marillius](#)

She didn't have an easy out before the moment the Rot spell hit. Titans and Dragon of Dragons was there and probably wouldn't have let her run like that. And before that the wards weren't down so there was no getting out. She didn't do extra. She fought till the very moment fighting was no longer required for her survival and bailed.

'Ladi Williams

No one can gainsay that, but to imply that she didn't live up to her word is wrong.
She did everything she promised to do and more.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Just not what a Ranger would do.
Hye Sue did what a Hye Sue do. Not what Ranger do.
Hye Broke her Name

'Ladi Williams

She didn't "break" her name. If Indrani had a better claim to it and took it doesn't mean Hye Su broke her name.

Ranger means different things to different people

MoreBeer

Ranger's role has been to hunt the worthy. She didn't violate the name, she broke the role.

When the Ranger makes a promise and fails to see the spirit through, and a candidate steps up to both fulfill the promise and the role, well, we know what happens.

[marillius](#)

She did everything she promised to do and not a single step more, is my implication. She had no way to leave the place until the ward was taken down and by that point the super deadly super dragon was out, making retreating a non-viable option.

jworks17

I've mentioned this before, but it's worth saying it again- how are Erratica's first drafts this smooth? It's exceptional.

Then again maybe these aren't first drafts, I'm just guessing they are because of the occasional spelling errors and such.

caoimhinh

He's a man of talent, commitment, and sheer *fucking* will.

BargleNawdleZouss

Something about which I know very little.

[jerdenizen](#)

Practice, I assume.

Cpt. Obvious

I'm guessing lots and lots of notes meticulously kept current and pretty detailed plan for the story.

I really would love to see a few iterations of the notes. Such as what they looked like before he wrote the first book. How it had changed for say book 4, and finally what had changed for book 7.

Whenever I try to write anything longer than a few pages at least one of my character will take the bit in the teeth and just go wild. And suddenly I haven't a clue where the story is going.

It's both frustrating and oddly entertaining, but so far I've never been able to reign them in enough to write a story worth reading. No matter what I do they just keep talking all over the story, never shutting up.

It's like a demented version of Seinfeld, and I can't stand that show and have never watched more than half an episode before rage-quitting...

So I admire anyone with the discipline to keep this many characters somewhat in line.

I imagine it's very much like herding cats.

Sykomantis

The trick is to design your story beats so that the only through line for an intelligent character is to follow the story as planned

[Hargabga](#)

And what if your character is a raving mad lunatic?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Write-arounds.

Like Workarounds, but for characters.

Then again, I'm afraid of the writers for the show Dexter..

Cpt. Obvious

I've tried that. Writing a raving mad lunatic is incredibly hard. If keeping ordinary people in line is like herding cats then adding a character like that to the mix turns the mostly peaceful heard of cats into a wet paperbag full of whet cats.

Now if you really want a challenge the write a main character who has no morality of any kind. A character to whom a living human and a dead have the same value, zero unless they can serve a purpose. I won't call that character evil as in its world view there's no such things as good or evil.

Tried it once. It wasn't long before I gave up. Getting into the mind of that character was scary AF.

dadycool

Magnificent. Indrani has come into her own and now the Dead King must face a new Ranger, one without a single Aspect to her Name. We now have the Hierophant, the Warlord, the Warden, and now the Ranger. Four of the five Woe have completed their metamorphosis into their final Names, only the Princess lagging behind probably due to how recently she came into that Name and the fact that Cat's still queen.

It actually makes sense that this is where the Emerald Swords would end up, chained to one spot, killing a god over and over again forever.

Mirror Night

I am curious how her Aspects evolve. I suppose Indrani and Hanno getting Aspects at the last second is great (not so much from the training prospective) but moreso from DK cannot prep for Aspects he doesn't know about.

I have no idea how Viv factors into the Last Dance of the Woe. I can barely tell if she is named, we haven't seen any Aspects, and she hasn't really done much since getting Princess. So who knows how she contribute. Hakram and Viv kinda seem to drag down the power level lol. Still the Woe is strong core as long as Cat stays out of Melee Range and stops pretending she is still Squire. And Viv can contribute something.

Tenthyr

Vivienne is still a talented thief even without the Name, she'll be able to contribute in the final dungeon crawl no problem

Mirror Night

Yeah not seeing how being a good thief without a Name is in anyway useful against DK. Viv is going to end up like Cocky hiding behind Masego at this rate when the Power Level is that high

Sugar Roll

One can make the argument that royalty are the biggest thieves out there. I wouldn't be surprised if she pulls off her biggest heist the next time we see her.

ninegardens

Royalty is a continuous cutting motion.

burnsy

My theory is that Viv is going to get an aspect that combines her stealing with her new status: Liberate.

What will this aspect do? Among other things, she could Liberate the dead from the Dead Kings control.

I'm also hopeful, since she has such a strong association with the sun of summer, that she gets a variant on Shine too.

dadycoool

Hakram has always been the Barbarian tank of the group. While Cat and Masego have to keep their distance, Hakram is the blender at the front, especially as Warlord where he gives a group bonus to melee attack.

I don't think Princess has actually established any of her Aspects yet, which makes her highly dangerous, even as an administrator. And she's always had a Strange Support role, see stealing a bunch of barges and using them as a barricade, then proceeding to SNATCH THE SUN FROM THE SKY, which I still can't get over. Also, she's already had her "Where's my place here" crisis and Hakram chopped his other hand off to resolve it.

Crash

Actually, the lack of Aspects is especially dangerous. See Hanno's new absolutely ridiculous set.

Getting your Aspects in the middle of The Final Fight is the best time for highly powerful bullshit to appear.

Under different circumstances Indrani would be likely to get something like Hunt as an equaliser like Struggle was, something that allows her to do her job as Ranger no matter what she faces. Instead, she just straight up got her Name by establishing herself as someone who would fight and laugh at a Drakon to protect her friends. Powerful Aspects are coming.

dadycoool

I was saying the lack of Aspects is a good thing, for the reasons you just described. A Named is no more dangerous than when their full potential is available and nebulous.

And yeah, laughing at a monster that could slaughter Titans and scared her predecessor is a very powerful way to establish herself.

ByVectron!

Wasn't there a blip about Ranger being a transitory name, still, for Indrani? I sweet I selves reading that recently.

ByVectron!

I swear I remember reading... Swype, swypos everywhere!

Noldo

No, it was that Aspect LEARN was ridiculous for Ranger just because it was not a transitory name.

Mirror Night

I am kinda confused as to why everyone and their grandma seems to know what Drakkon are when the Titans vs Drakkon predates Humans. I am not sure it predates Elves I suppose since they come from another continent.

Also it seems kinda weird to me Elves can do all this BS and yet not escape a room with some hellfire such that they needed Cat to save them. I think EE might be a Tolkien fan really feels like some Light of Two Trees Noldor Elf BS lol.

I suppose Hanno can detect the Drakkon? Since he was already at the door...

Tenthyr

The ancient conflict of the Titans and Drakoi are mythical, their story has saturated into people's cultures and histories. Since the Gigantes enslaved humans for a good while, the story of their Gods war probably passed to humanity that way.

ninegardens

>>"I am kinda confused as to why everyone and their grandma seems to know what Drakkon are when the Titans vs Drakkon predates Humans. I am not sure it predates Elves I suppose since they come from another continent."

I mean... lets put it this way...

What percentage of people you know know about T-rex?

Drakkon are **significantly** bigger than Trex, and significantly more recent.

People know about them because they are freakin' epic.

Abnaxis

Pretty sure Hierophant and Hye Su were the only ones who knew what a drakon is. Hye had to tell Cat because Cat had never heard of them ("they are to dragons what we are to insects") and I don't think anyone else knew what it is other than a big freaking monster.

megaprr

Hardly everyone and their grandma. Hye knew because her whole thing is hunting monsters and she's surely heard about it in her quest to seek out strong opponents. Masego knows because he's one of if not the most well-educated person on Calernia. Not to mention that Drakoi are gods, which are his specialty and the focus of his Name.

None of the others seemed to know what they are. And this is (I think) the first time we've heard of them outside the extra chapters.

Crash

Hye's whole thing WAS hunting monster. Now she's a professional runner lmao

Imagine being the Ranger for centuries and then losing the Name as you run away from a fight.

Had Indrani spat on her face, it would probably deal less damage to her psyche.

[Liliet](#)

Goblinfire is demon juice. Cat could work around it when elves couldn't because of the dimensional passage abilities, which are the one thing the elves don't have.

Of course, DK made sure that that one specific thing would be useless here, so elves are back to the top of the food chain.

Steve

Goblinfire really can burn anything, even Elven pretentiousness.

Especially Elven pretentiousness.

DC

Oh, I get it. It's a difficult to destroy reptile.

mavant

I assume DC is short for Doctor Clef.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Why wouldn't Detective Comics wanna scope out some IP?

MCU vs the SuperBatman vs WonderWoman?

This done as a Paper Comic/Graphic Novel then into Video?

I'd pay. Take My Money!!!!

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Hell, I'd take Animated.

mavant

I meant because DC was referring to SCP-682. Doctor Clef is another major character from that era of the SCP foundation stories.

Miles

"-rine, Catherine," Hierophant called out, sounding irritated.

"Are you listening?"

Oh the irony

edrey

now that i think about it, the elfs can just throw the drakon to the void with the hellgate.

i really like the possibility that hierarch meeting that monster. what would happen then?

nick012000

It would drop dead as the Dead King's magic broke, then come back to life again, free from the Dead King's control.

Then it'd probably get into a pissing match with the Hierarch, because its hunger-based domain seems antithetical to the Hierarch's anti-authoritarian domain.

Steve

It would completely destroy Anaraxes (can we take a moment to consider how fun it is for Anaraxes to have a name fundamentally based on some people being above others?)

It rules over no one. It eats everything around it because everything else is food. There is no competition between them, the Drakoi wins without even noticing.

If anything, it is the hyper-realization of Anaraxes' goals, which basically amount to turning people into a meta-organism that just consumes resources and votes a lot. The votes are the Drakoi brain, and the rest is the hunger.

Abrakadabra

That is not inaccurate description of our society. Every question is an economical question nowadays. We are the maw that eats everything.

Wonder

Well, I can only be sure that Cat's third Aspect is going to coalesce when she fucks up the Intercessor for good and into perpetuity..

Indrani is now The Ranger ,it's only left with Vivian. Frankly throughout this horrifying war ,we have seen nothing of The Shining Princess ,her stolen legion and order.

All throughout the Battle I couldn't stop thinking 🤔, maybe this godhead will be valuable to Masego's apotheosis.

I can only hope The Riddle-Maker can set the revenant Titans free .. if SveNoc can set The Good King of Callow free ,I wager The King of Titans also can..

Kojo

A Warden, Warlord, Hierophant, Ranger, Princess (Queen) and Saucy Siren enter a bar....

zenanii

Great chapter, but I started getting really annoyed with the whole "Masego has something important to say, yet because of circumstance he can't tell Cat."

The facts that he keeps getting interrupted I can swallow, but what really bothered me was how Cat literally never picked up on the part that he was trying to tell her something.

Yes, I get it, it's a very stressful situation having three dead gods coming after your ass, which is EXACTLY the sort of situation in which you should be listening VERY carefully to what the Hierophant, dissector of gods has to say.

The very foundation for Cats success has been built upon relying

on others, so it just seems incredible out of character for her to now all of a sudden not even give half a thought to the fact the Masego was trying to tell her something.

'Ladi Williams

I didn't get the vibe rhat he had anything VERY IMPORTANT to say. Ofcos he always has important things to say but nothing special this time in my opinion

zenanii

Pretty sure it's PRETTY FREAKING IMPORTANT if the Bard herself intervened to make sure Cat didn't hear it.

ninegardens

I mean, he is the one character who knows that Judgement is MIA at the moment (due to Heirarch's return), so that's pretty important.

... of course he could have mentioned that while wandering around the Serenity for several house, so.... probably not that:

'Ladi Williams

The band all knows judgment is free...though I am not sure if cat's figured judgments power is currently free floating but then she's always known the bard wants to use the doomsday weapon as she (bard) sees fit so no random surprises there

'Ladi Williams

Loool...thats YOUR interpretation.
In two days time we would know if you called it right... I'm rooting for you though.

Snappy270

What important things ? Masego was when he was explaining things, either the wards being down or how to clear the undead. Not really important things. Very odd nitpick to comment on.

Zopilote 506

Great chapter, however it seems like the number of typos has incresed, hey E.E. have you ever considered hirona a proofreader on fiverr or something?

BargleNawdleZouss

Juff will fix it for EE before it gets published. 🙄

Noldo

Are we getting all three Amadeus' elements covered in quick succession so that the next chapter is Trial followed by Pivot?

On a separate note, now that Hye is no longer Ranger, and the only thing she lives for is her upcoming fight with Cat, how likely it is that she would pick a new name (Avenger?) concentrating on her pursue of retribution? Although I suspect that in practice the fight between Hye and Cat is outside the scope of this book and largely irrelevant.

ninegardens

Okay, new Bet.

Larat is going to kill Hye Su. Either now (while she is just recently de-powered and her name is kicking her), or later, say... when she is trying to fight/kill Cat in that duel ten years time.

Hye Su had a habit of cutting Larat's eye out once per year, just for the lols. Larat exited the stage with a "lol, I'mma do what I want."

Hye Su has been hunted by the Emerald blades for years... but in some sense there is no "justice" in them killing her. They do it for Racist reasons.

None of the Refugees will do it. Their story is about moving on. Cat won't do it. Hye Su just... isn't important enough to her.

Larat on the other hand has REASON to hate Hye Su. He has *reason* to want revenge- she earned that.

If he kills her now, its very much a "You ain't the ranger now" moment.

If he waits until the Hye vs Cat duel, its very much a "Oh, hell your majesty, fancy seeing you here? Was this woman bothering you?"

Hell, he wouldn't even be punished by the narrative for interrupting the duel, because he has a strong connection to both Hye and Cat, and honestly, he is owed a duel just as much as Cat is. Him gatecrashing someone else's duel fulfills his role as the trecherous minion- even if he take Cat's side, its still him showing up to mess up an ongoing story for his own selfish reasons.

ALL the story beats are on his side here.

I guess the only catch might be, he might have the story to cripple her, take her eye, but not the story kill her.

BargleNawdleZouss

If Larat is still on Calernia, I can see him attempting to take Hye Su's eye, but not killing her. I believe he'd think it crueler to leave her alive with the memory of her defeat & his revenge.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

One-eyed Warden(Odin) vs One-eyed Hye(Deconstructed-Mary)
Sue.
Yep. Larat FTW!

Someperson

Not gonna lie this is a fantastic bet

The world clearly needs more Larat in it

Someperson

Dang I really liked how the Ranger transition went down.

Like, sure, if Indrani and Hye just straight up fought over the name (again) that could have been neat I guess, but the way it went down really highlights **why** Indrani has the truer claim on the Name.

And Hye deciding to throw in the towel and ditch the party was completely expected in light of the situation but I did **not** expect Indrani to be there in the right place and the right time to capitalize.

BargleNawdleZouss

Random thought: both Hierarch and Hierophant have mentioned "the bars of the cage" that is Creation. It would be interesting to see the two of them team up so as to facilitate Masego's studies, and possibly getting at The Gods themselves.

ninegardens

Now that I think about it... "rage against kings and gods and all the laws of creation" seems like a very Amadeaus kind of move. Maddie went about it by being smart and trying to form a solution. Anarxes just leans in on his own madness to force concessions, but....

In some sense they are very similar in goal/mindset. Probably part of why Cat was so respectful towards Anaraxes each time they met, even if he was a madman.

Chapter 66: The Empty Grave

"Needing a second blow to take a head is an unforgivable sin for two professions: butcher and king."

– Dread Emperor Terribilis II

It was a sad song that Yara of Nowhere sang us. Slow and meandering, like a stroll in a graveyard. The words should have been happy, but they dripped of grief.

"O Tiferet, raised where the river sings

You of gardens merry and nights so bright."

It was a fitting tune for the sight sprawled out beneath us, I thought. Our feet had devoured an empty hallway until we turned a corner and were faced with a decision: hurry on towards the gates or take a narrow set of stairs up into the galleries. We'd gone up, after brief hesitation, and now I hid in the shadows and leaned against the balustrade as I watched a battle unfold. The halls beyond the great one we'd escaped were lesser but numerous, a maze of roofless rooms overlooked by great galleries that hugged the ceiling – one of which I stood on. The small halls were fed into by the corridors leading to the spire's great gates, and as Named and soldiers spilled into the labyrinth I finally understood why the Dead King had made this place.

It was a slaughterhouse.

Every inch of it was trapped. I watched a company of bright-clothed fantassins blunder into a room whose sides were a pit trap covered by an illusion, gathering in the middle in time for holes to open in the walls and undead wedged inside them to begin unloading crossbows into the thick formation. Doors exploded, tar-covered floors were set aflame and swarms of poisonous insects poured out of hidden panels. I saw a doorknob turn into a leering devil that bit off the hand of the legionary that'd tried to open it, fangs crunching through steel, and even as she began screaming clouds of acid were blown into the room through small holes in the floor. All the while bows were fired into the labyrinth from the gallery above, arrows falling like rain. Death everywhere, and that wasn't even the worst of it.

I had wondered why so few Revenants had fought us when we fought our way out of the Hall of the Dead, and now I had my answer: they were here. Dozensof then, maybe as much as a hundred. They tore into the troops like wild animals, armoured battering rams and storms of sorcery that went through even heavy companies like butter. As the loud melees took place lighter Revenants, soft-footed and quiet, slunk atop the tall roofless walls and snatched the lives of officers to sow chaos in the ranks. Named fought

them where they could – I glimpsed the Valiant Champion decapitating a tall Revenant in white plate and the Skinchanger ripping out a lich's throat – but the maze was working against them. It forced them to split up, take different paths and run into traps.

Meanwhile, the Revenants moved according to the orders of their all-seeing eye in the sky: the Dead King himself, wielding his creations with fatal precision. He wasn't here, but then he didn't have to be. All it'd take was one Revenant up in the gallery to serve as his eyes.

"The city that forever blooms in spring,

Beloved of singers and delight."

"The Scourges are here," Indrani quietly said.

There was no sign of them, but she was right and we both knew it. The chord was there for me to pull on, and it was not slack but taut – tense, ready to snap. The Scourges would come out soon, and I knew exactly why it was that Neshamah was holding them back. His bloody work below told me the answer to that, with the way he was so carefully splitting up Named and trying to overwhelm them with lesser Revenants.

"He's trying to figure out what band of five he'll be facing," I agreed. "The moment he does, the full strength of the Scourge will fall on whoever he decides is the most important part of it."

It was what I'd do, in his place. Set up the meat grinder below us to kill off Named weak or not yet matured, throwing traps and disposables as he most powerful of our lot until he had a decent idea of what our strengths and weaknesses were. And then, when he'd figured out who was supposed to kill him, he'd break that band before it ever formed. It was his favoured tactic, always had been. He didn't want to face the Severance or the Crown before having broken the band behind them.

"No sight of Hanno or the Mirror Knight," I frowned, "but Akua shouldn't be far behind. We'll need to cover her and the Autumn Crown when they arrive."

Indrani shuffled and my stomach dropped. Ranger was not meeting my eye.

"What happened?" I said.

"It wasn't anybody's fault," she said. "We got ambushed."

No, I furiously thought. No, she could not possibly have fucked this up. I'd *trusted* her, trusted the both of them. I grabbed her by the scarf, pushing her back, and she only grimaced.

"*What happened?*" I coldly hissed.

"Catherine," Masego said from behind me.

His tone was a warning and I forced myself to heed it. I released Indrani, taking a step back and mastering my fury. It had yet to wane.

"The Seelie cut the crown in two," Ranger admitted.

It was like a punch in the stomach. I staggered back, eye closing as I struggled to find another angle. Another way out of this mess. If we had no way to deal with the Dead King except destruction, then he had nothing left to lose. No need to think in the long term. No reason to hold back whatever horrifying surprise I knew bone-deep he would have stored away to make the consequences of destroying him unthinkable. And now I knew for sure why the Intercessor had nudged the Hierarch into appearing in the Serenity. Neshamah's back was up against the wall, with no way to retreat.

It was do or die, for the Dead King, and he was the kind of person that'd kill all of Creation to earn a single breath more.

"What does she want?" I moaned out loud, fingers rubbing the bridge of my nose. "What can she possibly get from things going to shit for us? With Hierarch back the ealamal's back on Judgement, which is not *great* but shouldn't-"

"It is not," Hierophant interrupted me.

My eye flew open, meeting his own.

"Explain," I evenly said.

"I noticed when we crossed into the Serenity," he told me, "that the Choir of Judgement appears to have been silenced by the effort of freeing itself from the Hierarch."

My jaw tightened.

"So what the Hells does the ealamal do if Judgement doesn't guide it?" I ask. "Is it a dud?"

"It would express only inherent properties, like the tabula rasa effect," Hierophant said, "unless otherwise guided. Which-"

"- which the Bard can," I finished in a whisper, blood going cold.

So that was the game. Corner the Dead King so that he became the nastiest of animals, emptying his vault of all horrors on our armies, and then when it all went bad on us then Cordelia would fire up the ealamal and the Intercessor would get to decide what happened. What would it do, I wondered? Answers came to me by the dozens. She could rid herself of the Dead King and then kill everyone who knew about her, I thought, allowing herself to start building anew all the bridges she'd burned with our generation. Or she could kill all of us here, a warning as to what happened when she wasn't listened to. She could even make it do nothing at all, let us die and try to win the war with the rest of Calernia on the back of that weight.

There were so many ways for her to get back in the game, to snatch back her crown, and yet all I could think of was the conversation I'd had over a fire in the ruins of a palace once proud. *But it's slavery too, to spend your live lashing backs,* the Hierarch had said, grey eyes burning. *Just a different kind, and you can't escape it any more than they can.* And so the thought occurred to me, perhaps the most terrifying of them all, that I should be asking myself a different question.

Was Yara of Nowhere still trying to win at all?

"It's not finished, Cat," Indrani stiffly told me. "Akua, she forged something out of the crown."

That earned back my full attention. It was on the tip of my tongue to dismiss the possibility, the absurdity that someone could just forge something out of a broken crown of the fae in the middle of battle, but it never passed my lips.

If anyone could, it was Akua Sahelian.

"What did she make?"

"Shackles," Ranger said. "The kind that bind power both ways."

A crude thing, I thought, made on the bedrock of Masego's work. Yet it was as much a miracle as Hierophant's labour that she had been able to do even this much. I studied Indrani closer, eye narrowing.

"There's more," I said, and it was not a question.

Indrani grimaced again.

"She didn't say it, but I'm sure it's not the kind of shackles you get to take off after they're put on," she told me.

I closed my eye. Of course they wouldn't. They'd been made from the Autumn Crown, which we'd not intended Neshamah to ever take off. Whoever held back the Dead King would never be relieved from

that vigil. Yet someone would have to, before this was over, and that left a burning question: *who*. I had meant Akua to take up that role as queen over the Twilight Ways, when this all began, but the Ways were broken and now the Autumn Crown as well. Were we going to have to bet it all on the Severance? No, I decided, the shackles could work. They should be able to strip the Dead King of his mastery over undead, or close enough. We hadn't lost yet, it was just that instead of offering a gift that could not be refused we'd have to beat the Hidden Horror to shackle him.

And someone was going to have to be shackled to him.

"Fuck," I swore.

Should it be me? I wasn't sure that was feasible, not if it was to be the Warden and one of the rulers of Cardinal. I couldn't afford to be either gone or powerless. Who else, though? Akua might have served as the queen of a broken throne, but she'd made these shackles. I was not sure she could also wear them, that the story would flow. It would be a heroine's sacrifice, and though I was more than half in love with her she was not a heroine. Not even now.

"Warden."

Alexis' voice brought me out of my thoughts again, a reminder that all around us people were dying and I didn't have the time to spare to figure it all out in my head. The Silver Huntress was pointing something out for me over the balustrade and I leaned over to see. Fresh waves of warriors were entering the slaughterhouse, at their forefront warbands of heavily armoured orcs. At their head a towering man in scorched plate brandished a greatsword, the Warlord roaring as they entered the fray. Hakram had arrived.

"Appreciated," I told Alexis, "but he can take care of him-"

I caught sight of the killing arrow as it passed me, eyes widening as I reached for Night, but Indrani was faster. Her bow was already strung and her hands blurred as she moved, nocking and releasing her own arrow. It ended up being a close thing. I watched with a thumping heart, relieved for a moment when I saw Hakram had not been the one aimed at – only for the relief to fade when I realized soldiers of the Army of Callow had arrived with the fresh wave, and Vivienne was leading them. Ranger's arrow caught the Hawk's less than a foot away from Vivienne, the two of them hitting a legionary in the shoulder instead. She let out a shout of alarm and ducked, although too late.

The cold voice in the back of my mind, the part that wasn't frozen fear and rage at how close Princess had just come to dying, wondered why the Dead King would believe Vivienne Dartwick crucial to his defeat. Worth committing the Scourges for. I

realized, in the heartbeat that followed, that she wasn't. But she was one of the Woe, and we'd come out swinging for her – taking out into the open people he was genuinely wary of. It was a simple and straightforward ploy, a kind villains had been using on their opponents for millennia. And they'd kept using it because it fucking *worked*, I grimly thought.

"Ranger," I said.

"Yeah, I've got the Hawk," Indrani said with deceptive mildness.

Were I a better woman I might have spared some pity for what lay ahead of the Scourge.

"Hierophant with me," I said, then turned to the remaining two. "As for you-"

"I want to get the piece of the drakon to the Witch of the Woods," Cocky interrupted me. "And I will need an escort for that."

I mulled that, then nodded.

"If you can't reach her," I said, "then find the Riddle-Maker."

Kreios would likely be better for the fight if we were aiming at a second round with the drakon, but the Witch was a lot more likely to be free. She should have been pounding at the front gate with Hanno, serving as a magical battering ram, and those should be open by now. Still, it had not escaped me I had found no trace of either those two. The battle there might not actually be won yet. *Later Catherine's problem*, I decided. She was plucky lass, she could handle it. I caught Masego's eye and waited for his nod, only then pushing through the butterflies in my belly to take a few steps back. I broke into a run and, using my staff, vaulted myself over the edge of the balustrade.

"O Tiferet, home of my true love

A maiden fairer than the full moon."

I gathered Night to me as I fell, Mantle of Woe flapping around me, and did not even turn when an arrow was shot at my back. Indrani would take care of it. I wrapped myself in shadows, swallowing whole the volley that fell on me from the galleries above, and wove tendrils below to catch my fall. They caught the edge of a wall, turning the drop into a smooth lowering atop the wall even as the labyrinth came alive around me. I watched, unimpressed, as the undead in that maze of rooms turned towards me as one. Komena laughed in my ear, delighted, and together we raised my hand as Night coalesced between my fingers.

"Take a swing," I challenged. "See where it gets you."

A storm answered. Arrows and javelin and spells, swarms of dead insects and clouds of poison. Ghouls scrambled up the wall and skeletons thrust long spears at my feet. It would not be enough. In my hand I held a sphere of darkness, and as I opened my palm it was revealed for a heartbeat – until I closed my fingers to crush it. The air shook, for a moment, and as I grinned the sphere exploded into a shower of black pinpricks. They flew out, growing and swelling into beams as they did. Komena's eyes told friend from foe where I could not, held back by the limitations of my flesh, and everything else turned to smoke.

Night sliced through stone and steel and dead, the rays of the dark sun I had shattered taking a remorseless bite out of Creation.

The storm died, swallowed whole save for broken remnants that did not even reach my feet, and I let out a misty breath as Night swam thick through my veins. Behind me Hierophant landed atop the wall, his descent wavering like a feather's. He had lowered his own weight to take the edge of the fall, but within moments it was restored and he stood at my back.

"An ugly place," Masego mildly said. "I do not like it."

"Then lighten up, Zeze," I smiled, "because the two of us are going to burn it down."

It was an elegant, intricate plan to kill Named and men that Neshamah had crafted here. So instead of trying to defeat him in kind, beat him at his own game, I was going to take a fucking hammer to his clever little schemes.

"You have a plan, then?" Hierophant asked.

He sounded, I thought with a smile, so utterly unconcerned by the sea of enemies around us. I pointed my staff behind us.

"See that?"

"I do," he drily replied.

"It's the furthest any of our allies have gotten," I said. "So anything past it goes."

"Simple," he praised.

"That's me," I humbly replied, then winced when I realized what I'd just said.

It was too much to hope the Dead King hadn't heard that, wasn't it? Goddamnit. Well, time to drown my embarrassment in a copious amount of fire.

"I'll defend," I said. "*Attack.*"

"It is in your hands," Masego agreed.

In the heartbeat that followed translucent shields bloomed in a bubble around him, arrows pinging off the panels, and he began to speak in the mage tongue. He was out of it for now, so it was time for me to get to work. Now, we were surrounded by undead crawling over walls to come at us as arrows rained from above and Revenants converged on our very visible raised location. We were in hostile territory, which was why tactics dictated that my first move should be to spread that disadvantage around. I loosened my wrist and rolled my shoulder.

"All right," I muttered. "Let's see if this time I can make it hot enough it goes straight to bone ash."

A javelin flew up, shot from the dead angle of my dead eye, but I followed the nudge of my Name and slapped it aside with my staff. Breathing out, I raised the staff of dead yew I had received in the depths of newborn Twilight and stirred the air with it. Slowly, carefully tracing the circle as Night gathered and the air began to heat. The Hawk came for me, but I had Ranger on my side. I didn't glance at the black arrow before hearing it shot out. And as strings of black flame began to linger in the air in the wake of my staff, I shaped my will. Below me a ghoul clawed its way up the wall, baring its fangs at my boots, and I bared my teeth back.

"Run or burn," I hissed, slamming my staff down.

It did not, I saw, run quickly enough. Like a knot of snakes come loose, ribbons of blackflame erupted from where my staff had struck the top of the wall. They slithered in every direction, leaving behind burning trails as they ate through flesh and slid inside armour to devour the dead inside. I watched through a hundred eyes as the working spread out around me like a blooming flower, black flames consuming everything as they hungrily advanced. It would do, I decided. I'd not destroyed everything in that radius, as much because I was trying to avoid killing Grand Alliance forces as because some of the undead were hard to put down, but it was all on fire. It'd serve as a wall for most everything except Revenants.

"Abyss and firmament. I take the shape of the star and the depth of the pit, borrowing laws high and low."

"Oh dear," I muttered, glancing at Masego. "Is that really usable *inside*?"

It really was quite worrying how often I was the person in my inner circle that most responsibly handled unspeakable eldritch power. Although that was, I supposed, not unlike being the drunk with the smallest bottle. Still, now that I'd rid myself of the chaff it was about time for the real contenders to come out. The

first one to pop his head out was a Revenant mage that rose in through a dignified levitation spell, his colourful embroidered robes fluttering in nonexistent wind as he pointed a gnarled staff my way and began an incantation that echoed across the ceiling. Frowning, I pointed a finger and gathered Night in a needle before it shot out. It blew through his skull as I began to look who that'd been a distraction *for*, finding that tricky little tart the Seelie climbing up the wall to get at Masego's back.

I tossed a ball of blackflame at her, breaking the illusion, and enjoyed the look on her face when the fire then circled around instead of dispersing and blew her off the wall before she could eviscerate Hierophant. Really, like I *wasn't* going to learn when she kept using the same trick? More worrying than the sneak, though, was the way that all the poison clouds across the maze were beginning to gather in a ball under the ceiling. That was the fucking Tumult at work, mark my words, because of course now that I'd set this place on fire and Masego was going to smite it what we needed was a fucking poison storm on top of everything. Much as I would have liked to get rid of that, though, I had more pressing matters at hand.

Like the Mantle turning the wall I was standing on to dust.

I cursed, stepping back as the tall Scourge swung her mace at my retreating form. The parts of the wall that hadn't crumbled cracked from the blow even as I tossed a curse at the Mantle's head, which she took head on. Her helm warped, but she pit her power against mine and while if it'd kept up she would have lost I didn't have the *time* – through a Night eye I saw the Seelie throwing a knife at Masego's head, hastily withdrawing my will from the Mantle to form streaks of darkness around Hierophant's shield. The knife wasn't where I'd seen it, but I went wide enough I caught it anyway. Only for, you know, the Mantle to finish turning the wall under me to dust. Fuck, I thought as I fell, and I raised my staff to try to slap aside the mace blow but it was going to be tricky and-

And three hundred pounds of orcish fury smashed into the Mantle, Hakram Deadhand snarling as he tackled her through a door so hard splinters went flying. I landed on my knees, leaning against my staff, and let out a sigh of relief. Reinforcements had arrived.

"I have woven curses into hymn, stuffed a heart with straw. That which is hollow I have raised onto the dais, revered as glorious under three skies and revered by nine corners."

I hadn't seen the Prince of Bones yet but he was bound to be close, so I couldn't leave Hakram alone for too long. I couldn't leave Masego along for long either, though, because the fucking Seelie was around and he wasn't moving. She'd gotten past my armour like it wasn't there with that knife of hers, once, so I

wouldn't bet on a spell shield doing better. I wove a tendril to get me back up on the chunk of the wall where he was standing, landing in front of him, but there was no sign of the enemy. I took a few limping steps forward, frowning, then thrust my staff down at the burning room: a gust of wind picked up ash and tossed it everywhere, but still the Seelie remained hidden. Where was she?

My Name nudged me and I heard the sound of steel ripping into flesh, turning to see a throwing knife stuck in the Seelie's wrist as she flew on translucent red wings to stick Masego from the back. She shattered into pieces but almost immediately reappeared a foot below the broken illusion as another throwing knife thumped into her back, ripping her ballroom gown as she turned with an inhuman snarl. The Princess, sword in hand, flicked her other wrist and palmed a third throwing knife.

"The Varlet did it better," Vivienne Dartwick told her. "So what would that make you – a *quarter* rate Named?"

Ah, trash talk. That most hallowed of Callowan traditions.

"Can you cover Masego?" I called out.

"Run along, Black Queen," my successor smiled. "I'm finding stabbing fae to be satisfying in a very soulful sort of way."

And who was I to argue with that? The same tendrils that'd raised me up threw me in the direction Hakram had disappeared in, and as Indrani shot out an attempt of the Hawk's to kill Warlord I found the duelling Named and guided my descent very precisely: my boots landed on the back of the Mantle's head as she tried to wrestle Hakram's great sword out of his grasp, my staff following a moment later and sliding in the space between the helm and the plate.

"My turn with the curses," I grinned even as I unleashed Night.

It'd be hard to cook her from the inside, but I could do something simpler. No matter how much armour and steel there was in there, it was the bones that moved the Mantle. And affecting those was a lot easier than wrecking all that steel. Night sunk into them like poison, and even as the Scourge shook me off and sent me flying into a pile of stone I exerted a twist of will to get the working moving. A heartbeat later her limbs began shaking uncontrollably, and with a roar Warlord smashed her into the ground. He ripped his greatsword out of her grasp even as she twisted on the ground and I rose to my feet. His arm rose to deliver a crippling blow, but before he could the wall to his left burst open in a shower of shards as the Prince of Bones tore through.

"Shit," I hissed, and slid Night along the ground before the Prince.

I covered the stone with greasy, oily Night but to my unpleasant surprise it did nothing. The fucking Prince must have either enchanted boots or nails under the soles. Hakram took a greastword blow with his own, steel grinding on steel, and I realized with a start that the blades were almost identical. Had Hakram *stolen the Prince of Bones' sword* at some point? I loosed a burst of raw Night in the Mantle's belly as she tried to get up, knocking her back down, but that wouldn't last. This wasn't a good place for us to fight, not with limited space and two enemies so heavily armoured.

"We pull back," I shouted.

"Agreed," Warlord growled, taking a step back.

Even as we began our retreat, though, the tide turned again.

"Behold," Hierophant called out, "all ye with eyes, for I have made a god of clay and it is an idol of WRATH."

I shielded my eyes from the cold, alien light just as it came down. The clamour of the battle went silent as a grave, as if Hierophant's miracle had killed noised itself. When I took my hand off my eye it was to the sight of both Scourges withdrawing, which after hesitation I allowed. After all, where they were headed I'd find it difficult to pursue: the latter half of the great room that I had pointed out to Masego was now a plain of red, glowing glass.

Nothing else was left.

The front half of the labyrinth, having come into Grand Alliance hands through hard fighting while Zeze and I made a spectacle, burst into cheers. The dead there were good as routed, and through our advance was stopped until the glass cooled it was now open grounds to the great stairs at the back of what had once been a maze. The surviving Revenants fled that way, ignoring spells and arrows, and when I glanced up at the ceiling where the poison clouds had been gathering I found with some amusement it had been glassed as well. The heat had dispersed whatever the Tumult was up to, sparing us a spot of trouble on top of all the rest.

"Her smile gentler than the wings of doves,

Her laugh worth a thousand tunes!"

And the Intercessor was still singing, great. Because that was always a good sign. I went shoulder to shoulder with Hakram as we

returned – well, shoulder to arm anyways – and bumped my armour against his.

“You got there right in time,” I said.

“One of my better habits,” Warlord smirked.

“I suppose you do need something to make up for all the sleeping around.”

As he spluttered my eye sought the source of the voice and found that Vivienne’s face was cut, but it was just a shallow slice under her eye. Masego, following behind, was entirely unharmed and looked to be in a rather fine mood. I supposed I’d be too, if I had gotten to blow up half the labyrinth of someone I despised.

“You’re being pretty savage today,” I told her. “It’s been great.”

“Well, it *is* the end of the world,” Princess snorted.

“Speaking of that, Catherine,” Hakram said, “there’s trouble at the gates.”

Wait, hadn’t I figured something out for that? Shit, no I hadn’t. Earlier Catherine had passed me the sharper because she couldn’t be bothered to. *Earlier Catherine, what a bitch*, I uncharitably thought. She just kept screwing me over.

“Lay it on me,” I sighed.

“The Titans are brawling,” Vivienne bluntly said.

A small sentence that encompassing a large amount of collateral damage, I figured. Anyhow, the mystery of where the dead Titans had disappeared to appeared to be solved. Neshamah must have figured they were worth spending on keeping the Riddle-Maker out of his hair, and I couldn’t fault the decision. The last of the living Titans would have been damned useful when facing down the Hidden Horror. We kept moving deeper into the maze, avoiding corpses and traps as we moved through the crowd of cheering soldiers.

“Is Kreios winning?” I asked with a grimace.

“No one can tell,” Hakram admitted. “It was still going when we broke through.”

“Broke through,” I repeated with a frown. “Explain.”

“We haven’t won the battle for the inner city,” Warlord continued. “The Procerans seized one of the avenues and we’ve been funneling troops into the spire through it, but the palaces are still in enemy hands and we keep losing the plaza.”

Which was why it was such a haphazard mix of Grand Alliance troops that'd spilled into the maze. Whenever a push crested past enemy defences there was another wave of soldiers, but we didn't actually hold the great plaza. It made a rough sort of sense, I thought. It was where all the great avenues led to, so it would be the easiest place in all of Keter for Neshamah to reinforce.

"It has been some time since we crossed," Vivienne reminded me. "The battle could have tipped one way or another by now."

I slowly nodded.

"Do you know where Hanno and the Witch are?"

"Keeping the gates open," Warlord said.

And the enemy army off our backs, it went unsaid.

"I need a word with them," I said. "The rest of you should prepare for the offensive."

I paused.

"Zeze, can you get Indrani down here?" I asked. "I want us with her when we strike."

"I'll see to it," Hierophant promised.

I clapped his shoulder, nodded at the others and went on my way. The hallways that fed into the maze room were relatively straightforward, opulently decorated with few visible defences laid in save for wards. They were grounds the Dead King was prepared to lose, after all: their purpose was to guide invaders in the killing grounds. I passed through knots of soldiers and makeshift infirmaries where priests and mages saw to the wounded – or burned the dead. The Forsworn Healer was there, but I did not stop to speak with him. Soon I stood before the great open gates of the spire, at the top of wide stairs that gave me a wide view of the city, and my stomach clenched at what I saw.

We were losing.

The Grand Alliance's armies had broken into the inner city, overwhelming the ramparts and seizing two gates, but then they'd been pushed behind those walls like rats sealed in a casket. Our hosts had seized wide swaths of Keter's centre and dug in, but relentless tides of undead smashed at their defences even as companies desperately charged into the central plaza to make it past the enemy and into the black spire. It was a battle of attrition now, I saw, and one we could only lose. An hour, two at most, and our armies would break. Before half of that passed they'd grow too feeble to keep mounting offensives into the plaza, cutting off the flow of reinforcements.

We'd have to do with the people we had and whoever arrived in the next quarter hour. If we didn't take our swing at the Dead King soon we were finished. Breathing out shakily, I swept out the gates to find a few makeshift barricades had been raised at the bottom of the stairs and were being manned by hodgepodge mix of soldiers. Legionaries – mine and Nims' both – side by side with Proceran conscripts and League mercenaries. Two pikes that must belong to Spears of Stygia rose high, a woman in magister's robes with them, as Levantines painted in the colours of the Brigand's Blood locked shields with orcs of the Blackspear Clan.

In front of them, swaggering, was the Red Knight. More surprising to me was the presence of the Silver Huntress and the Concocter, who'd evidently made it past the enemy to find the Witch. Still, I saw no sign of either her or Hanno. Or Kreios, for that matter, who should-

To the east a sun lit up the sky, burning through stone houses and towers and hundreds of dead even as air turned so thick and liquid that it seemed as if a curtain had fallen over an entire city bloc. In the heart of it I saw the two robed silhouettes of the dead Titans, bearing livery in Keter's colours of purple and silver. A sight that seemed to enrage the third giant facing them, who pulled down the sky on their heads and let out a shout that echoed across the Crown of the Dead. I glimpsed the sun expanding and turning red, then exploding white for a heartbeat before it contracted and blackened, swallowing everything up before the magic exploded in strings of raw power.

None of the Titans flinched, magic rearing up again as they continued their terrifying clash.

Well Kreios seemed to, uh, have that in hand? A little hard to tell, like Hakram had said, but if I stuck my finger in there I didn't think it'd achieve much except losing me a finger. Best to leave them to it. My gaze shied away, looking instead for Hanno and the Witch. They still weren't with the barricades, but the soldiers there were pointing at something and following *that* I found them. There'd been a push to retake the plaza that had failed, but through the ranks of the dead a small band was running for the spire gates and the two of them had gone out to meet them. There were five – no, six – people sprinting as the dead howled after them.

The Witch of the Woods tossed a spell into the horde, a ball of transparent force that crushed all it rolled over, but it wouldn't be enough. A handful of Revenants had sped ahead of the rest of the undead, the fastest of them an armoured man with a great sword who... My fingers clenched when I realized I was looking at the Blade of Mercy. We hadn't been fast enough to burn his corpse. Most of our dead Named had been recovered and burned, but sometimes it'd been impossible to retrieve the bodies. The

runners were Named as well, I recognized. The Mirror Knight was easy to pick out by his armour, as were the Myrmidon and the Kingfisher Prince. The Grave Binder and Affable Burglar took a second look, but my breath caught when I recognized the person at the back of the pack.

That was Akua's armour.

Hanno caught the Blade of Mercy's blow a heartbeat before it struck her back, having sped up massively over his last few steps, and the truth of him was plain to See. The White Knight walked among us again, sword in hand. Hanno's blade blazed with Light as he drove back the Revenant, parrying a spear thrust from another who'd caught up and holding the rearguard until the Witch struck down with a mass of water than she froze in the heartbeat that followed. A wasteland of ice behind him, the White Knight leisurely retreated while covering the runners the rest of the way. I was down the stairs in moments, on them as they arrived.

"Warden," Hanno smiled.

"White Knight," I returned, clasping his arm when he offered it.

He made a face that, on a prettier man, might have been called a pout.

"That eye of yours does take some pleasure out of things," he complained.

"Not for me," I snorted.

And I was, after all, a villain. I swept through the others, offering nods and claps where I should until I reached Akua. She looked tired, I thought, but far from resigned. My eye dipped down a pouch at her side and she replied with a nod.

"I still have them," she said.

"Did you choose a name?" I asked.

Her smile was sharp enough to cut.

"Fetters," Akua said. "I call them the Fetters."

"It'll do," I said, and gently touched her elbow.

As much to greet her as reassure myself she was there. The Red Knight snorted contemptuously and I addressed her without turning.

"It might do you some good to remember that you don't, strictly speaking, need your tongue to fight for me," I mildly said.

I saw the smile in Akua's eyes she did not allow to touch her face, and when I turned to glance at the Red Knight she looked uncertain. Taken aback by how casually I'd just threatened to rip out her tongue in front of half a dozen heroes. Hanno did look disapproving, but though it was hard to tell with the mask I was pretty the Witch of the Woods was grinning.

"We'll soon be able to push deeper into the spire," I said. "The glass will have cooled."

"The glass?" the Mirror Knight asked, sounding confused.

"Hierophant was in a mood," I shrugged.

It said a lot about the kind of reputation Masego had grown into that not a single person here misunderstood my meaning after that.

"There won't be anyone more Named coming," Prince Frederic told me. "It has been most of an hour since I last spoke with First Princess Rozala, but I believe all we are the last. Everyone else is crippled or dead."

I kept a wince off my face. I'd not counted how many Named there had been in the maze, but it couldn't be more than thirty. More than half the people who'd signed the Truce and Terms were now either dead or out of the fight.

"Then we press on with what we have," I told them. "The Scourges still block our path, but--"

We all went silent. Even the least sensitive of the Named, even those soldiers without a speck of magic to them, felt *it*. Like a fetid warm wind out of a swamp, licking at our skin. It came from where half the maze still stood. *The drakon*, I thought. But how? The Emerald Swords should be keeping it contained.

"Either the Emerald Sword are dead," I grimly said, "or they were tricked."

Heavy silence followed.

"I think," the Concocter hesitantly said, "I think that I know what happened."

My eye went to her, a silent order to keep talking.

"The body it just a corpse," Cocky said. "It's the essence of the drakon that matters. So it might be that the elves are still cutting up a regenerating body but that the essence slipped away."

My breath caught.

"You're saying it's building itself another body," I said. "In there."

Out of corpses, steel and stone, I thought. I

"The Dead King's leash on such a thing would be loose," Antigone flatly said. "This may well be the seed of a drakon reborn."

I shivered at that, I wasn't too proud to admit it. I wasn't alone in that either. Few of the people here knew what a drakon even was and yet dread hung heavy in the air. Had the Dead King's monster gotten free? I concentrated, dipped into the darkness of **See**, and the story was there to be found. Strong, the riverbed of it deep and wide. It had been near a certainty from the moment Below's stories returned and the monster was revealed. *Which means he knew it would happen*, I thought. It was Neshamah, he'd seen that story play out a thousand times before. Which meant it was part of his plan, and when I stopped to consider what a drakon reborn might mean I understood exactly what it was.

He was raising another Evil we needed to stop. We couldn't just fucking ignore this and pass it by as we went to take his head, we'd need to deal with it else Calernia was just as fucked as before: we might not be in a state to stop it after we dealt with the Dead King. The one person who did have a story to lean into against the creature was already busy, stuck in the grooves a story just as strong: the last Titan putting to rest the stolen corpses of his old comrades. *Fuck*, I thought again. We were getting played, *had* gotten played, and it was skillful enough that even if I knew there was no other choice than to pay up on the price.

"Concocter, you still have that piece of the drakon?" I asked.

"I do," she agreed.

"Then you and the Witch need to figure out a way to put it down," I frankly said. "Take whoever you need to get it done. The rest of us go for the Dead King."

"I will finish it," the Witch of the Woods promised me.

"There might not be a way," the Mirror Knight cautioned her.

"Then I will make one," she replied without hesitation. "Whatever the cost."

I nodded, comforted by her determination if nothing else.

"Make your picks quickly," I ordered her. "We're running out of time."

—

"O Tiferet, ruled by lords fair and just

Your sages celebrated far and wide."

It was a horror.

I had seen dark and ugly things over my years as a villain, but not even the worst of the madness to be found in the Wasteland rivaled the seed of a drakon taking root. Out of the glass it had grown, swallowing up corpses and stone and armour like a tar pit, until a twisted abomination took shape. It had a dragon's long neck and body, but the wings were ragged and full of holes – their patterns hurting the eye – and while a spiked tailed slithered down there were no feet beneath. Only writhing tentacles of corpse-flesh and eerie, insect-like scuttling legs. It was the mouth that had me nauseous, though. The jaw split four ways, revealing dripping jowls and a sea of teeth that were as glistening knives. Every part of it writhed, moved, faces and armour and limbs looking as if they were trying to wriggle out of the abomination.

To stand in its presence was to feel it biting away at you, eating everything that you were piece by piece. It was not something humans were meant to face, and yet we must. There was no other choice, for it was rampaging all over remains of the maze. With a cruel intelligence it had lacked earlier it snatched up soldiers and trampled banners, leaving some half dead and bleeding out so they might scream out their suffering as they died. The only relief to be had here was that there was not a single Scourge here: the Dead King would not risk them when he was losing control of his monster.

"Go," the Witch of the Woods shouted. "I will draw its attention."

As her sorcery roared, we ran for it. The Woe came to me as we ran through the maze, avoiding swipes of the drakon's limbs that shattered rooms while the Witch struck at it with great icy winds. It was fewer Named than I would have liked who would come with us. The Kingfisher Prince would hold the rearguard with the soldiers and the Red Knight was to stay with him, one meant for leading men and the other killing foes. Then the Witch had taken the Mage – Apprentice had transitioned, fancy that, and she wasn't even done if I saw that right – the Knight Errant, the Myrmidon, the Painted Knife and the Affable Burglar. The Stalwart Apostle was to stay back and heal, with the Stained Sister to keep her alive. And the Concocter, of course.

Hanno and I would get the rest. The Woe, of course. Then the Valiant Champion, the Mirror Knight, the Forsworn Healer, the Daring Pyromancer, the Silver Huntress, the Vagrant Spear, the Page, the Skinchanger and the Grave Binder. Akua as well, of

course, though she was not properly named. Sixteen of us to end the King of Death.

It felt like too few, but there was no other choice.

The kept running, squeezing through the smoking halls, and the cloying humidity pressed ever stronger as we approached the drakon's side. It noticed us, even through the winds, and would have swiped if not for the madwoman who leapt on its back and began tearing out its back.

"Honour to the Blood," the Painted Knife shouted.

A heartbeat later she was sent flying, the drakon screaming in irritation, as I heard bones break. Kallia, I realized, might well just have died. But she'd bought us a moment. We reached the open grounds of glass, marred by the abomination that'd emerged from them, and though it turned its back on the maze to chase us the Witch of the Woods ripped out a chunk of the ceiling and collapsed it on the monster's head. It wouldn't hurt it, we all knew that, but it won us the rest of the way to the stairs. Across smooth black glass we ran, until our feet reached stone and the drakon's fury sounded behind us.

"Don't stop," I shouted. "Keep going. We lose if we slow."

We couldn't know where in the spire the Dead King waited, but it didn't matter. We had enough heroes assembled that providence would lead us there in time and even though we'd played most of the cards we had to play so had Neshamah. He didn't have a lot of defences or defenders left that could stop the crew of sixteen we'd assembled. Only the one, really, and he didn't make us wait long for it. We stumbled out of the stairs into a cavernous great hall, a forest of tall pillars under a curved ceiling so tall I could barely make it out. There were no torches here, no magelights, and yet a dim green light hung about the hall. Our boots found wet tiles as we entered, shallow waters covering swaths of the hall as they looked like emerald mirrors.

Among the pillars at the heart of the room, the Prince of Bones stood waiting.

"They're here," I quietly said. "All of them."

"Then we strike hard from the start," Hanno said.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them. No, that too was a trap. Sixteen against five with the strong Named we had, we were certain to beat them. But the story would be diluted. Too many of us moving in different directions. What would win out was the simplest one of all: 'the Scourges can kill Named'. We'd win, but our losses would be catastrophic. Like the Maddened Fields, it would be a victory that lost us the war.

"No," I said. "The rest of you go on ahead. This is for the Woe to handle."

The White Knight turned to me, startled, but I raised a hand.

"Don't argue," I ordered. "We don't have the time. We'll engage them, take the opening and go."

He was unhappy, I could see it writ plain on that plain face. But he would not turn his back on the decision we had made at the heart of the tower, when I had devoured the first of the Intercessor's eyes: I was the Warden and so he would obey.

"I'll be waiting for you at the end of the line, Catherine," Hanno of Arwad finally said.

"We began the Truce and Terms together," I smiled. "We'll end them together as well, Hanno."

A curt nod, and he moved. Nemed followed in his wake, headed to the side of the room and I found golden eyes looking for mine. There was something like grief on Akua's face, and she seemed startled with the intensity of it. Enough that she looked away.

The Woe gathered around me and I let out a long breath, eyes falling on the waiting Prince of Bones.

"By their golden wisdom without rust,

A hundred times did you earn your pride!"

So that was it, then. The last dance of the Woe. We'd go different ways after the war, should there be an after the war, but we still had today before it came to an end.

"Quite the fight you've picked us," Princess drawled.

"Eh, that's always been the way," Ranger said. "We always find the meanest fucker in the room and throw a drink in his face, it's kind of our thing at this point."

"We have grudges to settle, besides," Warlord grunted. "They've gotten away too many times already."

I rolled my shoulder, limbering it, and slowly unsheathed my sword.

"Let's buy them passage to the Dead King, then," I said.

I took a limping step forward, but Masego suddenly cleared his throat. I stalled and looked back, finding him staring at me disapprovingly.

"You haven't said the words," he complained.

I blinked.

"What words?"

"Our motto," he slowly said, as if addressing a dimwit.

Indrani got it first, letting out a hyena's cackle, and I got what he meant a moment later in utter disbelief.

"Don't you fucking dare," I warned. "Not a single one of you."

"Together," Hierophant enthusiastically said, raising his hand.

Filthy traitors that they were, the others all joined in.

"LIES AND VIOLENCE!"

A moment of silence passed as the Prince of Bones slowly cocked his head to the side. *Yeah, that really happened*, I commiserated.

"I hate you all," I said, meaning every word but one.

This time when I stepped forward, they followed.

My gait was lazy, unhurried, because I could feel it one more. The same sensation that had come upon me in Dormer, when the five of us had been the first into the last breach. Like a rhythm, a second heartbeat that had always been there but never heard.

Ranger, as always, opened the dance.

The unraveller flew, a killing stroke for any Revenant's flesh it found. The Prince of Bones did not move, the Hawk's black arrow shattering the artefact in flight, but the song was in our ears and our feet followed. Hakram tore forward, a roar in his throat as he raised the greatsword, and the water beneath our feet stirred as the Tumult's sorcery woke.

"No," Hierophant mildly said, and Wrested the spell.

With perfect coordination the magic was shaped into frost and tossed onto the pillar to Hakram's side, catching the Seelie's side as she flickered into existence. I hummed, Night thrumming in my veins as I sunk tendrils into the stone and pulled the pillar down on her head. A curse shivered past the spine of the pillar as it fell, the Mantle's armoured form wading out of deep water. Vivienne's half-step to the side, light-footed as when she had been the Thief, took her out of the path just long enough for her to ram her sword through the Seelie's throat.

She exploded into a storm of fading flower petals and the Princess frowned. Something inside of her grew, sharpened. Not quite there yet, but soon.

Indrani shot the Hawk's arrow before it could take the Vagrant Spear in the eye on the very same heartbeat where Warlord's sword met the Prince of Bones'. Steel rang against steel, both monstrous blades scrapping the other's edge, but Hakram would lose out in strength. It didn't matter, because as I slowly limped forward I had been spreading Night in the water. I thumped the butt of my staff against the stone and tendrils of water rose, tugging at the Prince's feet. He was too heavy to fall that easily, but the Mantle had to throw a curse at the water and to free him and that gave Vivienne an opportunity to disappear in the dark between the pillars. Princess or not, she remained a sneak at heart. Ranger shot the Mantle in the back of the head, the Hawk's arrow just a shade too slow to catch it, but it slid against the metal. The angle had been a little off.

On the other side of the room I saw the last of them, the Grave Binder, get onto the stairs. They were through, and now we could get serious.

I breathed out, forming eyes of Night all around me. One, a dozen, a hundred – a thousand. After all, I knew exactly what was coming. A heartbeat later the Mantle called down darkness over the heart of the hall, where she and Hakram and the Prince were fighting. Through my dead eye I gauged the distances, gathering Night to my hand, and let loose a spear of Night. It streaked forward into the dark, clipping the side of the Mantle's shoulder and disrupting her hold on the curse. All was revealed, just in time for me to see Warlord being forced a step back by the Prince, sword slammed into the ground as the armoured behemoth slammed their heads.

Hakram took a step back, dazed, but Ranger's arrow hit the Mantle in the articulation of her armour's wrist. It released Light when snapped – the Blessed Artificer's work, had to be – which stepped the Scourge cold before she could break Warlord's neck with her mace. The song quickened, four streaks of lightning forming near the ceiling. A halfway clever way to get around the limitation of Wrest, which could only seize one magical source at a time. Only Hierophant ripped out one of the streaks before it finished forming, striking at the others with it even as I drew on Night and closed the distance with the melee.

The last of the lightning shattered a pillar, guided by Hierophant's hand, and a heartbeat later there was the sound of someone falling into water. The Hawk, I saw through eyes of Night. Masego had found her, and her ragged cloak splashed as she rose from the puddles. I'd have to leave that to Indrani, since I – in the blind spot of my eye the Seelie flicked into being, aiming at my spine, but I swept wide with my staff. As I struck nothing, I realized with dim surprise that she'd tricked me: this once, the first blow had not been an illusion. I threw myself to

the side, already knowing it'd be too slow, but then a sword rammed into the Seelie's back.

"Eighth-rate," Princess said, tone cold as she ripped the blade free.

The Scourge crumbled into a bed of flowers, to my anger, but at the sight of it the bundle of power inside her took shape and set. Coming into her aspect, Vivienne Dartwick let out a sharp breath.

"So that's it," she murmured. "You've just been tricking us."

A glance at me.

"Catherine, *burn*."

I did not question it, turning to drown the flowers in black flame even as behind me the Prince of Bones swung at my head – only to be stopped by Hakram's parry, blades slamming into the ground as Masego Wrested the Mantle's cursed and smashed it into the Prince's side. The flowers lit up like kindling and with hoarse scream gathered back together, turning into the Seelie once more. Oh, I thought. This entire time, the petals had never faded during any of our fights. She'd just used an illusion to make it look like they did while she put herself back together out of sight. The Scourge screamed, wings erupting out of her back, but I swung with the strength of my Name behind me: the slash opened her throat, cutting into the bone yet but not hard enough to go through. Vivienne, swift as a viper, put a dagger through the Seelie's eye and dug deep. She knelt, grabbing my sword even as I pivoted to slap away a curse of the Mantle's with my staff and reply with burst of raw power that she had to block with her mace, and Princess leaned on her own Name strength to finish the cut all the way through.

The Seelie went still, and in the same heartbeat that Vivienne cut off her head the Scourge rammed her dagger into my successor's throat.

A scream welled up in my throat, too raw to be a word, and then the Princess exploded into a shower of fragrant flowers. She formed back a moment later, on her feet and smiling icily.

"I can Trick people too, you know," Princess said. "It's not that hard."

See through tricks, I glimpsed in her, *and mimic them*. The learning wouldn't stay in her long, that was the limitation, but some part of Vivienne Dartwick had decided she would no longer fall for the same trick twice with such utter determination that Creation itself had answered. It was fitting I thought, for of all of us she had had grown into the one most resolute to learn

from her mistakes. One down and four to go. The song swelled in agreement, the chorus whispering in my ear as the five of us moved as one. As Vivienne faded into the shadow of the pillars behind me, I turned back to the fight and joined Hakram's side.

The Prince of Bones and the Mantle towered over us, masses of steel wielding more of the same, but I was not afraid. Hakram Deadhand had stood at my side since the beginning of this, and he'd stand there still when we ended it.

The Prince struck and Warlord met him, muscles tearing at the contest of strength while I slipped behind the giant's back to avoid the Mantle's shivering curse. Above us magic warred against itself, the Tumult having lost patience and now trying to overwhelm Hierophant with brute strength and numbers, but across the green-mirrored water Hakram and I danced. The might of the titans broke stone and howled through the air but we were ever one step ahead, wind rustling over the water as we avoided death by a hair's breadth and struck back. I struck the Mantle's knee from the back and Hakram took off her hand, the two of us stepping out of the Prince's blow as Ranger killed the Hawk's arrow.

The Prince rushed me and I withdrew, leg throbbing, as Hakram smashed the Mantle's side and my staff trailed along the water. A trail of Night slithered until my back was to a pillar and the Prince of Bones' hulking shape was mere feet away, not even bothering to use the sword to crush me. Instead I smiled and turned the Night solid, the nooses I'd attached around his feet solidifying around a pillar to his back. He ripped through it with his weight and momentum even though I'd tied it at the base, but I still got what I wanted: he toppled forward even as I took a measured step to the side, helmeted head smashing into the pillar in front of him.

"O Sve Noc," I prayed as I raised my blade, "I ask you not salvation but grant me *spite*."

The Sisters smiled against my neck, talons digging into my shoulders, and the edge of my sword shone black as I carved into the Prince's neck. Going through layer after layer of steel until my momentum was gone and my sword stuck, I ripped it clean at angle that sliced even deeper. All the way through. A kick sent the Prince of Bones' head tumbling into the water, but the Scourge still leaned on his sword to get back on his feet. Unmoved.

That was when I heard the scream and the music stalled.

I looked through Night, seeing Vivienne crumple to the ground behind the Hawk as spikes of rim tore through her back. She turned to flowers, but the Hawk turned and shot a black arrow into them. She turned back into her true form, writhing and with

an arrow through the stomach. I ran, leaving the Prince to rise behind me, and ducked under the Mantle's swing as Warlord finally hacked through her arm. The limb and weapon dropped, but she touched his burnt plate and it shrivelled as he let out a roar of pain. I could see Indrani firing at her so I kept running past them, my dead eye watching as an unraveller went right in the stump and the Mantle lit up before dropping like a stringless puppet.

The Hawk nocked another arrow as Vivienne tried to get back on her feet, bleeding badly, and I tossed a ball of hast spear of blackflame at the Scourge. It moved only just enough to get out of the way and I had to close my eye as a burst of lightning fell on my head – only to veer off at the last moment and smash into the Hawk's side. She dropped twitching in the water as Vivienne ripped the arrow clean and staggered to her feet, leaning against the pillar. Only Hakram screamed behind me, because the Tumult had prepared two spells. A whirlwind of ice and water swallowed him whole, throwing him at the ceiling even as I got to Vivienne a laid my hand on her side. Masego would have to catch him, I was busy.

Night stemmed the bleeding, but I couldn't *heal*. I couldn't get her through this. No poison, though, I realized with a sliver of relief.

"Hide," I ordered. "And get to Masego."

She nodded, shivering. Movement at the edge of my vision caught my eye but it wasn't the Hawk getting out. It was, I realized with horror as a streak of sleekness broke the surface, an arrow. Somehow the Scourge had been able to use a bow from underwater. I froze, seeing how it would punch into my stomach, but knowing that if I moved it would kill Vivienne for sure. That wasn't even a choice. I pulled on Night, knowing it'd be too slow. It might save my life, if it wasn't poisoned and- scarf trailing behind her, Ranger's longknife shone green as she cut through the arrow. If she were still the Archer, I dimly thought, she wouldn't have made it in time. The arrow shattered and I shaped the Night I'd gathered into raw heat, throwing at the water.

It turned into trails of vapour, revealing a scalded Hawk, and in a heartbeat Indrani was on the Scourge.

At a distance, bow in hand, they were a match for each other. But the Hawk avoided fighting up close for a reason, and Indrani was no longer the Archer. The first blow cut through the bow, the second took three fingers and an eye. The Hawk stepped back, trying to make distance, but Ranger moved smooth as silk: a step turned into a beautiful thrust, the longknife piercing the Scourge's throat. All the way through. It wriggled, still moving, but with a simple pivot she struck with her second blade and the

Hawk's hooded head went flying. It was a victory, one she had craved for years now, but there was no time to celebrate.

"Get the Tumult," I ordered.

I let Vivienne stand on her feet, waiting a moment to see whether she'd collapsed before moving away. Hakram was duelling the Prince of Bones again, and their blades were so swift they were a blur to the eye. He should have folded, crumpled under the Scourge's strength, but I could see it in him. A rising tide of red, the heat and anger he had only learned to taste after he embraced the people he'd never thought of himself as part of. **Rage**, his soul sang, the aspect bolstering strength and limbs. It would not fail him so long as he remained in the throes of the red, ever rising until it burned itself out. I went for the Prince's back, gathering Night, when there was a crackle of lightning and Ranger let out a scream. I looked through eye and saw she'd struck at the Tumult only to hit a shield of lightning, a trap already laid.

Masego ripped it down and I focused my Night again, but in that heartbeat of distraction the other fight turned: the Prince's sword came down and Hakram's leg was cut clean through. It was steel, though, prosthetic, and even as he fell Warlord lunged for his enemy's throat. I shouted and dragged back the Scourge's sword arm with tendrils of Night. Yet even as Hakram began tearing inside the Prince's armour with his hands, death and steel on death and steel, the other hand picked him up by the neck and smashed him into the floor.

There was a loud, horrifying crack.

His spine. That'd been his spine. Warlord twitched on the ground as the Prince of Bones ripped out his arm, the steel limb and a great boot rose. I unleashed a torrent of Night at its back, beginning to topple it but not nearly quickly enough.

"No," I screamed.

"**Ruin**," Hierophant hissed, face red with fury.

The aspect he had meant to keep for the Dead King rippled through the air and struck the Scourge like a hammer blow. The giant mass of steel creaked, then metal screamed as it began to *crumple* like cheap tin. The Prince of Bones fell apart, limb by limb, until the all the layers slid off and all that was left was a pile of naked, twisted bone. It moved feebly, twitching, and the Warlord's dead hand, the only part of him that was not trembling, closed around his neck. He dragged it close, roaring as the last of his **Rage** burned and the orc's fangs tore through the Scourge's spine. It stopped moving. He did not, still twitching uncontrollably.

I pulled Night to me, the air cold and clear, and watched through an eye as once more Indrani tripped a defensive spell and was thrown back. The Tumult, the sleeves of its robes ripped off and the bones of it fresher than the rest, went still for a moment. Its eyes burned red, then it poured all it had left into a streak of three spells. Masego killed the first, unhesitating. I drowned the second, a rain of ice shards, in a well of darkness. The third was a sharp gust of wind meant to kill Hakram on the ground, and Hierophant flicked his wrist to make a shield in the way. And the wind stopped, but a small dot of darkness went right through. A curse. The Dead King had leant a hand.

I loosed a burst of Night at Hakram to push him out of the way but it only clipped his shoulder. It didn't move him enough. And none of us were close enough, Indrani's arrow was too far, and as the dot of darkness hit his scalp it was caught. Half of it, I saw with excruciating precision through eyes of Night, was caught by pale fingers as Vivienne Dartwick threw herself forward. Both of them seized up, but where he went utterly still she burst into a storm of flowers. Blood red, like the song, and they fell all over him. He was, I saw, still breathing. My eyes, all of them, turned to the Tumult and in that moment I saw the truth of it.

It was stitched together from the souls of many mages, but one of those souls had been the foundation. It was released at Hainaut but traces of it remained, like sutures for the Scourge, and they were everything. They were how the Dead King had made this creature in the first place. It'd been a necromancer, one, someone that could steal knowledge from the dead and use it. Those aspects were now the beating heart of the Revenant, what allowed it to exist. I raised a hand, gathering Night, and a streak of shadow formed above the Tumult. It was just an aspect, I thought. Gods, I'd been a fool.

"Silence," I harshly said.

And just like that the sutures disappeared. The souls began to pull every which way, the magic that'd been gathering breaking apart, and the Scourge stared blindly as the shadow deepened, expanded. Dread Empress Tenebrous massive leg shot through, crushing the Tumult like an egg with one of the most satisfying sounds I'd ever heard. I slumped to my knees as the leg withdrew, shadows fading behind it, and stayed there panting for a long moment. It was over. We'd won.

The song began to fade, exhaustion replacing it.

Sheathing my sword, I leaned on my staff to get back to my feet. Vivienne had taken human shape again and Masego was healing her, Indrani catching up to me as we limped to their side.

"What was it?" I croaked out. "The curse."

"I don't know," Princess admitted, face pale. "I just knew it'd destroy me if I remained me."

She was sweating and shivering. Too much blood loss, and despite Masego's best efforts that arrow wound refused to close completely. The Hawk's aspect at work, I guessed. The wound was fighting to be lethal. My eye moved to Masego for answers.

"It was a mind-killer," Hierophant said.

My jaw clenched as I forced myself to look at Hakram. He'd stopped twitching after being hit with the curse and would have looked like he was sleeping, were he not missing two limbs and his face swollen.

"How much of him remains?" I asked, voice choking up.

"I've contained the curse," Hierophant said, "and Vivienne took on half of it. If he wakes, he will have lost some memories but retain his faculties."

"If?" Indrani asked.

"I cannot promise he will," Masego admitted. "A healer in Light might do better, but I cannot."

Then he flicked a look at Vivienne, whose breath was laboured. Sweat poured down her face.

"You need one as well," he said. "You still have even odds of dying otherwise."

Ad the healers, we all knew, were behind us. While neither were in a state to move on their own. I clenched my fingers. Now that one song had faded, I heard, another returned in its stead.

"O Tiferet, where have you gone now,

Where went the song the river gave?"

I breathed out, all my eyes but one fading as I looked around us. This ruin of a room where only desperation and use of an aspect we had meant for the Dead King had kept two of the Woe form dying. And they might yet find their doom among these beautiful green mirrors, I knew, if I made the wrong choice. The cold part of me knew what should be done: whatever helped our chances of beating the Dead King. But I wasn't the girl I'd been at seventeen, savagely ruthless in defence of what I saw as a greater good. Indrani had once told me that in offering the Woe a hearth I had turned wild beats into tamed ones, but that sword cut both ways.

I wasn't willing to give the order anymore, not the one I should.

"Indrani," I said.

She looked like I'd slapped her, hazelnut eyes blazing with anger.

"You can't be serious," she said, "not when you're heading into a fight with-"

"It has to be you," I softly interrupted. "You know that. You're the one who'll get her there before she dies."

"I can't leave you to fight the Hidden Horror alone," Indrani pleaded. "What if..."

She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to. Masego limped to her side, laying a gentle hand on her wrist.

"She won't be alone, Indrani," he said. "I go with her."

"That's worse," she whispered. "I won't be able to protect either of you."

She set her jaw then looked away, drawing back from her touch. The look she gave me was unhappy but resigned.

"I swore to myself I wouldn't get like this," Indrani said. "I guess I'm not better than that, after all."

"I wouldn't be able to keep going if it wasn't you taking care of them," I told her.

"Liar," she ruefully smiled. "That's once today, Catherine Foundling. Don't disappoint me again by dying without me."

She helped up Vivienne and knelt, slinging Hakram's unconscious body over her shoulder. After one last lingering look she turned her back, heading for the stairs. I took a moment to steady my breath, Masego's solid presence at my side a comfort as I looked at the emerald grave where we had buried the Scourges.

"O Tiferet, where I gave love my vow,

Why have you become an empty grave?"

We shared a look and I nodded. Nothing more needed to be said: Hierophant and I hurried down the empty hallway, our footsteps echoing as we ran. We would get there in time, I could feel it. We'd be there for the end of the Dead King's story.

"Oh why have you become," Yara of Nowhere sadly sang, *"an empty grave?"*

ErraticErrata

Well, took longer to come out than anticipated but on the other hand I do believe it's the single longest chapter in the Guide. So enjoy 😊

Clacks

Just a little short, actually! You clocked in around 12k words here, while Interlude: Girl Without a Name broke 14k.

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1AS_NUqXnK9Wn-GkF7bEBaDGXCbHZRaLZxX5eJQ_DU04/edit?usp=sharing

Also, AHHHHHH, SO GOOD

BargleNawdleZouss

Gods Below and Everburning, how did you put this together? More importantly, WHY?

Also, thank you, Clacks! 😊

Clacks

Heh, appreciate it. I'm a physics PHD student, so the closest I get to relaxing is obsessing over a /different/ set of data.

Mirror Night

That rather seems the norm for fantasy writers books and chapters tend to stretch towards the conclusion. I think its because its hard to know how much you have to conclude until you near the end. But you are a writer so you know best. The delays have been well worth it though delayed chapters have been absolute bangers. Keep up the good work and dont burn yourself out.

DC

Yeah this is basically two chapters of content and only your commitment to no stupid cliffhangers compressed it into one.

Cpt. Obvious

Can't be the single longest chapter, can it? I mean it felt like I had hardly started reading before it was over...

Looking at the clock however tells a different story.

Thank you for yet another riveting chapter that manages to bend time itself.

dadycoool

"Wait, how can I have spent over an hour reading without noticing?"

dadycoool

At this point, you have more than earned our trust regarding these late chapter releases. I think we all basically went "Don't worry, take your time."

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Yep. It has proven worth it.

megaprr

Amazing chapter yet again... and I also want to toss in my voice into the 'no worries, take your time' chorus. It's always more than worth the wait.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

D@mn!

Bittersweet Victory. Better than Pyrric, but all we can hope for at this point.

P Jay

It's an incredible chapter. Everything we could have hoped for out of Woe v Scourges. Thank you

[Sugar Roll](#)

It feels strange that for someone named the Wandering Bard, it took so long for us to actually see her sing.

Darkening

I believe she sang a bit of the girl who climbed the tower back in praes, though Catherine only heard a line or two as I recall.

Tenthyr

A Drakon behind, a lich ahead.

arcanavitae15

Lies and Violence

This gave me some much nostalgia this is as Cat said probably the last time the Woe will fight together before they go off and do their own thing. I really love their relationship and how far they have all come. I feel like this is the culmination of story

arc of the Woe, and it was a good note to end on. They have all grown so much throughout the story and it was a wonderful journey to read.

Juff

Typo Thread:

stood on. > stood in.
Dozensof then > Dozens of them
as he most > at the most
favourited > favourite
flow open, > flew open,
if it was to > if I was to
Arrows and javelin > Arrows and javelins
look who > look for who
get as > get at
along for > alone for
fae to most > fae to be most
could so > could do
noised > noise
invaders in > invaders into
Soon l I > Soon I
that have me > that gave me
by hodgepodge > by a hodgepodge
fasted > faster
than she > that she
dipped do > dipped to
pretty the > pretty sure the
anyone more > any more
believe all we > believe we
Sword are > Swords are
it just > is just
grooves a > grooves of a
The kept > We kept
This if for > This is for
awat > away
it one more > it once more
and to free > to free
Nigh tot > Night to
which stepped > which stopped
Mantle's cursed > Mantle's curse
with burst > with a burst
at angle > at an angle
spikes of rim > spikes of rime
the Dead King to rise > the Prince of Bones to rise
of hast spear of > of
a laid > and laid
one, someone > once, someone
Tenebrous > Tenebrous'
face swollen. > face not swollen.
Ad the healers > And the healers,

form dying > from dying
wild beats > wild beasts

*arcanavita*15

I love how Nessie reaction to Lies and Violence was ,are they seriously doing this right now? AHHAha I giggled so much when I read that.

kjn

Thanks for the amazing chapter ♥

That was a Steven Erikson chapter.

Lord Haart

Peak EE and peak Erikson are definitely in the same zone. Bliss to read, and strikes the heart.

Probably the biggest difference is the perspective – I think first person is just harder to make as riveting so kudos to EE for making that really just not matter. Cat is a great character and I'm going to miss her once the story ends, no matter how it ends. But even already her journey has been incredibly satisfying.

Mirror Night

Makes sense DK let the Drakkon off the leash. It works better for him if he is not controlling the boss narrative wise...Drakkon Godshard feels very warhammer to me. Sent two Titans to fight Kreios as well.

As for Named final role call. Shame not to see the Blessed Artificer. Also I know they started with more Heroes then Villains but it feels they lost a lot more Villains then Named though the battles are still young.

Last dance of the Woe was epic. Kinda makes sense Viv and Hakram got the worst of it. They are kinda the weakest of the Woe. Nice to see Viv get to shine shame she didnt get to do more earlier though but that is an awesome Aspect, new aspects of late have been pretty darn fun and different. As for Indrani surely she gets to ride a sixth ranger plot now...and she is one the fastest characters in the series. So she should be able to catch up.

Pretty Epic

Joe Mama

I think it's natural that they lost more villains. Villains tend to burn out quickly by definition, even more so than most Named do, and they're filling a role here which goes outside

their usual parameters (part of a Crusade with all the rules that entails) shunning some of the limited protection of their stories

Droughtbringer

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Damian Lucius Black

“Needing a second Boost to get ahead is an unforgivable sin for two professions: Reader and Writer.”

– Dread Emperor Terribilis II

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

BargleNawdleZouss

So much awesomeness! Worth the wait!

Open questions:

1. Status of Ishaq the Barrow Sword? I expected someone named “Deathless” to make it to the end. 😊
2. Status of the dwarves?
3. Status of Rumena? Is it a hidden knife for the end? Likewise for Ivah?

Sykomantis

No you’ve forgotten the most mysterious card we still have that could come into play.

Where is Larat?

Jernik

I think Larat is out of the plot. He’s gone, and the winner for it. If he came back into the story, I think it would be a big step back for his character. His entire motive was to escape the story, escape the threads of plot.

shikkarasu

May he forever be someone else’s problem.

Lord Haart

He could still come back out of choice. I can imagine him picking up the pieces of Twilight.

Frivolous

I'd be much more depressed and sad for Viv and Hakram if Catherine were not the Warden, and thus able to requisition Named healing on behalf of her friends.

Plus, you know, Catherine still has an undetermined aspect left.

dadycoool

Honestly, it felt more cathartic than anything else when Viv saved him. At least to me.

Crash

Beautiful. Poetic. Amazing. 10 out of fucking 10.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

That's the payoff of an arc you're feeling. The dynamics between any two main characters in a story like this might as well be additional characters in their own right. 😊

ohJohN

When she caught the spell, I really thought she was about to lose her hand to save Hakram's life – a full circle from him sacrificing his own hand for her sake all those years ago 🤔

shikkarasu

It was still full circle, I think. She didn't lose it, but she judged him worth a hand.

Daniel E

DK shows us what happens when a proper old-school Villain takes the 'Evil Overlord List' to heart. (look it up, it's a fantastic read). Also, Kreios vs. Titans; I'm kinda confused. Did one of them create a sun, then the other uses time magic to collapse the star? Wouldn't a black hole existing for even a nano second be enough to sunder the continent? Regardless, I am psyched beyond words to see DK in his throne room.

dadycoool

That's exactly what happened. I'm guessing Kreios made a magic bubble to localize the whole thing, but a black hole can only have as much gravitational force as the star it was born from, plus anything it eats. If the magic star didn't have any gravity, then its corpse wouldn't either. If only the actual light and heat existed, then only the darkness and cold would exist.

edrey

Lies and violence, i couldnt stop my laugh, when a read that. a masterpiece.

the memory problem is nasty, but the good news is that hakram and viv still have aspects yet to form, that can help also, i was expecting the aspects that cat had collected from named and revenants, she should have lots of them. now is the time to use them.

so counting, there are three points, cordelia and the ealamal, the drakon and the titans, and the death king battle. the wait is too much for me.

Remy Toh

Prediction : Cat will be fettered to the Dead King and Akua will take her place as head of the Cardinal. Wandering bard will be killed by the Severance.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Nope.

Warden delegates like a Warden do.

She has yet to **Sentence** anyone.

Dome Zasrekh

Bind the Bard and DK together and get rid of them both? Pls.

[Hargabga](#)

For all the vile stuff Yara did, that's really really cruel.

Dome Zasrekh

I have no mercy for the enemies of great ships! For Roland, they will burn!

badatgames2911

For Roland, Robber, Taric, and all the others we lost to this war

ohJohn

That's a strategically disastrous solution: the Fetters only impose the restriction that either party's exercise of power requires the consent of the other party, and the Bard has been very clear that she wants DK to eat the baby.

Maybe he'd block her from all fuckery out of (justifiably) paranoid self-preservation, but it sure seems like she'd be happy to rubber-stamp any and all atrocities he might want to unleash. It only works if whoever is chained to DK

would never, ever, EVER let him do anything, like Akua or Cat.

[Liliet](#)

Bard has been very clear that she wants DK to go ahead and take a swing, that doesn't mean she wants him to succeed. Assuming they're strategic allies because one has been goading the other does not sound anything remotely like right to me.

Crash

This is true, but it does mean that she is willing to let him act if and when that could be useful for her end goals. Namely, preserving the status quo. Or possibly, setting him up to take the fall. Whichever it is, plan is still somehow unclear.

Random younglings trying to shake out the system and bury the Age of Wonders? DK, please eat the baby.

Need a villain to get a band of heroes going? Alright, you're allowed some necromancy as a treat.

Setting up a plot that will take centuries to come to fruition? Yo, Neshamah are you up for a spot of murder this weekend?

While the Bard does not seem to want DK to win, she also doesn't quite want him to lose. Not in this way, anyway. She would likely be willing to loosen his leash every once in a while under the correct conditions.

[Liliet](#)

I read her differently.

Sinead

Even without Yara's will, it could be that they use her Role to bind her to not let out the Dead King. Basically she has gone rogue based on a technicality, but the Fetters cut out her loopholes, so she is left with being an anchor on the Dead King.

shikkarasu

I do, too, but I have to agree with the point that she might let him have some slack.

I think she opposes him and, as a result, they are *already* fettering each other after a fashion. DK

even went on to call Cat the third of his kind, implying that Bard is his equal and opposite. I also think she feels like the the knot between them is a noose, and is willing to go to unconscionable extremes to get out of it.

Let me be very clear: I sympathise with the Bard, but that doesn't mean she is a good candidate for stewardship. She can't take any more and, frankly, doesn't deserve to. I think Cat will wear the Fetter as Warden of the Dead and name Akua head of Cardinal, but I hope she finds another way so she can have a proper retirement from all this crap.

Liliet

I don't think Cat is a good candidate. It's not her story.

I've been enamored with the Cordelia option. She has/wants NO powers and is about as incorruptible as it gets.

Crash

Honestly I can't get a read on her. At any given time I'll be juggling three different opinions on what she's doing.

I've accepted that the Bard just is.

ohJohn

Sure, she's an excellent liar and her goals are still fairly opaque; it could easily all be a plot to kill DK, or something else entirely. I don't think they're particularly strategically aligned, or that she'd definitely hit the "OKAY, I'LL LET YOU EAT THE BABY" button on the Fetters, just that:

1) Why take that risk, on the off chance she actually is cool with DK killing everybody? Why would you ever give that button to someone unless you're *extremely sure* they will never hit it?

2) *Especially* if they've already hit a previous "EAT THE BABY" button?? It's very plausible that her original baby-eating speech was just 5D chess, but – on principle – I personally would keep anyone who has endorsed baby-eating far, far away from any & all decisions regarding babies.

3) At the very least, that she encouraged DK to take a swing in the first place – even if she never actually wanted him to win the war – shows that her goals can be *very* orthogonal to the GA's, and that she doesn't balk at using mass death to achieve them.

It would be neat to kill both birds with that stone. But if everybody's lives depend on someone holding a button and NOT pressing it, there are just so many candidates more trustworthy than the ancient inscrutable monster who stopped valuing the lives of others millennia ago (and has said + done some troubling button-related things in the recent past).

[Liliet](#)

I'd say there's way too much last minute plotting/revelation of plotting to go through to say anything for certain right now wrt all this ^^

ohJohn

tl;dr: there are like 2 people on the continent who have expressed pro-baby-eating sentiments; even if one of them might not be super serious about it, maybe literally anybody else should hold the key to the babies

[Liliet](#)

i mean that IS a good point

Shin_Splinters

Did anyone catch what the Tumult was stitched out of?

Great chapter, the Practical Guide never disappoints. Also Hakram is becoming a full blown cyborg.

aurikdomi

Several mage souls, the primary one of which was the necromancer mentioned in this chapter.

ohJohn

Technically, he became less of a cyborg in this chapter: he didn't lose significant parts of his flesh, but he lost a lot of the prosthetics 😊

[Mincheriit](#)

The limbss ripped off this fight were already prosthetics so hes not getting anymore progress to being a magitech cyborg

unless he gets some head tech to help him with the curse after effects or extra bits from replacing the lost prosthetics i guess.

dadycoool

The Final Dance of the Woe was everything it could've been. The entire story of the Woe was leading to this moment and, while not everything went right, it was definitely a successful culmination of their individual, mutual, and collective Stories. Trying to analyze it would probably take all day, but first there's Masego setting aside his well-thought-out plan for someone else's sake, Hakram embracing his heritage, understanding that it wouldn't ostracize him from his friends, Vivienne diving in front of danger for him, Cat making a choice for the lesser good and sending away what might be her most powerful weapon so Indrani can get the two to safety, and Indrani letting herself be soft, fully abandoning the former Ranger's teachings. We can go a lot deeper than that and there's far more to analyze, but I'm gonna stop there.

"You're really doing this inside?" That was great, that the girl who shot off fireworks just to see what would catch fire grew up to be the most reasonable user of eldritch powers out of her friend group.

"Where'd the Titan go? It's not like we can simply LOSE the single tallest living individual on the planet. Oh, there he is...I have no idea how he's doing, so I'm gonna ignore him."

badatgames2911

Viv you have a good track against other sneaks but you gotta stay away from folk who throw magic around girl its just not working.

Hakram my guy you gotta stop getting injured like that. I was reading this and my thoughts went "no please don't die like Nauk did. Don't rip out the throat then bite it man pleaaaaase.

Good work Zeze unfort on the aspect but solid still.

Idrani you did good too but i gotta say your track record of running at magical barriers protecting mages controled by the young king is kinda sloppy.

Good show cat solid all around.

Crash

Well, he ran out of limbs to lose. It had to be his head this time, eh?

[Adrian V](#)

I haven't finished yet but i have to ask where was the last time (or even first) that the motto was mentioned or even discussed? The fact i forgot the motto made me realize just how long it has been since the band has been really together.

Also am I the only weird one that when reading about the Titans brawling imagined Kreios suplexing the other 2? Or something out of Kinnikuman?

Also I didn't like the witch saying whatever the cost, she should just said "i will stop it" and leave it at that, now fate is almost certain to kill her and gods know what else it will cost for certain.....unless the Herald surfaces with some of his new little friends xD

ruduen

First time I could find: Chapter 31, Book 3

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/13/chapter-31-high-noon/>

"So we're going to stab a god," I said. "I mean, we've done it before. But this one is a few places higher in the pecking order of things not to trifle with."

Archer snorted.

"But we'll win because we stand for something greater than ourselves?" I gallantly attempted.

"We do?" Apprentice asked, surprise. "What?"

"Violence," Archer suggested.

"Peace, order and the Imperial way," Hakram offered, the filthy traitor.

"We lie a lot," Masego mused. "It could be lies."

"Lies and violence," Archer proudly called out, raising a fist.

Apprentice did the same, apparently under the impression this qualified as a battle cry. I refused to grace the mutiny with a response.

"Just don't get yourselves killed," I sighed. "I don't want to have to train up replacements."

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Lies and Violence solved many of their early problems...

CGundlach

Interestingly Cat brought this unto herself in the intro narration of that chapter:

>Now, in my experience planning the ending of a lesser god required three necessary steps. The first of them was, naturally, lies. [...] The second step was a certain proficiency for violence, [...]

badatgames2911

i feel like WotW is best suited for drakon slaying bc she has magic taught to her by our resident titan

Jason Ipswitch

It wasn't until I read your post that I realized Witch of the Woods abbreviates the same way Wizard of the West would. A name that has existed in the past, but we've never seen in the "present" of the Guide. I wonder if Antigone has occupied the role traditionally filled by the Wizard, which is why we haven't seen one emerge?

Darkening

The wizard was a callowan name, tied to the callowan tradition of sorcery. The name hasn't popped up because black did a remarkably thorough job eradicating callow's traditions and making new mages learn the imperial way, in a specific effort to kill the name. Given Vivienne's likely to revive at least some of old callow's traditions in an effort to rebuild their individual identity separate from the empire, it's entirely possible one will crop up as the queen of callow's magical advisor. Masego being the go to mage for both cat and Vivienne presents another stumbling block for the Name I suppose, since he fills a lot of the role for callow's royalty that the WotW typically would.

ruduen

Wow, there's a whole lot to process. Quite a chapter!

There are a few silver linings and unused shots waiting to fire, so as rough as it is, there are still paths to the end. The Witch of the Woods is probably the best remaining shot against the drakon – "Student finishes a mentor's unfinished task" is a strong story, though it's likely diluted by Kreios still being alive and the drakon only being revealed so recently. The Woe were bound to have some luck – "Holding off the enemy so others can get the job done" is a strong hand to play. They had their moment early, so the Dead King has disarmed the Woe coming together one more time for the final battle, but since they didn't all dramatically die in their task, that means that the remaining ones who advance should make it in time for one more

dramatic contribution. Hanno still hasn't actually fired off his last aspect, and Cat still has one undeclared aspect waiting for the climax. Both 'weapons' to use on the Dead King are still in play. And since the Augur left a note for Cordelia, there's at least one more reveal waiting in the wings.

There are few notable 'challenges' remaining, though since it's the final pieces, there's a good chance a few more surprises will await everyone. It's now a matter of if they can be overcome, and if the remaining threads can be tied together to form an end. After all, the Dead King still remains for the final boss, and the Wandering Bard is still around to be the secret boss, and neither are the type to make it easy.

Xinci

The Drakon is an extremely interesting case of observing Demon-like qualities held by a Creational entity. Gives definitive implications for the history of the argument when coupled with its probable "descendants" in drakes, wyverns, 9 year snakes, possibly those spirits of fire underground, nameless eidolons, and dragons. I wonder if this Drakon could eventually spawn further subgroups if exposed to the right series of bindings and restricting stimuli.

Vivienne getting Trick, definitely feels like the "Fox Queen" route that Catherine was sort of going on is getting reinforced. Helps that she was trying to make sure her Callowan successors would be narratively canny too, and what better way than to be able to observe and iterate on your enemy's tricks?

It looks like Yara may be getting a rather amusing inversion of Cat's plan for the Dead King. He sought immortality, but to her those Fetters may be a way to attain death, or at least rest. Creation is as ever a viciously ironic place.

As a sidenote I am quite curious if Concocter might use the Drakon essence fragment, or at least learned qualities from it to help heal Hakram. Drake blood was noted as incredibly mutagenic but considering the Drakoi and the Drake Knight it seems to be that the healing factor is correlated to that quality. Maybe we can end up avoiding a similar situation to Nauks mental damage.

[Adrian V](#)

Good thing i commented before the big fight, and that i can say that after the Drakon was presented tells us just how OMG this chapter was.

Vivviene's Trick made me realize why she really fits Princess so well (apart from the old truth of Nobles being legal thieves): think on just how many Disney plots have to do with Princesses

sneaking around, lying and hiding their identity, it suddenly makes so much sense.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Princess is a Transitional Name...

[Kletanio](#)

Right. When a Queen does it, it's "Deceive"

[Adrian V](#)

No its taxes

BargleNawdleZouss

So sad to see the Blade of Mercy as a Revenant! Antoine would have (is?) hated that.

With that in mind, which of the Grand Alliance's Named who have fallen against Keter are we likely to see in the DK's throne room for the showdown before the showdown?

[vexingvision](#)

My guess is on Hanno, in a perverted twist of the most ancient tale of them all: good Vs evil.

Mirror Night

I don't see why that be interesting at all unless you just hate Hanno.

Not to mention I don't even think DK could use any of Hanno's abilities.

DK revenants cannot use Light, Recall is unlikely to work, Save would even it apply to DK? I suppose he get mileage out Hanno's Reality Warp but presumably Hanno would have already used it. So unless it resets DK is not getting anything out of that.

I mean maybe Barrow Sword and Blessed Artificer they are the Named we have got the most of that are MIA.

Crash

So, according to Cat this has to be solved in the next hour.

How many chapters would that be? We're very close to the end and I must admit I'm not quite ready for that.

Anyway, the next chapter should (hopefully) be an Interlude so we can see the others arriving in the throne room and what they did

while the Woe fought. Else Cat's just gonna kick open the door and find a couple bodies on the ground and that's no fun.

agumentic

We're supposed to hit the ending this month, so in theory, no more than three chapters, since we also supposedly have two epilogue chapters. Still, we will see how that'll pan out.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Of all of the webserials I read, yours is my favourite. Consistently. Thank you.

ninegardens

Welp... The final Scourge fight was everything I had hoped it would be. Zeze just pulling out an aspect and **wrecking** the prince of bones made the Prince feel weak sauce for a second, and then Cat is like "We were saving that for the Deadking. We were **saving** that." and suddenly it feels right.

DK spent his band of five, but burned off 3 of the woe, and one of the most dangerous aspects arrayed against him so...not a great trade, but not a terrible one.

BargleNawdleZouss

Aha, so you're saying the Dead King is Dyatlov from HBO's "Chernobyl" miniseries? 😊

[vexingvision](#)

After hundreds of chapters including pitched battles and suspense-filled action sequences, you still manage to keep every single one of them interesting and exciting and usually oh so satisfying without them feeling like a repeat.

That is mad skill – I usually skip lengthy fight scenes in books. I always look forward to these.

TheFatOne

And so we have the true final beat of the pattern of three that is 'Orcs Cat relies on losing firmness of body and mind to a dire foe'. I thought Hakram's maiming by the Severance was the third one, but this is much more clear.

For reference, the other ones are Nauk to Summer flame, a defeat, and Juniper to Praesi treachery, which I'd consider a draw. Here's hoping Hakram is a win?

Sykomantis

I don't think Princess's new aspect is Trick, like some others here seem to think it is. My guess is she just got *Adapt*. But it doesn't help her if she can't survive the trick the first time it hits her, so maybe the next one will be *Endure* or *Persevere*. But that only leaves a single choice for the third aspect: *Overcome*.

shikkarasu

No, it's is definitely Trick. Adapt is a solid option, but she loses the connotation that she then uses the Trick. As for the rest, she has never been a tanky Named. It isn't her thing. I expect social Aspects along the lines of whatever Akua had as the Heiress. Sway, Inspire, Discern, things like that. She's been focused on diplomacy for too long to be a front liner.

ohJohN

∞/10, EE, I genuinely don't know how you so consistently knock it out of the park.

[3 pages of excited, unintelligible screaming redacted]

Anyway, a small nitpick that gave me an excuse to research lore:

But the Forsworn Healer presumably went ahead with Hanno while the Woe fought:

I dug around for past references to him and: he's a hero, can use Light, and Tariq implied he was a stronger healer than the Stalwart Apostle – the only other Named Light-healer confirmed to be at the spire.

He seems like the best chance to heal Hakram's spine/brain, and since he's up ahead Indrani could both escort her friends to a healer AND stick with Cat & Zeze – though I'll concede it's probably not a great idea to bring two people on death's door to The Ultimate Showdown (not least because it's likely FH will be extremely busy already 😬). On the other hand, I don't expect the drakon has been slain yet, so heading back to SA carries a lot of those same risks, and it'll be hard for Indrani to sneak by that fight with 2 passengers to look for a regular priest... Hmmm.

shikkarasu

We also know that spine injuries can take weeks/months to heal. (see Baroness Kendal's botched assassination while Cat was in Arcadia) Not to mention his Prosthetics need to be rebuilt. Vivian is also fighting the Hawk's killing Aspect and just not a front line fighter at the best of times. Even a Named healer might not get them on their feet in time to keep fighting, so instead that would tie up Forsworn Healer and/or burn an Aspect for no appreciable/reliable gain.

Keeping Healer focused on the forward crew is the best option in this case. No-one other than Cat and Zeze have an unresolved story with the Dead King, anyway, so it's just the safest play.

Cambyses

What happened to the Barrow Sword? I don't remember him dying but he doesn't seem to have made it to the final 16.

Darkening

Man, vivienne really took a level in badass after becoming the princess, eh? I think it was mentioned she was training with her knights but that's quite the step up in capability. Sad that it looks like she won't get a chance to Yoink the dead king's soul or something. Truly that would have been the strongest aspect ever known.

lenethren

This is an amazing chapter. Beautiful in so many ways. Thank you again for sharing this wonderful story.

jack

Christ, leave poor Hakram alone. He doesn't even have any limbs left.

ohJohN

But it's slavery too, to spend your live lashing backs, the Hierarch had said, grey eyes burning. Just a different kind, and you can't escape it any more than they can. And so the thought occurred to me, perhaps the most terrifying of them all, that I should be asking myself a different question.

This felt particularly important, possibly the deepest insight Cat has had on Yara's motivations yet.

I've seen the theory for a while now that maybe WB just wants to die (especially after her post-Arsenal resurrection), but I think this lends it some more weight. And with the ealamal + Cordy + the note still left unresolved, how big a plot point learning that the Bard could guide angelic power was, and her taking Judgment offline the day of the final assault, I think the ealamal *has* to figure into the resolution of her story.

What if she's trying to force them to fire the angel nuke so she can set it to "kill Yara" mode? (Agnes's note is just, "do it, Cordelia, get her out of your hair" 😁)

shikkarasu

Ooooh, and then there is a vacancy for the role of 'immortal being that keeps the Dead King in check', lending weight to the Fetters. I actually really like this read.

Valentin R

Guys does anybody knows how many chapters left, till the end of the final book?

badatgames2911

Harkram, adjunct to catherine foundling, officer if the 15th legion, becomes Hakram Deadhand, the Adjunct, the first orc with a name in centuries. He is both a battlefield asset to the Squire, said to move as an extension of her own body, and also a organizational and overall intelligence asset as well.

Masego, the Apprentice, son of Weska the Warlock, one of the best practitioners we see in the series, and frankly is one of the most first horrifyingly powerful people we really see unleash.

Idrani the Archer, student of the Lady of the Lake, and the only one of the Woe who is mayhaps better than Squire at physical violence.

Vivian Dartwick, the Theif, a heroine in the Lone Swordsman's band fighting against Squire and the rest of the woe, joins the and becomes the Theif, a villain.

Catherine Foundling, a fighter in a underground pit, Becomes the Squire, apprentice to the Black Knight Amadeus.

This is the Woe at the start. A well rounded and powerful group of Named

Masego is the first if the Woe to transition into his final* Name. The Hierophant, vivisector of miracles and breaker of gods. Masego was already one of the most powerful Named we had seen up unto this point, mayhaps being eclipsed by his father the Warlock, but Hierophant quickly shows that he us one if if not THE most powerful Named mage alive, especially after the death if Weska the Warlock. Even after his magic is taken from him and in a weakened state he is still able to lash out and threaten Sve Noc, proving his power. His ability to remain one of the best practitioners without the ability to use the gift unless he uses and aspect, *WREST*, lends to his ability.

Vivien Dartwick, formerly the Thief, looses her Name after maturing past her previous mindset and is shown to mature considerably, and become the heiress-designate of Callow. Also is the reason Hakram looses his other hand god damnit vivi.

Catherine Foundling loses the mantel of Squire, becoming the Duchess of Moonless Nights, her abilities in combat grow considerably, and she is able to regenerate from most attacks, including those made by the Saint of Swords and grey Pilgrim. She later becomes the Sovereign of Moonless Nights after the marriage of the King of Sinter and the Queen of Sumer. Her capabilities expand.

Catherine then ventures into the Underdark with Archer and they confront the Drow and their goddesses, Sve Noc. While in the Underdark Catherine loses her mantle over Winter in a bargain with Sve Noc and becomes the First Under Night, a priestess of Sve Noc and she uses the Night much as a priest uses the Light.

Most of the Woe remain the same for a long time here. It is well into the war with the dead king that Vivien becomes the Princess in a battle where she led a cav charge to save soldiers lives, it is notable that the Princess is a heroine once again. She is still the Princess at this point in the story even tho we know it is a transitional Name.

Catherine is the next to come into her new Name, becoming the Warden of the East. Her role lends her to being the conveyer and general boss of the Villainous Named, and as WotE she is meant to have a counterpart, the Warden of the West, the hero in charge of the Heroic Named. Catherine, however, judges the Claimants to WotW to be unworthy, and becomes the Warden, a Name that encompasses both heroes and villains. While Cat is still a Villain, it is said that the Name Warden could be either a hero or villain depending on who holds it.

Hakram Deadhand had been losing grip on some of his aspects and his name over all as the Adjunct due to multiple factors, and eventually becomes the Warlord over the orc clans

Idrani was the last to transition into her new Name, becoming the Ranger in a fight against a Drokon that the previous Ranger Helyr Sue had fled.

Once again it is suspected that after the war when Catherine abdicates the throne of Callow Vivian will transition into Queen or some other similar Name. Hakram Deadhand has stated that he cannot remain Warlord because the Clans need to learn to function without him.

This is not a full analysis of the woe bc frankly i wont be typing that out on my phone in the comments but i just wanted to summarize some of the key points and benchmarks to see what we started out as unto now. I know i missed major events and plot points but like i said this is not a full analysis

letouriste

Just...is there a limit to what hakram will lose in this story? He nearly became a veggie 😞
Both in mind and body.

Chapter 67: And Justice For All (Redux)

“Learn this: all is finite, all ends. The only worthy act in existence is to seek the breaking of that fundamental truth.”

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

And up the spire we went, seeking the King of Death.

This was his last redoubt, the fortresses where he would find either end or victory, and so even though his greatest forces were all spent it was far from empty. Room after room stood filled with traps and troops, guarded by Revenants and closed by wards older than any living memory but the Riddle-Maker's. Yet none of troubled Hierophant and I as we climbed the spire, for the White Knight had led a company of Named through them and in their wake they left only utter ruin.

Traps lay ripped open, the bones of armies were strewn all over the floor and the keening remnants of wards torn through sang their dirge over the broken remains of the Revenants that had fought that unflinching warband. They'd gone through, I saw as I trailed fingers down the chord if them, like a hot knife through butter. Taking hits but never hard enough to be knocked down, trampling the Dead King's defences through a simple difference in weight. The heroes, after all, must reach the end of the story. They had to face the tyrant. Anything that stood in the way of that would be swept away like a stone fighting the current.

Yet as our feet hastened across the wrecks of defences that would have given even the finest soldiers of Calernia pause, I realized that one more Neshamah had played a trick on us. We had found the monster beneath the spire and then fought it at its bottom. The Scourges had waited for us after a mere flight of stairs, awaiting our deathmatch within the emerald grave. We'd stayed there, fighting and planning and hoping – thinking victory was in our grasp. And in doing so we'd been carefree in spending the one thing we were running out: time.

We were, at most, two hours away from annihilation. And that was if our armies held by some miracle, the finest of outcomes. In practice I expected we had half of that at most. The Dead King had filled his spire with traps and dead and sorceries, but they weren't truly his line of defence. That was, as it'd been since the start of this, *time*. It was the simplest thing in the world, so simple we'd overlooked it.

He would be waiting for us at the top of the spire, and it'd take time to get there.

I could see in the lay of battlefields when it had occurred to Hanno what was happening, the way he and the Vagrant Spear had started to strike forward aggressively. They had to be taking hits out of that, some wounds even, but with the Forsworn Healer among them they'd be able to stay in the fight. Ruin by ruin I saw as worry turned to haste and then impatience, the wrecks now reeking of Light as the heroes began to brute force their way through. *It's what he wants, Hanno, I thought. To exhaust us before we get to him. Look at the defences he's built.*

Traps that had to be dodged or broken, troops unimpressive but in large numbers, Revenants that'd need Light or aspects to slay quickly. Wards that were possible to break and overpower, but only if Named put their back into it. None of it was meant to stop them cold, the Dead King knew better than that. They couldn't be, he'd be fighting the story when trying. So instead he was grinding them down into exhaustion, flushing out all their tricks before they made it to his last throne room. The reigning king of attrition was up to his favourite game once more, ending his war the same way he had begun it. There was something almost admirable about that, I thought. There was no lie in Neshamah, no compromise.

The Dead King was true to his nature, horror that it was.

Halfway up the spire, I saw when the others made their decision. One of the walls was melted through, what had to be the Pyromancer's work and no small amount of effort. Through the opening I saw Keter sprawled out below. There were some traces of fighting further ahead, we saw, but it ended at a set of wards. Undead milled on the other side, looking confused. None of them tried to cross it.

"Not the Dead King's work, these," I muttered.

"The Grave Binder," Hierophant told me, looking fascinated. "Clever work. It prevents the dead from passing, but also from noticing it exists at all."

Which told me they'd not gone through here. Hanno had made the right call: they needed to fly up. Most likely they'd ridden the Skinchanger, she had flying shapes large enough to carry most of

them at once. Might have been two trips, but with a strong enough vanguard it wouldn't matter. Fortunately, though we lacked a shapeshifter we were not without means to catch up. I limped over to the edge, letting out a sharp whistle as I stared into the falling ash, but she'd already been on her way. Zombie was a good girl, after all. She'd felt the need even before I did.

Great crow's wings scattered the rain of ash as glided through the air, casually evading a ballista bolt from far below as she turned and made straight for the hole in the wall. I hastily backed away, running into Masego, who saw the approaching hippocorvid over my head. We tripped backwards in a sprawl, Zombie landing in a faint clutter of hooves and slowing until she stood over the both of us with a faintly smug look. I was reluctantly impressed she could manage that with a beak.

"We'll talk about his later," I promised her.

She let out an unimpressed caw as Masego and I dragged ourselves back to our feet, dusting off. I sat the saddle without difficulty but Zeze was rather more wary.

"It is a necromantic construct," he reminded himself in a mutter. "Much more reliable than a horse."

Well, whatever helped him not throw up on my back. He slipped behind me awkwardly – the saddle wasn't really made for two – and closed his arms around my shoulders, though I did notice he stopped to stick himself to the saddle with a spell. Fancy.

"Why do these people keep building these enormous fucking towers," I complained. "One, just once, I would like a nice ground floor lair. No drops at all, just solid architecture without all the goddamn hubris."

On that cheerful note, I spurred Zombie onwards and she charged out into the emptiness. An old scream tried to bubble up my throat but I stubbornly kept my lips closed as my mount glided forward, falling into wide arc before she began batting her wings to gain height. We went around the spire, circling ever higher, until I suddenly pulled on the reins. Zombie went into a glid, cawing with confusion, and Masego stiffened behind me. I ignored both, my eye on the camp laid out below. It had not occurred to me, in the moment, what it meant that our armies were stranded in the inner city. They were cut off from our fortified camp, now but the opposite was also true and the armies of the dead were swarming our defences. In multiple places they had breached the palisades, the small forces left behind giving ground where they were not outright swept away.

And nowhere was the swarm thicker than around the ealamal, where I could see soldiers mounting a desperate defence from behind heavy wards.

Cordelia, I thought. In worry for her, but also of her. If her position was overwhelmed, if she thought the weapon was about to fall into enemy hands... No, I told myself. It wouldn't come to that. She would not pull the trigger until there was no other choice left, and it was my role to ensure she had one. I knew Cordelia Hasenbach. I'd known her as my opponent and then as my ally, and now I thought I might be coming to know her as a friend. And the woman who'd sat across me in Serolen, who'd called me vicious but meant it as a compliment, I trusted her. Either too much or not enough, I thought, but still I trusted her.

She would not fail me if I did not fail her.

I loosened my grip on the reins, leaving *Zombie* to begin circling upwards again. It wasn't all that hard to find where they'd gotten back into the tower: on level near the top was a ring of tainted glass windows and a few of them had been broken. There was no sign of fighting, but layers of wards had been broken through recently enough the shattered sorcery had not entirely collapsed. Exotic effects – swirls of colours, airless currents and some sort of golden translucence – lingered as *Zombie* plunged through the broken windows, trampling shards of glass.

I dismounted, helping Masego down and send off *Zombie* with an affectioned slap on the rump. Best she did not stick around when the greatest necromancer Calernia had ever known was so close. Like the forest of columns where we had fought the Scourges, the entire level was but a single room. It was all bare stone made into something eerie by the light filtering through the coloured glass, only the stretch where Hanno had smashed through forcing a slice of the world outside. There was a... stillness to this place that was uncomfortable to me, and even Masego seemed wary.

At the end of the room a set of elegant ivory stairs rose, leading at what could only be the spire's very summit.

I breathed out, settled my beating heart. While I could not hear any fighting from above, there was no doubt in my mind it had already begun. All that was left was for us to join it.

"Ready?" I asked, as much for him as to settle the last of my nerves.

"I have been waiting years now," Masego softly said, "to even these scales. To take... how is that your people call it, Catherine?"

"A long price," I murmured.

"Yes," the dark-skinned mage smiled, not a speck of friendliness to it. "A long price, and long have I waited to exact it."

Hierophant's Name settled on his shoulders like a cloak, rising to answer the will of the man who bore it.

"Today will be the day," Masego simply said.

There was no need for a boast, not when the words were spoken with such chilling certainty. Our footsteps feeling so loud against the stone, we crossed the room and climbed the pale stairs. Every inch of the ivory was sculpted, I saw, the work so fine and subtle I had missed it from across the hall. Each was a battle, a host of crusaders coming to take the head of the King of Death.

We stepped on their corpses on our way to his throne room.

After all the beauty and horror we had found within the Dead King's spire, I had expected to find a gripping sight awaiting us. Instead the immortal seat of Neshamah Be-Iakim was a bleak, barren place. A great hall of old stone, curved pillars rising from the stone tiles like ribs to hold up an unadorned ceiling. From tall rafters hung two rows of banners, none twice the same. I found the Fairfax bells and the Papenheim wall, Stygia's cranes and Praes' tower. Near every royal line of Procer, most of the great cities of Callow and even Ashur's crowned ships. Each the banner of a great house, a great host, and now all of them hung limp from rafters. Never to know wind again.

They all led to the end of the hall, the end of this spire and the Crown of the Dead itself. There sat the King of Death, atop a dais of four steps. It was a simple thing, his throne. The same black stone he had raised steles and towers in, the seat's back rising high until it ended in a crescent around the heraldry of the banner behind it. Ten silver stars set in a circle around a pale crown, all on deep purple cloth plunging down from the ceiling. It did not quite cover what lay behind banner and throne, a great gate of silver filigree depicting the lay of Creation and all surrounded it. All in never-ending movement, Arcadia and Heavens and Hells forever spinning around us in the void.

And under it waited the Hidden Horror, wearing the same body he has before he became either hidden or horror. Neshamah Be-Iakim had been pale in life, like one who saw too little of sun, and kept the tone in death. His hair was dark and short, his eyebrows bushy and his lips full. Neither tall nor short, he had a scholar's build and would have passed for one if not for his light brown eyes. In the dim of the room they seemed golden, as if to make up for the slim circle of bone he wore as a crown. His robes were simple, purple and pale, and as Masego and I set foot in his hall he raised a hand.

In a flutter a movement, a bird landed on his fingers. A sparrow, I saw. Long dead, for all that its feathers and lost none of their luster.

"Warden," the Dead King greeted me, then glanced to my right. "Masego."

Hierophant's jaw clenched. Feeling my boot touch roughness beneath it, my gaze dipped and I found that the stone tile beneath it was inscribed with a name. *Prince Estienne Barthen*, it read. My gaze swept the room, finding hundreds of tiles, thousands. Near every one with a name, but some kept empty. Waiting to be filled. We stood atop a graveyard of the braves who'd thought they could beat death, I realized. If we died today, would our names be engraved with the rest?

And where, in the name of the Gods Above and Below, were the others?

"Neshamah," I replied. "I've gotta say, your hospitality's taken a turn for the worse lately."

"Has it?" the old horror mused. "I had though my reception most fitting for the manner of guests you've been."

At my side Masego's glass eye was moving wildly under the eye cloth, the reason I was buying time with this idle talk in the first place. That the Dead King was *letting* me, was not a good sign. My friend stiffened, and I knew it'd be bad news before he even opened his mouth.

"Most of this hall is not in Creation," Hierophant evenly said. "It a hundred different realms, carved out of Arcadia."

Keter itself, I knew, had no mirror in Arcadia. No crossing point. We had thought that was because it had been annihilated, but now I was guessing otherwise. Masego, when possessed by the Dead King, had taken Liesse into a stolen shard of Arcadia that'd been severed from the greater realm. *He used the same trick here*, I thought, *or something close to it*. That was why we couldn't see any of the others, too. They were all in shards.

"So we can't get to you without passing your crucible," I mused.

The monster, the crucible and the pivot. I'd now found the second of the three. The old horror raised his hand and the sparrow flew away.

"You will find, Catherine," the Dead King said, "that there are adversaries beyond the teachings you so desperately clutch to even at his late, *late* hour."

"Might be," I smiled back. "But you know me, Neshamah: I've always been a little slow to learn my lessons."

The air shivered, and thirty feet in front of us a corpse dropped. A man, I saw in robes of gold and red. His trimmed beard and long hair were drenched with water, as was the rest of him, and the corpse looked swollen. Waterlogged. The Daring Pyromancer's cadaver stayed there on the tiles, rivulets of water slowly spreading.

"It does not matter," the Dead King replied, "for I am a patient man."

There could be no more waiting, I knew, lest bodies continue to drop. I turned to Masego, getting a nod, and without another word took a single step forward.

—

All I found was darkness.

I had grown used to night and Night over the years, but what awaited me inside the shard was not the same. It was not anything natural, not even the kind of darkness you found in the depths of the Everdark. Even there you could find something... real about it, a tangibility. A reassurance that you were in Creation. There was not a speck of that in here. It was not just an absence of light but of everything, not a single sensation to be found save for solid ground beneath my feet. No foe came for me, no blade was swung or curse woven. I had stepped into a shard of nothing, and as I wandered I learned the nature of the trap: there had been a way in, but I knew of no way out.

I could wander this place for an eternity and never find one.

How long did I waste, walking forward? It was hard to tell. Time was nothing here, far enough from Creation that even the gift of the Sisters had gone silent. I spread Night around me but found no boundaries, no limits, even though I knew that the shard must have them. Frustration mounting at how the very first shard I'd found was stumping me, I stopped and forced myself to calm. There was a way out, it was the way traps like this worked. It was just being kept away from me somehow.

"This has got to be the single most boring trap ever made, *right?*"

A voice I should not have been able to hear, not under the rules of this place, reached my ear. Even if I'd not known what Yara of Nowhere sounded like, I would have known who was speaking. Who else could reach me in a place like this? I spread Night around in thin tendrils, trying to find her, but the Intercessor remained frustratingly out of reach.

"That's not going to work," the Wandering Bard amusedly told me. "Besides, there's no need for it. I'm here to *help* you, Catherine."

I tried to tell her to fuck off, but no matter how much I moved my mouth no sounds came out.

"There's no need to be rude," Yara scolded me. "You're the one who ate my eyes, Cat, not the other way around. Surely we can have a civilized conversation."

It was not possible for Night to burn in this place either, I discovered to my mounting displeasure.

"Well, maybe not quite yet," the Intercessor admitted. "But we'll get there, don't you worry about it."

A soft, rueful laugh.

"We've got until the end of the world," she said. "That's plenty of time, as these things go."

She was gone a moment later, the faint traces of her presence vanished, and I forced myself to calm down. Whatever her game was now, letting her upset me could only help it. And, whatever she'd come here for, she had shown me it was possible to come and go from this shard. I still didn't entirely know how the Bard got around, save that it was bound to an aspect and dependent on Named, but that was something I could use. She was not the only one who'd learned to **See** stories. Opening my dead eye, I found the stars in the void that were the Named around me. Even the Dead King himself, at the end of the hall. From there, it was simply a matter of walking towards him.

The ground was shifting, I realized after only a few steps. Or maybe the shard itself did, because leaving Night hanging in the air hadn't tipped me off about the direction changes. The trap kept you contained by making sure you were never able to reach the edge. Something that couldn't keep me, not when I had a morning star in the distance to follow. It wasn't long before I found the boundary, laying a hand against it and feeling another shard pulsing on the other side. I worried my lip, pausing for a heartbeat. *Did she put me on the path to figuring this out?* No, I reminded myself, it didn't matter. The Intercessor had been so careful to obscure everything about what she really wanted that playing guessing games could only end in a loss.

I crossed into the next shard, blinking in discomfort at the intensity of a soft ambient light. It felt like the sun itself, after the last shard. I was standing in a cube, I saw, about a hundred feet long in every direction. The ground was featureless and the boundaries I felt ahead gave off a... hardened feeling compared to the last. Like I'd have to pry it open instead of

cross. The only warning I got was the movement of air, for there was not a sound. I warily glanced up and though I was looking at a mirror until I realized it was water. A mass of it, falling down on my head.

"Fuck," I swore, pulling on Night.

My shadow lengthened, spread and swelled as I hastily guided it above my head. The water poured through into the nothing there, but it wasn't wide enough and on the sides the tide clapped down as I poured Night into the shadow to spread it even further. I was swept off my feet by the rebounding waters, armour and cloak and fighting me as I forced myself back on my knees while the tide reached my shoulders. With a grunt I finished it, turning my shadow into a veil that went from side to side of the cube and ate the mass of water that should be crushing and drowning me. Panting and drenched, I got myself back to my feet and waded through the water to the border of the cube. It'd be tricky, I knew.

There would be a moment between my shadow withdrawing and my crossing the hardened border where I'd be vulnerable. Taking a deep breath, I flattened myself at the bottom of the water for a semblance of protection and released the Night.

The boundary fought me, resisting the crossing, and something like a titan's hammer blow struck me from above. Before I could pass out, though, I got through with a scream of triumph. Which turned into a simple scream, when I was yanked forward into the other shard. Thousands of clawed limbs tore at my armour from every direction, looking for weaknesses as writhing bodies pressed against me. Horrifying screams and gibbering laughter filled my ears as I felt claws rip into my flesh even as I huddled together and drew on Night. There was no room to do more than wriggle: the shard had been entirely filled with thousands of devils, crammed so there was barely even room to breathe.

"Have it back," I snarled, and opened my shadow.

The tide I had just devoured poured out below me, the pressure crushing the devils like overripe melons as I scrabbled for the boundary I could feel ahead. It was a small shard, was meant to be. I'd only have moments until the water became my doom, reached and drowned me, but as devils pulled at the Mantle of Woe I crawled forward until my hand found the border. There were Named on the other side, I could See it, and so it was with a hoarse shout that I battered my way out. I fell through on my knees, bleeding from the cheeks and elbows where claws had found room in the plate, and landed wild-eyed in the middle of a fight.

The Vagrant Spear ducked under a spout of bright-red flame, the Daring Pyromancer risen a Revenant watching her with swollen bloodshot eyes as he guided his magic to continue hounding her.

There was power in the fresh Revenant, pulsing still, and it could not escape my eye when it had burned so bright. **Raise**, the power had claimed. It was the source of his power to make Revenants, I thought, but it was... rough here. Used in haste, a cruder form of his usual method. And already I could see the trace of the first aspect fading as another replaced it, though it was not yet clear. It related to rule, I thought, or perhaps sovereignty.

Rising to my feet, leaning on my staff, I saw that we stood halfway through the hall and that Sidonia and I were not the only one to have reached here. The Mirror Knight stood hunched behind his shield, and it was a mark of how unsettled I'd been after the last shard that I had not noticed until now. He was, after all, being drowned in magic. At the bottom of the Dead King's dais four robed skeletons were standing as they unleashed torrents of sorcery at Christophe de Pavanie. Red lightning crackled against the shield, turning to steam frost that kept burning before it could creep past the edge of it, and what appeared to be a blow of curses simply slid off like rain.

The only sorcery appearing to find purchase was rippling, transparent kinetic force trying to rip the shield out of his grasp and forcing the Mirror Knight to stand hunched as he fought the magic with brute strength.

"I do appreciate," I croaked out, "that you don't stop being fucking ridiculous even when we're on the same side, Christophe."

Reaching out with a tendril of Night, I slipped past him and grabbed the boundary of the shard he'd need to enter before getting any further. From the corner of my eye I saw the Pyromancer body swivel my way as he let out a shout in a language that rang in my ears, a snake of white flame erupting from his outstretched hand, but the Vagrant Spear moved in a blur and cut through it with her Light-wreathed spear. Focus never wavering, I pulled open the shard and to my mild amusement a storm of fire came exploding out. It smashed through the streams of magic and into the Mirror Knight, who stoically bore it and was merely knocked a few feet back. His stance never even wavered.

The magics were interrupted, though, and when the White Knight burst out of thin air with his armour smoking I knew the tide was tipping in our favour. **Save**, his soul sang out. Not the last aspect he'd come into, but he was leaning hard into it still. Enough that it obscured the other some, though not entirely to my lone eye. **Recall** had never gone anywhere, but the latest addition had my brow rising. **Undo**? It felt like the Grey Pilgrim's own **Forgive**, but there were... nuances. Not necessarily resurrection, it could be other things, and there was a limitation that Tariq hadn't had. Something particular to Hanno. *Justice*, I decided. *He needs to be undoing something he believes unjust.*

Still, what a goddamn terror of an aspect.

The Dead King apparently agreed the situation was beyond salvageable, as the Pyromancer let himself be impaled by Sidonia without batting an eye so he might finish casting a spell that shot out a small arrow of red flame. I wove Night and Hanno moved, the both of us intervening as the Grave Binder tumbled out bleeding from a shard. I pulled the villain down the ground, to his startled shout, and Hanno cut through the red arrow. It burst into small beads of red flame as it did, and while the White Knight drowned most of them in Light as I dragged away the Binder two survived. They exploded outwards, one catching the Levantine's right foot and turning it to ash in a heartbeat.

The Vagrant Spear sent the Revenant's head flying in the moment that followed, ending it.

Grim as the thought was, I could not help but think it'd hadn't been too bad a trade. The Pyromancer might have done a lot more damage if he'd been allowed to keep going. The fire shard I'd opened stopped pouring out flame as the boundary closed again, but smoke was still obscured out sight of the rest of the hall like a curtain. The four dead hadn't begun using magic again, though, which was something.

"Warden," Hanno called out. "Have we lost anyone else?"

I cocked my head to the side, turning and drawing on See.

"The Page is going in circles," I finally said, then looked forward.

My brow rose.

"And the Valiant Champion's already ahead," I said. "No one else died."

"Luck," the Grave Binder roughly said, hand aglow as he closed his rotting flesh around the foot he'd lost. "The shards ahead will-"

He was interrupted by the boundary to a shard bursting open, devils flowing out. We gathered together, the Levantine villain, hastily crawling our way, but the horde of twisted creatures flowed around us. Boundaries began popping one after another, tides of devils pouring out of them in mangled states, and even as beleaguered Named began to come out an honour guard of what looked like walin-falme formed. They bowed deep as Akua Sahelian walked out, her armour pristine, with Hierophant at her side. *She stole the devils*, I realized. She'd been caught in the same shard I did, or one similar, only she'd stolen them from the Dead King's grasp. And then she'd found Masego, using his eye to pick

up more devil shards and navigate the maze to help out the others.

Of the thirteen people that had come to end the King of Death, the remaining ten now stood halfway through his hall. Only the Page was yet lost and the Champion still ahead.

"Apologies for the lateness," Akua drawled. "I was distracted by the *appallingly* bad taste in decorations."

"Also the shards trying to kill us," Masego hopefully added.

There was a moment of stupefied silence.

"See," the Forsworn Healer muttered at the Silver Huntress, "I told you it was awful. The colours of the banners clash."

I snorted.

"I don't suppose you could send your little friends forward to clear us a way?" I asked.

"I'm sure something can be arranged, darling," Akua smiled.

She idly waved and the chittering tide burst forth, flowing into the shards. I cracked the side of my neck.

"All right," I said. "Forsworn, can you do something about the Grave Binder's foot?"

The man eyed the missing limb carefully.

"I can," he said. "There is still ash on the ground."

"Good," I grunted. "The rest of us will pair up and go forward together."

I glanced at Akua. Much as I disliked admitting it, Masego was the most fitting partner for her going forward. As long as she had his glass eye, she could guide her devils through the shards to some degree.

"White Knight," I said, "you're with me. The rest of you decide on your pairs yourselves, and do it quick."

I caught Hanno's eye and he nodded. Even as the smoke began to clear, the two of us slipped past the boundary of the shard I'd picked out: the one that should lead us towards the Valiant Champion. Devils had gone ahead of us, but when we passed we found them floating impotently. I realized after a heartbeat that not only were we weightless but there was no *air* in here. Hanno kicked off the side of the sphere, looking to get through, as the both of us held our breaths. It was too large a shard, though, I thought. Fortunately, there was something at hand for me to use.

Night answered my will, thin tendrils of it shooting out to pierce through the devils that Akua's will kept from resitting.

Not all of them had lungs, but most of them had bellies and that was enough. I sucked the air out of them, bringing it to my mouth with another tendril and offering the same to Hanno. Though grimacing in distaste he accepted, and I used that same tendril to let him drag me to the other side with his momentum. He waited for me there and we crossed together into *pain*. He formed a shield of Light but my limbs were still trembling from the lightning that's truck me. Fuck. If I hadn't become the Warden, that would have had me down for the count. Even with my Name I could feel pain lighting up my every nerve. When the whiteness left my eye I saw we were in little more than a tube filled with lightning, which at least made it easy to reach the boundary. His armour was smoking again, but otherwise he looked rather unfairly fine.

It was easier with his help, even though unlike others we'd gotten ahead of the devils. The defence had not been built with two Named in mind, designed to isolate and stagger us. Akua had, with her devil trick, upended the Dead King's entire defensive strategy. We went through a shard that was a sphere full of blades and spinning – into my shadow they went – and then through another that appeared to be a pit where we endless fell but Hanno revealed through Light to be a ring of warped space simply pretending to be the same. From that we crossed into a box of crushing gravity, the closest either of us came to dying, but Name strength was narrowly enough to let us reach the other side crawling on our bellies.

I ripped my way through, landing on stone tiles as my bloody chin bruised, and barely had the time to see the ray of rippling frost burst my way. I rolled hastily to the side, knocking my staff onto the floor so Night would rippled out and disrupt the spell before it could hit me. It still iced the floor to my side and I slipped as I got up, landing on my knees and gathering the Mantle of Woe onto me just before the curse hit my chest. The magic slid off and I rolled to the side before the returning frost could catch me, rising to my feet even as Hanno crossed out of the shard. We were, I saw with mute surprise, near the bottom of the Dead King's dais. The Hidden Horror still sat his throne, watching us with something like boredom, but the Valiant Champion had already engaged what looked like his last line of defence.

She was wrestling with a massive silhouette that I thought, for a moment, to be the Prince of Bones. The shape... and yet it was not a Revenant, I realized. Stronger and larger than undead should be, but... it had not been Named while alive, and though it had the hint of it now it was because of the power burning inside it. I could see it clearly now, what I'd glimpsed in the Pyromancer. **Reign**, that was the aspect. Kingship over death, over undead. And

as the word sunk into me I Saw the depth of it, what it meant. For a heartbeat Neshamah disappeared, turned into nothing more than a vague shape by the sheer number of strings that came out of him. Every single one binding him to undead, reigning over them.

A kingdom of one.

Someone uncorked a flask next to me and I stiffened, just in time for the Intercessor to offer me a grin.

"The third one's the real trouble," she told me. "Also, you should duck."

I threw myself to the side, for my instincts had been agreeing with her, and red lightning poured through where I'd just standing as I landed in a painful roll. The Bard was already gone, naturally. Out of my Name trance, I actually took in the full lay of the opposition. The four mage bodies from earlier were there and there was a second hulking silhouette resembling the Prince of Bones, which Hanno had engaged before it could flank the Valiant Champion. All the mages but one were looking my way, which wasn't a bad situation. If we could keep this up until the other started crossing, our odds weren't too bad. Mind you, the Dead King had yet to take the field himself. He knew, as I did, that he'd never be more powerful against us than in the moment he got up from that throne. It was to his advantage to delay that as long as possible.

"All right," I called out at the mages, rolling my shoulder as I drew deep on Night. "Let's see what you've got."

I wove Night and they came for my life. It was simple sorcery, what they used. The kind that every undead mage I'd faced in this war used – only brought to its pinnacle. The Dead King wielded them like a master painter playing with coloured chalk, a man at the pinnacle of his trade having a lark with children's toys. Red lightning curved as I tore through it with sickles of raw Night, looping and darting at me from every direction. I turned frost to steam only for it to explode in cutting shards, unwove curses only to find that like poisonous flowers blooming they every part turned out to have teeth. I gave ground, often and quickly, as the three dead mages methodically cornered me.

Red lightning turned into a spear blew a hole straight through the Mantle of Woe, hitting the side of my leg, but even as I fell and screamed the Skinchanger and the Vagrant Spear burst out of thin air along with a tide of devils. I felt the weight of **Reign** shift as I killed the pain in my body with a twist of Night, and in a heartbeat the devils changed sides again. The Skinchanger turned into some sort of large pale cat, leaping out of the way, and Sidonia's spear lit up again as she was forced to tear into her allies. I backed way, swallowing a burst of lightning into a

circle of Night, and greased the floor under the devils to nudge thing the Vagrant Spear's way.

Her footing remained flawless even as they began falling, turning the struggle into a one-sided massacre.

The tide was turning again, I thought. Curses flew again, this time after Sidonia, but I stuck close to her and slammed burst of raw Night into the Dead King's elegant work. On the other side I saw the Champion's axe carve through one of the massive undead's arm, Hanno covering her side from the other. A heartbeat later the Skinchanger landed on the foe's back, turning into some kind of black tentacled creature that entangled its limbs. With a swell of triumph I saw the Silver Huntress and the Forsworn Healer cross, raising my staff to turn to shatter the lance of frost thrown their way. It exploded in shards that my lance of Night sucked in – I'd not fall for that trick twice – but then from the corner of my eye I caught something.

The Dead King was rising from his throne.

I went still in utter surprise. It made no sense, neither the Severance nor the Fetters were here yet and-

"Turn to dust," the King of Death ordered in Ashkaran, voice ringing out as he flicked his wrist.

The Forsworn Healer did. The spell had been little more than a grey sphere, and the moment it touched the hero he collapsed into flakes of dust.

"Honour to the Blood," the Vagrant Spear shouted, tone gone hot with fury, and she leapt.

I stood numb for half a heartbeat more, uncomprehending at how badly I'd somehow miscalculated – or he had. I might well have gotten my ribs crushed by a battering ram of rippling kinetic might had Masego not burst into sigh and Wrested away the spell, smashing it back into the undead mage's face and sending him flying. I drew on Night, sword in hand a running forward as Hanno abandoned Rafaella to face the two great dead alone – she was smashed to the ground but I saw nothing more – even as Sidonia leapt at the Dead King with her spear high. He caught her by the throat, effortlessly crushing it, but she appeared in a flicker behind him and-

And red lightning caught her in the side, just in time for the Mirror Knight to come out of a shard and catch sight of it.

He let out a hoarse scream even as the Grave Binder pushed him forward, rushing forward. Fuck, I thought. If he got himself killed... No, we had an opening. Hakram had once told me Christophe and Sidonia had some odd thing going on, and she'd just been hurt

at the Dead King's hand without dying. He'd gotten up too early, too, and while more of us would die we could *win* this. He'd made a mistake, I told myself, even as a voice in the back of my mind reminded me that when a skilled enemy made an obvious mistake it was no such thing. Still I charged forward, ducking under a spike of ice and carving through the mage that did it as I kept running.

The Dead King didn't even bother to turn towards Sidonia, who was still wreathed in lightning, and instead he pointed a finger at Christopher. A thin, pale filament shot out. Roaring, the Mirror Knight kept on charging at the Hidden Horror with his shield raised but it was not him the spell had been aimed at. The filament punctured the Grave Binder's neck, sinking entirely into the flesh, and a heartbeat later he collapsed into a thousand small cubes of rotten flesh. I heard Akua shout and a shield erupted between the lightning and the Vagrant Spear even as Hanno and I went for Neshamah's sides.

I struck at a translucent shield, shattering it, even as the White Knight did the same – only for him to be grabbed by the neck and tossed to the side, while I struck at the Dead King's chest with my staff and slithered Night into his body.

"Arrogance," Neshamah chided.

The Night tore back out, striking me in the face and tossing me on my back. It'd turned *cutting*, somehow, tearing up my skin and ripping the eye cloth off my dead eye. I got back up in time to see three things happen in quick succession: the Mirror Knight unsheathe the Severance and strike in a choppy gesture, the Silver Huntress loose a Light-wreathed arrow and the Vagrant Spear strike at the Dead King's back. My heart leapt to my throat as the spear took him in the back of the knee and the arrow went through his hand, shattering the spell that'd formed there. The Severance shone, its swing perfectly arced toward the Dead King's neck as I met his eyes.

They were calm, considering. Not afraid in the slightest.

Right before the Saint of Sword's conviction made into a blade caught his neck, he turned and touched Sidonia's forehead with two fingers. Her own skull compressed, crushing her head from the inside, and she died even as the Severance took the Dead King's head. It went tumbling to the ground, the body collapsing, and surprised triumph stole all our breaths. Except I knew better, deep down. The dead hadn't stopped moving, and as Akua matched a burst of red lightning aimed at me with a pale mirror I watched the Dead King's twice-corpse twitch. The world shivered as Hierophant Witnessed the truth of it, but a wind blew from behind as something passed us by. Dimly I felt the shards of Arcadia being drawn between us the dais where Neshamah's remains were writhing, but that was not what drew my eye. The Dead King's last

aspect was burning, lighting up to my own like a bonfire in the night.

Return, the Dead King laughed, and he did.

I closed my eye, realizing then what it was that the Hidden Horror was. Not just what Neshamah Be-Iakim had been when he became undead, but the story he had since become. A maker of armies and Revenants, he how Raised the dead. The sovereign of the Kingdom of the Dead, he who Reigned over death. And finally the unending menace that had been seared into the memory of Calernia, the great doom that would Return no matter how many crusades battered its gates. He wouldn't die, I grasped, because deep down most of Calernia didn't believe that he could. It wouldn't be that simple, in practice, there would be weaknesses and nuances.

But that was the story at the heart of it, and a story was a powerful thing.

When I opened my eye, we stood at the beginning of the hall again and the Dead King sat on his throne, a dead sparrow on his hand. The shards had pushed us back, returned us where we'd begun. Of the thirteen who had come to this last hall, now eight stood dazed around me. The Page, who had never left the shard where he was imprisoned, remained there.

"I don't understand," Christophe said, voice anguished. "You told me it would *kill* him."

He was looking down at the sword in his hand, the Severance laid bare. The sword was wavy to my eye, as if it cut the very air around it.

"Why does he still live?" the Mirror Knight demanded, eyes going to me. "*What did Sidonia die for?*"

And I didn't have the answer, but someone else did. My eye went to him.

"Hierophant?"

Masego stood there, frowning, and I had to clear my throat before he returned to us.

"The Severance did what it was meant to," Hierophant said. "It cut both his body and his soul."

"Then why did he not end?" Hanno asked.

"His soul did not disperse or move on to the otherworld," Masego said, "because it is otherwise bound."

Akua's twitch betrayed her surprise.

"He has made a phylactery," she said. "A soul receptacle."

My fingers clenched.

"His throne?" the White Knight asked.

"No," I murmured. "That's not the kind of man we're dealing with."

"Keter," Hierophant said.

"*Where* in Keter, Masego?" the Silver Huntress patiently asked.

I felt my stomach drop.

"Keter *is* where, isn't it?" I quietly asked. "It's the entire fucking city."

He nodded.

"After all," Masego said, "it is the Crown of the Dead. The name was more fitting than we ever knew."

"So he keep coming back until we destroy city," the Valiant Champion said.

Another nod.

"Then what does the Severance even do?" the Mirror Knight harshly said.

"It destroyed him," Hierophant informed him. "You did sufficient damage to disperse his soul. Only instead of moving on his soul remained bound to its anchor, and then something-"

"An aspect," I elaborated. "Return."

"An aspect," Hierophant adjusted, "ensured that it formed anew. The scar the Severance left is still there, the damage done was permanent."

"So the only way to destroy him is to destroy every single fragment of his soul with the Severance," the White Knight evenly said.

Which, he did not need to say, did not seem in the cards. Not only did we need to get to him through the shards again, but we were fewer, wounded and tired. And it occurred to me, in that moment, that he had risen from his throne the very moment the Forsworn Healer reached him. Immediately, without hesitation, and that his first blow had been aimed at the man.

The Dead King had never stopped fighting his war of attrition.

"We don't have the time for that," I said. "Even if we could, our armies will break first."

My eye slid to Akua.

"It will have to be the Fetters," I said.

Hanno grimaced, but did not argue. He knew as well as I did that we were out of options. I'd ordered Akua to tell them all of the Fetters on their way up, knowing it might come in necessary, and was now glad I had.

"I will take the other end," the White Knight said, volunteering for an eternity without hesitation. "Who will shackle him with the other?"

"Let me," Christophe de Pavanie quietly said.

Hanno blinked at him.

"Perhaps someone faster on their-"

"Let me hold up the other end of the leash," the Mirror Knight cut through. "Enduring, Hanno, has been my sole virtue from the start. Let me make something worthy of it."

The White Knight's face closed, as he hesitated, so Christophe sought my eye instead. I was, after all the Warden. I studied his face, the grief still on it, and decided that though grief over Sidonia had formed the decision it was not the sum whole of it. It was the consequence of the man he'd become, the one I had spoken with in the shadow of Keter before the end of this war began. And that man was, for better or worse, someone I would trust with imprisoning the Dead King.

"Give him the Fetter," I said. "I'll hold the other."

Hanno began to argue but I held up my hand. There was no argument to be had. That was the nature of sacrifice, wasn't it? Selfless and selfish all at once.

"Thank you," the Mirror Knight quietly said, meeting my eye.

"There are things for which I deserve thanks, Christophe," I replied quietly, "but this is not one of them."

I turned away when Akua pressed the ring of bronze and copper into my hand, pretty piece of torment that it was. She was looking at me, I thought, like she'd never seen me before. *Did you think I would force it on you?* I thought. *It wouldn't mean anything, if it wasn't your choice.* In the end she said nothing, leave me to give Christophe the second Fetter. I breathed out.

"We cross again," I said. "Prepare yourselves."

"It will not be the same," Hierophant warned. "He blended the shards before putting them back into place. There are fewer but they have grown in danger."

"Danger's our trade," I replied. "And he's not the only one with surprises left."

I sent Hanno to fetch the Page alone, but the rest of us went in pairs again. I took the Skinchanger with me, accepting her suggestion that I should carry her as a mouse. It was lethal from the start, with the first shard we stepped into a blend of the falling water and the lightning tube. If I'd not still had water from the first go we might well have died electrocuted, but crashing water on water bought us just long enough to crush. In my haste, though, I did not notice that the crossing separated us. I had no idea where she ended up, but I'd stumbled into a pitch black furnace. The fire was not difficult to deal with, simply requiring that I wreath myself in a coat of Night, but the darkness was.

Last time I'd used the Dead King as my compass, but this time he felt obscured to my eye. I found it difficult to See him, as of something was obscuring my sight. I'd have to wait for another Named to get ahead of me before I could figured out which way to go.

It was only inevitable, I supposed, that she'd come back then.

"Told you the third was the trouble," the Intercessor said. "Did you really think you lot were the first to ever get to him? Please, I nudged three crusades that way before giving it up as a lost cause."

The first dark shard had been a void where I could not even speak, but this one was different. It had been blended with a shard of fire, and so needed to be able to burn – the threat had changed from simply being lost or being on fire to my running out of strength in Night as I waited out both. It did mean, though, that now I could speak.

"I know what you're after," I sneered. "We've figured it out. Judgement gone silent and the ealamal just *waiting* for that hour of need. I know you're trying to make us lose, Yara."

I heard her drink from the flask, not just a small mouthful but a long swallow.

"That's *one* of the things I'm trying to do, Catherine," the Bard said. "It's not that I really want to kill everyone, you know, it's that they gave me no other choice. Except, of course, you taking my place."

"That failed in the Arsenal," I said. "You're too late."

"No," the Intercessor quietly laughed, "I don't think I am. You still have an aspect left undefined, and most importantly you have a crucible."

I rolled my eye.

"I've known a few of those in my time," I said.

"No," she said. "You haven't. Not the kind you need to become me. Do you want to know what it took, to become?"

I actually did, I found to my own distaste. It was information too valuable to be turned aside, even if she was likely to be playing me.

"What?" I asked, giving her what she wanted.

"The impossible," the Intercessor said. "You have to do the impossible, even if only the once."

I opened my mouth to answer but she tutted me.

"No," she said, "you haven't. You've done the improbable, and admittedly with some skill, but not the *impossible*. You haven't broken fundamental rules to win."

"And you have?" I asked.

She ruefully laughed.

"Creation was easier back then," the Intercessor said. "There were fewer of us, more unseen spaces to work in. I'm not sure I'd be able to pull it off now, but I did when I was young."

She drank, and after I could hear her smile.

"I convinced Creation that I was made of stories," the Wandering Bard told me. "That I could wield them, shape them, live through them."

"How?"

"First I made myself into a song," she said. "Then I made myself into a story. Then I tricked gods into singing one and telling the other."

She sounded almost fond.

"Of course, then I got exactly what I asked for," the Intercessor. "Thought I'd gotten the better of the Gods, for the first few centuries."

She laughed, and it was bitter enough I could almost taste it.

"Then a few centuries more passed, and I got who that joke was really on," Yara of Nowhere said. "It's never them, Catherine. If you learn anything from me, learn that."

"And you think I can do the same as you?" I frowned. "Trick gods?"

"Gods no," the Intercessor snorted. "You're a blunt fucking instrument, child, even when you're being subtle. But you *can* do the impossible, the table's set for it."

When she spoke again she felt close, as if whispering straight into my ear.

"You can't beat him," Yara said. "The pieces aren't there, Catherine. But if you beat him, anyway, well..."

"Then I take your place," I finished.

"Good odds you do," the Intercessor jovially. "It'll be a fucking forever of a curse, but then you're a pretty terrible person. And if you fail, well, I still get my way. Cordelia will do what Lycaonese do and I still get to put it down."

I convinced Creation I was made of stories, she'd told me.

"You're not just getting rid of people who know of you," I quietly said. "You're trying to kill everyone on Calernia. No more stories, no more you."

It was how she got out of the cage she'd made for herself.

"Not *everyone*, Cat," she chided me. "It's still Judgement doing it, after all. I'll just make their standards stringent enough that, say, maybe forty people on the continent are able to meet them. That'll do the trick. In a few decades people will die out soft, and I can spare a few decades."

I felt her smile again.

"Those go by," she softly said, "in the blink of an eye."

Ahead of me, I Saw another Named pull ahead. I had my path through.

"You won't beat him with that thing Sahelian's cobbled together, whatever it does," Yara told me. "It won't stick through a death, Catherine, and that's his favourite trick: he'll die to get out, if he has to."

I'd been about to walk through the fire, but I paused at that. It made, I realized, a horrible amount of sense. The Autumn Crown had been supposed to make the Dead King indestructible in exchange for undoing his mastery of the dead, but the Fetters

were a simpler creation. If the Dead King let himself die after he was bound in them, could he slip the noose? The Fetters would be closed around his soul, and his soul could be carved up and dispersed. Christophe had already done it one today, it just hadn't stuck. It wouldn't stick, I suspected, even if there was not so much as a speck of intelligence left in that scarred up soul. He'd just come back mindless and hungry until the soul was utterly destroyed.

There was a decent chance, I realized, that even our most desperate plan *wouldn't work*.

"There it is," the Intercessor murmured, sounding pleased. "You see the wall, the impossible. Now you just have to find the determination to *break it*."

"What do you want of me, Yara?" I spoke through clenched teeth.

And I knew the danger, I did, so I touched the Night for the slightest bit. Set a weave to unmake.

"You're the Warden," she said. "Not as catchy as-" and there she said a word in a language I had never heard, "but we can work with that. You're still a user of stories, of Names. So use them to win."

A hand touched my shoulder and I let her, closing my eye to See what she wanted to show me. Her own glimpse of Creation. It was not objects in motions, chords and stories and the lay of possibilities. It was, I decided, like a living tapestry. All interwoven and ever-moving. But she wasn't looking at the whole of it, only at the small part that was here and now. Today, in this spire, facing the Dead King. The Named that had pulled ahead of me, heading for their foe.

"That's what we're working with," Yara said. "That set of stories. Some are unfinished, and those tend to be the most useful, but we're not going to win this with a third aspect or the Page transitioning. It's fucking Neshamah, he's been the collective nightmare of Calernia for longer than we've been pissing in pots. Your winner is here."

Grey thread in the tapestry, I saw, not empty but that she could not see. Not yet come into colour.

"Akua," I said.

"That's your victory right there," the Intercessor agreed. "She's got weight in spades and personal ties to you on top of it. It always works best when it costs something, yeah? Nudge our girl into the right Name at the right moment and you can, just for that one fucking moment, do the impossible."

"You can't control what Name people get," I flatly said.

"Maybe not out there, but in here?" Yara smiled. "Hells, you've got her all ready for a dozen redemption stories and all the other moving parts in here are Named. *This is your board, Catherine.* You just have to sit down and play."

And the thing was that, even now that her own vision was fading I could See what she meant. Akua wasn't one of the stars, she was not Named, but I could feel a course of stories she might come into. And the others, well, the practicals of their fights against Neshamah might be beyond me to predict but they didn't really matter. I looked at them going through the shards and it was the simplest thing in the world to reach out. The White Knight was having trouble reaching the Page, so I gave them a little nudge. Flicked the Page's aspect of **Incise**, making him remember there was more to it than combat. It was sharpness and precision, not killing, and those applied to more than just fighting.

He cut into the darkness, enough for Hanno to see, and Light followed.

Now the Silver Huntress was going to charge ahead, because she had always envied Archer and now Archer had become the Ranger. So one nudge to hurry to the left instead of the right and she stumbled into an airless shard of powerful gravity, the Mirror Knight hurrying behind her and falling. He hit the bottom of the shard with the weight of years of accumulated **Dawn**, blowing right through. They fell into a shard of devils and blind rage, but they were right next to Hierophant and he tore open the boundary with the shard he shared with Akua. The devils flooded into the frost, dying in moments, and in his rage the Mirror Knight shattered the walls both shards.

They all made it to the middle of the room, much sooner than they should have.

"That's the push and the pull," Yara said approvingly. "It's the fundamentals of the game, how you get people moving. You're going to need a little more than that, if you want to shape stories."

I hummed, because she was right. The Valiant Champion, I Saw, carried with her a great guilt. She had too often been the last one standing, and she treasured the White Knight all the more for being one of the rare survivors of bands she had joined. She wanted to be the first into danger, so it wouldn't be others paying the price, and that was easy enough to arrange. She was already behind the four who'd reached the centre of the room and gone on ahead towards the Dead King, so she'd hurry after them. That would drive her to take risks, enough she came through first again. Then someone... mhm, it'd have to be heroine she wouldn't

care for anyone remotely villainous. The Silver Huntress would do.

A nudge that got the Silver Huntress wounded by one of the dead mages would do the trick, pushing her to use her domain and wiped out all of the Dead King's defences in one swoop. It would open space for the Mirror Knight to strike, and... what if she died instead of got wounded though? Oh, the Champion would go after the Dead King directly then. Better results, he wouldn't be able to pull some trick I wasn't able to see that fucked everyone over and the defences still got wiped by the others while the Dead King was stuck in the domain. Probably worth the Silver Huntress, since she was the likeliest to die of the Dead King got to pull his trick.

"You might need a third go," Yara noted, having followed every nudge. "Focus on getting Sahelian there and damage his defences. You only need the one miracle, everything else is about getting it there."

And it sounded cruel, I thought, but it was true. Hadn't it been what this entire battle was about? Thousands were dying out there in the inner city so that a handful of people in here could slay the Dead King and end it. If I was cruel, it was because I played a cruel game. And what was the life of a handful of people, against all of Calernia? I'd known the answer to that at sixteen, and the years had done nothing to change it.

"The White Knight's a dead end," I muttered with a frown. "I can't even use him properly."

"**Save's** a real bitch," Yara sympathetically said. "Tariq used to pull the same shit by asking Mercy for tips, though at least I could get around that. Your boy's a lot more of pain to deal with."

In most stories he sacrificed himself for others, stepping in to save them if they got nudged into a path that got them killed. It was like he was pathologically incapable of seeing the larger picture. The Mirror Knight, at least, could be relied on to go in a blaze of glory to avenge the Vagrant Spear. That'd turned out to be a fortunate death, leverage-wise. I watched as Silver Huntress and the Mirror Knight reached the Dead King first, beginning the fight as he sat his throne. They wouldn't be enough.

"I can't get to Akua," I finally said. "Not strong enough."

Even if I stepped in myself, it wasn't enough to nudge her into a name. Love was not enough. It had to be her decision and I didn't have a good enough angle to move that.

"Yes you can," Yara whispered into my ear. "You're not looking at all the angles, Catherine. When a nudge isn't enough sometimes you have to **Guide** things down the right path."

And oh, it was so very simple when finally my eyes were open. See hadn't been enough, it could only observe. To be able to **Guide**, though, as Yara could? That was looking at the endings of a story and choosing the one that would happen. It seemed a little thing and it was, it really was, when you thought only of a single story. But when it was five, twenty, a hundred? Then it was like being able to forge your own puzzle pieces. Silver Huntress died trying to be what she wanted Ranger to be and Archer to admire, which led into the Valiant Champion containing the Dead King. The rest of the board was cleared and then, when she died and he came back, the Page tried to transition and died if the White Knight didn't get in the way, which he would. Leaving who the Dead King really wanted to kill, the Hierophant, wide open. Akua would be too slow and not forgive herself.

So she'd reach for something beyond her, a Name, and that I could **Guide** into what I needed.

She would destroy him. We would. It would all be over.

"It's not my aspect, though," I murmured.

"Hierophant's right," Yara assured me. "The godhead's just a trick of perspective. Use mine for a bit and you'll pick it up."

"They both die," I finally said. "Almost all of them do."

"And that's a tragedy," she agreed. "It's always a tragedy, Catherine. No matter how tired you get, that doesn't change. There's always a William to make you weep. But if you don't play the games, if you don't get your hands in the red, then how many more die?"

She squeezed my shoulder comfortingly.

"You always got that part," Yara said. "That the deaths don't matter more because they matter to you. You'll get to keep that, I think. It'll make you better than I was in some ways."

"Because I can do what needs to be done," I quietly said.

I felt her nod. And she was right, I knew. What a paltry fucking cost the handful of people in this spire were, if it kept the rest of Calernia breathing. The easiest of bargains. And maybe it'd wound me, but my life had been a collection of wounds. What was one more? I was a villain, in the end.

Mine was not the fate of happy endings.

I breathed out and watched it in my mind's eye, measuring angle and timing. It would be close, but Yara was wrong. I wouldn't need a third go, just slightly bloodier hand. It would just need to- the weave undid itself and pain returned to my body. My leg, my bad leg throbbed with pain.

Do not forget, it whispered. *That this is not a game. That you make mistakes.*

I wanted to argue, to struggle, but the pain took my breath away.

Do not forget, it whispered, *that there must be more than ruin.*

"Catherine?" the Intercessor slowly said.

I shook off her hand.

"If you'd said I needed to kill Akua, I might have believed you," I quietly said. "But Masego, Yara? *Masego?*"

The one who'd never left me, never asked anything of me. The one who'd promised to stay by my side when this all ended, even as everybody left. The one who'd forgiven me for killing my father.

"They say we only get one choice that matters," I told her. "And maybe that's true. So here's my choice: *I will not be a crab in your fucking bucket.*"

She was gone in an instant, and as I stepped out of the shard I breathed Creation's air once more. A pivot, I thought. It had been a pivot. The others were fighting the Dead King, I Saw, and they were losing. I watched it unfold, the desperate gamble. Alexis wounded and the Valiant Champion using her domain to whisk away the dead defending Neshamah. I passed through another shard, barely feeling the swirling acid as it roiled against a wreath of Night. Then the Dead King revealed why it was he had slain the Grave Binder, calling on Revenants buried beneath the tiles bearing their names. They tore through, swarming my companions. Neshamah had, as always played it so very careful.

He'd gotten rid of the healer to ensure our wounded would not return. He'd slain Sidonia so that love could not be turned against him twice. And then he'd killed the Grave Binder so that no one could hinder his raising of Revenants.

Only, I thought as I stepped through a swarm of poisonous insects that multiplied by the moment, he had made a mistake. Because Return wasn't perfect, he'd showed me that. He needed his anchor it was why he'd done a grand gesture like making all of Keter his phylactery. The Mirror Knight had killed him one today and if the anchor hadn't made sure that his soul stayed in Creation, that it didn't disperse, then the Severance's cut would have been the end of him. Return wasn't an absolute, because no matter how powerful

a story there was always a weakness. And I'd learned his, I realized, entirely by accident. Years ago, in a fight that had nothing to do with him at all.

See, I'd once wanted to steal Akua Sahelian's soul to get around an oath not to shed her blood but she'd already taken it out and put it in a phylactery. Masego had called it a manner of lichdom, back then, and been mightily impressed. He was not someone easily impressed, which had gotten me curious. What was it that Akua had done that was so unusual? A real lich was undead, I'd learned. That seemed a small detail but was why they were able to take out their soul and why Akua's trick of taking it out while she lived was such an achievement: the soul was removed during the ritual that turned the mage into a lich. The Dead King, then had removed his soul when he became undead through the ritual that destroyed Sephirah when he effectively died.

So if his death was undone, it'd *come back*.

When I crossed the last shard, striding through entropy that stole another meaningless decade from me, I came out onto a scene of triumph. And not ours.

The Valiant Champion was on her knees, most of her torso turned into bone. The Silver Huntress' bow had been snapped and she was losing a fight with a Revenant spearman, giving ground, while the Skinchanger had turned into a spotted cat to avoid the howling sorcery of a robed mage. The Mirror Knight was being sat on by a massive distorted Revenant bearing a crow's mask, though the undead's attempts to break Christophe's neck were running into the issue of the neck being harder than the behemoth's gauntleted fists. The White Knight was fighting half a dozen Revenant swordsmen and holding, but he was not winning. The Page was doing the best of us all, savaging what looked like an Arlesite duellist dripping with gold suns.

Akua and Masego were locked in a struggle of raw power with the Dead King, sorcery against sorcery, and they were *losing*.

I breathed out, sharpening my mind as I pulled on Night and stepped forward. The Dead King laughed, seeming genuinely delighted. There was a ripple and the two Soninke mages were blown away, sent flying, as the King of Death turned to me.

"I knew you would not fall for her tricks," Neshamah smiled. "You lack the perspective, Warden, but you still understand the essence of it. *We are all prisoners.*"

I'd heard this before, I thought, from Masego. Who'd been raised in a shard of Arcadia as a boy and seen it end, wondering then how long it would take until the Gods did the same to Creation. The Game of the Gods would have an end, after all. Someone had to win.

"And you want to get out before Last Dusk," I said.

"When the Gods end it all, Catherine Foundling," Neshamah Be-Iakim said, "when the last soul passes and the last of Creation is unmade, then I will stride alone into a sky of cold and distant stars."

He leaned forward.

"And in that empty void between worlds, moving to no purpose but mine, I will at last know the taste of freedom."

And he meant it, I knew with ironclad certainty. Every word of that. All he'd ever wanted was to get out. And maybe part of what he'd become was on Yara of Nowhere, who had hounded on behalf of the masters he wanted to rid himself of, but it wasn't on her head alone. He was still the same man who had destroyed Sephirah for his madness, who had taken a sickle to Calernia through the millennia as a reaper of lives. He was not excused. He was the face of everything I wanted the Liesse Accords to kill, the black madness that broke nations and swallowed whole cities. A single man whose lunacy was enough to break the world.

And Gods, hadn't we all had enough of that?

"From them," I said. "You'll be free from them, Neshamah. But you forget that you are yet in the pit with the rest of us. And down here, we are all mud."

"Am I to monologue for you, Warden?" he smiled. "I will not snatch defeat from the jaws of victory."

It was a gesture of respect, I grasped, when he called me respect. For my Role, for how far I had come. He had meant it when he called me a peer.

"You don't need to," I said. "You've already given me enough."

"It would be worse to kill me, you know," Neshamah idly said. "I have prepared for it."

"You'd make it worse," I acknowledged.

I'd long seen it coming. He seemed, I noted, a little cheated by how easily I accepted that.

"You have seen the shape of my sovereignty," the Dead King said.

"I have," I agreed.

A million strings, a million dead, all to make a kingdom of one.

"Should I end," the Hidden Horror said, "it will pass to another. One Creation should fear even more than I."

It took me a moment to understand what he meant. When I did, I almost refused to believe it.

"Weeping Heavens," I said. "You don't even control the drakon when it's just a drop of essence. You'd give all you hold?"

"I had a friend once," he smiled, "who was a woman of remarkable clarity. She once asked: if Creation is not mine, what need is there to be a Creation at all?"

I cocked my head to the side. I shouldn't, I knew, but in some ways I would forever be my father's daughter.

"Quoting Triumphant," I told him, "is the last refuge of the uninspired."

And I beheld him then, standing proud and unbent in the face of all Creation. The oldest of tyrants, the King of Death himself who had worn his pale crown through the millennia to war upon the world. The first and greatest of the old breed, the one they all fell short of becoming. The last relic of the Age of Wonders. And I knew, in that moment, that he was mine to judge. That I had taken on the Role, the responsibility. I was the Warden, the usherer of the Age of Order, and it fell on me to close the curtain on the times that had come before it. The Mirror Knight had one feared I would make myself a ruler over Named, and he was not so far as that. I'd always been about authority, just never about wearing a crown.

I was to be a judge.

"Neshamah Be-Iakim," I said, "you have devoured cities and shattered realms, waged war upon all the world and sown ruin wherever reached your hand. You are the high priest of desolation, the tyrant undying."

He felt it, I saw, same as I. The shiver in the air. His Role and mine, testing the other's weight. His hand

"By my Name of Warden," I said, "I **Sentence** you to die."

He came for us, then, without a speck of holding back. It came as a swarm of buzzing curses, a tide of a million deaths, but the charge of my last aspect had sunk into him. The **Sentence** would stay in him, my authority – my madness – carved into Creation. His fate was writ as death, and now the lay of world would fight to ensure it.

I had, at last, a providence of my own.

The Silver Huntress's wrist was touched by a curse and she withered to bones in a heartbeat even as I swallowed a shout of dismay. The Page exploded into ash, the Skinchanger screamed as

she unravelled from the inside. I raised my staff, drawing as deep on Nigh as I ever had. It would not be enough, I knew, but so long as Hanno could – the Valiant Champion interrupted the thought, leaping forward with her axe high, and as she looked death in the face she smiled.

“Exalt,” Rafaella of Alava said.

And then she was gone, the Dead King’s great doom and his Revenants with her. In the heartbeat that followed were moving. The Mirror Knight first and swiftest, Hanno and I tearing forward even as Hierophant and Akua’s magic rose.

“Hanno,” I shouted.

His eyes met mine.

“Bring him back,” I said. “Make him *alive*.”

Three spells went flying. Masego’s hit the Dead King in the chest, burning through robes and sending him stumbling back. Akua’s and Neshamah’s collide, one giving and a heartbeat later Akua Sahelian *screamed*. Christophe de Pavanie, smiling, dropped his shield and swung the Severance at the Dead King’s neck two-handed. Bit his wrist, oh his wrist was caught. And Neshamah’s other hand was laid on his neck, a curse leaving the fingertips and spreading black across the Mirror Knight’s skin. He smiled still.

“Reflect,” the Mirror Knight whispered.

And the Dead King screamed, rot spreading across his dead limbs as the Mirror Knight slumped. Breathing his last he twisted, twisting around the Severance, and handle of it fell into Hanno’s outstretched hand. The one missing fingers. He caught it. I struck out, the staff of deadwood I’d ripped from Liesse after refusing the old victories and defeats writhing with the power of the goddesses that had made me as much as I’d made them. The hit caught Neshamah in the neck, even as his magic sharpened, a pulse of Night disrupted the spell. Hanno of Arward’s hand touch the Dead King’s forehead, that rough workman’s palm covering it.

“Undo,” the White Knight said.

And as Creation screamed, life roared back into the Dead King’s corpse. Millennia of weight fought the White Knight’s fresh aspect, an oak tree to a dandelion, but a finger had already been laid on the balance. I had Sentenced Neshamah to die, and for that he must first live. So colour flushed back into his cheeks, those pale brown eyes widening as his magic rose again. A killing spell, and end for the both of us.

“Silence,” I ordered, and it died.

And Hanno struck, the Severance biting into the Hidden Horror's neck for the second time that day. It cleaved through flesh and bone, red blood spurting as death followed in the wake of life. Neshamah Be-Iakim's head fell, its eyes golden in death, and the two of us stood by the dropping corpse in disbelief. Movement behind me, and I turned sword in hand but it was Hierophant – who darted forward, hand snatching a sparrow as it erupted from the Dead King's last corpse. It was, I saw with surprise, a soul. His soul.

"I told you, King of Death," Hierophant smiled, "that I would come for you."

And he bit off the sparrow's head, teeth crunching as he swallowed and began to devour the Dead King's soul, making its knowledge his own. The foundation, I knew, of a godhead to be. We'd won, I realized. We'd just killed him. And though he had threatened us with the drakon, if the Antigone came through then... A sigh sounded, and I turned to see Yara of Nowhere standing among the ruins of the highest hall of Keter.

"Why," she asked, "does it always have to be the hard way with you lot?"

Kiara

Ok so in the timeline that can never be...what is Akua's glorious name as she slays the Dead King?

Someperson

I am partial to The Doom

[Tom](#)

Catkua

Isi Arnott-Campbell

So in the manner of "Wekesa the Warlock" or "Catherine the Squire," she'd be Akua the Catkua?

Someperson

AA

This chapter was insane and brilliant

[Jairo Lugilde](#)

This is literally the game-ending final boss with a thousand phases that when you finally beat him the twist true final boss reveals herself. I love it.

Someperson

Mark my words the shackles get used on the Intercessor before it's all over

Stephen Marsh

I hope so. Interesting how she isn't happy they won.

SeventhSolar

She definitely lied about a lot of things. I'm not sure about the fact that they couldn't beat Neshamah without breaking a fundamental law, since Cat's Sentence kind of seemed like Creational BS? But Cat beating the pivot with a line about crabs in a bucket definitely means Bard was deliberately screwing them over in some unnecessary way, and that she didn't just set up an absolute win/win like she pretended.

Lord Haart

Cat was going to put everyone on rails to die in that scene, as if it were a game. Like WB, that sort of power is the death of empathy.

Cat indeed reminded herself that she's in the bucket too, and that escape lies more in helping others out more than pushing others down.

Very happy Nessie died for his actions. Leashing him would have been a pushover ending.

Abnaxis

Waaaaait...

If it's that hard to separate someone from their soul without them turning undead, how does soul-boxing work?

Xinci

I believe those soul boxed were noted to be created by a derivative method for lichdom. There are only a few of them from what we have seen? Mainly as separating the soul in a way that it isn't damaged requires immense precision and a metaphysical ability to separate it and then it must be tied to the person in a way that it doesn't desynchronize from the body.

Someperson

I suspect soulboxing doesn't make any effort to keep the victim's soul around if they die, unlike proper lichdom and also unlike Akua's trick. It is purely meant to be a punishment or a means of leverage, which means it don't need to be as fancy.

I believe the reason why soulboxing is rare is significantly due to Praesi politics. In most case, if you soulbox a high lord, their family will backstab them and replace them rather quickly, because who wants a leader who is at the mercy of somebody who doesn't have the interests of your house at heart?

Of course, that only explains why it isn't used more often on important political figures. I would assume that it's a tricky enough bit of magic that using it on some random person to make them do as you say would be considered a waste (also, for all of their faults, the Praesi do not believe in slavery).

Abnaxis

Yeah, now that I think of it the presumption was that if the soul is released from the box it would immediately snap back to the owner, so I guess the binding between body and soul doesn't get separated the way lichdom does it?

Like, soul-boxing is gluing the soul in a box and stretching it like silly putty, lichdom is actually going at the soul with a scalpel so you can stick it in an ice bucket.

[GoodGirlJW](#)

OH NO I AM ALL CAUGHT UP D: D: D:

Cap'n Smurfy

I love how after all this time Cat Choosing to keep the limp came back to help her. She kept the reminder, keeping the memory.

Letouriste

Yep! I was annoyed by it (thinking she could achieve the effect without it) but i guess i can forgive it now 😊

biasteh

So now that I've caught up, there's only 4 chapters left? Bleh

Spindel

I have read this entire story, just lurking, never writing but I just have to say it: Amazing!

This is one of the best stories I ever read and this chapter was one of the best within it. Especially that pivot with Yara! The only downside to those 4 chapters to come is that it will be over afterwards. Thank you for this, EE.

M0och123

OMG, brilliant!

D. D.

How the hell is there only one other comment so far?!

Goddamn, what a finish.....and it's not even over yet.

Letouriste

You're not on the first page of comments haha

DC

Wait a sec...

A dead king, a kingdom named after the Sephirot, the Kabbalis book of darkness, and now providence in the fall of a sparrow?

This is not a coincidence because nothing is ever a coincidence.

Interlude: Legends V

"One: first, do good."

-"Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

The wards shuddered.

The great battering rams of the dead were cracking them apart blow by blow, the beleaguered defenders conceding one barricade after another to the horde. Swarms of undead birds flew so thick above them all that it seemed as if night had fallen, the creatures snatching up any soldier that left the protection of the sorcery and tearing them apart so that limbs rained down. How many more layers were left the wards? Cordelia was not certain, but it could not be more than a handful. Inch by inch they had given ground to the Enemy, the Dead King's tireless teeth

devouring them one soldier at a time. They might just, she thought, run out of men before they ran out of ground.

She'd begun with almost two thousand, but that longer had long dwindled into the hundreds.

The princess sat with her back to the all-too-thin palisade that Hannoven men had raised with calm competence, now standing behind it with halberds and hammers as the horde continued to hammer at the wards. What a small thing this length of wood was, in the face of the monsters that awaited. What would it do against a rampaging beorn or the venom of a wyrm? It might as well be parchment. And still she sat there, among the crowd of grim-faced soldiers calmly awaiting the death coming for them one bite at a time. Cordelia's gauntleted hand brushed back her mud-streaked hair, careful to avoid the cuts on her face.

She'd been offered healing, but she would not die from torn cheeks and every wasted speck of Light was a soldier the priests could not send back into the fight. Standing by her, Simon de Gorgeault looked over the top of the palisade and let out a thoughtful hum.

"Goods news, Simon?" she drily asked.

"It appears that the Dead King is a fine diplomat indeed, Your Grace," the lay brother easily replied. "I do believe I am spying the High Lady of Kahtan fighting side by side with the Prince of Orense."

It took Cordelia a moment to recall that both of them were dead, though she would have been clued in by the raucous laughter from the Hannoven soldiers anyhow. It was exactly the kind of black humour they loved. A shade lighter than what Bremenites preferred, but then most Lycaonese agreed that they only laughed because they'd never learned how to cry.

"It figures," the once-First Prince mourned, "that they would only start getting along after I abdicated."

Laughter again, and though exhausted Cordelia forced herself to rise to her feet. Over the palisade she found what Simon had, a contingent of Praesi dead in colourful armour methodically levelling the broken palisades the dead had already taken so that the horsemen died in Rodrigo Trastanes' honourable last charge would be able to ride through the smoking grounds. What a small thing a palisade was, she thought again. So easily done away with, for all that it was the only wall standing between them and death. A remembrance brushed against her mind, then, and to her surprise Cordelia found herself thinking of her mother with a faint smile.

"Good news, Your Grace?" Simon lightly echoed.

She shook her head.

"I was merely thinking," Cordelia said, "that sometimes the story you hear is not the one you are being told."

"I don't follow, I'm afraid," the lay brother said.

"When I was a girl, my mother once told me the tale of the Three Cousins," the fair-haired princess said. "Do you know of it?"

It was an old story known among all Lycaonese and even some of the northern Alamans, though the tale changed with the telling.

"I do not," Simon admitted.

It was simple, as the most beloved stories tend to be, and Cordelia remembered her mother telling it with characteristic brusqueness. It'd been her way, the choppy burst of emotions. Anger and laughter, come then gone in a moment like Hannoven's capricious summer rains.

"I can tell it, if you would like," she lightly offered.

What else was there to do, as they waited for the rams to break the wards? There were no more tricks, no more walls, no more desperate gambles. Only the brutal trade of time for lives and ground. The white-haired man laughed.

"As good a time as any, I would think," he cheerfully agreed.

There were, she thought, worst men to face the end of the world with than Simon de Gorgeault.

"An old king," Cordelia said, "died without sons and daughters. His line died with him and another rose to take the seat, but laws are laws."

The lay brother rested his elbows on the edge of the palisade, resting his chin on his palm as he listened with bright eyes.

"His wealth of iron was split in three parts," Cordelia told him, "and given over to his last three kinsmen: three cousins, who went north to seek their fortunes as men do. They journeyed long, longer than men ever had before them, but in time they found a rich, green land by the banks of a great river. They decided to settle there and raise their halls."

A broad-shouldered redhead in plate down the palisade, her solid matron's face split by a smile, hummed out the first few notes of *O Blessed Hannoven* – that sardonic hymn boasting of every horror plaguing the land as if each were a blessing to thank Above for, be it spring floods or the armies of the dead. Cordelia had also picked up on the resemblance, as a child. Hannoven bordered lakes

and rivers, and though far north counted some of the finest farmland in Lycaonese hands.

"Only," Cordelia said, "as they began to build, they learned too late that the river was the Last River and that on the other side of it dwelled Death."

She shrugged.

"But they no longer knew the way back, so they raised their halls anyway."

"Stubborn folk," Brother Simon said, the fond twist of his lips making it a compliment.

"The first cousin, the oldest, was a lord bold and brave," the princess said. "He built his hall in stone and fashioned his iron into a gate that none could break, raising a tall banner over it."

Cordelia has thought him the wisest when she was first told the story.

"The second cousin, the youngest, was a hunter clever and sly. He raised his hall atop a tree in the woods, hidden in leaves, and fashioned his iron into arrowheads aplenty."

There was no disdain in her tone, but it was there to be found in the faces of some who listened. Her people were a pragmatic sort, they'd had to be to survive, but they believed in honour still. There was little honour to be found in hiding in the woods as your kin perished around you, clever or not.

"The last cousin, neither young nor old, was a warrior neither bold nor clever," Cordelia smiled. "He raised his hall from wood, fashioning his iron into a sword and helm. And for a long summer and winter the three ruled over their halls, until spring came and Death with it."

In the distance the boom of the rams against the wards sounded, followed by a loud *crack*. The first fault line. It was only a matter of time now.

"The spirits of the dead came charging out of Below," she said, "a great army that laid siege to the bold cousin's stone hall. And though they were many and furious, the iron gate did not break."

But this was not a southern tale. Victories did not keep on shining like stars in the sky. They passed, as all things did.

"Yet the siege did not end," Cordelia said, "and as the moon turned the oldest of the three cousins grew hungry. Behind his strong gate he remained a prisoner, until his hunger slew him

behind stone walls and he rose anew to unbar his gate of iron for Death."

Simon looked stricken, but there were grunts of approval from the soldiers around them. Most of them would know the story already, but even those that did not would approve of the lesson her mother had tried to teach her: no walls were ever strong enough to keep death out forever.

"Onwards the spirits of the dead marched, into the woods where the youngest cousin had raised his hall," she told the lay brother. "And the clever cousin laughed, for the spirits stumbled about as he remained hidden in the leaves and slew them with his arrows of iron."

There were few tricksters, in her people's stories, and she thought for good reason. Tricks meant little against the Chain of Hunger, and it was a rare trickster indeed that could get the better of the King of Death. More often, the sly got a lot of people killed trying to prove their cleverness.

"Only the dead are endless," Cordelia shrugged, "and though they could not find him they devoured the forest tree by tree. The youngest cousin killed many, but arrows always run out."

The end had been writ from the start.

"The tree was toppled, his hall with it, and he was swallowed whole."

Simon de Gorgeault's face had slowly changed from engrossed to grim. Lycaonese tales, she mused, did tend to have that effect on southerners.

"And the last?" he asked.

"The last cousin, the warrior, had no tall walls or hiding place," Cordelia said. "His hall was wood and easily torn down by a hundred hungry hands, but as they did he strode out wearing his helm and bearing his sword."

"And he fought," the lay brother quietly said.

"And he fought, neither winning nor losing, until spring turned to summer and the dead returned to Below," the blue-eyed princess said.

"So he was victorious," Simon said, sounding surprised.

He was startled by the hard laughter from the soldiers around them, but Cordelia was not.

"As the dead left, he set down his sword and helm to raise against his wooden hall," she told him. "And as he sat in it, the

warmth of summer reaching his face, the last cousin knew this: Death would return with spring."

That had been the lesson her mother was trying to teach her, she'd thought as a child. You couldn't ever really beat Evil, not like in the pretty stories ending with a wedding and an endless summer's peace. You fought, until you died and someone else took your place. It was a fate that couldn't be turned back by a strong gate, couldn't be hidden from in the leaves. Either you faced Evil down or it devoured you whole.

In the distance, the wards cracked.

"A hard lesson," Simon de Gorgeault finally said, frowning as he gazed upon the dead. "Perhaps the Principate would not be facing ruin, had more of its people learned it."

She smiled.

"Years later," she told him, "I learned that it was only the way the tale was told in Hannoven."

In Rhenia, the story was about the halls. The first cousin was lazy, made a large iron crown and built a hall of river's mud. The second was clever, made an axe and a smaller crown then built his hall from the forest's wood. The third built only a pickaxe, spending all summer and winter to make his hall out of mountain stone. All fell but the last, the third cousin then using the remains of their broken halls to mend the wounds in his own. *Pride is worth nothing, the story taught. Survival belongs to those who labour for it.* In Neustria the cousins forged either a sword, a shield or armour out of their iron. The armoured cousin took up the arms from his fallen kin to survive.

In Bremen the story went the same as in Neustria, save that the dead did not retreat with summer and all three cousins died. But when Death took the fallen cousins Below to celebrate, the iron got stuck in the passageway and blocked off the dead until the got the iron was chewed through, come next spring.

"Is it so different elsewhere?" Simon asked.

"Not so much," Cordelia admitted. "But I remembered, then when it was my mother told me the tale. I was young, you see, and had just wept that she was never home."

And so Mother, brusque and blunt but never quite able to admit when she was sorry, had tried to explain why she was always out there leading solders. Evil had to be fought on the field, she'd been trying to say, else it would reach their gates. She was trying to keep Cordelia safe, to buy them another spring. It hadn't been a lesson at all, just her mother giving the closest thing to an apology as she had it in her to give.

"Sometimes the story you hear," Cordelia softly repeated, "is not the one you are being told."

It'd been the failing palisades that had hooked the thought, the wrongly learned lesson that walls always failed in the face of Death, but now she wondered. Time was running out. The last word she'd had of the fighting inside Keter had been that the inner city was breached, but since then there'd been no word and the Grand Alliance camp was being overrun. Had been overrun, she admitted to herself. Most of it was in the hands of the dead now, the few remaining pockets in the hands of the living either forts built around supplies or the heavily warded Praesi grounds where hodgepodge survivors had fled to as the rest of the camp collapsed.

Cordelia Hasenbach had sworn that she would wait until the very last moment but that moment was approaching, step by step. Inevitable as the coming of spring.

It was her duty to do what must be done. The responsibility she must bear for the weight of her sins, the niggling questions of whether any of this would have happened at all, if she had not called the Tenth Crusade. If she had not made mortal wars into the affair of Above and Below, raised her hall on the shore of the Last River. And still she could not help but wonder: was it really the sword and helm she had chosen? The fight, to hold down in her hands and not fail it? It felt like an invincible gate, the certainty that she could end it all at any moment. It felt like a bowstring pulled back among the leaves, the fading mirage of victory. Was the story she was telling herself really the one she was living in?

She reached for the slip of parchment under her breastplate, fingers closing.

The wards shuddered one last time and then they broke.

—

"It's not a dragon," Sapan firmly said.

"It's got scales and wings," Arthur Foundling replied, "and it breathes fire. Sort of."

It was transparent, not like any fire he'd ever seen, and instead of burning seemed to simply disappear everything it touched. Not ideal, given that it narrowed down the Knight Errant's options in facing the beast from the already sparse 'shield' and 'dodge' to merely 'dodge'. Which, given that the dragon kept growing, was becoming more difficult by the moment. It was a most inconsiderate sort of beast.

"It has commonalities with a dragon," Mage reluctantly conceded. "But so do a seagull and a wyvern."

"Don't those have tails with stingers?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"A seagull," Sapan slowly said, as if addressing a complete idiot. "Have you really never seen one before?"

There was a moment of stillness between them, then they both broke out laughing until they were out of breath.

"Had me going there for a moment," Arthur admitted, still wheezing.

"It'll be a few years until I can be match Lord Hierophant," she told him, sounding admiring. "He can say *anything* with a straight face, it baffles even the Warden."

The levity had released something in the both of them, but not even her clutching at happier memories was enough to make up for the horror before them. Their breather was at an end and they would be returning to the nightmare, leaving their hiding place behind a broken pillar tall as a tower. His limbs fighting him, something like fear pulling the other way, the Knight Errant peeked out around the rough stone edge. The 'drakon', that breed of Evil dragon, was cruelly enjoying itself at the expense of the brave men that died failing to give it pause.

The fourth charge faltered of the hour as the armsmen in Hainaut livery broke, either fleeing or breaking ranks to try to drag back Princess Beatrice. The beast had killed her horse under her, tossing her down with broken legs, and was now popping the heads of those who came to help her with hateful glee. It left her crawling, only plucking out the lives of the most loyal as it ignored another volley from the Praesi scorpions. Packs of goblins had dragged in the engines only to find the bolts sinking into the flesh to no effect, made part of its body. Even unravellers did nothing, and though copperstone munitions had burned bright on its hide the bite had not been deep.

Useless as anything but a distraction.

Arthur's jaw clenched as he watched another soldier being pressed into the ground by a massive finger as Beatrice Volignac screamed in anguish. From the corner of his eye he saw light-footed Levantines move in with ropes and hooked swords, Tartessos slayers, but he held little hope. A flicker of movement among the ruins caught his attention, the Affable Burglar smoothly advancing through broken stone. Towards Princess Beatrice?

"Gods help you," the Knight Errant whispered, and he meant both kinds.

They needed all the help.

"Arthur," Sapan called out.

He took it as a reminder not to stay out in the open too long and ducked back behind the stone, resting his too-warm forehead against the fallen pillar. This room, as great as the heart of the Alban Cathedral itself, felt like a boiling cauldron. It was hot and humid, in a way that licked disgustingly at your skin. The longer they stayed in here, the harder it was to think. Sapan's hand on his arm jolted him out of his thoughts. It'd not been a reminder, after all, but to call his attention to something. A young man in legionary's armour, Liessen blond hair peeking through the helm, had come to fetch them. A sergeant, by the single red stripe on his shoulder.

"Lady Antigone wants you," the sergeant told them.

They nodded back tiredly, the other man not waiting to escort them. He'd only been a messenger. The Witch of the Woods was not far, huddled with the Concocter over what looked like a makeshift alchemist's kit. Or a brewer's, really. Two small barrels, tubes of glass bubbling over an open flame and a hermetic vase. Lady Antigone had fought with the first two charges, helping them with her great spells, but after they broke retreated here to consort with the silver-haired Concocter. Arthur knew little of what they were up to, save that it was meant to destroy the elder dragon, but Sapan had been told of it in greater detail.

If they had assumed he was unlikely to understand the technicalities of alchemy and magic, they'd been entirely correct.

"We are nearly done," the masked Witch flatly told them.

"Almost," the Concocter murmured, laying a palm against the hermetic vase. "It's begun to sublimate properly."

Arthur sent a helpless glance at Sapan, who sighed.

"Lady Concocter stole a sliver of the drakon's body while it was still contained in the corpse where the Dead King imprisoned it," she told him.

"I knew *that*," the Knight Errant grunted. "But it's not in that body anymore so why would it help?"

"Because that thing is eating away at everything it touches, even us," the Concocter said, turning to meet his eye. "Except it didn't eat at the corpse it began within in the slightest."

He slowly nodded.

"So we are stealing the Dead King's work," he tried.

"I might be able to slay the drakon," the Witch plainly said, "if an artefact imbued with the property is sunk into its body."

Because otherwise it would simply be eaten, presumably, Arthur followed.

"Good news," he said, meaning it. "How are we to help?"

"I kept back the Affable Burglar because she's our only thief," the Witch said. "She will bring the artefact in the drakon. From you, Knight Errant, I need a wound."

He breathed in sharply.

"You want me to break its skin," he realized, "so that you might have an opening to push the artefact through."

A mute nod.

"It may well kill you," the Concocter frankly admitted.

"I'll do it," Arthur Foundling replied without missing a beat.

Fear tried to make his lips stiff, take back the words, but he had moved quicker. The Concocter's eerie orange eyes blinked in surprise.

"I have sent for help," the Witch of the Woods told him. "But I know not if they will come. You are our last chance."

It was either him or the Stained Sister, now that the Myrmidon guts were strewn across the gallery above their heads, and the Sister was protecting their only Named healer. Twice already the elder dragon had shattered a hall where the Stalwart Apostle plied her powers, only quick escape saving her life when a stream of transparent fire came for it.

"I am a knight of Callow, Lady Antigone," Arthur Foundling replied. "Our causes are always lost."

He shrugged.

"And still we prevail."

At his hip the Peregrine burned, and it felt like a smile.

—

A wave of undead hammered into the palisade, toppling it like a sandcastle failing in the face of the tide.

Cordelia kicked the skeletal hand that slipped through two stakes, shattering its wrist, then backed away hastily when a spear jutted out. She hacked at the wooden shaft but her angle

was wrong and her sword got stuck, she and the dead on the other side pulling at each other to get free. The princess set a boot against the palisade to put her back into it, the sword suddenly ripped clear as she stumbled backwards. She went back to pressing against the stakes a heartbeat later as arrows began to fall in a ragged rain, taking a step back only when a bearded man in Reitzenberg colours raised his shields above their head. He was chewing at the inside of his cheek, eyes calm, and peeked over the palisade's edge.

"We're about to go down, I'd say," he told her in Reitz. "We move back to the next, let the mages torch everything."

Cordelia's eyes sought Simon, but he was further down helping up a soldier with an arrow sticking out of her shoulder. The lay brother could take care of himself, she decided.

"Let us go," the fair-haired princess agreed.

A heartbeat later she was blind, thrown off her feet as wooden shards exploded and one bit deep into her brow. Gritting her teeth, she scrabbled for the sword she'd dropped as the massive undead boar that'd smashed through the palisade shook off a few soldiers, carving through with its tusks. The soldier that'd shielded her was on a bed of ash and dirt, his spine bent at a straight angle. Fingers shaking, Cordelia worked off the straps of his shield and snatched it up. Undead were pouring through the breach, ghouls running on four legs and leaping at soldiers, but the thunder of hooves approaching told her who was to come. The Prince of Orense's horsemen now served the Enemy, and a way had been opened for them.

"Simon," she shouted, eyes searching. "We must-"

The older man, she saw, was on the ground. Wrestling with a ghoul, the soldier he'd been helping running away. Cordelia ran, and though she knew she should be following the other it was to the lay brother she went. With a wild scream she hacked into the back of the ghoul's head, parting flesh and bone. It took two blows before the creature scrabbled away, crawling on its belly as it twitched, and Brother Simon – his throat scratched raw and his scalp scarred – took its head with a swing right through the neck.

"Come on," Cordelia croaked, voice raw.

She offered him the pommel of her sword to drag him up, his chest brushing against the dead man's shield she now bore, and though the warmth of having kept at least one person she cared for breathing was yet in her belly when they turned it was to the sight of doom. The boar collapsed, a Hannover spear through the brain even as the soldier who'd leapt on its back was dragged up screaming into the sky by vultures, but a beorn's great head

leered over the broke palisade as it climbed over it. It was close, too close for them to be able to run in time and- and an armoured silhouette landed on the abomination's back, splitting its head open with a single blow. They leapt down even as the beorn collapsed on the palisade, landing smoothly and flicking their sword free of gore.

"Honour to the Blood," the Barrow Sword drily said, offering her a salute.

Cordelia recovered from her surprise first, blessed by extensive diplomatic experience in pretending nothing ever took her aback.

"Lord Ishaq," she greeted him. "My thanks. If I may request that you escort us to-"

He raised a hand to interrupt her, which was highly rude but she'd allow to pass without comment given the present circumstances.

"There is cavalry coming, Barrow Sword," Brother Simon bluntly said.

"Give it about three more heartbeats and," the villain began, then trailed off.

He was off one heartbeat, Cordelia pettily noted even as the sky lit up. A great pillar of burning Light tore through the clouds, smashing into the ground so powerfully it shook. A wind laden with the smell of burned flesh and molten metal washed over them, poisonously warm.

"There was cavalry coming, priest," Ishaq Deathless grinned through his beard.

He had, Cordelia thought, never more looked like one of the Damned. She mastered her discomfort.

"That was the work of the Blessed Artificer, I take it?" she calmly asked.

The Barrow Sword nodded.

"The Hierophant got to blow up a maze, the way we hear it, so I believe she's getting a mite competitive," he said.

Even with the relief that the column of Light had earned them the dead were continuing to pour through breaches and more than half the palisade was now on the ground, being trampled over. Soldiers were already retreating to the safety of the next layer of wards, the thin last shells, and by unspoken accord the three of them began a retreat that way as well.

"Is she coming our way?" Brother Simon asked, sounding worried. "I understand she was wounded yesterday, and to fight alone through such a horde..."

Cordelia shared his fear but chose to look upon the hope instead. If Adanna of Smyrna joined their defence, a rout may yet be avoided. The faint yellow glow in the air above them told her that the ward keeping the vultures from falling upon them was still mostly standing, but there was precious little else left. The last two palisades had boundary wards that would keep the dead from passing them, but weaker ones than those that had already been cracked. They would collapse before a quarter hour had passed, if the black stone rams were brought to bear against them. Should the Blessed Artificer bring down a wall of Light, however?

Oh, they might yet hold.

"Arrangements were made, priest, worry not," the Barrow Sword said. "Besides, you do not yet stand alone."

"Your presence is a relief," Cordelia assured him.

"As it should be," Ishaq Deathless laughed, "but it is not me I speak of. Your plight did not go unseen, Cordelia Hasenbach. Help has come."

And as if summoned by his words – perhaps not 'if', should Catherine be believed – a wave of suffocating power washed over them all. The ground shook beneath their feet and Cordelia would have fallen had Simon not gallantly caught her elbow. She steadied and turned in time to see the ground below the broken palisade rise, the earth itself rising into a rough wall. Stunned, she followed the Barrow Sword as he made for the wall cutting through a few remaining ghouls and climbed up the slope, shield hanging limp on her wrist. Up there, standing tall, she saw them coming.

There could not have been more than three hundred of the Gigantes, and yet they marched through a sea of undead as if taking a stroll.

Skeletons raised arms only to find their skulls crumpling, ghouls were turned into wet red smears before they could even leap and even arrows *melted* in midair. A beorn roared and charged only to begin unraveling, its great clawed paw tumbling forward but never even reaching a Gigantes' foot. Swarms of birds dropped like rocks, shattering on the head of the dead. When a tall Revenant in yellow robes bearing a long spear pointed it at them, it then twitched jerkily and rammed it seven times into its own eye before collapsing like a stringless puppet.

"Gods," Cordelia hoarsely whispered.

"That, Your Grace, is every last remaining spellsinger come to make war," the Barrow Sword quietly said. "Burn the sight your eyes, because Creation will never witness such a thing again."

They withdrew from the wall, but not far. With this unnatural rampart having risen from nothing, taller and stronger than any barricade might hope to be, soldiers rushed back to defend it. Cordelia went deeper behind the wards to make sure that Simon's throat would be seen to properly – the bite of some ghouls carried poison – then returned to share the watch. Skeletons and ghouls climbed the wall, needing beating back even under swarm of arrows, but the tusks and beorns that tried their hand at shattering the earth instead broke their own skulls. They could hold, Cordelia thought with renewed vigor, until the Gigantes arrived. It was tense, dangerous work and twice arrows thumped into her shield but she ripped them out and the wall held. The Barrow Sword kept the defence alive, moving like a prowling cat across the rampart and beating back whatever foothold the dead gained.

The Gigantes finished the march with the same air of indifferent inevitability they had begun it with, part of the earthen wall opening as a door for them before they spread out. The fair-haired princess had learned everything there was to know of their people in Proceran archives and bought Levantine secrets at great expense, but even so she could not interpret a single of the 'words' that the giants shared with each other. Not one was spoken, subtle shifts in gesture and sorcery expressing all the Gigantes cared to share before they parted ways, nearly of all them spreading out alone along the rampart. Only two remained together, and their approach had Cordelia straightening her back.

She had little experience speaking with Gigantes, and so she was faintly grateful when the Barrow Sword emerged from a band of halberd-wielding Neustrians to join her. The two giants stood more than thirty feet tall, both shaved and one bearded. Though their people's necks were short and their legs long, it was the face that spoke of their inhumanity to Cordelia. Those large eyes paler than any human's could be, those strange ridges of cartilage that stood in place of ears. The Gigantes without the beard considered them with milk-white eyes, offering a nod to the Barrow Sword.

"Bahal," they said, voice rumbling. "You earn your charge."

"Great Elder, your praise brings me honour," the Levantine replied, offering a bow.

Those pale eyes moved to her then.

"Princess Hasenbach," they said. "You are known to us."

It was tempting to appropriate the villain's use of 'Great Elder', but risky without knowing the context. A safer answer was in order.

"This brings me honour," Cordelia replied, and Gigantes seemed satisfied.

The bearded one spoke up then.

"We come here at the word of the Living God, the Maker of Riddles, and bring this knowledge: the Young King is cornered."

Cordelia went still as a stone.

"Though the corpses of gods were profaned and the shadow of the old enemy brought back," the bearded giant continued, "the Warden and the White Knight storm the spire. Victory is at hand."

Or defeat, the princess thought, but did not dare speak it. The knowledge that Catherine would do whatever it took to win was reassuring, but Cordelia knew the difference between arrogance and faith. Sometimes there was no victory to be had, no matter how bold or clever or worthy you were. Sometimes all that you could hope for was for the iron of your fight to be hard enough to swallow that the Enemy would have to wait until spring to march again. She would hope, she would have faith, but she would not delude herself.

"We thank you for the knowledge brought," the Barrow Sword said, tone a little stilted.

He bowed, and Cordelia had been expecting him to so she smoothly imitated the gesture. The Gigantes eyed them for a moment more, then nodded with exaggerated slowness – as if to make sure they would see it – before striding away. No more explanation was given for any of this. The villain sagged when they were out of sight, perhaps the most human gesture she'd ever seen out of him.

"Bahal?" she lightly asked, masking the depth of her curiosity.

"The manner of my Bestowal accidentally made me part of the ancient Gigantes courts of justice," the Barrow Sword admitted.

His hand rested on the pommel of the bronze sword she had never seen him without, not any more than the bronze scale that seemed to weather ever blow of the dead without breaking. She cocked a brow.

"And what part would that be?" she asked out of honest curiosity.

"The death matches," Ishaq Deathless grimly said. "I have good reason to be glad that none of the Eighteen Cities still call themselves such."

Fascinating as that was, and Cordelia had always been intrigued by the old stories of Gigantes living among the humans of the Eighteen Cities as rulers and guides of a sort, sadly they were yet at the end of the world. Fighting to keep from reaching that last fateful fall. Cordelia raised her shield, grip strengthening around her now ragged sword, and had opened her mouth to speak when suddenly she went still. So did the Barrow Sword, and many a soldier, for a ripple had gone through Creation that even the most blind of them could feel. The dead, to the last, went still.

Atop the tall black spire that stood above all of Keter, a sphere of fire winked out.

"Gods," Cordelia Hasenbach whispered, tears coming to her eyes. "Oh, Merciful Gods. She did it. *She killed him.*"

The undead began to move again but it was chaos, nothing at all like an army. They broke up into bands around Binds, hacking at each other as much as they tried to climb the walls, and it sunk into the princess' soul that they had done it. They had destroyed the King of Death and now his armies would – there was another rippled, and Cordelia shivered. It passed over her like a humid wind, tasting her skin, and the Barrow Sword let out a soft curse.

Below them, the dead stirred again.

With feverish hatred, they fell on each other and all they saw. Broken teeth swallowed flesh and metal, tore into walls as if they were parchment and devoured all they reached. What had been an army become something altogether more terrible. Like a river of hunger the horde turned into a great horror that ate all it could touch, all it could reach. Moving like a single massive, writhing abomination Cordelia could not even begin to see the heart of. But she knew, oh she knew with iron certainty that the mind behind it lay deep inside the Crown of the Dead.

"What is this madness?" she asked, revulsion tuning her voice raw.

"They call the Riddle-Maker the Living God," the Barrow Sword said.

She turned to him, found his tanned face gone pale.

"No one's sure what he fought, to become the last of the Titans," Ishaq quietly said, "but if I had to bet I'd say it's something like this."

"Then it should be dead," the princess said.

"This isn't a city where graves stay filled, Cordelia Hasenbach," he replied.

And as they stood there, below them a god clawed its way back to life. Slowly, she reached for the parchment pressed against her heart.

—

The Knight Errant stepped out of the ruined maze, his sword in hand.

The Peregrine burned like a star to his Name, bearing no enchantment save a clarity of purpose. It was to make a better world as the Grey Pilgrim once had, by removing evil from it. By the cutting edge, if needs must. Arthur advanced alone, even though the lack of comrades at his side was fearful, for he knew his Name preferred it. Not for him the comradery of the Woe, not when his every instinct pulled him towards being the lone knight on the bridge, the challenger. The test or the savior, but neither leader nor led.

The hymns on his armour humming, he marched out while the dragon finished tormenting a company of goblin legionaries: it was stepping on whichever was on the edge of either side, making them swerve in panic one way or another as it toyed with them like a cat might with a mouse. Arthur was not sure it was a thinking creature, not like a person, but it was intelligent enough to be cruel. It knew what fear was, and despair. It seemed, he thought, *hungry* for them. Word from the rearguard was that it seemed to have seized control of the dead there, and though the Kingfisher Prince was holding he was losing ground.

Whether or not the Dead King had been ended, as some hope, they were still running out of time.

He hurried. Ugly as the thought was, the picking apart of the legionaries was covering his approach. Arthur was not so proud that he would refuse being given the first blow on such a foe, even if the price of it was the life of comrades. If he could have done anything to save them he would have, but... The Knight Errant had been raised in a war that taught hard lessons, and one of them was not to waste the chance to save most because you wanted to save all. So he hurried, stride lengthening, as goblins screamed and sweat tricked down his back.

He was half a hundred feet away from the dragon's back when it suddenly turned.

A leg jutted out of its shoulder, tearing through the glass floor, but the Knight Errant had already moved. Burnt shards trickled against his side and he struck at the twisted limb, the Peregrine humming as it tore into the side of leg. Flesh parted, burning, but there was so *much* of it and Arthur was almost disarmed when the leg was pulled back into the creature. He'd made a scar, but would it still be there if the leg was spat back

out? He was not so sure. The dragon turned its full attention on him, screaming as it swiped and its claws ripped up the ground.

He ran through the trails of death, Sapan's magic roared to life and hitting the dragon's head with spikes of light not unlike the one that had turned half the maze to glass. The beast roared in pain and Arthur rolled past a claw that would have torn him in half, feeling it graze his back and leaving him with grateful relief. Callowan knights did not wear capes. The elder beast's side spat out small limbs, human limbs, only made out of writhing metal and stone as tormented faces moaned out and the horror tried to snatch his side. The Knight Errant hacked into the madness, but though the burning scars he left tore screams from the faces they were soon gone, pulled into the monster. He was doing nothing, no matter how fine his sword.

And the dragon was laughing as it struck, ignoring streaks of fire and lightning from mages as well as Sapan's strange spikes returned, shaking them off where it had disregarded the rest. Arthur knelt under a great paw the claws closed in on him. He tried to slip in between but they headed him off, closing quicker, leaving him to realize that the drakon could have killed him already. It wanted him to *fear*, to fall apart. Instead the Knight Errant straightened his back, gritting his teeth and swinging at the coming death. Bone gave and -and the entire limb toppled forward, the cage around him falling with it.

Arthur had a glimpse or a rail-thin silhouette under a cloak and a single-edged sword of wood, a narrow face granting him a nod.

As he watched the elder dragon began to be rent asunder by cuts from every direction, the rest of the Emerald Swords walking the creature's skin unimpeded to carve through limbs and even its neck. The monster at its own flesh, growing it back, but it was an opening and Arthur took it. Swallowing his fear, he reached for the dragon's fleshy side and began to climb it. Hands pawed at him, reaching for his belt and his limbs to pull him inside the beast, but he shook them off with Name strength to continue his rise. He would rise, and he would wound the Evil thing as Lady Antigone had asked of him.

Halfway up the flank something ripped under him and he shouted with alarm as a limb exploded out of the flesh where he'd been, a long stretch of bone that bled out a thin membrane looking like an insect wing's. Desperately clutching at the limb as it drove him sky high, the Knight Errant fought the hands trying to drag him in. He was slashing at the bone but it was doing nothing, only scars, and what were those worth when they disappeared in a moment? Arthur's frustration mounted, a lifetime of wrongs he'd been forced to just watch laughing at him.

It was like there was a wall, like the Gods had decided he could do good but no further than this line and every effort he'd make

past it would come to vain. He'd thought he'd gotten past it in the Tower, when he had chosen right over wrong and all the rest, but here he was again: flailing at the dark, accomplishing nothing. What had Dustin even died for, if Arthur was just going to *keep failing to save people who needed him*? He refused that repellent, disgusting thought. That were some things, some entities beyond reckoning. That some walls couldn't be broken.

That there was anything in this world that the Knight Errant could not **Wound**.

An Emerald Sword cut the wing bone but Arthur pulled himself on it, Name flowing through his veins like fire, and even as it fell ran down the length. It was too quick a fall, too long a length, but still he ran – and even as he came short, just before he began to fall he leapt up with both hands on the Peregrine. Hanging in the air for the barest of moments he struck, the edge of the blade forged from the Grey Pilgrim's death and named by the Black Queen striking the elder dragon's flesh. **Wound**, everything that Arthur Foundling was screamed. And in that moment there was nothing in Creation that was beyond his reckoning, so the drakon's side was split open as if a titan's axe had fallen upon it.

And the wound did not close.

Arthur fell down as the drakon screamed, the ground hitting him mercilessly. His head rang and his limbs ached, the breath snatched out of him replaced by fire. He rolled to the side, trying and failing to get up, and saw Emerald Sword cut through the limb that would have turned him to paste. There was more, he saw as he caught a flicker of movement. The Affable Burglar was running across the open grounds, almost impossible to see even as she moved through open grounds. She was clutching something in her hand, though Arthur saw nothing more than a splash of colours. The dragon saw more, a forest of limbs erupting at the villainess, but a massive wolf bounded in the way and took the blow for the Burglar. The animal died, body crushed, as the villainess slithered through the promised deaths.

The Knight Errant gasped, spitting out blood as he leaned on the Peregrine to get back on his feet. He could cover the last of the way, he thought, but his limbs would not stop shaking. He only got on his knees. How many feet were left before she reached the wound? A hundred, maybe less. Only before the Burglar could get there the ground under her began to hollow, a tentacle of flesh destroying her footing, and though she ran across the collapsing space it was when the dragon blew its flames. The transparent death filled the air and the Affable Burglar would have been swallowed whole – if someone hadn't thrown themselves in the way.

The Painted Knife's mangled body, limbs broken and twisted, rippled for a heartbeat as an aspect lit up.

A heartbeat later the flames were gone and the elder dragon's head with them, as if it had annihilated itself, while Kallia the Painted Knife collapsed to the ground and the Affable Burglar raced through the last few feet. As her hand rose, at last Arthur saw what it was she held: a painted mask of clay.

The Knight Errant saw it disappeared into the wound, and only then did he let himself pass out.

—

For the second time that day, Cordelia's fingers shied away from the last words Agnes had left her.

Not because she thought there may yet be a darker moment, but because her attention was grabbed by a most unexpected sight: a flying fortress was coming to them. One of the great behemoths the Praesi called the Old Mothers, which she'd been told were all grounded. And it did seem that the magical castle had been wounded, for a third of it was missing and the insides were bare. Swarms of vultures were coming at it relentlessly, dying against translucent shields as they ate away at them, but it was slow going and Cordelia parsed out what would happen before it did.

The great fortress crashed before their walls before the shields broke, ground rippling and dead dying in droves.

The Gigantes, though troubled and wary of the sudden turn of the dead, opened a gate for the hundred or so Praesi that ran out of their broken fortress. Most of them seemed to be legionaries, but there were also richly dressed mages and two that stood out from the rest. Alaya of Satus, once the Dread Empress of Praes and now the appointed chancellor of the confederation that'd emerged from that empire's ashes, would have been noticeable in any crowd. Cordelia was more inclined to men than women and generally inclined to despise this woman in particular, but she would not deny she was one of the most beautiful people she'd ever seen.

The other was not a great beauty, but she was the Barrow Sword's promised fulfilled: Adanna of Smyrna, the Blessed Artificer, was running along side the once-empress.

It was instinct when Cordelia retreated deeper towards the ealamal, into the tent where she had restlessly sat before taking up the sword. An attempt to reassert control in the face of the unexpected, to hold the rod that commanded the dead angel in her hands. It was Brother Simon who introduced Chancellor Alaya when she arrived, though the Blessed Artificer burst in without waiting for the same.

"Princess Cordelia," Lady Adanna said. "How is the weapon?"

Cordelia only knew so much about the technicalities of the ealamal, besides the fact that it had been filled to the very brim and remained able to be commanded. She saw no need to admit that, however.

"You may have a look yourself," she suggested, "so long as you do not attempt to affect it."

"I wouldn't, princess," Lady Adanna assured her, perhaps a tad condescendingly.

Cordelia wondered if the other woman would have dared while she was still First Prince, then set aside the thought as unworthy of either the women it involved. More burning still was Chancellor Alaya's sympathetic gaze when the Blessed Artificer wandered off to do as suggested. The Soninke did not go as far as saying 'Named, huh' as if commonly mourning, but the cocked eyebrow had much the same implication.

"Princess Cordelia," Chancellor Alaya greeted her instead.

"Chancellor Alaya," Cordelia politely greeted the woman who'd tried to have her assassinated on twenty-nine separate occasions.

Thirty, if you counted the poison in her favourite fish soup and the lemon water as different attempts.

"May I take a seat?" the other woman smiled. "I'm afraid I will be of little use out there."

The fair-haired princess conceded with a nod and Alaya claimed a chair with sinuous grace that seemed almost absurd when paired with the rickety wooden furniture. Like a pearl tossed into offal. Simon looked askance at Cordelia, who discreetly shook her head back. The lay brother left the tent.

"I expect you have little more news of the fighting in the city than we do," Cordelia leadingly said.

"My mages believed the Dead King to have perished," Chancellor Alaya replied, "but there is some debate as to what seized control of the dead after."

"Some sort of ancient dragon god, if my sources are to be believed," she said.

The former empress took that with the unflinching aplomb of someone who'd ruled over the Wasteland for many years.

"Unfortunate," Chancellor Alaya noted. "Two of my finest mages were looking into a way to undo the Dead King's mastery over death, however, and though they did not succeed it seems they have learned something that might be of import."

"And that would be?"

"If Lady Nahiza and her assistant are correct, then this... draconic usurper only commands the dead in Keter for now," the dark-skinned chancellor told her. "Its mastery grows by the moment, and in time it will command them all, but the Dead King's reins were as a great kingdom and it yet holds only this very city."

Cordelia's fingers tightened around the ivory baton she held in her lap.

"Would you," she said with forced calm, "have any notion of how quickly that mastery will spread?"

It was a polite, dispassionate way to ask how long the Principate had before some evil god mastered the dead destroying it and *ate everything alive*. Cordelia did not know whether or not this risen dragon would be as much a terror as the Dead King had been, but in truth it hardly mattered. So long as the dead did not collapse into warband, then Procer was buried and the rest of Calernia with it. Even if the Principate was not made into a great army of undead, the strange powers the dragon god lent to the dead seemed just as fearful. It was still defeat, the end of it all.

"My experts are uncertain," Chancellor Alaya admitted. "It could be an hour, a day or a week. They cannot tell if the dead in Keter were usurped because of proximity or ease of spread."

Which tells me nothing, Cordelia thought, even as she felt the wards shiver. She rose to her feet, marching past her guest with lack of manners that sat ill even at the end of the world to peek outside. The golden hue in the air was gone and the vultures were swarming. The wall seemed on the edge of falling, even with the desperate efforts of the soldiers and the Gigantes. Feigning calm, Cordelia returned to her seat across from the woman who had once been called Malicia.

"A ward collapsed," the chancellor mildly said.

"One of the boundaries," Cordelia said, then added in a moment of harsh honesty, "and the most important. Now the vultures will begin devouring men."

"It is a matter of time until the defences break, then," Chancellor Alaya noted.

Cordelia wondered if the other woman's calm was as put on as hers. It must be, she thought. Not even Praesi could face their own death and Calernia's with such blitheness, surely.

"A quarter hour, perhaps as much as half," she forced herself to reply.

And under the dark-eyed woman's unblinking gaze, she set down the ivory baton on the table. Malicia – and that name was more honest than the others, for deep down Cordelia still thought of her as that – stared at it for a long moment but did not ask a question. No doubt the Eyes of the Empire had told her exactly what the artefact commanded the ealamal looked like. They matched gazes, neither allowing emotion to reach their faces. To Cordelia's faint surprise, it was the once-empress that looked away first.

"I do understand, you know," Alaya quietly said. "The comfort of holding it in your hand."

Cordelia's face tightened.

"Holding what?" she asked.

The other woman considered that, for a moment.

"Your fate," Alaya finally said. "Made simple and savage, perhaps, but still your fate."

She faintly smiled.

"I knew it was making it all crooked, when I sought the Sahelian gate-maker," the once-empress confessed. "That I was breaking faith with Amadeus, with the tale we told ourselves of a world where the two of us were enough to win."

"So why did you?" Cordelia quietly asked.

"I ask myself that question every day," Alaya of Satus said, sounding tired. "And the answer changes. I have so many reasons, so many excuses, but in the end I suspect there is a single truth buried beneath them. Like a corpse in a grave."

The blue-eyed princess did not interrupt, waiting patiently as she watched the other woman's face.

"I didn't believe we could win," Alaya said. "Not truly, not the way he did. I believe we might have gains, that we might manage our defeats, but I never thought that if we took on the world it would end in anything but tears."

Cordelia, who had spent years and a fortune in silver learning all she could of the Dread Empress of Praes, knew enough about what had brought the dark-skinned beauty to the Tower to feel a sliver of pity. But no more than that, for being handed tragedy was never an excuse for handing it to others. Silence hung above their heads like a waiting sword, growing thicker even as the distant sounds of battle closed in.

"They might win," Cordelia said. "There are Named and armies yet fighting. They might win and slay this... dragon god."

"They might," Alaya agreed, "or the Dead King's last revenge might yet devour all of Calernia. There is no way to tell."

The screams and the clash of steel were so close they might have been mere feet away from the tent. It meant, Cordelia knew, that there was only one barricade left. If even that. All else had fallen. She swallowed thickly, fingers so tight around the baton that her bloodless knuckles matched the ivory's paleness. And it was all coming apart, all coming to an end, and Cordelia just felt so fucking tired.

"Is it too much to ask," she asked Alaya, "that we be allowed to face the end of the world without a mask on?"

The Soninke beauty looked as if she'd been slapped.

"Sometimes," Chancellor Alaya said, "the mask is all you have left."

And Cordelia understood that, she truly did, but then...

"I just want," she murmured, "to be able to weep honest tears before I die. Only once."

"We might not die," Alaya said, then her face tightened. "Well, perhaps not you. I do not believe your ealamal will spare the likes of me."

"I don't know if it will spare anyone," Cordelia admitted. "Or even how far it will reach. It is a blind sword to swing, one that save half the world or kill it. *I cannot know before I swing it.*"

"And the world," Alaya smiled, "it's yours to save?"

"I am a Hasenbach," Cordelia simply said. "I have a duty."

And she would not compromise on that, not even in the face of the end times. A scream sounded, then the sound of flesh being ripped into. It must be right outside the tent to be heard so clearly, she knew. There were no lines of defence left. She reached for the ivory rod. It was not a complicated sequence to trigger the ealamal's release, just one impossible to reach by accident. Cordelia rotated the baton's sculpted lionhead and extended the length, beginning the works and reaching all but the very last. All it would take, now, was to snap it closed.

"I think it might be the pride of the young to demand hard truths even at the end," Alaya of Satus said, breaking the silence, "but I strive to be the sort of woman who settles all her debts."

And there was, they both knew, a kingdom's worth of corpses due between them.

"So I will tell you this," the dark-skinned woman murmured, "though I would rather not speak it, or even think it."

The once-empress smiled, and it was the most heartbreakingly sad thing Cordelia Hasenbach had ever seen.

"I see my death now," Alaya said, "how I will end, and I regret it."

Her fingers closed into fists.

"I wish I had trusted him," Dread Empress Malicia said. "It would have been a better end, the two of us against the world."

And Cordelia knew what she meant, down to the marrow of her bone. Because she knew trust as well, remembered sitting with a woman she'd once hated in the heart of city that should have been a horror but she had found instead to be a wonder. She remembered looking at Catherine Foundling and seeing underneath the warlord the girl who just wanted to help people who'd helped her. Who wanted to make a fairer, kinder world for orcs and goblins and all the lost that'd carried her to the throne. The realization that she was not facing a plague made woman but a dragon of the old tales, fearsome and vicious in defending her hoard but not genuinely *evil*.

Cordelia wanted to see the city they might make together and the world around it.

But in the end, she thought, what did want matter? Like the three cousins of the tale, she was fighting Death – whether it wore the Dead King's face or some other horror's as a mask mattered little. It was the same spring, the same inevitability. Cordelia had hoped that the sword and helm would be enough to get her through the horror, but now she had to face the truth. They were losing, lost, and moments away from even the ealamal being in the enemy's hand. Evil had won the last laugh.

The best she could hope was for her iron to stick in the Enemy's throat.

A ghoul tore into the tent flap, ripping it up and swallowing a chunk, only for a pair of skeleton to burst past it. Chancellor Alaya drew a knife, rising to her feet, but Cordelia's hands were on the baton. Until she recalled her last gift, and her fingers reached for the parchment against her breast. On the third time they closed, and as the fair-haired princess took up the wisp of parchment she unfolded it to find her cousin's words. Guidance, she prayed, or a secret to pass through the dark. Her cousin's death made into one last blade pointed at the enemy. Instead, what she found was a single sentence hastily scrawled.

No matter where, no matter when, Agnes wrote, I will always bet on Cordelia Hasenbach.

She reared back, as if struck, even as dead poured screaming into the tent. Too many to defeat, too many to hold the ealamal against even with Named. But all she could think of was the tears in Agnes' eyes on that cold day where the soldiers had brought her to Rhenia, after her mother's death. How lost she'd looked, how she'd burst out weeping when Cordelia pulled her close. A bet, huh. Trust from beyond the grave. And here Cordelia had been, making pride out of something she'd dared to call duty. The shame burned at her. The tent began to fall, pegs falling as the dead charged, and Cordelia Hasenbach took the ivory baton in hand. Cordelia had wanted to see the world the two of them might make.

But she was, she found, willing to die for it too.

With a scream, Cordelia Hasenbach broke the ivory baton as she made a bet of her own.

—

The Witch of the Woods stood alone on a plain of glass as the drakon turned and she slowly lowered her hood.

Antigone had never borne a surname, for the only man she might have called a father did not have one. Humans sometimes took a husband's or a wife's, she knew, but though she cared for Hanno they had never wed or cared to and so her name remained as it was, both beginning and end. She liked it better that way, in truth, for it was not just a word: it was a gift. She did not remember who she had been before Kreios found her, and so all that she was had begun with the name he gave her. *Antigone*. After the Titan he'd held higher in his esteem than any other, dead long before mankind's age began.

She too, her father had once told her, had once stood alone.

The Titans had been given a choice once, after the end of the Long War where they triumphed over the drakoi. The last of them debated whether to seek old glories, the undoing of their losses, or to instead offer a hand to the lesser peoples that had come to be as they fought their great struggle. Seven, she'd been told as a child, had come to decide to clap their lessers – children, they called them – in chains and put them to work until glories of the Gigantes could be restored. Only one had refused, and Antigone instead went west to found eighteen cities that'd outlast all the rest.

Yet when the price of hubris, of trying to unmake the costs paid to Creation for victory, had come calling it was not the seven that perished. Only the Riddle-Maker remained, the last of the

Titans, forever shamed that instead of bringing back the lost his great work had instead killed all of them save for him. And even he was broken, lessened. It was why Antigone had never once thought today that she could simply wait out the storm, that if she stood alone long enough her father would make all the trouble go away. Kreios' divinity had been made fragile, finite.

And he had spent it piece by piece since he came to Keter, matching the Dead King blow for blow. Given himself away to save the lives of the children he had fought to put in chains, putting out a star to keep fireflies alight. He had begun with a great work and hardly ceased since, holding nothing back once the Dead King revealed that he had stolen the corpses of two Titans fallen in the Long War. Fighting two of his old comrades come back undead would bring him to the brink, she knew. However lessened and incomplete they were still Titans.

There would be no god standing at the end, no matter who the victor, and so it was in Antigone's hands.

She missed the painted clay mask, the first face the kind giants of Hemera had given her as a girl. Yet even without its protection the Witch of the Woods barely even felt the wind against her skin, her body a stranger to itself. It had a price, to slay even the shadow of a drakon. It was the monster of an age long past, meant to be fought by folk that loomed too tall for even the last gasps of the Age of Wonders. But Antigone had stood in great shadows all her life, known only boots too large for her to fill ever since she first heard the song of Creation. Ever since she was a girl she'd fought to be more, to be complete, and fallen short.

She was the Witch of the Woods, belonging neither to the airy spires of the Gigantes or the crowded cities of mankind. Her home was in the in-between, the antechamber of greatness. Even her Name only allowed her to be a shadow of what Titans had once been, of what Gigantes aspired to be. Antigone, eyes blinking into the too-bright light of the hall, looked upon the drakon that screamed out unending rage. Warped Creation around it simply by existing. Only it wasn't truly a drakon, was it? Not yet, anyway.

"I am a shadow," Antigone said, "but you are one as well. Shall we see which runs deeper?"

The weight of the awakening god was turned on her, her power rising to fight as the air itself began to eat her, but it didn't matter. The body was just a shell, eyes to see. She had already put all of herself in her mask, her face, and the Burglar had delivered it onto the beast. It had sunk deep, as deep as it would, and coated in the Dead King's finest trick it remained whole.

As did Antigone's soul within it.

"Gather," she whispered.

Only it was not moonlight and the power of the land she called to her this time, but blood and sinew and bone. The red writ of the drakon.

"Cradle."

With open hands she brought all she had gathered into her grasp, giving a reverence unearned. But it came into her embrace, joined with her, as the magics she had learned did. Closed against her she held the wriggling essence of the dead god, trying to slip her grasp.

"Sing."

To be one with the world, to see the manifold paths of consequence: the stone that became the avalanche, the droplet that became the tide. It had been a pure thing, all that Antigone aspired to be. It had let her see what the Gigantes saw, for the barest of moments, and wield the greatest of their works as her own. Only it was not her father's song she sang today, the lessons she loved. Instead she sang the red and the hunger, the doom-made-intellect that was the drakon. And in that perfect moment she understood it, as perfectly as she was allowed to understand Creation.

And so she was a god, a circle full and complete, the crowned essence of the act to eat.

"It was mine," Antigone smiled, and closed her eyes.

And even as her body fell apart, she took her first and last act as a god: she ate herself, until nothing was left.

Not even a shadow.

—

In the ashes of a broken city, Kreios Maker-of-Riddles fell to his knees and wept, for as the last of what he had been passed he had felt his only daughter die.

ruduen

Wow... Just... Wow. The threats are dealt with, but the world will feel the cost of it all.

There's only one threat that's left. All that's left is for those last pieces to fall into place. With or without death coming, it's the end of the tale – and it's time to see just how well she handles being on that side of the story.

Rabblrouser

Man, all the Names I wanted to learn more about are dying. This chapter really kicking me in my feels.

Sir Nil

You all did Good.

Gunslinger

I'm crying. What a moment of character development from Cordelia. Agnes your genius. And holy hell Antigone's last stand. Perfection

caoimhinh

I just now realized why this last group of Interludes is called Legends.

It's because the lines between Chosen and Villains have blurred, and they are something else now. They are all here doing good, all making hard choices in the face of death, doom, and despair. They all make their last stand.

So they are something else. Something greater, and less colored by the politics and tags usually associated with their respective callings.

Here they are all Damned, fighting in a hell of a war, seizing their own fate in their hands, and putting their own madness against the odds of doing the impossible.

Here they are all Heroes, fighting and sacrificing themselves to save the world.

*Here they are all **Legends**.*

Clayton

Holy crap, what a chapter. This was so good, I'm absolutely speechless.

Darkening

Man, the gigantes went all in on this. I doubt the dead broke through to Cordelia without the spellsingers spending all their power and burning themselves out, Kreios spent his godhood to put down the titan corpses and fight off the dead king, and now Antigone is dead. Really putting the coffin nails in for the Age

of Wonder. This is about as ruinous a victory as I've ever seen. I'm not sure what's left to keep the rats from coming south and eating everyone after this battle, that might be an issue. Kinda wish we'd seen more of the drow, we barely saw them mentioned at all after Rumena broke the gate.

Sir Nil

After both DK and Drakon lost control of the undead, I bet the Drow over the Rats any day, especially since they won't be specifically countered for using Night.

KiltedBastich

Yeah, it's been established that the Drow look at the Ratling invasions as an asset. A free moving buffet of Night to harvest, that returns of its own volition? That attacks nearly mindlessly, with no real tactics, and vast numbers? Just about perfect. They can gleefully get their murder on, and the rest of Calernia will be cheering them on.

mavant

I dunno, the one Horned Lord we encountered seemed like a plausible match for the Ten Generals.

Joe Mama

One, or even a few of them, yeah. All ten (well, two are dead, iirc, so eight), with a pseudo-god on their side? Probably not

[Adrian V](#)

Yeah, plus it was undead so it was actually weaker than one alive, plus out of the five named i think it was the weakest? I know at least 1 that when it was mentioned Cat was really glad it wasn't the one they were facing

Someperson

The *first* horned lord would probably be a tricky match for even the drow's finest, yes.

But what a prize of Night, should they win...

I wouldn't bet on the *second* horned lord winning.

nipi

The drow are in more need than ever and the rats shall become night

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Well, Sve Noc is Whole, the Chain is an ever replenished feast of Night...

Tenthyr

Arthur learning to refuse the temptation accepting the Pit.

Cordelia learning to trust in a better world.

Antigone learning what it means to be named after her namesake, heartbreakingly.

And what's even left, for Yara to play? Not much, I would gamble. She thinks she'll just start again. I suspect she'll find a Fetter on her wrist.

Shin_Splinters

I know we've all been theorizing who would wear the other fetter, and we still can't be quite sure... But there's only one person in that spire who isn't named, meaning the Intercessor is half blind to her, and she's currently down in a narrative sense and holding one of the fetters. So I'd bet on Akua being the one to actually chain Yara, while Cat is holding the other. Not sure if Cat will end up wearing it, but basically all of her friends who came to Keter are still alive, so the narrative may demand a greatwtr sacrifice from her.

[GoodGirlJW](#)

I've just been waiting for the Chain of Hunger to show up during all of this, ever since the siege started. Somehow lured in to screw everyone over at the last moment. Maybe the Bard will do so, though at this point, I doubt it.

They'll more likely be the enemy in whatever comes after Practical Guide to Evil, if it's in the same setting. I assume that such a sequel will be based in Cardinal, and I am here for it. ♥

Darkening

Nah, EE already posted the first few chapters of their next project a while back. It's some underground world with like, renaissance level tech and people making contracts with gods for magic powers and stuff. It looked pretty interesting.

[GoodGirlJW](#)

Oh... Well, I'm disappointed that we won't get a series set after Practical Guide, but I look forward to more by this great author at least.

[Rey_d`Tutto](#)

<https://palelights613694448.wordpress.com/2021/02/25/chapter-1>

alexjmscott

There's nothing to stop the author coming back to the setting a few projects down the line, even if he's taking a break from it with the immediately-next one.

The Chain don't really strike me as (normally) having much strategic awareness of what's going on in the rest of Calernia, and/or the inclination/ability to take advantage of the distraction with a major assault. That probably gives whatever remains of the Grand Alliance a few seasons at least to recover and rebuild before they need to face the Rats, more likely years or even decades. And from a writing point of view, that changeover interval gives a good opportunity for a change of viewpoint protagonist, should the author decide that the Warden's generation have earned their retirement!

[GoodGirlJW](#)

Yeah! Just fell in love with this setting and these characters even though I only found this web serial like a week or two ago, and I don't want to leave it any time soon.

Tristan Dixon

I have loved every chapter of Book 7, and the Occidental arc in particular. But this chapter has to be my favorite. The contrasts between regret and conviction are breathtaking and amazing to read. First, Alaya's words about her motivation, the rift with Amadeus, and her final confession; contrasted with Cordelia's choice to believe she could win, Agnes' final words, and her ultimate choice to shatter the control device. Then, Antigone's fulfillment of her potential by using Kreios' lessons to become a god and then eat herself; contrasted with the too little too late actions of Kreios in the past and his despair at feeling her die. And over everything, the sense that the last few legends that exist on Calernia are being crushed, but that they have to be if the continent is to move forward. And on a personal level, I grinned so hard it hurt the first time Agnes used that line after Cordelia caught Hanno's coin, and I nearly cackled aloud when I read it again here. Plus, I've always loved Arthur, and seeing him really come into his own is always the most awesome of sauce.



[Tom](#)

For the curious, Agnes's original line and context and source:

> "It does not matter," the Augur said, "if on the other side stand kings and monsters and all the gods that stride this earth. It does not matter if the odds are paltry and the signs scream of defeat with every silent voice."

> Blue eyes and a warm embrace. Of course you'll live with us now. You are family. You always will be. This, this she would not forget until that final venture beyond where she was meant to go.

> "I will," Agnes said, "always, always bet on Cordelia Hasenbach."

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/09/04/interlude-and-yet-we-stand/>

Peter Emuss

> "until that final venture beyond where she was meant to go."

Her manner of death prophesied that far back, both in and out of story. Bravo EE. Bravo.

Liliet

Something in between a plan and a prophecy...

;~;

Damian Lucius Black

No matter where, no matter when, Agnes wrote, I will always Boost A Practical Guide To Evil

<https://topwebfiction.com/listings/a-practical-guide-to-evil/>

Mirror Night

Honestly EE kinda unfair that all Cat's Friends get to live while all Hanno's Friends die. All he has got left is the healer at this point that we have actually seen him bond with. I suppose they went out on their own terms but still.

Sure Hakram is crippled but 1,000,000 gold Orc will be built back even better. But Viv is going to be Queen, Masego got revenge on DK/godhead, Indrani got to be Ranger and what Cat is going to lose Akua. I mean I suppose that might slap for Catkua fans but since I never liked it that has like zero impact on me.

'Ladi Williams

Why are humans never happy until they compare one thing with another?

What makes Hanno cats equal or rival that you decided to pick and compare him with her?

Using this logic of yours we can nitpick all we want bcos we can say why did the lordlings survive but Amadeus did not?

Enjoy the stoey and stop looking for shit to be disappointed about

[Liliet](#)

Because, as is well known, only relentless positivity is allowed in this comment section?

'Ladi Williams

Lol. Well no, but nitpicking is really really annoying 😂

Mirror Night

Not sure how it would be nitpicking.

All of Hanno's friend except one appear dead and it really depends on how much of a friend you want to count the Apostle as. All of Cat's friends appear alive at this point.

As for why I chose to compare them I would think that would be kinda obvious to anyone reading this story. Though I suppose I don't need any special reason to compare two characters. I think part of the fun of literary analysis is drawing interesting connections between characters.

Fair Point Lil, no body no death though I believe dear Champ had taken some significant injuries before she disappeared seems unlikely she walk those off.

'Ladi Williams

I was just coming off twitter when I replied that comment and I guess my anger at some idiots carried over.

I tend to not want to argue with long term readers bcos it's obvious you like the story asuch if not much ore than I do to still be here after all these years...long term readers being handles I see regularly in comments and recognise...

So...sorry? 😂

But as much as criticism is good for the author and should be encouraged, some just rub me the wrong way.

Mirror Night

Eh its fine I have heard worst on this site.
But I accept your apology and know how annoying twitter can get.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

YouTwitFace is a plague on humanity.

jamesc9

More or less of a plague, if a current purchase plan goes through?

Rynjin

Not really an excuse, since if you're willingly using Twitter, you're causing that toxicity in yourself.

'Ladi Williams

I don't even understand what this means.
Also, person I was tendering an apology to has accepted it so I don't get why you are being salty especially as you don't even have an horse in this race.

Anyways...peace and love. 🙌🥰

'Ladi Williams

A horse...😂🤔😏

[Rynjin](#)

It means that "I worked myself into a lather arguing with morons on Twitter" isn't a valid excuse for being a dick to someone else. Nothing is, really, but being pissed off at something that actually matters (bad day at work, your dog died, you had a fight with your girlfriend, whatever) is at least understandable.

When you're angry due to something self-inflicted (spending your time on Twitter), it's neither an excuse OR understandable when you're a dick somewhere else.

[Liliet](#)

We're talking about the gal who couldn't be hurt by the ghosts because they're not real while having no problem hitting them back.

When the intent of the summon was the exact reverse.

Raphaella and reality are on some very specific terms.

Damian Lucius Black

AUTHOR'S EDIT:

That's enough. Post the links if you want, there's no rule about it, but what you're doing is borderline harassment. Keep doing it and you'll be getting banned.

Josh Brooks

Toxic fandom in it's purest form.

[Liliet](#)

You're assuming Raph is dead, but have we seen the body?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Cat loathed her for causing Captain's death. For sure she's alive.

[Sugar Roll](#)

That's why they're the fucking Woe. Do you see any other band with a group name?

HAHIND

Maybe it even was an elaborate attempt by Catherine to lose as few of the Woe as possible, since the main engagement was against the Scourges, which are far less dangerous than the DK.

medailyfun

It just means the story of Woe is the one to survive against the odds

Spencer

I don't think their name invokes a happy story of survival.

Joe Mama

I mean, out of context sure, but when the Summer Queen named them it was that they bring Woe onto their enemies.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Plucky Underdog

[Hargabga](#)

Well, it's the fate of not being close to the protagonist. They should've known it's a webnovel and that Cat is a main character.

[Sugar Roll](#)

And heroes sacrificing themselves for the greater good is a known occupational hazard.

G .

I mean, this story is about making evil the right way, she took her father's steps and make them better and beyond, she deserves the Woe to live through it till the end.

Spencer

That's a big assumption given that we haven't seen the end of the Bard yet. I'm still waiting for more woe to befall the Woe. Probably starting with their leader.

Steve

The Bard is still breathing.

[GoodGirlJW](#)

Ah, yes, Catherine's friends, famous for still being alive. You have definitely recalled correctly all those chapters where they definitely didn't die tragically and horribly. And you are certainly not jumping to any conclusions about her friends here when the series isn't over.

This is a balanced and reasonable critique based on facts and logic that you have written. Definitely.

Darkening

Well, the bard is still alive, she was in a band with him so that counts right? 😊

ninegardens

Oh shit.

Ohhhh shit.

I mean... of everyone here, in some sense, Bard's betrayal of the white knight was the most personal. Sacrificing the other members of his band. Using him.

... and she DID just mention that he was one of the hardest people for her to turn aside.

.... Is Hanno going to be the one that brings her down. Not for justice, not for judgement, but because he himself truly believes that she is evil.

That... would feel pretty good.

ByVectron!

They aren't Cats "friends," they are her party of five, they have been her family for years (if not as long as she's been Named), and they are The Woe. Hanno has friends and sometime companions (except for Antigone,) but *nothing* compare to the weight of relationship between The Woe.

badatgames2911

OH YEAH SURE THE HERO GETS TO BE A GOD BEFORE MESAGO

jk i loved that and i called that she was gonna b eat the drakon with her gigantes magic. loved the 300 spell singers comin to help at the end of the world.

AGNES W0000 get bent bard.

Ishaq is still my fav non woe villain.

Arthur and Saipan have a great relationship. good to see Kalia do stuff, i hope she is still alive. Alya and Cordy was a great scene, i have enjoyed Alya a lot since she became Chancellor. No word on hakram/ vivi is worrying, was thinking Ranger would come out last sec to help finish the drakon but this was great too. I expect to see some stuff from the dwarf and drow side of things, especaially Rumena THE TOMB MAKER and Iva the LoSS. I want to see Iva leading a band of goblins with night powers to win the day. Only race we know of we havent seen at this point is the gods damned gnomes lol.

dadycoool

Ishaq is and has always been a delight. He won't get his name on the roles now, having failed his accepted task, but sometimes the trailblazer doesn't make it to his destination, overly wearied by the trail he's blazing. All that really matters is that he left footprints for others to follow.

Arthus and Saipan follow in the groove Amadeus and Weseka carved and Cat and Masego live in, the magic user and knight becoming acquainted because their parents/teachers were such close friends and forging an equal friendship on their own.

Mirror Night

I would say they are more the new Saint and Peregrine though will have to see what they plan to do long term. Its not clear the Mage is going to spend her time questing.

Snappy270

How ? The Mage doesn't seem to be much of a peregrine. She may have trained as a healer but she has transcended that and now cares about magic as a whole. Seems alot more like wekesa and mesago.

Arthur maybe good with swords but seems to care about doing an ideal like callow or saving someone. Saint only cared about fighting evil at all times, not because she was trying to achieve something only cause its evil.

Plus it's the mentoring. Black to cat to Arthur. Wekesa to mesago to saipan.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Arthur and Sapan are giving me more Indrani and Masego vibes (but fully platonic) with one wandering around and the other serving as a home base and backup when it's needed/appropriate.

KiltedBastich

Er, Ishaq killed the Wolfhound, one of the Scourges, which means he very much did accomplish the required feat to be added to the Rolls, with a little bit of help from Sve Noc. It was a whole thing with him gaining Night. Did you miss it?

'Ladi Williams

I think the slew of awesome chapters since then has mostly made a lot of people forget the tiny stuff...but yeah he did get his deed and that's when he was offered and gleefully accepted night.

dadycool

I was under the impression that they told him to kill the Dead King himself, not just a Scourge. I remember how big a deal it was that Cat's chosen successor in the T&T was getting the Night powerup.

[fox5s](#)

That's what they wanted to set it to initially. However, that was deemed by the leaders Levant to be too high a bar and a bad precedent of difficulty to set. It was scaled back to him getting one of the Scourges.

[fox5s](#)

Errr... correction. That was what the leaders of Levant wanted it set to. Cat and Hanno had them scale it down to one of the Scourges.

dadycoool

Okay. I remember Cat offering to negotiate down and Ishaq declined, saying something about how, as the first one, his Deed should be greatest. I could very well be misremembering or didn't catch the entire thing.

Cpt. Obvious

You are correct about Cat wanting to negotiate for a easier goal, but that was after they had already been convinced to back it down to killing a scourge.

The thing is that in order to be added to the Rolls you have to perform a noteworthy deed. For a long time only Heroes had their names added, and just about any heroic deed was accepted. When they were forced to accept that any named could apply to have their name added even if they were villains the immediate reaction was to require a deed so hard it was most likely impossible. However when they were told that if that was the new standard then there would probably never be any more names added to the Rolls they went with killing a scourge.

Cat argued that this was also a ridiculously high risk deed. Not only were they hard to destroy, but there was also a very limited number of them.

Ishaq on the other hand thought it was a good choice. It would set the bar higher for everyone to come. No longer would getting a Hero name be enough to have your name added to the Rolls but you would have to back it up with a deed that is truly noteworthy. This would also increase the honor that having having your name added meant. Now just having your name in the Rolls weren't enough. There would also be a question if it was added after or before Ishaq. And if it was before just what was the deed that got the name added. If it was after Ishaq then it would be a given that the deed was something truly special. So not only would he be the first Villain to be added for a very long time (Some of the founders didn't really seem all that Heroic...) but he's name would be known for raising the standard. And that would satisfy his villainous need to get one up on the keepers of the Rolls.

Abaddon130

Bit of a correction here. Up until now no was required to be added to the roles. Everybody in

Levant that came into a Heroic name was automatically added. You could be either Blood, Bestowed, or both(Called something like Chosen in Bestowal and Blood). When the leaders of Levant agreed to allow Villainous names to be added to the Rolls a stipulation was added. Now, instead of all Heroic named automatically being added to the list and Villains automatically excluded, anyone with a Name can't be added to the Rolls with the caveat that you had to perform a worthy deed that was chosen by the leaders of the Blood. So, while a significant portion, potentially 100%, of those that had been added up until now probably performed at least one deed that would be considered worthy of being added, there was no guarantee. I don't remember which one of the blood had the thought, but I distinctly remember it being noted that this new method would keep the people from being added just because they were Named. I'm pretty sure they also noted that this would be a significant boon to the rulers of Levant. Being able to, either send names to take care of an issue that would otherwise be quite a headache, or in rare cases give a task that would be extremely difficult to complete in order to keep certain people from being added to the Rolls.

So I agree that the distinction of being added pre or post Ishaq will probably be a big distinction from now on, but there won't necessarily be deeds from the past to compare it to.

Liliet

He had succeeded in his task though

nipi

He already got his deed and being Deathless he might still be around. We have seen him be killed before. Not sure how well he would fare against being absorbed though.

beleester

I think the knight and wizard being friends is pretty common because of the "adventuring party" setup that most bands fall into – we've seen it in multiple places, like the Lone Swordsman's original band. But Hierophant seems to have started a tradition of the wizard being a master of deadpan humor.

Cpt. Obvious

Earlier in the story I wrote a comment about how the then Squire and Apprentice seemed to echo a theme. We know that Amadeus and Wekesa first met and became friends when they were Squire and Apprentice respectively. Then Cat, under tutelage of Amadeus, met and befriended Masego, foster son to Wekesa. And again it was as Squire and Apprentice.

Just to make it even more interesting Amadeus and Wekesa had fostered friendships with several other villains forming a group of five that lasted for many years. Something that was generally considered almost impossible. And to this core group of named they also tied several non named friends who were sworn to the Gods below. They got so well known the group got named as the Calamities.

Cat and Masego echoed that, and even got named as the Woe.

So will Arthur and Sapan copy their "parents" and form a group that echo the Calamities and the Woe?

After the 6'th book I thought so, but now I'm not sure. Is the Errant part of Arthur's name going to keep him from being a part of a fixed group? If his name drives him to be the lone defender it might take some work to get a group of five to work well.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Don't want Gnomes. Much Bad. Much.

Isi Arnott-Campbell
dadycoool

Wow. EE continues to show us how adept they are at plucking at our heartstrings like Yara with her lute. Most stories have characters that only really exist as characters, but EE has given life to the individuals in this world. It's easy to see Named and Stories as nothing but Tropes, but they're so much more than that and chapters like this really highlight that. Well done, you made my heart break for someone whose Extra Chapter I haven't even read yet.

Juff

Typo Thread:

left the wards? > left of the wards?
that longer had > that number had
horsemen died > horsemen who died
her strode > he strode
the got the > the
Myrmidon guts > Myrmidon's guts
straight angle (strange angle?)

broke palisade > broken palisade
allow to > allow it to
those that had > those had
sight your > sight into your
under swarm > under swarms
another rippled > another ripple
comradery > camaraderie
some hope > some hoped
roared to life > roaring to life
spikes returned > spikes
paw the > paw, but the
glimpse or > glimpse of
monster at (monster ate? monster tore at?)
saw Emerald > saw an Emerald
open grounds (repeated)
colours The > colours. The
disappeared into > disappear into
a no and > a nod and
warband, > warbands,
that save > that might save
until glories > until the glories

Mirror Night

I think things would have flowed better if we had this occur before the final fight against DK so we could go direct from DK to Bard. Maybe add more doubt to what is going on with the Undead so its unclear if they won or not. But this chapter kinda kills the flow even if it is on its own well written.

I also think a lot of these characters needed more characterization before hand. Cause like all the Hanno, Antigone, Krieos and Gigantes stuff is in like Extra Chapters. Arthur kinda disappeared after the Praes arc and his connection to Tariq was never that strong. Painted Knife had a cool band plot in the Free Cities and got taunted by Cat some? And as for the Burglar not sure we even knew her gender beforehand so kinda weird she is playing a major role here.

'Ladi Williams

It can't have happened before the dk fight bcos the Young King had to hand off his kingdom to the drakoi.
How else was the drakoi going to get its greedy hands on the reins of death without undermining the Young King?

Mirror Night

Yes that is why I said make it a bit more unclear on if DK is actually dead in this chapter and then you can switch order. Have the story go Legends V, DK Final Fight, and Bard Resolution.

Because IMO, this chapter while good and poignant and tragic is kinda a momentum killer. With my other issue being some of these characters are a bit light on the characterization front for this final deaths and stands to hit as hard as possible.

Snappy270

But this is fighting the bard. This is one of her last plays before finally confronting cat for the last time. But agnes comes in the right moment to stop that story.

Plus alot of stories go like this the main villan is dead but a last plan to destroy everything gets set off. In terms of momentum this is in keeping with most stories.

There just an extra act know the end where the hidden boss gets a go. Like many stories.

Crash

Agnes, yet again: Fuck you, Bard.

You love to see it!

[Liliet](#)

What momentum is there left to have?

Yara lost. This is her loss. There's no more momentum because there's no more confrontation. This IS the climax. This is it.

Snappy270

hell no Yara isnt dealt with there is another climax with her.

ninegardens

I mean... maybe.

The Ealamalelelmalm was kind of the last card we saw up Yara's sleeve. She MIGHT have something, but there just aren't many remaining plot threads for her to pull on.

I'll admit, I am a little confused/worried by the fact that she was up in the tower talking to Cat and co when she could have been down on the ground, screwing over Antigone, or pushing Cordelia harder. Which... honestly really should have worked if Yara had put her focus on it.

Like, that convo with Alaya could easily have been interrupted.

Which ummmm....

does lead to the disturbing possibility that there is something MORE damaging she can be doing in the tower? But I'm not sure what. Mostly I'm confused.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

She was trying to get Cat to become her successor at the last second, which could potentially have negated the need to annihilate Calernia. I guess? Who knows, honestly.

Calvin

And so ends the legacy of the Titans, the last of the old gods who roamed the earth. All hail the crows!

[Liliet](#)

People I predict are alive despite logic:

Cordelia

Kallia

Raphaela

[Liliet](#)

Whoops didn't mean to reply

Mirror Night

Cordelia: Sure I don't think EE is going to kill her likes her too much.

Kallia: One of the most esoteric Aspects around no idea how it works but yeah she seems alive.

Raphaela: Well no body is in her favor she wasn't in the best of shape when she activated her Domain. Could go either way.

Crash

She's a Hero. If you didn't see them die, assume they're alive.

The Cliff is the real trick or perspective.

Agent J

Kallia better not be dead. We lost Vagrant Spear and Silver Huntress. Give me Kallia, EE, you miserly death merchant. You even slew the Wolf Mother!

I won't complain about Antigone though. She went out with fireworks, I loved it. Pulled a Warlock and killed herself with Divinity. Except, because she's better than the Warlock in every way, instead of Dooming a City, she Saved a

Continent.
Yes. Fucking. Queen.

Liliet

I especially love the part where she's like "well Hanno and I never bothered to get married"

queen indeed

caoimhinh

If I recall correctly, the last time the issue of whether Hanno and Antigone had something was discussed, it was from Hanno's POV in one of the Winter Extra Chapters, when Repentant Magister teases him saying someone should tell Antigone that all she has to do is ask to get in bed with Hanno, to which Hanno mentally responds that it wasn't the first time others had talked about it, but that he and Antigone don't have anything going on. He even confidently states this because the body sign language that they often communicate in is a language without lies.

I always found that funny, because my first reaction was "Just because she is not telling you something doesn't mean that she is lying", and turns out I was right, Antigone cared for Hanno, but apparently never confessed her feelings.

That, or they got together afterward. I do seem to recall that Hanno seemed to be sharing a house with Antigone back when they went to Salia the first time...

alexjmscott

Hanno and Antigone did share a bed at one point, according to the bonus chapter "Stranger", and may have done so since, but they appear to have decided mutually that their closeness and affection did not need that distraction on any ongoing basis.

Liliet

No, he doesn't say "he and Antigone don't have anything going on". He says "he and Antigone know EXACTLY what they have going on" and goes on for an entire paragraph about how definite that is.

Hanno had a crush on Antigone that he kept down because she's ace, and Antigone was just thinking of him as her qp partner in the meantime. I love them.

bellacohl

"One: first, do good."

Not Good.

Do good. Do right by others, not by the Heaven's writ. Because it is the right thing to do.

Arthur's choice at the Tower, Hanno's at Keter. Cordelia.

God I love this series.

mavant

I interpreted this as a pointed contrast to the Hippocratic Oath rather than about good versus Good. A statement on the value of active good works versus merely avoiding bad ones.

[Liliet](#)

It's multiple things ♥

ninegardens

>>No matter where, no matter when, Agnes wrote, I will always bet on Cordelia Hasenbach.

I called it! I fucking called it.

Agnes Hasenbach, you glorious moonloop. You are without a doubt, the greatest seer.

And once again, you have saved us all.

Also: I kind of love Witch of the Wilds being the one to end the Drakon. They've been hyping up her power level for like... 5 books now, but she's always been the hero of another story and... feels like she's got to do that again now. Feels appropriate.

badatgames2911

Some times i still think of her as Wich of the Wilds too. I also think Wayward Bard sometimes bc they called her that when she was in Lone Swordsmans band. I like it when Named are called other things, makes me think its like a cool alternate skinn. Literally for Wayward Bard!

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I think of her as the Witch of the Wilds because I used to play a lot of Dragon Age: Origins, which has some people called that in it.

[Hargabga](#)

I actually find what Antigone did a contrast to what Warlock did in his final moment.

"He reached out for it then, what they'd shown him. The barest glimpse of the godhead, but oh so gloriously full.

"Reflect," he whispered.

For a moment, for an eternity, Wekesa was unto a god.

He snapped his fingers and the world broke."

dadycoool

Selfishness v selflessness. Sacrificing others for your own gain v sacrificing yourself for others' benefit. He broke the world, she made it whole.

Mirror Night

I mean he did it to save Masego. I am not sure you can describe what he did as Selfish. I suppose you can in the sense that he was doing it to save a single person versus the world. But I don't think its fair to describe Weseka doing that as being selfish.

dadycoool

I'm realizing that I really should go back and actually reread everything. I'm dreading the month it'll take, but clearly I haven't gotten everything I should out of it and parts of it, big parts, are fading from my memory.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

I'm waiting on the finale before my fourth re-read

Asterix

EE's SO must be smug as heck:.when EE says "here comes the climax", he really, really means it.

Also:

"No matter where, no matter when I will always bet on Cordelia Hasenbach.

P.S. Get bent, Yara of Nowhere. I hope you live forever.

Sincerely,

Agnes Hasenbach"

Checkov's Armory FTW

Mary Gentle

When they tell that story of the Cousins here, their name is the Three Little Pigs, and the Death's name is Wolf . . .

(Sorry? Me? I'm not sorry!)

And – no Angel? No Angel! ☹

I've been waiting whole books for Chekov's Angel to be fired, and now you do this to us. Grump.

It took me a while to warm to the Barrow Sword, but now I just love him.

And yes, Alaya, you utter moron, you should have trusted Amadeus. Honestly, has it taken until the (near) end of the world for you to work that out?

Kind of a bitty chapter, which mostly leaves me grumbling. Because, no Angel. Dammit, I wanted to know what would happen when the Angel is fired off, and now we'll never know.

Spencer

Don't we know pretty well what the Angel does? It kills everyone that doesn't pass judgement. Which under the Bard would be everyone on the continent except 40 heros.

The angel was still a pretty damn important plot point, even if they avoided actually pulling the trigger.

Mary Gentle

It seems to me like there ought to be something else still hanging there. Though evidently there isn't.

Like it goes: we'll use the angel – we won't use the angel – but then the angel [something].

I have no idea what the [something] would be, but all the build up just to not use it... Poot.

Besides, Judgement has the day off. Wouldn't it have been end of the world cool to see what Yara would have done in their stead?

No?

Eh, maybe you're right.

Snappy270

well they did use the angel several times to defend the Salia. Since Judgement was cut off, it was just a large source of light. With Judgement connected but not active it

could be manipulated by the bard, which results in what 7/10ths of calernia dying including the dwarfs ? So ... it goes argue about the angel for a book. Use it cause we have too ... Oh no its a doomsday device again but we cant tell anyone, Agnes saves the day.

MoreBeer

We know exactly what Yara was planning to do in Judgment's place. It was spelled out for us. Kill everyone except an arbitrarily small number of people too small to survive for long, so that within a few years everyone dies, leading to the absolute end of all stories and her release from the eternal role of intercessor.

It was absolutely end of the world. No need to see it; i think that sort of story isn't the one we're reading. Just imagining it and seeing it deflected its fine for me!

Crash

I wanted a Kreios interlude but Not Like This. That's just fucking rude.):

(Was the liessen blonde sergeant Edgar? Wish)

Spencer

Poor Kreios. I wonder if he's mortal now, or if he'll be stuck for eternity with his grief and powerlessness.

Sinead

Perhaps he has one last song in him.

BargleNawdleZouss

Edgar was from Laure, IIRC. I just hope he made it off that bridge when Catherine led the assault into the city.

Still hoping Lt. Inger from The Arsenal made it through...

badatgames2911

Inb4 the sergent that used to tell cat stories when she served drinks in the rats nest shows up.

[onedollargum](#)

Antigone does her best carbuncle impression.

beleester

You know, I'm honestly not sure if Agnes's note was an actual prophetic nudge, or just trying to be encouraging no matter when Cordelia ended up needing advice.

GentCrowCruisin

I think the trick was to see when Cordelia would read the thing and then figuring out what to say to her at that moment.

ninegardens

Agnes: *Spends years trying to figure out what to do in the end despite oracle blockers.

Agnes: Fuckit, I got nothing

Agnes: Better write and encouraging note and trust my Cuzzy.

ninegardens

More seriously though, it might not have been prophecy OR "just an encouraging note". Agnes might have been leaning hard on the story fu and gone "Fuck it, an encouraging note from a dying oracle at the right time is probably enough story weight to sort this out, even if I have no idea what `this' is."

Daniel E

Dramas aside, I love the fact that over the last 2 chapters, the solution to a world-ending ancient evil has been 'om nom nom, delicious soul'.

BargleNawdleZouss

Hells of a chapter. Again!

1. Glad Ishaq made it and continuing to kick ass.
2. Chekhov's Ealamal...averted!
3. Arthur got a crowning moment of awesome and his first Aspect as Knight Errant, excellent.
4. I wondered if Cordelia and Alaya would ever have a face-to-face. Well done!
5. What's Malanza's status?
6. Next chapter: need updates on what the dwarves and drow are up to! I'm a bit sad that Rumena wasn't in on the Dead King's destruction.
7. If we get a nice long LOTR Return Of The King extended epilogue, I want to see how Sapan the Mage upends the Ashuran tier system, which always rubbed me the wrong way.

8. Awaiting Ranger Indrani's timely return to watch Masego's back while he achieves apotheosis.

9. Will Neshamah come back one final time?

10. Assuming #9 is NO, then who will hold the Fetters. I believe it will be for the Wandering Bard, with any of the following holding the leash:

- Catherine
- Akua
- Anaxares the Hierarch

11. At what point do the Gods of Above & Below stop The Game of the Gods and reboot the playing field?

SuitorShooter

The Fetters were built from the Crown of Autumn, an artifact forged specifically for Neshama twice over. Using them on someone else is probably a narrative no-no. Besides, it can't be Cat, she knows she's too important as both the Warden and founder of Cardinal to be taken off the board. I feel like Akua passed some kind of pivot where the Fetters **could** have been forced onto her but weren't, her taking them now doesn't feel right. And I can't see Anaxares ever using the Fetters, ever accepting slavery be it as slave or master.

[Adrian_V](#)

Mmmmm i really wonder what the dwarves and their Herald have to be dealing with since they didn't show up in epic fashion from below the earth, seriously their part seemed to go a little too well compared to everything else.

Also i think i remember Erra confirmed that the ratlings came to be from the Drakons, something about blood? They confirmed it on discord and its on the WOE doc if i remember well, if so this whole thing with the drakon really puts in perspective some of what future generations will have to look out for against.

Also i wonder if the Emerald Swords late arrivals is because the Drakon managed to trick them and they just noticed they weren't hacking at it xD

PS:poor Kreios, he needs a hug, no seriously he needs one otherwise i think he may just finally snap from grief and become the next BIG terror at some point.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Kreios is Broken. He's got little Story-fu left at the End of the Age of Wonders.

[Adrian_V](#)

Is the broken ones that are the most dangerous, and he just knows too much, losing his god status may have just made him more dangerous if he snaps

SuitorShooter

An interesting Aspect for Arthur to pick up. *Wound*, he can always harm, but not necessarily kill. I wonder if he'd have gotten a different Aspect if they'd told him to kill the Drakon, not just wound it.

BargleNawdleZouss

Big Picture question: has there been an explanation, "on-stage" or off, of the win condition for The Game Of The Gods? Whether in one of the chapters, comments section, Reddit, Discord, or elsewhere? Given what Neshamah, Wekesa, and Masego researched, at what point do Above and Below agree that one side has won the current round, and it's time to wipe the slate clean and start a new Game?

Please post the appropriate link(s), if available. Thanks in advance!

ninegardens

So, here's my question: Do the gods above and below even exist?

Cause see like... we don't have any definitive proof. Yes yes, there's laws of creation, and story fu and all that. But like... we have living things in our world, and everyone said "Well, it must have been created by the gods", and then we discovered evolution.

I mean, okay, I guess we have Yara insisting that "there's a bunch of people 'upstairs' who are wondering what you are up to to heirarch", its just...

You've got Amadeus, who was always pretty angry to see "Half the world, turned into a prop for the glory of the other half." (he also claimed that he would never blame fate, and it was things PEOPLE did that mattered, so... his philosophy might possibly have not been entirely coherent on that point)

The two biggest villians in the story are those characters who shake their fists at the gods. For letting them be finite. For forcing them to be immortal. Whatever.

Nessie and Yara are driven by their anger at the gods, their desire to escape them....

But what if the the gods very existence is nothing but an idea. They aren't railing against actual beings, they're destroying the world in their anger against... well nothing. The closest we

get to seeing the gods is Kairo's death, with him seeing a vision of their applause as he dies. Which, you know... could have been the hallucination of a dying man seeing precisely what he hoped and expected.

Maybe the bet just can't end, for the simple reason that there never was a bet, or potentially even any bettors. I think that that's a bit of a weird reading of the story I've got here, but I also think the story so far has done a very good job of never really confirming the POINT of any of it (or even telling you clearly who bet which way.)

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Another point about this: the goblins are monotheistic. They construe Below as a singular, all-encompassing god, the Gobbler, from which all things came and to which all things shall return.

I personally like to think that the Gods do exist, but that their natures are essentially filtered through any relevant stories, having simply been one or two amorphous masses of divinity before making Arcadia (and if one, then eventually splitting under inadvertent fae influence), and only being refined further by Creation. Perhaps instead of growing bored of the fae's stagnant nature in the same way that mortals might grow bored, they instead started over because they can only know themselves through their own handiwork and were being stifled by Arcadia's on-rails nature.

WuseMajor

And next chapter starts with the Bard going "...Where's the Kaboom? There was supposed to be an earth-shattering Kaboom!"

WuseMajor

I'm hoping that Masego brings something into play that stops the Bard's last card from being played. Because, right now, all the cards we know about have been played.

The Dead King is Dead.

The Drakon is Dead.

The Angel's Baton is broken.

But Yara of Nowhere is still here, so she must have *something* left. And, I bet Cat could find it...if she knew 100% what Bard's true endgame was.

Which the Dead King figured out...but didn't tell anyone. Except Masego just ate his soul, so, if her true goal is anything other

than “just die already,” hopefully Masego will puzzle that out and mention it at the right time.

Pencilcrayons2

Absolutely stunning chapter. I have chills. I’m not ready for the end.

Letouriste

That...that was really something. Legends indeed. I’m at lost for words haha

Someperson

I’m a tad concerned that that one Revenant who Catherine saw briefly, the confused-looking and unarmored one who the Dead King apparently decided to hold back, **still** hasn’t turned up.

Chapter 68: Hallow; Hollow

“And though her schemes lay broken around her, the Intercessor only laughed and said: ‘When one defeats the inevitable, the word for it is not victory but delay.’”

– Extract from the ‘Parables of the Lost and Found’, disputed Firstborn religious text

Yara of Nowhere sat on the Dead King’s throne with legs crossed, smiling as I Saw from atop the spire the way the stories fell into place.

The Dead King’s last act of spite threatening to swallow us all, the desperate fighting below us to keep the drakon from waking. And intertwined with it, the story Yara of Nowhere wanted to cut out throats with: Cordelia and her ealamal. I couldn’t See Cordelia herself, she wasn’t Named, but everything happening around her was a strong enough trajectory I could just barely make her out – like tracing someone out of shadows. It’d be the same for the Bard, I figured. How fucked would we be, if Cordelia had taken up a Name that night in Salia and Yara had gotten an open invitation to be in her head? We might well already be dead if not for the Augur.

The stories raced, threading with each other into what I already knew was meant to be our noose. We got our miracles, the Barrow Sword and the Blessed Artificer and the Gigantes, but we’d gotten

them *too* early. And though I could See the drakon's end in the course of the Witch of the Woods – at a cost that had my heart clenching in pain for Hanno – it would be too late. The defence of the ealamal would first collapse, the shadow of Cordelia Hasenbach moving and then... light, blinding Light until there was nothing at all. A hint of Hanno living through it, but it would be as the Intercessor had said. He'd be one of half a hundred across all of Calernia, a continent slowly gasping out its death rattle.

A quarter-hour, I realized, would be all it took for the Intercessor to slaughter Calernia with: the span between the fall of the ealamal's defences and Antigone saving us all. How small a thing to kill a continent with.

Then the both of us went still, because the current shifted. One last hidden string, a single grain of sand left in the midst of the machinations of the Intercessor. The Augur, I realized. She'd left something of herself behind, something small. Couldn't be more than a sentence else it would be too much, too large. The Intercessor would have seen it, and perhaps I as well. Only neither of us had, because the Augur had died and given the last of herself into the hand of a woman without a Name. Like an arrow loosed in a dead angle, the words had flown unseen until they hit and now it was too late. The Light-to-be went dark.

From beyond the grave, Agnes Hasenbach took us all for a ride one last time.

And just like that, I thought, we'd won. I did not know if Cordelia was alive or anyone with her, but the ealamal was out of play. I saw no story where Named hands lit the bonfire meant to swallow us all. I breathed out shakily as below us the Witch of the Woods' last march began, watching the way the Intercessor's face tightened.

"You always did see a little too far for your own good," she said, "didn't you, Agnes?"

"Catherine?"

Hanno's voice was tinted with worry, but I did not turn. The Intercessor was still here and I did not dare look away from her sitting form. Not yet, even though she was beaten.

"We live," I said. "The ealamal sleeps. And I'm sorry, Hanno, but-"

"I know," the White Knight quietly cut through. "I can't get there in time to Save her."

"You get to keep Kreios," the Intercessor shrugged, "though there's nothing much left there. Your own doing, Catherine:

you've leaned so hard into the changing of the age all the relics are getting buried with its turn."

I breathed in, pulling on Night, but the Bard did not seem worried. She brushed back long fair hair, pawing at her side until she found her silver flask. Knowing that striking at her now would achieve nothing save giving her a way out, I instead wove myself eyes. The moment I saw through them I looked at Masego, who was kneeling by Akua's side. She was prone and her breathing heavy, but the calm on Hierophant's face brought out the same in me. He liked her enough that if she was at risk of dying from her wounds he'd be showing worry. And wounded she was, I found now that I took the time for a second look.

I could see where the Dead King's spell had hit her. It wasn't as obvious a killing stroke some of the others he'd used, but the edges of her right hand were warped and there was something about the skin... It was dead, I realized. Her entire arm was a cadaver's, every part of it dead. It hid beneath her armour, but I saw the faint stiffness creeping up the side neck. How much of her had been killed with that single stroke: half, a third? My fingers clenched. I was not sure even Light would be able to heal that, but at least she was still living. And the yellow strands of sorcery around Masego's hands seemed to be easing her breathing.

"Hierophant?" I called out, my sole flesh eye still on the Bard.

"There is no danger of death," he said. "She should be able to speak again soon."

I breathed in sharply. I'd not even realized she couldn't, so I took a third look even as other eyes saw Hanno walk up to my side with a grim face. Only my gaze strayed from Akua, as though I was worried there was something else I'd just Seen.

"You are forming a godhead," I evenly said.

He smiled.

"I have not yet digested all I gained from the Dead King," Hierophant said, "but when I have I expect my perspective will be... broadened."

And that'd be enough, we both knew. The godhead was just a trick of perspective, he'd once said, and even an old monster like the Intercessor agreed. He'd have the power and the understanding, and that'd be enough.

"So that's why you're still here," I softly said, matching the Bard's gaze.

She drank deep of her flask, grimacing after her first swallow. Something reeking of strong liquor and oranges reached my nostrils.

"It would have been cleaner if you let me do it through Cordelia," Yara of Nowhere said, voice rough from the drink. "One stroke, nobody suffers. But I've already told you: if you demand the hard way, it's what you'll get."

And I believed her, or at least believed *she* believed it, only I could see an angle she might use for – a whisper spread across the world, the first use of **Guide** I'd ever caught her in. And in that moment that followed, I saw as she cleared her failed story off the board and dragged in another.

"It is already finished, Bard," the White Knight calmly told her. "Spite can only-"

I raised my hand to silence him, and though he looked somewhat annoyed he stopped talking.

"Say nothing without choosing your words carefully," I said, voice echoing across the Dead King's hall. "We are now a single wrong sentence away from dying."

Yara smiled, Hanno stiffened and my fingers closed to tightly around my staff that the knuckles turned white. I could see the story she was going to ride now. I should have realized from the start that it was fucking arrogance to think we'd gotten her. The Augur had broken her plan, sure, but the Intercessor wasn't a blood-drunk villain on her first rampage. She'd laid *foundations* for this and none of them were gone.

"You said," Hanno murmured, "that the ealamal sleeps."

"And Cordelia Hasenbach won't wake it, if she lives," I said, sliding a glance Yara's way.

She tossed an affable smile my way, but no answers. It was a halfway good sign she hadn't taken the opportunity to gloat, but it might just be she wanted to keep her cards close to the chest.

"But the Seraphim are still silenced," I said, "and the ealamal still filled to the brim with Light. She doesn't need *Cordelia*, she just needs anyone at all to light the fire."

"No one will," the White Knight confidently said.

Far below our feet the drakon died, as if the Heavens themselves were echoing the word of their favourite son. The Bard looked untroubled, which had Hanno on edge. As it should be, because with the drakon gone, devouring every dead it had come to reign over in its death throes – though that sovereignty had not spread

far beyond Keter, and the rest of the dead still stood – the battle on the ground was won. There was no reason for someone to use the ealamal, as Hanno had so confidently asserted. However horrendous the costs, we had won.

By the mortal way of looking at it, anyway.

“Not a hero or a villain,” I quietly agreed. “But she’s not me, Hanno. She works with more than just Named.”

“The Seraphim,” he softly said. “You believe... no, it doesn’t matter. We need the Hierophant to-”

Two sounds from behind us. First Masego’s soft gasp as he rose to his feet, then Akua’s rasping cough as she gained back her voice. I watched as Hierophant took a few stumbling steps, then went still as sorcery coiled around him in tight rings. Hanno drew his sword, but I laid my hand on his arm. It wasn’t an attack, it was his own magic. He’d finished eating the Dead King and so his perspective was undergoing an adjustment. He’d be out of the rest of this conversation, as much because of the terrible efforts as because providence would ensure he was not there. He couldn’t be, because he was part of the story as the opposite of the Seraphim.

“Do nothing,” I said. “The path it goes down if we interrupt him is... unpleasant.”

Enlightenment stopped halfway through was just madness, and that was a dangerous thing to afflict a man as powerful as Masego with.

“What *is* he doing?” Hanno bluntly asked.

“He is forging a godhead of his own,” Akua rasped out as she rose to her feet, “as one of Below’s. An Evil god. What will your Seraphim say to that, White Knight?”

“They’ll aim to kill it,” the White Knight said. “Before it can darken Creation. But they cannot reach out in such a way. They are yet silenced.”

“No, not anymore,” I told him. “Just gone quiet for a while more, thanks to our friend.”

“That’s me,” Yara helpfully told him.

She was, I realized, starting to have fun.

“Then they should still be unable to-” Hanno began, then his jaw clenched. “The ealamal. Gods forgive us, it is a *Seraphim’s* corpse.”

"And filled to the brim with enough Light to scour half of Calernia," I flatly said. "She just needs to draw their eye there so they can throw their genocidal tantrum."

I expect he would have argued with that characterization of the Choir of Judgement – fair enough, it wasn't the most flattering interpretation – but Akua interrupted. She'd moved stiffly as she approached my side, her right leg likely affected by the spell even if it'd not been entirely killed, but she was breathing fine and both her eyes seemed to be working. A knot I'd not known was in my belly began to loosen.

"Yet she has not," the golden-eyed sorceress said. "As demonstrated by the fact that Catherine and I still breathed. She still needs something from us."

Yara toasted her.

"If you'd been half that clever a girl," the Intercessor smiled, "you might have had a chance at knowing what real love feels like before you die."

I'd known Akua for years. As an enemy, a prisoner, a companion and one more thing since. I'd made a study of her, and so though her face changed little I could see how that little sentence slid right between her ribs. It had stung, and so she retaliated.

"Babble however you wish, Intercessor," she coldly replied, "but you are running out of luck."

Shit, I thought, getting what would happen just before it did. Yara of Nowhere grinned at us, blue eyes bright in the dim light of the Dead King's hall.

"I *am* luck, girl," the Intercessor said. "Providence made flesh. This isn't a fight, it's a game – and we'll play as many times as it takes before I win."

Akua had been baited. 'I am providence', that was Yara's story. Not a Named, not an enemy, just a force of nature. We could no more be her foe than we could be the enemy of a river or a mountain. And Akua had given her the opportunity to get it out there and get it out first, without even restoring to something like a monologue. But my eye narrowed, because this wasn't the sort of game where you steal an advance without giving something in return. *As many times as it takes*, Yara had said. Which meant she had more strings to her bow than Masego's apotheosis. Figuring what those were, I thought, would let me steal a step of my own.

But first I needed to get our own story out.

I went rifling through my tattered cloak, getting out the long dragonbone pipe that Masego had given me when we were barely more than children. I got out a packet of wakeleaf as Akua sighed and Hanno shot me an incredulous look, stuffing the bowl before I pulled on Night. Fire bloomed, lighting the leaf, but it also shivered across the ground. Slithering over the corpse of the Mirror Knight, finding what I was looking for. I breathed in deep of the wakeleaf, savouring the burn in my lungs as I stole back the Fetter that Christophe had carried. The Intercessor smiled.

"What is it that the three of you always say?" she mused. "Ah, right – *mistake*."

She cocked her head to the side, drumming her fingers against the silver flask.

"I can see why you all do it, it's strangely satisfying," Yara of Nowhere told me. "Shall I explain your fuckup, Catherine? It feels like the courteous thing."

"I made them equal," I said. "Is that what you're going to say?"

She hid her surprise, but not quite well enough. Yeah, I'd figured it would work like that. See, the reason we weren't currently all dead was because the Intercessor needed a story behind her to get the Seraphim to pitch a fit and immolate Keter, if not all of Calernia. She was manoeuvring to get that through our conversation here, though I wasn't sure exactly *what* she needed out of us. That was her story, her play. By going for the Fetters I'd made them our story, our equivalent, and that was where she thought I'd made a mistake. Creation ran on symmetry: a Black Knight for every White Knight, an aspect of Protect for every aspect of Destroy.

Yara's path to victory needed a story, so by making the Fetters ours I'd made it so they would need a story behind them to work on her.

I'd known it would have that cost from the start, though, and it was worth it. Akua had made the Fetters without being Named, even if Named had helped. It meant, and Bard had admitted it herself, that she didn't actually know how they worked or what they did. She'd called them shackles not as a potshot but because she didn't know they were called the Fetters or what exactly they would do to her. We might not know exactly what the Intercessor wanted out of us here up here, but she was also in the dark about Akua's creation. That was worth the price of attaching a story to them.

"She's delaying," Hanno evenly said. "Waiting it out until the Hierophant finishes apotheosis."

"Was it worth it?" Yara asked him curiously. "You've gotta realize that even two days ago you would have been able to end this in a moment."

She snapped her fingers, smiled.

"But you just had to go your own way, leave the Seraphim behind," the Intercessor said. "So now the ties are cut and you can't guide them. So I ask again – was it worth it, the sense of satisfaction that carried you up this spire?"

Hanno took half a step back, looking like he'd been slapped. Had she planned that, I wondered? That if he became the White Knight again it would be without a tie to Judgement. Our struggle in the Arsenal had been years ago and I still kept unearthing deeper layers to her schemes even now. I pulled at my pipe, closing my eye, and found my first opening. She'd gone after both Akua and Hanno personally, but it was only Hanno who was being treated as a threat. Yara had tried to hurt Akua, but Hanno was being *disgraced*. He's the only one of two she sees as a threat, I realized. Because of his Name? No, shouldn't be. The Fetters would need a story but not a Name.

It was about the story. Which meant she thought Hanno had a story that might allow him to hold one of the Fetters but not Akua. Why? I studied the golden-eyed sorceress through eyes of Night, Seeing no nascent Name in her. She was wounded but not at risk of dying and her beauty was barely marred so... *Ah*, I thought. *There it is. You don't think Akua can take up a Fetter unless she's dying.* And the damning thing was that she was most likely right. It wasn't even about character, at least not in the moral sense. Akua's journey had been one of fighting free from prisons within and without. She would not enter another cage, not after refusing the Tower's.

Even if she forced herself, the story would be weak. It might not work.

It looked bad, I thought, but once more by pressing forward Yara had given me something. She was attacking us but not trying to establish a story of her own. That told me more than she'd meant it to. I opened my eye.

"Hanno's right," I calmly said. "You're waiting us out. You don't actually need anything from *us*, do you Yara? Hierophant's already undergoing apotheosis, and that's all you needed to get the Seraphim there. You just can't get them to move before he's *actually* a god."

They'd refuse, I decided, and she couldn't force them. There were still a lot of heroes in Keter, enough that as long as there was even the possibility of Masego being stopped the Seraphim wouldn't just burn the city to cinders. The moment he came

through on the other side, though, the calculations changed. It was no longer the possibility of Hierophant forging a godhead against the destruction of the Grand Alliance, it was a risen god sworn to Below against the destruction of a handful of Named and earthly armies. To a Choir, it would be choice that basically made itself. She was attacking us for the same reason she'd boasted that she was providence: she had nothing to defend.

Yara reached behind the Dead King's throne, fishing out her ragged old lute, and set it across her lap. Then she gave me the most vicious grin.

"I guess you're right," she mused. "If one of you killed Zeze, it'd sure stop my evil plan."

My pipe clattered against the stone, spilling ash and smoke. I didn't remember sheathing my sword, but it was out in my hand in a heartbeat. Part of me was ready to apologize if I was wrong, but I wasn't. Hanno's eyes were calm as he held the Severance, taking a single step forward. Akua brushed against my side, a comforting presence I dimly realized I'd expected. Not even for me but because she cared for Masego herself. She'd called it a nudge, righting a wrong left to fester, and she'd not lied. But it'd been more than that too.

"Hanno," I said, "this is exactly what she wants."

"I am aware," the White Knight evenly replied. "But you have confirmed yourself, Catherine, that should the Hierophant finish his apotheosis it will bring about mass slaughter."

"We don't beat her like this," I hissed. "Not if we let her-"

"Kill me after, if it makes you feel better," Hanno of Arwad tiredly said. "Two lives for hundreds of thousands? That is not a choice, it is a *duty*."

"Or you could die in the attempt," Akua said. "Stripping us of your strength, just as the Intercessor wishes."

The White Knight considered us for a long moment, then shook his head.

"I probably will," he said. "But he'll die too. A fair bargain."

I had nothing to threaten him with, I realized. He'd already decided he had a duty and he was dead. I'd once given Tariq pause by threatening to murder the Grand Alliance and wield its remains against Keter should it cross me, but that wouldn't work here. The cause was spent, the battle ended, and I had given too much of myself to Calernia for Hanno to believe me if I swore calamity over this. He knew me too well.

He was, in some ways, my friend.

"I wish it could be otherwise," the White Knight told me, and I believed him. "But it is Catherine Foundling who would fight me over this, not the Warden."

The echo of Akua's words returned to haunt me, the wants of the woman and the needs of the queen. The tall hero straightened, blade rising.

"We'll all lose friends today," Hanno said. "I'm sorry it had to be by my hand, Catherine."

And was that to be it? I'd kill him or he killed Masego and maybe I'd lose both anyway. The Intercessor had grabbed me by the hair and dragged me back on the Tower's steps, my bloody knife in hand. What life was I to take this time, how many was I to bury?

"You'll have to hold him back," Akua murmured, "before I can land a curse. I believe I have something that can hold him down, though I know not all the strings to his bow."

And I breathed in sharply, because I had my way out. The Intercessor herself had given it to me earlier.

"It won't work," I said, and Hanno stilled.

His eyes were on me, his gaze steady as he looked for the lie.

"She has other stories lying in wait," I said. "Killing Hierophant only makes her change to them."

"Other stories," the White Knight slowly said. "Such as?"

And I'd not known then, but it seemed so obvious now that I'd felt out her schemes. No matter how skilled her hand, Yara wouldn't have been able to be *sure* that Masego would forge a godhead. Her story, though, was that of the Choir of Judgement striking down an Evil god. And it so happened there was one of these certain to be at hand.

"It's Sve Noc," I said. "We mended Night, made it better, and raised them anew. They're more dangerous now and they won't burn out. Judgement will want to end them and they can try it through me."

I wasn't sure if they'd win, but it wouldn't matter. The struggle would kill the people the Bard wanted dead anyway and that was the whole point. I watched Hanno game it through, wonder if everyone could be Saved by killing me as well, but even if he could do it there was no guarantee the Intercessor didn't have a third string lying in wait. It would be just like her, I thought as my eye went to the woman still sprawled on the Dead King's

throne, to get us to kill each other until no one was left and victory landed bloody in her lap.

"You're right," the White Knight finally said.

And it was a load off my shoulders.

"We can't win by beating her here," I said. "She can't die and even if we drive her away she'll keep at this. Find a way to sow ruin while we try to recover after the war, push us over the edge."

"She has to be bound," Akua softly said.

And I held both Fetters in my hands, the rings of copper and bronze that would be put on once and never taken off. The Intercessor idly strummed her lute, still tuned from her song earlier, and smiled at me.

"Ah, and now we get to the good part," she said. "Are you coming to be bind me, Catherine?"

"You're the last relic left, Yara," I told her, stepping forward. "It's time for you to be buried with the rest."

A flash of rage distorted that pretty tanned face, turning it ugly, but it was gone in an instant. I waked past corpses fresh and old, past broken stone and the Dead King's remains.

"And that's for you to decide?" she asked.

"I am the Warden," I simply replied, and Creation echoed of the word.

She only smiled.

"Not the right kind," she told me. "We made sure of that."

"**Silence**," I ordered, stepping forward.

And then the Intercessor laughed.

"Try the other one, your third," she told me. "The one we made sure you'd come into before this moment. *See what happens.*"

And dread seized me, because in that moment I understood what she'd done. I had my three aspects, one formed to bring about the end of the Dead King himself. My Role was settled, seared into Creation as loudly as triumphantly as a Role ever had been. And it was not the Role of a jailer, for all that my Name could hold the meaning.

"Yeah," Yara gently said, "you lost before you even started."

I'd fallen for the oldest trap: you put two choices in front of someone and forced them to choose so that they might never realize there was a third. If I'd had an aspect to spare, if there had still been room for my Role to settle... Instead I'd chosen between **Guide** and **Sentence**, as it'd never occurred to me I could refuse to choose at all. *No, that's arrogance*, I told myself. *We wouldn't have killed the Dead King without my last aspect*. If I'd chosen nothing we would have lost, and the Bard gotten her way again.

"I win," Yara of Nowhere smiled, "or I win, or I win. That's the only kind of game worth playing, Catherine."

If I used the Fetters on her, they wouldn't work. I knew that with sudden, ironclad certainty. I didn't have the right weight behind me. It couldn't be me, and I'd not made much of a case for Hanno. He could and would offer, I knew that, but in the end he was below me. My subordinate. It was an ill-fitting match, and I could try to fit it in the story of an unkillable Evil being imprisoned by a hero through worthy sacrifice, but Yara had headed me off there already. *I am providence made flesh*, she'd claimed, and I had not contested it.

I was at a loss.

Wind brushed past me and a streak of darkness hit the Bard's arm as she let out a yelp of pain, burrowing through the stained leather and sinking into the flesh. I glanced back to see Akua approaching, a cold look on her face, and Hanno looking at her with disapproval. It was easy to see why, since one of Yara's arms had withered dry. It looked like a mummified husk, though the Intercessor looked more amused than anything.

"Well, you made sure not to kill me," she drawled. "Feeling better, oh mighty Sahelian?"

Akua brushed past me, armour whispering against mine, and cocked her head to the side.

"Slightly," she said. "But I am not finished."

"Enough," Hanno said, drawing my eye to him. "Torture will accomplish nothing and is unworthy of-"

There was no longer a sheath at his hip, I idly noticed. He must have lost it at some point in the fighting, though it hardly mattered since the Severance would not have fit it. It cut too deeply to... I clenched my fingers then unclenched them. The Saint of Swords and once cut my aspect domain, using Sever. The same aspect we'd made into the blade. *So it still should be capable of that, with the right guidance*. The first time I'd reached for my third aspect, Masego was forced to cut it out of me. The second time it mixed with Winter, became a domain that was not entirely

mine. I had a precedent, a pattern forming, and most of all a story to ride.

I had never been above mutilating myself to win.

"Hanno," I said, cutting through whatever he'd been saying. "I need you to do something for me."

"Catherine?" he asked.

I paused a moment, choosing my words so I could ask him to cut my third aspect out of me in a way he would not refuse. It was the mutilation of my soul, but it was also a way out of the trap I had fallen into. Like the fox in the trap, I would eat through my leg rather than perish. Without Sentence, my Name was once more incomplete. It'd be damaged, my legitimacy in my Role diminished. I'd be misaligned. And though I would make myself into a bastard thing, it would be a bastard thing that might just be able to fetter the Intercessor. That was how you killed a god, wasn't it? By making another.

And I would destroy who I was until I became what was needed to win.

My mouth opened to speak, but Akua interrupted me with a sigh.

"You're bleeding yourself again, aren't you?" she asked.

I refused to meet her eyes, the accusing gold.

"I used to admire that in you, darling, did you know?" Akua told me. "Your willingness to destroy yourself to win."

"It's not pretty," I said, "but it works."

I forced myself to look at her then, truly look at her. We were no longer the girls we'd been at seventeen, worn down by war and grief and the scars of the lessons we'd learned, but I could look at Akua Sahelian today and see in her the shade of the girl I'd first glimpsed sitting across my father in a tent. The same tall hourglass figure, sharp aristocratic cheekbones and deep golden eyes. Changed by time, all of them, but the roots were unchanged. I'd thought her stunning before I learned to hate her, and I still thought it now that I'd learned not to. She was in armour, her face touched with grime and the lingering stiffness of the Dead King's curse, and yet I could still understand why as a girl I'd thought her the most beautiful person I'd ever seen.

"I have learned," Akua Sahelian gently smiled, "not to settle for that."

And the circlet of copper and bronze she had stolen from me sunk into her wrist, the first of the Fetters bound. An exclamation of dismay ripped itself free of my throat, scraping it raw. I

reached for her but she shook me off, and the words I was chewing on were drowned out by the Intercessor's mocking laughter.

"You?" she guffawed. "Come on, Doom of Liesse. My dearest folly. You think taking the fall for Catherine because you love her will be enough? Love's never enough, child."

She leaned forward in her throne, blue eyes burning.

"Stop wasting our time," Yara of Nowhere said. "You still keep to Below, and just because you've learned that other people are *people* doesn't make you redeemed."

A wide, nasty smile greeted Akua's unflinching approach. She held, I saw, the second Fetter in her hand. I jerked forward, a spasm of the heart, but before I could finish the step Hanno's hand caught my arm. His eyes were kind, but they were also firm. I turned away, chewing on my lip.

"You're not dying either, I made sure of that," the Intercessor said. "It's not a way out for you, you don't get anything out of it."

"You are," Akua Sahelian idly said, "a liar."

Yara blinked.

"I assure you, you're not dy-"

"You called yourself luck," Akua said, "but that is a lie, Intercessor. You are not a blind roll of the dice. *You take sides.*"

"I've helped both sides of the Game," the Intercessor dismissed, "I-"

"You help Good," Akua said. "When you have the choice, that is the truth of you. Providence made flesh is the truth of you, Yara of Nowhere, because you are the golden luck of heroes."

"You're quibbling," Yara snorted. "You'd bind me with a complaint?"

"Not to *you*," Akua Sahelian smiled. "To your masters, for all that you know so do they. And through you I give grievance, for your game is *unfair*. How can it be a true wager, when your own Intercessor favours a side?"

The Intercessor went very, very still.

"You don't know what you're doing, girl," she hoarsely whispered. "If you had any idea-"

And we felt it all, then. The weight. The *attention*. Akua Sahelian had called on the Gods, and the Gods listened.

"Fortune and misfortune," she said. "Providence and calamity. It takes two to make it even."

She leaned forward and the Intercessor scrabbled back on the throne, lute dropping on the ground and snapping a string as the silver flask toppled over the edge and began spilling liquor all over the floor. Dark red, like blood. But there was nowhere to run, and the Fetter slid around her wrist.

Its lettering burned bright, for the barest of moments, and then it sank beneath her skin.

"No," Yara shouted. "*NO*. You can't-"

Akua struck her across the mouth, shattering teeth as the Intercessor fell on the tiles. She spasmed there, crawling and going away.

"I simply cannot abide screaming," Akua told her. "You will have to learn that if we are to be colleagues."

Yara kept crawling away, bleeding from the mouth, and as Hanno finally released my arm I rushed forward. Gods but my leg hurt. Akua only half-turned towards me, but it was enough. I swept her in my arms, her armour rough against mine, and though I had to dip her backwards I found her mouth. It should have been hard and wanting, after too many years of denial, but it wasn't. It was... soft. And yet the yearning would not leave me, or her, and it felt unbearable to part even when I had to suck in a trembling breath.

"Ah," Akua faintly said. "So that's what it feels like."

"I was," I began, but then choked on the words. "I couldn't..."

"I know," she murmured against my cheek. "I know. We are who we are."

"I wasn't going to ask you to," I admitted.

"I wouldn't have, if you did," Akua said. "It's my choice, Catherine. I saw what I could be, and though it is not a penance..."

She half-smiled.

"I have learned lessons," she said. "And instead of letting them join me in the grave made of Liesse, I would teach them with the villains that will follow in my wake."

My heart clenched.

"She might not let you," I whispered. "Neither of you can nudge if the other doesn't allow it."

"So we will have to bargain," Akua softly laughed. "Else we will be nothing at all."

From the corner of my eye I saw Hanno kneeling by Yara's side, light glowing around his hand, and I realized that he was healing her. She'd just tried to kill us all, to kill all of Calernia, and yet Hanno of Arwad knelt besides the woman in pain and tried to help her.

It was, I thought, the essence of the man.

Akua drew away and though I resisted I did not force her to stay. She took a step back, watching my face, and something like grief flicked across her face.

"Finish it," she quietly asked.

Cold dread filled my stomach.

"You can't really be asking me that," I said.

"We will only know for certain it has worked after," Akua said.

"That's not what I meant," I replied.

"I know," she smiled. "But for our parting, my love, perhaps it is my turn to be allowed to wield the cruelty."

I could have argued. I could have screamed and railed and refused, but all it would have done was mar this. A moment neither of us would get back. So instead I paid my dues, my long price, and drew the knife that'd killed my father.

"I love you," I said.

It had never admitted it to her before. I likely never would again.

"And I you, my heart," Akua said, eyes golden like the sun. "Farewell."

And I killed her, like she'd asked me. Plunged the knife into her heart, parting flesh, until she leaned forward to gently kiss me and let out a soft gasp against my lips. She died, and in the instant she did she was gone. So was the Intercessor, the other side of that now forever spinning coin. Hanno rose to his feet, face solemn, as behind us Masego let out a loud gasp. Sorcery billowed out, light filling the hall and rising through the tower like a shining star as the Hierophant finished forging his godhead. It was over, I thought, touching my cheek and finding

tears there. I closed my eye and leaned against my staff, feeling the last of my strength leave me.

We'd won.

We'd lost.

So began the Age of Order.

Mary Gentle

First things first: thanks, ErraticErrata, for doing some truly remarkable things on the journey through these books. I joined in #3, and the story episodes gripped me thereafter.

I don't know how to feel about the climax.

It doesn't feel like a victory, as someone else remarked. I've read it through twice, and read the comments, hoping to find an understanding why it feels like such a disappointment to me.

It's not just the lack of some of the people we've loved, but it's partly that. Though I understand it would be difficult to orchestrate Hakram, Vivian, Rumena, and Anaraxes (to pick some) to be on the same spot for the climax. But... They were a loss I felt.

After thinking a lot, it comes down to this for me, and I don't particularly expect anyone else to agree with the viewpoint:

If Akua Sahelian was going to be the one to end the Age of Wonders – why the hell have we been following this Catherine-somebody around?

Which is another way of saying: If the Age of Wonders was going to be ended, as it's been woven into the story since the beginning, then Cat has to do it.

Whether by self-mutilation or some other device, it ought to have been Catherine Foundling. The Story says that.

Yes, I follow the logic of the narrative as it's on the page. The problem for me is, I don't believe it.

I don't mind if Akua becomes the Practical Guide, but I do mind that it's her act that is the decisive one. I mind that Catherine Foundling stands there like a spare prick at a wedding as the Age of Order is ushered in. Yes, she was about to do something. But she didn't.

Maybe my expectations were too big. I suppose I was expecting something like the end of Book 5, with Kairos, but turned up to the max. (Though, has Kairos's last chapter been edited since it was first put into the Guide? Something seems different about it.)

I guess there are two episode chapters to come, so the fat lady hasn't quite sung. Possibly there's something there that will make me see this differently.

ninegardens

I can see what you're getting at. Mostly I think... Akua has been Cat's project for the last 4 books. In some sense I'd say that in some sense Cat has brought about the end of the age of wonders, (and the creation of the age of order) because she managed to talk everyone else into it.

She CONVINCED the White night and first prince to work with villians. She didn't make the final decision, they did, but she convinced them.

She CONVINCED Akua Sahelian, the most recent scion of "age of Wonders" villiany to reject the teachings she was brought up with, and embrace the age of wonders. It was Akua's final choice, but the point is Cat was the one that led her there.

In a similar bent, Hanno and Tariq are responsible for Mirror knights development. The sacrifices he made, and his key part in defeating the Dead King are his own, but a big part of this story is about the importance of **investing** in people. This is something Cat does. Something Hanno does. Something Amadeus does... and something Yara and Nessie were incapable of. Something Akua Sahelian **was** incapable of. Some Malicia failed at.

I'm not particularly keen on the Catkua ship and all, but like... for me it makes sense that Cat's final defining "act" isn't her intelligence, isn't her habit of self mutilation, and isn't pragmatism. It's the trust she has invested in people, over and over and over again. Still feels a bit weird, I agree, but it does feel on theme.

ninegardens

**and embrace the age of ORDER.*

God damn typos. Wish I could edit these things. Blehk.

In other news, now that all is said and done, what do people think of Kairos? Was he a monster and a villian (okay, yes, yes he was), or was he one of the heroes of the age, one of the few to outmanuever WB and DK? (although... given Yara's

bullshittery here, it doesn't really seem like Kairos' gambit ever ACTUALLY troubled her. Hmmmmmmmm... 🙄

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Re: the ending: I think you hit the nail on the head.

Re: Kairos: he is my terrible, metaphorical-bastard* son and I love him. I'd call him a goblin, but this story has those. However, I have forgotten many details of his interactions with DK in particular. Not sure about WB.

*That is, a son who is metaphorically bastardous as opposed to an illegitimate son. Obviously he isn't literally my son.

Miles

Turns out our Ubua was the MC all along, and Cat was just the love interest.

fp

That's part of what feels a bit off in this ending to me. I feel like Akua was clearly in love with Cat, but with Cat it always seemed more she just thought Akua was hot (and thought it a lot).

Other thing with this ending is I also agree that it seems a bit weird for Akua to take the "Practical Guide" roll, where it doesn't seem like she'd have all that much to offer other than "If you're thinking of killing an entire city, maybe don't" and maybe something of a Villain Therapist eventually? Whereas Cat would clearly be equipped to give tons of name lore tips, and try to set people up to work together and be successful, and I could see her really enjoying that.

Overall still enjoyed it though.

D

I think we're supposed to read Cat as an unreliable narrator when it comes to how she feels about Akua. She's been presenting her thoughts as "yeah, she's just hot" but so insistently so that it could be read as her being in denial about having caught feelings.

caoimhinh

Yeah, the switch of Catherine's view from "Wow, she's damn hot" to "OMG she is the love of my life" seems very very weird. Because besides Akua being hot and showing signs of Catherine's plan of rehabilitation/redemption working, it didn't seem like something that should have awakened such deep feelings of love in Catherine.

Also, Catherine inner monologue acts as if this was her plan all along, but that's a complete lie, given that the Dead King didn't invade until Book 5, and the plan of using the Crown of Autumn couldn't exist until after the Dead King started invading, yet Catherine already had Akua out of the Mantle of Woe by that time, and only further on into Book 6 did they get to prove Masego's theory of Quartered Seasons. So the redemption story for Akua was something Cat came up with later on.

Outwardly pretending it was her plan all along, like whenever she talked to Vivienne about it, is fine, but having that inside her own mind is weird.

tynam

Catherine has been called out before, most notably by Killian, for lying to herself (and thus in her internal narrative, to us) about her feelings for Akua. The unreliable narrator should not be a surprise; Catherine's internal thoughts about Akua were over-emphasised and unconvincing in exactly the same way as when Catherine lies flagrantly to avoid embarrassing herself but admitting she cares about the Woe.

I certainly read it as a love story since before the 'betrayal' before After; it's the only reading that made sense to me.

And, no, it's not a complete lie that this was the plan all along. Sure, Catherine didn't know about Quartered Seasons way back in the everdark, but she is genre savvy enough to have known there'd be something like that waiting at the end.

Lord Haart

It's not a Redemption Story. Akua is aligned to Below, even more strongly than at Liesse.

It's just that she isn't trying to win the game with the same old rules, instead setting new ones.

I think Akua being the pivot here made perfect sense and narratively differentiates PTGE from being "standard fantasy protagonist is the chosen one snoozefest" material.

It was an ending that made perfect sense but which I didn't quite see either – I thought Akua would be a jailor, which is more Cat's role, but her being a guide makes much more sense to me. Cat is a more experienced

mentor, but didn't have quite the rage against Above and fondness for Below that Akua does.

Rynjin

Cat's entire character arc since the Underdark has been about becoming a leader, more than a doer. Manipulating all the pieces and putting them in the right place...and moreover, trusting them all to play their part because of who they are.

She was never going to be the one to bind the final evil. The sacrifice, for once, was not hers to make. Instead, she has the responsibility and penance of living in the world she's created.

Jkyoulost

But Akua isn't the Practical Guide. She's Calamity to WB Providence. Cat is still the one left on the mortal plane in Cardinal, set to guide the course of Named for the Age if Order, while Wandering Akua are trapped bickering back and forth for the rest of time.

Vortex

I actually like that the story did not end with Cat cleaning everything up again. She has literally done that dozens of times, abusing herself and sacrificing herself to take the final win.

To give up control and let someone else take action feels like a much stronger character defining moment than jamming her dogged determination down everyone's throat yet again.

There were some awesome moments in Cat's defiance of the previous books, but in this final instance I think entrusting the final defiance to others is a mark of how far she has come as a leader and how much she has grown as a character. I am quite happy with it.

Lord Haart

Agreed. Same lesson as Hanno really.

Xavius Night

I think it is as the chapter for Eudokia played out: all of this is about Catherine bending the rules of the story, over and over again, because she's following the rules in the meanest way possible. Just as Scribe slew a school of assassins with its own hands, Catherine wrote the story of the next age to bear a different person as the focal point of its birth from the death of the old.

And in the end, she did teach Akua the lesson of Callow: for

the small slight of defeating her over and over again, she gave the long price of an ever-broken heart to Catherine.

[sorter43](#)

Beautiful.

Finally a long price paid off.

Crash

Well, the past few chapters have been a constant feeling of being kicked while you're down. It makes sense it'd come to this, then.

It has been a great journey. Joined in kinda late, around the time Kairos was working up to his death. Left and came back again often as life got in the way of things, but for this last stretch I've been caught up and it's been a blast. It really hits different waiting out the days and reading on launch.

I'll be looking forward to the epilogues, Pale Lights and whatever you write next EE, this has been amazing. Thank you.

[apperatus27](#)

Hoo boy, that was a really solid ending. Not sure why folks are complaining about someone else taking the spotlight at the end. Nobody complains about Gollum walking the ring the last two steps, after all.

Looking forward to what you write next because gosh darn was this an amazing series.

Mary Gentle



doing just that.

There's a thematic thing Tolkein has going that makes it work (for him), because his universe functions on Divine Providence. It's important that nobody be able to resist the Ring, because otherwise, perhaps anybody could have. And then maybe you start wondering if Boromir was right after all. But if Frodo fails, and Gollum – by Providence – falls into a volcano, that's supposed to solve the moral difficulty. It doesn't, for me, but I can see that, in-story, it does.

I don't get that feeling here. There isn't, for me, a thematic link between Akua and the current arrangemend of Good and Evil. Not the way there has been for Catherine, ever since Amadeus chose her.

But I'm still hoping that something from the epilogues will put it into focus for me.

AnRighteous

Really liked the ending since imo it derives from akua spending the entire series coming to terms with no matter how good she is her past acts will never be truly forgiven. She then becomes the evil counterpart to the WB, an undesirable role.

In other words, she will forever be evil and this is her eternal attempt to atone for her actions. She shows to some degree how one can be Evil yet good.

Lord Haart

I hear you but Akua is the final thesis of Age of Wonders Villainy. And if Above, too, because Above world never let Villains succeed without a narrative Damocles Sword above their heads.

Akua's pivot here is one she is more for to make than Cat. Cat is really practical neutral in many ways, she wants peace even if it means blunting Villainous aspirations. She did not like Wekesa and if she hadn't been Masego's friend for so long, wouldn't have approved of another diety for Below. I think Akua is much more Below-aligned, but just as practical now after the events of the series. She won't sabotage Villains from the start – but she WILL demand they do better.

BargleNawdleZouss

Fingers crossed that MaseGod can fix Hakram as well as Sve Noc did for Catherine!

Thanatoss

Great Ending!

The only small tidbit I would complain about is that there WAS a story about:

1. Cat being parallel to Triumphant.
2. Cat defying gods many times and forging a story that she can defy them.
3. Probably something I did forget..

Hmmm

Anyways absolute perfect ending! Beautiful! I MUST see the aftermath before I die, XD

Lord Haart

Yes true – Cat had made a habit of bending angels to her will.

But Judgement was much warier of her and would have been a gamble to have pit herself against Bard there.

It also wouldn't have solved that Yara would just do the same in a few decades or centuries.

Rey d`Tutto

Damn.
Best writing I've read for a while

LostUmbrella

I joined late in the story, around the end of book 6, but I loved every step of the way, ending included. Thank you for the journey, EE.

Velrix

Thanks for this story, damn I'm tearing up.

I'm loving the end of the chapter, but I feel the middle a little lackluster. It feel a little bad compared to your habitual masterwork.

Clarissa

This is cool and good and I enjoyed the ending, tyvm! Thank you for writing, pgte has gotten me through a lot of the last couple years ♥

Yamageddon

Thanks so much EE! Really excellent! Love the whole chapter! What a relief that the tension has finally been released. Looking forward to the cleanup. Climax between Cat and Akua was great and emotional and beautifully tense. Glad that Akua stopped Cat from making that self mutilation hat trick. The world would not have had half the chance it should have in the aftermath of it all if The Warden had disappeared into the Nothing with Yara.

It had to be Akua. But damn that's bittersweet. What bargains will Akua and Yara make? Will they be competing to see who can guide hero's or villains the best? Will they learn to work together? Will they sit in a pit of mutual hatred forever? Will Akua's spell casting abilities + the wisdom she has learned be enough to face off against the Bards machinations? Will Akua bargain for an annual reunion with Cat?

These are the questions that will keep me up tonight.

Lord Haart

Between WB and Akua, it's like the Above and Below twins from Cat's Name dreams, just with personalities reversed.

Tristan

Do you know what I would find a very satisfying second epilogue?

Cat, having lived a long life as the Warden, ushering in the new Era, uses her story-fu to arrange a meeting between her, Yara and Akua. There, she voluntarily steps into (some evolution of) Yara's role and takes over her fetter, finally allowing Yara to move on and die, and leaving Cat and Akua chained together guiding future Villains and Heroes towards a brighter future. While making sweet love in the Between.

(As for the objection that both Cat and Akua are Villains, I don't think that's really is a problem. Akua, with her redemption arch were poised for a Heroic name, while Yara, having started out as a Hero, was more or less a Villain in the end with her plot to end the world. Cat has a fairly neutral Role as the Warden and I think the Gods might accept Cat and Akua as a sort of a third power that can mitigate the excesses of both Good and Evil.)

Finally, a big thank you to the author. It's been an absolute pleasure. I will be buying physical copies of the story as soon as they are available. However the epilogues turn out...

Isi Arnott-Campbell

If it doesn't happen officially then thank you for the head canon.

JoeArchipelago

My first comment in many years reading this series. I just want to thank you, EE. The story has brought me through a lot. I love the story so far, and I love the last few chapters, this one included. I absolutely love your characters – Akua has been my favourite so far, and her ending does not disappoint.

I am looking forward to your next work!

Rabblrouser

So epic. So sad. What a phenomenal story. I'm going to really miss these characters.

Thecount

Thank you for sharing this story Erratic, its beautiful. It will always have a place on my shelf, and i will forever recommend it to everyone. Hope it was, is and will be something you will look back kindly just as much as i will, for all the years it and you helped me endure the years. Again, Thank You, and i hope your next project, whatever it will

be, will also bring at least as much joy to people and to you as this story.

Name

Well done.

Someperson

Well damn

Wasn't really sure where Akua's story was going and I had a feeling it would bite the bard in the ass but yeah she really does have the story to be the Tragedy that balances out the Bard's Providence

In some way, this satisfies Catherine's whole arc on a deeper level, not of trying to *break* the game of the gods like Amadeus but simply insisting that the game is made fair.

That was what the Accords and the Age of Order really did, after all. Reforming the rules and reforming fate. The perpetual finger on the scales that is Providence was the last step in that process.

Man though the Gods in this setting are kind of all jerks

starflower

EE... I regret not leaving comments throughout the book. I've been with this book since 2017, and I think it's tied for my favorite work of fiction ever, I adore it and I've learned so much from your characters. Every time I got bored with the story, I came back later and got pulled into it again. And this... was a brilliant climax. I worried if things would work, how the *hell*, after all this buildup, it could actually work, but I kept reminding myself that trusting you had worked before and... that worked, and it was beautiful. Cat & Akua, specifically, made me crying. Akua is my favorite and I'm holding back feelings until I read the epilogues and learn how she actually ends up, but... Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, this is a masterpiece, and it means so much to me. Now to the epilogues!

Black Spiral Dancer

Came late this time... I now know why... I have been postponing this moment... I love endings, yet I hate what comes after. A void. I hate the age of Order, just like I hated it when Tolkien wrote it out. I want no place in it.

I am as the villain of Yore, more like Dead King than Kairos although I deeply admired him as well for his boldness. My story plays along the same lines as his, with a twist.

It was during this long story that I have had my own enlightenment, when I finally saw that our world indeed had a written foundation behind, and inner threads that can be altered if you keep the balance just right.

Throughout my life, I have tested the randomness of our own world, and tried to so subtly end it more than once while leaving a way out, and saw that again and again I would not die as long as I did not tempt that directly (as of course, like in any story, then I would have surely died). It felt like I was here for something out of the ordinary, yet I could not SEE what, for I could see the paths of life and I rejected almost every role in it. Almost, not all. But the one role I did not reject seemed more than unlikely, but borderline impossible.

Yet the trigger I had been waiting appeared at the precise time I thought it would and it was an unlikely blend by itself, a rare gate that opened at the precise time, something that I had not seen before. And through that trigger I began my first change. I was born half a monster, yet now I had enough time to ponder if I wanted to become a less-than-perfect man or a complete monster, and though that was a choice, it wasn't really: I was never one to be content with being lesser.

I have done then, as Catherine did, a leap in the dark, trusting I knew better, and the story came through as I had thought it might... and I knew then, I had my second true glimpse that my life was not random, nor this world was random as I was taught it was.

Yet my change was yet skin-deep, and although I had now the flesh of the role I accepted, I had not the Story, I had no way to tell my truth because I knew truth not. I could only walk in the maze with closed eyes, knowing not even it was a maze, only having faith that I was not in an endless plain: for a maze, for all its dead ends and turns, does lead somewhere... until I hit the third glimpse, my truth. At the age I was expecting, but exactly when it was almost ending and I had completely forgotten I had been waiting for it. And like a truck had hit me... I was shocked to my core. Twice, for I felt an echo stir exactly 7 days after, at the same time as if to re-assure me it wasn't chance or randomness. And now I had a Truth, a Story behind me, and a Name.

And I could hardly believe it but I knew then that this world was as fake as the world of Calernia: we are but shadows of such a greater reality we can merely grasp the edges, yet we go blindly thinking we know all there is. Folly. I could SEE now how my life was carefully laid out, piece by piece, to achieve, to get to the point I was standing, and not by some higher divine being some call a god, but by... me. I knew myself best, I knew what I wanted and how I thought things, and I posted signs where I knew I would look for, and they were always there, they never failed, because it was written.

I knew then that much of what was thought and said was twisted echoes of the truth, the road was so long abandoned and blocked by thrash that few could ever see or pass.

For it was believed that spirituality was GOOD and the carnal, the material, was EVIL. Oh, just like Yara did, two choices were offered only to hide there was a third... which turned everything in its axis. For before Time, before the clock and the Age changed, there was Spirit and Flesh and there was not that GOOD which nowadays is praised by most religions. That time is now seen as EVIL, but it was just another path, one which led to shadowed paths beneath the Earth, not to the bright sky, but just like now, that was seen as the only path. Talk about balance...

We have reached, as Tolkien and ErraticErrata wrote, the End of the Age, and a new future looms closeby. Yet I am not willing to live then, for that future seems too ordered, too clean, too bright, and I like the shadows. So I will take once again that old, old path which was abandoned. And like a dark wind, I will CLEAR the way again and allow choice to bloom. For the world still sleeps, but I am awakening, and though the path goes down infinitely, I have no regrets while I walk it, for I have seen the sky and I found it tedious, the heavens boring and lackluster. From deep I came, and I have chosen again that it is where I belong. I again jump, and with me much of this age will FALL, and we will build a world where the gloom never ends, where the shadows lay and make our imaginations vivid with magic. Lies and Violence, yes, but oh, so much more too!

Lord Haart

Be safe man. Age of Order or Wonder, this series is really about forming healthy connections with others, moving through pain to find support, and knowing that the infinite is really no match for the finite.

Epilogue I

"Why did the Black Queen invade Keter?

She'd run out of living to tax."

– Overheard in a Laure tavern

Cordelia was dying.

Every ragged, rasping breathed told her of that truth. Too much of her throat was gone, devoured by a ghoul even as she killed it. Distantly she heard the buzz of Light coming down, feeling a sliver of cold satisfaction that the Blessed Artificer's wall had kept the dead away from the ealamal until the end. Her pride had not slain Calernia. Was Alaya alive? She did not know, and her mind was slipping. Darkness crept in from the edges, closing in on all sides. Her breath rattled out, a groan, and the last of the princess' life began to leave her. *A good death*, she thought.

Soft fingers were laid against her forehead. There was a shiver and her life stalled, as if caught in her throat.

"Am I too early or too late, I wonder?" Ivah of the Losara mused. "Many will grieve that you are not to be brought into the Night."

She tried to move, to raise her hand, but it would not move.

"We see you, Cordelia Hasenbach," the Lord of Silent Steps said, its voice echoing with two others. "You who offered peace to the Firstborn and meant it, who would welcome us into these Burning Lands as an ally."

Coolness, fresh and pure and so intense as to be almost painful, flooded her veins as her body was wracked with spasms.

"We are the children of the Ever Dark," the silver-eyed drow told her, "but we have learned our lessons. Steel shall be answered with steel, but you who offered good faith will see it returned in kind."

Cordelia let out a hoarse shout, hands rising as she convulsed upwards and caught the Firstborn's shoulder. The cold was fading, and though she was not healed neither was she *dying*.

"It is done," Ivah of the Losara murmured. "Death will not have you today."

The princess breathed out, leaning her head on its shoulder. Exhausted even though she had done nothing.

"Maybe," Cordelia panted out, "tomorrow."

And like a seizure, a banner flown in the face of grief, twin laughter sounded in the tent.

—

Night had fallen over Keter but even past midnight the dark was yet kept at bay.

Thousands of torches and bonfires burned across the Crown of the Dead, the great army that now stood mistress of it gone wild with victory. Casks of beer and liquor rolled down the streets,

singing filled the winding streets and it was as if the very seat of horror had turned into a summer fair. Everywhere soldiers shouted and laughed and bickered in a dozen different tongues, old feuds forgotten for a night as all celebrated the end of the Dead King. It was a sight like none other: Alamans nobles sharing Levantine liquor with Soninke mfuasa, orc and Firstborn poets trading tirades with Arlesites over prizes of Callowan ale. Lycaonese and Levantines belting out ribald songs, Taghreb – even the new High Lady of Kahtan herself! – joining the impromptu Barber and Edward play mounted by Callowans and goblins.

There might never be a night like this again, they all knew deep down, and so they roared all the louder for it.

In the shadow of broken flying fortresses the great pyre for the dead was burning low, eclipsed by the bonfires of the living on the great avenues where cattle roasted and a thousand cooks from all over Calernia filled plates for whoever put them on the table. It was a night for life winning over death so it was no surprise that a thousand couples were born in dark corners. For a night, a few or even years to come. Wise heads opened the stocks of tangleroot brew for any who wanted it, intending to avoid accidents, but some bellies were bound to swell in coming months anyway. It was a night for rash decisions, the release of years and hopelessness – revelry sublimating all the horror of the war against Keter into a life without the Dead King's shadow hanging over them all.

In the heart of the city, though, a handful gathered in a small room inside the black spire as the clamour of the festivities echoed from a distance. It was a distinguished company, the kind whose absence might have been noticed had merry chaos not seized the city outside. The Warden and the White Knight, two pillars of the age to come. Dented from the struggles of the day but yet standing. With them came three that would have seemed mismatched, if not for the clear ease between them: Vivienne Dartwick, the Princess, Indrani the Ranger and the Hierophant himself. Who did not seem so different, at first glance, for all that he was said to have reached apotheosis. Still tall and thin, long braids woven with trinkets going down his back, and his eyes were yet one of flesh and the other of glass.

Only now it was not the fires of Summer that glinted beneath the eye cloth but something else, a vision of miracles and revelations whose very sight would madden the unready. And there was something else, in the way the world moved around him. It was as if he moved free of the current, only faintly touched by Creation's laws – the way his robes sometimes moved when there was no wind and went still when there was, the lack of footsteps on ash and the way no dust ever seemed to cling to him.

Before all five of them an orc lay on a bed, his breathing laboured

Hakram Deadhand, born to the Howling Wolves Clan. Once the Adjutant, now the Warlord. Though victory had been won, or the so the clamour outside claimed, two evils yet lay in him. One was horror in the mundane, the spine cracked by the Prince of Bones' hand that now stilled his limbs. Light healing had made the wound livable, but little more. Sorcerous healing of so fine a thing was beyond the ken of any on Calernia save perhaps the finest mage-doctors of Ashur. None were here. And so instead the Warden had sent for another.

"It was a wound taken defeating the Prince of Bones," Hanno of Arwad quietly said. "It is a tragedy, Warden, but I do not know if it is..."

"Unjust?" Catherine Foundling finished, fingers clenching.

It was a powerful boon, Undo. The stuff legends were made of. But like all legends, it had been dealt into hands that would not abuse it: the White Knight could not unmake what he did not see as unjust, and he was a rare kind of man. The kind that dying so others might not, the bloody pyre of heroism. Many of the Named that had died in Keter, most of them, would remain in the grave. It was not unjust to die willingly for something greater than yourself.

"He didn't die," the Warden said. "Instead they hurt him, White Knight, and did it where it'd cut deepest. He only just got out of that chair and now they put him back into it. For good."

The dark-skinned man met her gaze, his face a calm contrast to her stormy one.

"He's done so much to keep this continent standing that no one but a handful of scholars will ever know about," she told him. "We both know how the world works, Hanno. In the books he'll be the Warlord like it's all he ever was, because that story fits. It's cleaner. The rest will get swept under the rug, and they'll just remember him as a footnote – the first Warlord in ages, broken in Keter. End of the tale."

Her face clenched with fury and grief.

"He deserves better."

Hanno of Arwad did not answer, though he was brave enough not to shy from her burning gaze. The White Knight was not a man whose convictions were easily moved. And yet he stepped back, when instead of trying tirade or persuasion the Black Queen of Callow got down on her knee. Catherine Foundling was a proud woman, it was known. She had held to the bone of that pride ever since, as

a girl, her father had taken into the heart of an empire and the mighty had knelt around them he had told her of a way to live: *we do not kneel*. Her father's truth, one he had lived and died by. Refusing compromise even in the face of death, unbending for anything or anyone.

But Catherine went down on her knee, because she was more than her father's daughter and Hakram Deadhand mattered more to her than pride.

"Please," she asked. "I know there are others as deserving, that you only get once day."

Her fingers clenched.

"And still," she said. "*Please.*"

And Hanno of Arwad let conviction move him, offering a hand then another. The first to bring her back to her feet, shamed she had ever knelt before him, and the second laid on the Warlord's side. **Undo**. Creation shivered, then the White Knight let out a small breath as he stepped away. The Hierophant replaced him, weaving an incantation, and after his eye ceased moving around he pulled back to give the others a nod.

"His body is in perfect condition save for the limbs cut by the Severance," he said.

The Warden and the White Knight matched gazes for a long moment, Catherine Foundling dipping her head into a nod that said much without need for words. Hanno returned it.

"I'll see you outside," he said.

"Might be you will," she agreed.

And with a mute goodbye at the Princess, Hanno of Arwad left the small room where he had brought a miracle. He was not one of the Woe, and the last evil that lay in Hakram Deadhand's body was not the kind to be beheld by outsiders. The orc began to stir awake as the White Knight closed the door behind him, Hierophant still standing by his bedside. Hakram woke feverish and befuddled, as if did not recognize where he was. His vision swam into focus, coming to Catherine, and tension left him.

"Cat," he gravelled. "Where are we?"

Her jaw clenched.

"Keter," she told him, hoping.

The Dead King's curse had been a mind-killer, but only half of it had reached him. Vivienne had caught the other. The confusion on the tall orc's face deepened, to the horror of the others.

"What is the last thing you remember?" Masego briskly asked.

"Heading for the Arsenal," Hakram told them. "Would someone get me out of these bindings, they-"

And the horror on his face when he saw the limbs lost to the Severance was like a blow to the stomach for them all. He fought to master his face, but the anguish was too deep and sudden to be smoothed away.

"I," he began, then his voice broke. "How much did I lose?"

"Two years," Indrani said.

"There might be more," Masego said. "It is too early to tell."

"It should have been less," Vivienne bit out. "I caught the spell, it-"

Her words caught his eye, and the way he stiffened did not go unseen by any of them.

"You don't remember who I am, do you?" Vivienne Dartwick softly asked.

Hakram shook his head, the hint of shame on his face burning the rest of them like acid. The Princess swallowed thickly, blue-grey eyes turning to Hierophant.

"There has to be a way," she said. "You told us the curse is still in him, why can't you purge it?"

"It is," Hierophant simply said, "the Dead King's work."

Even from the grave, Trismegistus King's will was not to be easily overwrit.

"There's always a way, with curses," Catherine Foundling said. "You taught me that. The magic fails if there's not a way out."

"It has a price," Hierophant said. "And it will not bring everything back."

"But most," Catherine pressed.

"Most," he conceded.

And the Warden stepped forward, but a hand was laid on her arm and she found Vivienne Dartwick's gaze had turned to steel.

"No," Princess said. "Not this time. Let me."

Neither woman gave, but eventually the Warden was the one to look away. Vivienne knelt by the bed, Masego's hand on her shoulder, and faced a hesitant Hakram.

"You don't remember me, right now," she told him, "but I haven't forgotten. There's a debt between us, Hakram Deadhand."

"I cannot call on it," he replied.

"You don't have to," she said.

And Hierophant's other hand came to rest atop the orc's head, his flesh eye finding Princess' own to seek one last confirmation. A simple nod and magic billowed out like the wind. Currents of it, thick and visible to the naked eye as faint blue trails, as Hierophant bound them all together. It was not a spell, not in the way he had been taught as a boy, but something simpler. Will exercised on the world, the purest manifestation of what he had hoped to become. And through that binding, he drew out the curse as one would a poison. It fought and wriggled and tried to sink its hooks deep, but inch by inch it was drawn out of Hakram Deadhand and into the only place it could be.

Vivienne Dartwick let out a shuddering breath, accepting it whole as she closed her eyes.

The magic ebbed low, then guttered out entirely. Hierophant's hand retreated and Hakram suddenly clutched his forehead as he let out a roar of pain. Fangs drawing blood from his own lips, he shook wildly until the fit passed and a light returned to his gaze that had been gone. It lit up the room, reflected in the others around him as their hopes soared and he let out a wounded noise at the sight of the Princess.

"Vivienne," he said. "Gods, Vivienne, what have you-"

The Princess of Callow let out a rasping laugh, eyes opening as the curse's foul magic flared.

"My turn," she said. "The choice came, Hakram."

The curse boiled out, Vivienne Dartwick's left hand turning to ash until there was not even bone left above her wrist.

"And I judge you well worth a hand," she finished.

Looking more fragile than anyone had ever seen him, Hakram let out a grieving curse and drew her into his arms. It was as if a dam had broken, all of them coming together onto the sickbed in a pile of limbs clutching the others tight. The Warden rested her chin atop Indrani's head and breathed in raggedly. For the first time since she had left the Dead King's all, it felt over. Finally over.

"Alive," Catherine Foundling whispered.

Crippled and lost, a parade of the mangled, but they had gone through the storm and all five of them come out the other side breathing.

When she finally let herself weep in relief, she was not alone.

—

There'd been talk of having the ceremony at dawn but when faced with the very real possibility that most of the Grand Alliance would be too hungover to show up common sense prevailed.

It would be held at noon instead, which still ended up requiring the shepherding of a great many nobles and soldiers still quite drunk. The Plaza of Five Palaces, a soldier's sobriquet given during the dark hours of fighting at the foot of the black spire since the Keteran name for it was anyone's guess, remained beautiful even after the previous night's festivities. It had to be cleared out and cleaned but there was no lack of willing hands for the work, for who didn't love a wedding? Besides, Razin Tanja and Aquiline Osenia had become beloved figures beyond even Levant as much for their war record as their open affection for one another.

Guests began arriving an hour before the ceremony, and some soon realized this was to be the most highly attended wedding in the history of Levant. Though the Champion's Blood had no one sitting for them, foreign guests were the most prestigious of perhaps any wedding on Calernia. The First Princess of Procer and every last remaining — recognized — royal of that realm, the queen and princess of Callow, the Empress of Aenia and representatives from every single city of the League, the chancellor of the Confederation of Praes and even the first Warlord of the Clans in several hundred years.

A dash of the exotic was added by the presence of General Rumena and a handful of sigil-holders as well as the Herald of the Deeps and his generals, then a dash of the legendary through the presence of Kreios Riddle-Maker and the last living spellsingers. Had the elves not disappeared without a word, every realm of Calernia would have had someone in attendance.

The Dominion's ways were not as elaborate as those of some other realms, but no less eye-catching for it. Razin Tanja and Aquiline Osenia arrived not in dresses or fine clothes but naked from the waist up, painted entirely in the colours of their Blood: red and grey for the Binder's Blood, green and bronze for the Slayer's. The paints were a work of art, the most skillful hands in Levant having helped shape the elaborate patterns even though it was the betrothed who had themselves applied it as was tradition. The two

of them were a sight, black-haired and handsome Lord Razin smiling softly at slender, lethal Lady Aquiline.

The crowd, made up mostly of guests and Levantines but swelled with thousands of curious soldiers from every stripe and banner, went wild at the sight of them. It felt like spitting on the Dead King's grave, for the young couple to come to stand before the black spire and exchanged their elaborate wedding knives. A tall and bearded Lantern bound their hands together with hemp rope and they cut their way out with the knives, emerging from the common trial wed in the eyes of Gods and men. The two of them kissed with enthusiasm that had the crowd roaring once more, and it was a done thing. Many of them, in some way, knew they were looking at more than just a wedding.

Razin and Aquiline embraced each other under a sunny sky, in the heart of Keter, and it was the first step towards the end of the Dominion. It was the first step towards what would come after, for good or ill, but with the sun so bright and the sky so blue no one thought much of the ill.

—

On the night of the wedding, after the banquet was over and the festivities had ignited all over the city again, a somber few assembled in the palace known as the Garden of Crowns. A great sprawl of greenery and stone, it had been chosen for its silence and beauty. The Revenant that had guarded it was long gone, so in the stillness of the Garden graves had been dug. For all that the day had been the domain of life clawed back from death, with dusk came death's dues.

And there were many of them to pay.

Named were lowered into graves, some who had in life been loved and others hated but who were now all honoured in death. The pillars of the Truce and Terms, Ishaq Deathless and Hanno of Arwad, did not intrude into private the private griefs of the Named assembled before them but they spoke of the commonality binding them all.

"In the face of the end of times," the White Knight said, "we came together. We made accord, where never before had there been so great an accord between Named sworn to Above and Below."

"We're past the storm," the Barrow Sword said. "We lived through it, and now that we have what kept us together will fade. The Liesse Accords will not be the same rules that bound us through this war."

Struggle between Named would begin anew, the Game of the Gods returned. Rules of engagement would bind it as they had not before, but steel would come out once more.

"But those who died here died for more than just Calernia's survival," the White Knight said. "They proved that, when the storm comes, we can stand together. That there is a line between doom and the world, that we all stand on the same side of it."

Eyes went to the Warden, who stood silent by the Ranger's side along with Hierophant and the Warlord, but she said nothing. She had not been the captains of these Named, at the end, and so it was not her place to speak. Hers would be the world that came after, not the funeral of the old one.

"It might be that call won't come again in our lifetime," the Barrow Sword said. "And perhaps we'll never see the likes of this war again. But if the time comes, if horror rises again..."

"There will be a truce," the White Knight said.

"There will be terms," the Barrow Sword continued.

"And when we beat back that storm, the victory of that day will have been bought by those we bury here."

A murmur of agreement, like a shiver in the air. Respected men, both of them, but there was more to it than that. For all the grief that clung strongly to the air in this Garden of Crowns, there was a hard sort of pride as well. They had beaten death, in the end. They stood over the sacrifices, of which there had been too many because there were always too many, but they had won.

And so the world changed.

The crowd broke up, coming apart into half a hundred small burials. Some gathered many grieving, Alexis the Silver Huntress' not only bringing the last two survivors of Refuge but also many who had liked her or fought at her side. Others were small things, like the Hunted Magician's who only earned a single faded flower from the Artificer and the Blacksmith each before he was put to the ground. Sobs filled the night, away from the laughter and merriment that still held much of the city around them, and quietly the lost were given their dues until there was only one left. In a silent corner, standing far from all save Hanno of Arwad, Kreios the Riddle-Maker buried his daughter.

He looked old, and his grief was the grief of all the world.

—

They celebrated the victory for five days and nights.

The festivities lost their edge of desperation as time went on, the disbelieving tinge that came with having survived the end times becoming a sort of jubilant savagery instead. There could be no corralling soldiers finally releasing all the tension and

terror of the war on Keter, especially not when the sergeants and captains that might have tried were part of the hollering crowds. Wisely, no such order was given as the leaders of the Grand Alliance and its allies – historians had already begun to wrestle with the turn of phrase, looking to avoid the repetition and make a name form themselves by picking the one that'd stick – instead rode out the wave. By the sixth morning ale rations had run out and the stashes of contraceptive herbs were running dangerously low, which wound down the merrymaking more efficiently than a thousand shouting sergeants might have.

Armies began to put themselves together again, staggering back to the parts of the city where their banners had been raised. It was slow-going, and though it was rumoured that High Marshal Nim had wanted to hurry it along by sounding the gathering horns and threatening the lash for those who dragged their feet it was also said that Chancellor Alaya had intervened against it. Instead it was stretched out for another day, though soon there were enough soldiers back in the ranks that the work of preparing the departures could begin. Though with continued dwarven support there was no risk of running out of supplies and indeed the Herald of the Deeps invited the hosts to remain as long as they wished – a pretty gesture that some, perhaps cynically, suggested might not be unrelated to the fact that most the Kingdom of the Dead outside Keter and its outskirts remained swarming with undead – for some of them the war was not yet over.

The Principate of Procer had been saved from utter annihilation, but it was still a broken realm of which large swaths were yet occupied by roving corpses.

That knowledge was enough to sour the Proceran forces, often the rowdiest, on the thought of agitating to rest longer in Keter before marching away. With so many officers dead, the camps ravaged and some soldiers still missing even the most disciplined of the armies found it impossible to leave in good time, so compromise was reached. The hosts would leave through Arcadia in waves, the first of which would leave on the morrow: the eighth day since the fall of Keter. Which brought one last matter to the fore, an old promise it was time to fulfill. Though summons were only sent to the Army of Callow and a few of the kingdom's allies, once word trickled out into the ranks there was no stopping the tide. It was, after all, to be a historic event. The kind you got to boast to your grandchildren of having been at.

Some of the nobles thought it a strange choice, to choose the ashen ruin of a breach over a more majestic site like the Dead King's black spire or the Plaza of Five Palaces where the great Levantine wedding had taken place, but none who knew either of the two women. No matter how high Callow's red-handed goddess of victory had risen, she had never quite gotten the mud off her boots – and oh, how her soldiers loved her for it. Even now, even

still, for what else could you offer the woman who had led you to triumph against the King of Death himself? And Vivienne Dartwick, though crowned and heroine twice over, had never shaken the old urge to take to rooftops at night. Princess she might be, but she had once been a thief and not since learned squeamishness.

Besides, the both of them faintly understood something. That the moment where the Army of Callow had crossed the chasm, threw its defiance in the Enemy's teeth and shattered the hold of the dark, had been the end of a tale. One Callow told itself about itself, a tale of bloody victories and long prices and a kingdom earning back the pride it had lost in the Conquest. And just as faintly, they understood – had for years, one way or another – that this tale could not last forever. Must not, lest Callow break itself upon the world again and again, just as surely as Praes once had and still might. And so they would honour that tale, but they would also bury it.

Near a hundred thousand were crammed in the streets and houses, atop rooftops and through ruins. A platform had been raised and greats of the era stood besides it, Named and rulers alike. The hallowed survivors of the war on Keter were resplendent in their armour and finery, but it was not to be their day. It belonged only to the two women on the heights, who had not even sent for a priest.

Princess Vivienne Dartwick stood resplendent in a long dress of Fairfax blue, pale accents evoking the rays of a sun radiating from the neckline. Her missing hand was replaced with a wooden one covered by a white glove. She wore little jewelry save for a silver bracelet, her hair made up in the same milkmaid's braid that had become her signature, but as thousands beheld her none of them would have thought her born as anything but royalty. Behind her stood two veiled banners, held up by knights of the Order of the Stolen Crown.

Queen Catherine Foundling wore black and steel. A soldier queen she had been and would be, wearing scarred plate over a black tunic. The eye she had lost to the Hawk was covered by black eye cloth, down her back went the famous Mantle of Woe and in her hand she held a dreadful staff of dead yew. The sole jewelry she wore was the crown she had been anointed with in Laure, when she stole a kingdom back from Praes after the Folly. She needed nothing else.

The ceremony was, in the end, a simple enough thing. The Black Queen stood before her soldiers, the rest of the world behind them, and told them true.

"I took my crown," Catherine Foundling said, "to fight a war."

Boots on stone, shields and swords rattling. Not only from her own but also from the rest of this grand army, for love or hate

none would deny that the Black Queen had brought them to this day.

"It took us far and wide, that war," she said. "East and west, north and south, until we reached the edge of the world and brought doom to the King of Death himself."

Cheers and shouts, the sky itself rattling from the noise of it. She waited until it wound down, letting it wash over her.

"We won it," the Black Queen said. "Keter has fallen and with it we brought an end to the Age of Wonders."

The crowd roared again. It passed.

"I took my crown to fight a war," Catherine Foundling repeated, "and that war is over."

Slowly, almost regretfully, she reached for the crown on her head. It was as if a spell had been cast over all the city, for a pin could have been heard dropping and none dared to move. None save one: as the Black Queen removed her crown, Vivienne Dartwick stepped forward.

"We'll have peace now," the Warden promised the world. "And I have been war's queen. Peace will need another."

And a roar answered, for though never had Catherine Foundling been more beloved of her people than after this last victory, they loved peace even more and Vivienne Dartwick stood for that. The roar drowned out the entire world, as the princess of Callow smoothly knelt and her queen crowned her. Vivienne rose a queen, and Creation whispered in a quickening perhaps in time a Queen, as the tale of the Black Queen of Callow came to an end. The Warden stepped back, from the kingdom and the stage, leaving both in Queen Vivienne's hands. The queen's face was calm and bright, smiling patiently until the shouting ebbed low, and only then did she speak.

"It would be easier," Queen Vivienne said, "to look only forward. To chase the sun and leave the grim years we fought through behind us."

She shook her head.

"It would be easier," she told the world, "but we have not come so far by choosing what is easy."

She stood tall under the sun in a way that had nothing to do with height, blue and pale and every inch a queen.

"I will not forget that the crown I now bear was forged in mud and blood," Vivienne Dartwick said, voice high and clear, "that

tomorrow we will get to stand the warmth of the sun because of the hard decisions made in yesterday's darkness."

And behind her, the woman who had crowned her went still as stone.

"We made mistakes. Great and small, tragic and laughable. Ours was a long, hard road and more than once we lost our way."

They did not look at each other, but it was a conversation between the two anyhow.

"But I will not deny that road. I will not forget it, try to bury it out of sight," Vivienne said, and there she finally met her friend's eye. "I may regret the mistakes but not the journey."

Something passed between them, too intricate to be simply called love but no less shining for it.

"For that, I feel only pride."

The queen turned back to the other woman's red-rimmed eye.

"It was an orphan, a Foundling, that led us to the edge of the world and brought us back. I'll not let another name steal that deed."

The crowd breathed in.

"House Foundling will rule Callow," Queen Vivienne said. "I will bear the name, as will those who come after me, and *we will not forget.*"

The crowd breathed out, its roaring approval a wall of sound that seemed like it beat back even the wind.

A gesture from the queen and the knights revealed the two banners. The queen's personal arms were unchanged, a white sun on Fairfax blue. But the royal standard, the Sword and Crown, had changed. A silver sword and crown had once been held in balance on it, the sword weighing heavier. Beneath them an old claim had still been writ, *justifications only matter to the just*. No longer. The sword and crown stood even, one no greater than the other, and the words had been cut short.

Only to the just, it simply claimed, as in the Book of All Things.

"We lived through the end times," Queen Vivienne smiled, bright as sun above her. "Now what comes after is ours to make."

[ErraticErrata](#)

Only one chapter left! I'll be making an announcement regarding the Patreon and the break I'll be taking before beginning to make Pale Lights public when the final epilogue comes up, but until then I hope you enjoy the closing of the series.

Mirror Night

Its been a Great Run. Hard to imagine only a single chapter remains. But I suppose all good things must come to end that is the nature of reality.

Enjoy your break EE, you have certainly earned it. And I look forward to Pale Lights a shift from more classical fantasy to a different sort of fantasy where the world has fallen to ruin to agree. Kinda perfect timing lol with Horizon and Elden Ring coming out.

TRUELIKEtheRIVER

Hey, one minor request regarding the discord: If you have the chapter ready on time thursday, can you delay it by 40 minutes for one last RIOT before PGTE is done? (20 minutes past release time riot starts, 20 min after that, riot stops)

edrey

A great journey, but every story has an end. its sad but it is one of the best novels i had read so i have no regrets. thank you.

Onos

Feels like the end of an era. Thanks for the story EE, looking forward to Pale Lights.

[mrwizard70](#)

To everyone who was complaining about last chapter and the way things ended, *this* is why. Car is not horrifically maimed. She, and the world she built, will live on, prospering instead of just surviving. That victory is far greater than anything against death, and required far more of the books runtime. This chapter is victory against the things Cat has fought since page one, not whatever book Nessie showed up

[achillial](#)

I found this story after a brutal injury put me in a wheelchair for several months, and I really can't describe the amount of joy and satisfaction it has brought me over the last few years.

It has been solace in turmoil, a reward for a hard days work, and an inspiration to work on my own stories. The care and craftsmanship that went into this story is genuinely uplifting, and I eagerly look forward to discovering the new worlds you'll build in the future. Thank you for this tale, and I'll see you in the next one.

Mirror Night

Well one more to go until the end of the road. Quite the journey. This felt a bit short though lacked a bit of meat. But I suppose you need to rest a bit after the heights we hit. I suppose it mostly feels light cause all this wrap up is kinda predictable. Hakram Fixed, Viv is Queen, Levant Marriage, Funerals, Truce & Terms Confirmed.

Djinn O'Cide

"Had the elves not disappeared without a word, every realm of Calernia would have had someone in attendance."
Chain of Hunger's missing also. And they really know how to party.

ninegardens

Do the Ratlings really count as realm?

letouriste

i think so. they even have overlords

Crash

Go on then, walk up to a Horned Lord and tell it it ain't shit. I dare you!

They're famously bad guests though. Eat everything in sight.

SuitorShooter

The Ratlings were on the way, they just got delayed eating all the corpses in Procer.

lqueenofblades1

breathes in
mentally screams
breathes out
Fuck it
screams out loud anyways

DeadOfKnight

I have been reading the web serial for 6+ years and I don't never if I have ever commented, but on the eve of story's completion, I just want to thank you for the incredible journey and how much I've enjoyed PGTE!

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

It ROCKS!
You Rock!

Squemish

God it really feels like it is over... but in a good way. One left

Soronel Haetir

I sure hope that epilog says what ended up happening with Anaxares.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

He becomes the new Evil in a Can...

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Since Anaxares in in a Hell, maybe he runs into Triumphant...

ninegardens

Foreign Oligarchs Will Be Eaten By Bees

Eris

Dang. I have no complaints or questions, just appreciation. I've been reading 'A Practical Guide to Evil' as soon as a new chapter would come out for almost two years now. I think it was book 3 or 4 when I got caught up.

It's pretty crazy. My life has changed so much and it'll keep on changing. I'm graduating high school and leaving on a mission, and it's time for me to start being an adult.

It's fitting that my favorite book series ends when the new season of my life starts.

I'll always look back on this with fondness. One of the highlights of my high school was waking up a little earlier every day a new chapter would come out so I could read it before school, so I could think about it and imagine being a Knight of the Broken Bells, or a Proceran Fantassin, etc.

Thank you!!!!

Also Long Live the Republic of Bellerophon!

KageLupus

As you begin the next leg of the journey of your life, remember the lessons you have learned from the Guide. First, do good.

badatgames2911

Those are not the lessons I learned

Veivisurter

199. This list began with the simplest of axioms, the first. In the years since others like you have added to or taken away from it, a chain that goes back further than any of us know, changing and twisting as it grows. In time no two list will be the same, save always in this one regard: there is no two hundredth axiom. That place remains empty, so that once you learn something worth passing down you may fill it yourself. Look forward, as we once did, and let those who come after you learn from our mistakes. What greater gift can there be?

Juff

Typo Thread:

rasping breathed > rasping breath
her throne (throat?)
our ribald > out ribald
years and hopelessness > years of hopelessness
the so the > so the
kind that dying (valued? believed in?)
taken into > taken her into
them he had > them, and he had
once day > once a day
them come > them had come
foreign guests > the foreign guests
and exchanged > and exchange
private the > the
undead – for > undead – as for
two women. (missing something like “were surprised”)

Bufford

God damn EE, way to make me tear up at the end. That was beautiful and I’m glad I got to Witness this miracle of writing.

Zggt

It’s been years. When I started reading this, this story was one of few, online literature being mostly a raw, undeveloped thing. It has stood out from the get-go, and even as the online landscape has wildly changed, that fact remains. I’m so glad that there was no trite “and then the main character died winning the final confrontation”, which has become a tired cliché for writers attempting an epic (looking at you, Sanderson).

Years of reading on the bus on the way to work, a varying number of times a week. From a junior in my field to an expert, through

bad relationships and good, while essentially reinventing myself, this story has been a constant joy. For turning something as tedious as a ride to work into something for which I could get excited. I may have enjoyed it more in a binge, like so many who will get to read it from now on, but somehow, the fact that it has been beside me throughout this journey makes it so much more profound.

Thank you. Thank you so very much.

Wonder

I love that the main Villain party has survived , before I have come to know ,love ,rage at sometimes .

Only to the Just.

Callow begins to recover even now!!
And Cat goes off to build Cardinal.

badatgames2911

HAKRAM AND VIVI Y000000 WELL WORTH A HAND BITCHESSSSSSSSSS

Classic weding shananerganery between the lordlings

Ivah saves cordy woouoooo, gotta have cardinals diplomat at the end

drunk soldiers do be like that tho

RIP WotW. I really hope we get a burial for some of the named we knew more personally. *ROLAND* Cough cough

i guess even tho there was no body the Valiant Champion is truly dead

They said they needed a mage healre from Ashur, but there were none? Was Mage killed????? Wasnt she trained as a healer??

Godrophant is chillin like a Villain

its not over yet. but the ride was wild EE. thank you so much

arcanavitae15

Godrophant, casually ignoring the Laws of Creation.

Earl of Purple

Sapan lives, but she's the Mage. They need the Silver Mage for this, one whose craft is purely dedicated to healing and not bastardised by war magic, artifice and anything else she learnt from Masego.

BargleNawdleZouss

Godrophant, or MaseGod?

badatgames2911

Masegodo

Isi Arnott-Campbell

MaseGodrophant

Reader in The Night

Could Hanno not have healed Antigone with Undo? I know that by Hanno's logic, a single life, even a life dear to him, was a fair price for the death of something like the Drakon. But didn't he bend his rules a bit for Hakram?

Mirror Night

Maybe but I think this is more about giving Cat a happy ending. Not Hanno cause Cat is the main character. The more annoying part is we don't really get much reaction to Hanno losing all his friends...

ninegardens

I mean (A) Hanno is a weirdo, who has been repeatedly stated to be unnaturally serene, and is established to not express emotions so much.

(B) If Hanno undid Antigone's sacrifice, then umm..... Would that bring the Drakon back? Cause unlike Hakram's injury, her death was VERY deeply tied to the death of the Drakon.

Cpt. Obvious

The point about Antigone's death being tied to the death of the Drakon is what makes Hanno using his aspect to help Hakram slightly more palatable for me. There were so many who deserved better than dying. Christophe was about as purely good as anyone, and he was a big reason they managed to off the DK. On top of that he had really tried to learn how the world worked and how Good didn't always equal good.

But Hanno and Antigone loved each other and the only reason I can see for him not to try to bring her back is if her death is what's keeping the Drakon from resurrection.

shikkarasu

There's also the issue of it being a sacrifice. It was mentioned that even Tariq could not **Forgive** self-inflicted harm when Masego was being possessed by DK in proto-

Twilight. The act of inflicting the harm on yourself makes it harder to heal in-universe.

Becoming like a god and devouring herself? There was nothing left to heal and you would have to fight the will of the god she briefly was to do it.

ohJohn

Even setting aside whether he sees her death as an injustice, not just a deep personal wound – I'd worry that to revive her would just be to reincarnate a god of devouring. BEST case scenario there, she immediately gobbles herself back up.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I feel you about Hanno, but the fact that Cat didn't lose any of her direct companions in the final battle is A) not a fact to begin with: her almost-girlfriend and favorite treacherous advisor has been voluntarily trapped in a role that has been observed to break the spirit of so great a being as the Wandering Bard; and B) the first true happy ending Cat has gotten in the story.

You wanna talk about main characters' dead friends? Ratface, John Farrier and his fellow Gallowborne, the entirety of Liesse, Robber, Nauk, almost Hakram on several occasions that came close enough to be worth mentioning in terms of pathos, Amadeus, Captain (Cat's de facto mom), almost all of Indrani's adoptive siblings from when Hye raised her, many of whom went to their graves not knowing she'd ever cared they were alive, both of Masego's dads, Juniper's mother; I could go on. I get where you're coming from about Hanno being unable to keep even one friend and not getting the screentime to mourn them properly, but it's more surprising that the Woe is as intact as it is than that several heroic bands with one common member were almost wiped out.

Still would've been cool to have Raphaela around, at the very least.

arcanavita¹⁵

Either there wasn't enough of her left due to her heroic sacrifice or he didn't view heroic sacrifices as unjust.

Piu

Well, as we saw he can Undo something happened millenia ago (DK resurrection). So nothing says he can't Undo Antigone's death tomorrow... But it seems he lacks justification for that.

Rey d`Tutto

Heroic Sacrifice UNDOne also breaks what that Sacrifice/
Killed/Destroyed/Maimed/Shredded/Obliterated/etc.
Or not.

JJR

I'd guess that undoing a heroic sacrifice is "possible" but would also undo the effects of the sacrifice. So Antigone comes back but so does the Drakon. You'd could get a story about being careful with your powers that way.

caoimhinh

The added rule of "Hanno needs to think it is unjust to Undo it" seems weird and even goes against what Hanno himself had perceived when he obtained that Aspect, which was "Once a day, he can Undo a tragedy", which -let's not forget- was awakened to resurrect Marshal Nim who had died fighting the Scourges.

The bit about needing to think of those things as unjust in order to Undo them was added afterward, probably to justify the many wounds and dead that will remain as such. But Hanno could resurrect the Dead King using Undo, so this really doesn't fly that much.

It would make sense that he can't resurrect someone for whom there's not a body left, though.

Peter Emuss

I was always under the impression that Hanno had to consider it unjust in order to *Undo* it from its very first use – he'd made a mistake not listening to *Save* because he wanted to try and finish off the Prince of Bones first and Nim was dead because of that mistake. It's been there from the beginning of the aspect to my mind, even if it wasn't explicitly stated. Plus it is thematically very appropriate for Hanno to judge what is fair, given his journey.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2022/01/28/interlude-legends-iv/>

As for the Dead King, it was unjust that he could continue gaming the system when good men died and, more than that, his avowed commander had *Sentenced* him to live-then-die and that's the very definition of just if Hanno's going to trust Cat's judgement.

shikkarasu

Even if he didn't view it that way, I think **Sentence** bent the rules to let them get away with it. It's basically Dark

Providence. I would go so far as to say that it's also the reason that ZeZe was able to catch DK's soul so easily;
Sentence > Return.

clooneh

Would Hanno have seen it as an unjust death? I think he would have seen it as a noble sacrifice and the very sad one, but not unjust.

Zach

I think the main difference is that Hakram getting paralyzed wasn't really something deliberately/knowingly done "in exchange" for defeating Prince of Bones. It was just an injury he took in the course of a fight. But Antigone deliberately sacrificed herself to defeat the Drakon, with the weight of that sacrifice likely being necessary to the outcome.

It would be different if the Drakon had given her a fatal injury prior to her defeating it – that would be more analogous to what happened to Hakram.

arcanavitae15

I am so happy to have read this and to see it March on through the years. Thank you for making this EE. I learned a lot of from this story that I will carry with me for a long time. It was a great adventure and an even greater story.

donteatme

Thank you so much for this wonderful series EE. The dedication required to write so much is truly amazing. Also Anaxares?

arcanavitae15

The abdication was so striking for me, a bittersweet moment that was both a beautiful new start but also a tragedy, I teared up the most at this part.

arcanavitae15

Hanno of Arwad did not answer, though he was brave enough not to shy from her burning gaze. The White Knight was not a man whose convictions were easily moved. And yet he stepped back, when instead of trying tirade or persuasion the Black Queen of Callow got down on her knee. Catherine Foundling was a proud woman, it was known. She had held to the bone of that pride ever since, as a girl, her father had taken into the heart of an empire and the mighty had knelt around them he had told her of a way to live: we do not kneel. Her father's truth, one he had lived and died by. Refusing compromise even in the face of death, unbending for anything or anyone.

But Catherine went down on her knee, because she was more than her father's daughter and Hakram Deadhand mattered more to her than pride.

"Please," she asked. "I know there are others as deserving, that you only get once day."

Her fingers clenched.

"And still," she said. "Please."

This shook me, it depicts how much her father effected her life and his ideals but also how she has grown past it. Amadeus references always make me feel so awed in how well they are done.

Soronel Haetir

The one that struck me was "There's a debt between us, Hakram Deadhand". Usually that would be someone calling in a debt, not admitting that they owe.

arcanavitae15

"Crippled and lost, a parade of the mangled, but they had gone through the storm and all five of them come out the other side breathing."

That is the sum of the Woe, broken and lost who found each other and found that they were no longer alone.

[Adrian V](#)

Well almost there, any sugestion for wich extra chapter to read (apart from Saint's chapters) once they are made public?

Also stupid onion ninjas, they are already preparing for the next battle.....

Стас Бушнев

Fetters, then Scriven.
But they all are very good.

[Peter Emuss](#)

In my opinion, they are all superb and should just be read one after the other.

ohJohN

SCRIBE Scribe SCRIBE

ohJohN

also Neshamah!

(they're all genuinely great, those 2 just stuck out as particularly powerful or fascinating chapters)

*arcanavita*15

I am so happy that Viv gave credit to Cat and that she has the possibility of not being remembered in a negative light that means so much to Cat.

[Natman717](#)

I've been deleting emails for this story, and not reading chapters for what feels like forever. Read consistently for like 3 years and just stopped one day, last I remember the crew was in some like pocket dimensions school/vault place that was being invaded by fae? during some special truce with Keter? I think? But for some reason I read this chapter, and damn it felt good. Not sure if I'll ever have the energy to go back and read what I missed, but I'm glad I'm here for the end. I'll Always think about this story even if I don't read it anymore and I just have to say thanks for how many memories lie with this adventure. Truly an amazing story, one of the jewels of the web novel era.

bellacohl

Oh boy, I'm not writing much in this comment because I know I'll rant in the last epilogue, but god dammit this was so good

Sunday

Thanks a lot EE

This story means a lot to me, it's probably my favourite work of fiction

Doom Ms Evildoom

Thanks for the book, EE. It's been a constant part of my life for years now, and I'm not sure what I'm going to do once it's gone. It ended perfectly.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Top 5 favorite fiction writers.
Tolkein, Asimov, Heinlein, Jordan, and EE.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

You moved Herbert (& Son) to #6

badatgames2911

Adding window here. Wibbles books are always great and worm was something else. EE and Weeble are some of my favorite fantasy writers for these two books alone.

Hargabga

I have stuck with this story for 4 years, and it changed and influenced me in the lot of ways. I found it when beginning a new stage in life, and this book has been one of the few red lines tying it throughout. And now it ends, and, coincidentally or not, that stage of life ends too. Sweeping changes rage and I may not find anything like this book again to tide me through thick and thin, but damn, it was a good ride. And I'll remember it forever.

lenethren

Loved this. Thank you again for sharing this marvelous story you created.

Sugar Roll

Now where is Abigail in all of this? Is she partaking in her share of rash decisions?

alexjmScott

She's probably sat in a command tent/office somewhere, trying to figure out what's about to blindside them while they're distracted by the revelry. She's a pessimist at heart, is the Fox: you don't get something good without a catch, in her experience, and for something this good there's going to be one hell of a catch coming. And if she wants to retire to Laure on a general's pension, she's going to make sure that she gets back there in one piece.

beleester

"Only to the just, it simply claimed, as in the Book of All Things."

I had to search for this – it's in one of the epigraphs:

"Thus the Gods granted us the second boon: beyond the veil of death lies a land of always plenty, which will only be open to the just."

So taking Cat's motto, but changing it from mockery of the idea of justice to an honest endorsement of it.

Sinead

Not only that, but they had open Callow for those to return in good faith: first the Thirteenth, and thrn the goblins, as well as other elements of the Praesi diaspora.

Callow is a land of plenty in a lot of ways. And this now holds
tgdm to it.

gir

“before all four of them an orc lay on a bed” – shouldn’t this be
five? cat, vivienne, indrani, masego, and hanno.

mindsword2

I believe I started reading around the Lord of Silver Spears.
It’s been a long time and this will almost certainly be marked as
my favorite web novel ever read. I quote this work nearly every
week it feels like and the words and phrases have sunk deep.

Ever worthy, EE.

megaprr

So damn good.

End of an era.

[Draconic](#)

Thank you for this journey.

[Yuz](#)

It was wonderful.
Thank you, truly.

Barrendur

Not perfect, but *good*. Not new, but *original*. Not balanced,
but skewed in the readers’ favour. Thank-you for sharing this, EE

JRogue

I cannot possibly say “thank you” enough, but...

Thank you.

BargleNawdleZouss

I would be totally fine if EE wants to take a week or two to
write Epilogue II, and give us the Tolkienesque extended ending
(immediate AND long-term aftermath) that we’re all craving.

David Stone

I wonder if Cat will add Keter’s flag to her Mantle.

Daniel E

A barb about taxes immediately struck me as more random than normal. A quick search later: Book 1 Chapter 1- "How many Praesi does it take to change a lantern's wick?

A legion to conquer all the candlemakers, a High Lord to sell the wicks down south and then we're taxed for being in the dark."

– Overheard in a Laure tavern

[daletutor](#)

Truly wonderful, sad that it's finally coming to an end thou

Arexus Galia

This is the first time I'm ever commenting here, but I've been following your wonderful tale for years now. I was studying in college when I first started. You engrossed me so much in your work that I would sometimes read it instead of paying attention to the prof. And here we are now. Years later I know have a job, and now the tale of Catherine ends. It was a hell of a ride. And I would like to thank you for your years of work. God bless man, and good luck in your next endeavor.

P.S.: Abigail better get her bloody pension. She deserved it!

Rabblrouser

I feel like a kid again and my best friend is moving away. I hate to see these characters go, but their story is told.

ethericsentinel

Cordelia Hasenbach has learned a deep truth: There's always a boom tomorrow.

SomeGuyWhoReadsThings

Man I feel like a little hole is about to open up on my weekly routine. And a bigger one in my heart for all these characters. It's been so long that I legit can't remember a time when I didn't read this first thing in the morning. Such monumental work mate well done, can't wait to read it all in one go now 😊

john

So Masego became the God of Figuring Out How To Be A God Correctly?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Does that mean he'll one day lend his patronage to other would-be gods, at least as long as they aren't threatening his friends' legacies?

starflower

I'm just crying and laughing and having my breath caught so much.

[vuthuha912](#)

Yeah. Amadeus never went down on his knees to beg for Alaya life. I am not sure kneeling would have worked for Amadeus but it really makes me think about his attitude to life. He never beg for help, he will find away to achieve his goals and help others (the ones he wanted to help). Sometimes being vulnerable is the answer. Just ask for help you idiot.

Epilogue II

"At the end, there will be more than the Gods.

With the Last Dusk will come the passing of Creation, discording turning to concord as the wager of Fate is resolved. Yet it shall not be the end of everything, for though all came of the emptiness of Void to create is to make something from nothing. That is our gift, and so the sum of the choices we have made will echo beyond the bounds of time.

In the end, we are told, they will all have mattered."

– Last page of the Book of All Things

The valley, they told Catherine, was called the Knightsgrave.

It was a pretty sight, tall grass split by a burbling mountain spring whose banks grew thick with red flowers. That was not unusual, in the Red Flower Vales – which in these parts the native Procerans called the Vermillion Valleys – but the mage tower surrounded by a few cottages was. Half a dozen wizard families and twice that in simple students had made their home in the Knightsgrave, a small hidden school of wizardry in the mountains. The temple built by the cottages made it plain that the House of Light was keeping on them, but both the brother there and the magistrate in nearby Beaumaraïs knew and approved of the school.

Neither recognized that they were being visited by the Warden and the White Knight until they were told, and quickly acceded to silence when it was asked of them. Borders were still being drawn, after all, but Beaumaraïs might well be part of the lands ceded to Cardinal before the year was out.

The burial of the Rogue Sorcerer, Roland de Beaumarais, attracted something of a crowd. Magistrate Alisanne handled the early arrangements, but then turned the affair over to Brother Albert. Catherine Foundling had known many a shade of grief over her years, both hers and that of others, so she did not ask why the beautiful grey-eyed woman could not stand to look at the coffin. Roland had said there would be a woman in Beaumarais and there was no need to ask who she might be.

It was a simple but heartfelt service. Brother Albert did not take up too much of the talking, ceding the place instead to Roland's father – his last living parent, after his mother's death two years past from the green fever – who spoke of the light there had been in his son since he'd been a child, of how proud he was that he had gone out into the world to chase the murderer of his brother Olivier. Roland the Beaumarais, it seemed, was something of a local hero. He'd fought off an evil wizard as a teenager, rumoured to be a Praesi warlock, and founded the small wizard school.

Magistrate Alisanne's eyes were hard as flint all through the service. Eyes turned to her several times, expectant, but she never spoke a word.

Hanno spoke instead, of the good he had seen Roland do and the love others yet bore for him. The eyes of the young wizards shone, when they heard of the company a man who'd once been a boy here had risen to keep. Of the people he had helped, the evils he had defeated. Catherine Foundling, when her turn came, spoke only two sentences.

"He took an arrow meant for me," she quietly said. "The debt I owe him is greater than words can convey."

Roland was buried by the banks of the spring among a bed of red flowers. A stele of stone was left to remember him by, simply reading: *Roland de Beaumarais, the Rogue Sorcerer. A life spent for another is never wasted.* As dusk approached the crowd dispersed, heading back into town for the funerary banquet. The White Knight took a single look at the magistrate and the once-queen standing among red flowers before taking his leave with them, leaving them to the privacy of their grief.

"None of the people who came knew him," Magistrate Alisanne quietly said. "Most came to Beaumarais after he left, attracted by rumours of the school."

"Not even his father?" the Warden asked.

A bitter smile answered.

"Especially not him," the magistrate replied.

Catherine Foundling was the keeper of many secrets, and so she did not ask why the other woman had insisted on a closed casket funeral when the body was well-preserved and had allowed none to gaze at the body. Roland had been a friend, one of the finest she'd ever had. She would not pry at his secrets while standing over his grave.

"I meant it," the Warden said, "when I said I owed him a debt. He spoke of you while dying."

The grey-eyed woman's face twisted with grief before she mastered herself. Only then did she answer the implicit offer.

"The rumours say that Cardinal grows by the day," she said.

"We're still laying the foundations," the Warden admitted. "Though houses have been raised for workers and officials."

It had been a year and a half since the fall of Keter, but work had only begun six months past. The Principate was dragging its feet recognizing the borders despite Cordelia's best efforts, though she had assured Catherine that it was not malfeasance. Part of the lands currently belonged to Orne, who had effectively declared independence during the Principate's collapse and had only loosely been brought back into the fold. First Princess Rozala could have pushed harder on the matter, but she already had too many demands on her time between the campaigns to recover the north and the negotiations with the secessionists in the south. Cardinal was at no risk of pulling blades and so very much down the list.

"Then perhaps I should go north," Magistrate Alisanne mused. "Our prince has called for officials to join the resettling of Brabant now that the verdant companies drove the dead from it."

"If that is your choice, I can put in a word for you," the Warden said. "Princess Beatrice is an old acquaintance; she would do me a small favour without thinking twice."

Princess Beatrice Volignac, who had formally abdicated all claim over Hainaut and pledged her army to the reconquest in exchange for the Highest Assembly granting her the principality of Brabant, was also in dire need of skilled officials. The ruling line of Brabant and its capital had both been wiped out, leaving the land in such brutal anarchy that the commoners were begging the orc mercenaries who'd driven back the dead to stay and settle in empty villages. Some were accepting, the Silver Letters had sent in their latest report to Cardinal, and there was already talk in Beatrice's court of inviting a goblin tribe to try to cut down on the costs of reconstructions. The roaring success of that gamble in Brus under the Kingfisher Princes was inviting imitation.

"And Iserre?" the magistrate idly said, tone gone teasing.

"Rozala Malanza's less likely to do me favours freely," the Warden drily replied, "but I could arrange something there too. I wouldn't advise heading there unless you want to see some fighting, though."

The grey-eyed woman's brow rose in surprise.

"Would it truly come to war so soon after the last?"

"Salamans is backing their own Milenan to contest Malanza's and they're not backing down," Catherine Foundling said. "They'll want to avoid open war with the Highest Assembly, but they want to use a civil war Iserre to break its southern ambitions."

Much of the south yet refuse to recognize Rozala Malanza as the legitimate First Princess, alleging in a fit of irony that she had usurped the good and rightful ruler of Procer – First Prince Cordelia Hasenbach. Using that pretext they were resisting being brought back into the Principate, though the real reasons were rather more pragmatic. Not only had the First Princess sworn to unseat every royal who had not sent armies to Keter but the Arlesite principalities had been the least hurt by the war and would be the first to recover. Few of them were enthusiastic at the prospect of being heavily taxed for the next fifty years to pay for the recovery of Procer's heartlands, the same Alamans princes that had been their rivals for power in Salia for centuries.

Only the swing of public opinion in favour of the First Princess since the victory in Keter had stopped war from erupting, but that would not last. Rozala Malanza was not as skilled a diplomat as her predecessor, for all that she was significantly more beloved of the people of Procer.

"I've never had a taste for war," Magistrate Alisanne finally said. "And that was before I lost him to it."

The grey-eyed woman shook her head, smiling at the grave.

"I should see, I think, what dream it is that he gave his life for," she decided. "Let it be Cardinal."

—

The opening of Cardinal College drew the greats of all Calernia.

Even after four years and fortunes spent Cardinal still looked like it was only half-done, but what *had* been done was spectacular. At the narrowing of the pass between Procer and Callow there had once been a fortress called the Bloody Twins, but the fighting of the Tenth Crusade – the duel between two dead

legends, the Sovereign of Red Skies and Antigone Drakonslayer – had broken it and masses of stone been dropped from a Hell. Using the old fortress as a foundation and the fallen stone as materials, an army of stonemasons from the signatories to the Liesse Accords had begun to build the city.

Now two great square towers of grey stone rose as tall as the mountain they ate into, a great plaza passing between though they connected by a massive arched bridge – Concord Bridge, it was called – that stood half a league above the ground. From a distance the entire College looked like a gargantuan arch curving towards the clouds, and radiating outwards from it the bones of a city had been raised. Large avenues split the grounds like the lines on a sundial, districts swallowing the northern and southern valleys as tunnels were being carved through the mountains to bind the mountain-city together. Great swaths were still empty, but already a trading town on the Callowan side that heavy grain imports had driven demand had been founded and the districts around the College filled up.

The rest was yet as villages dotting the empty belly of a great city, workers come from abroad and migrants drawn by rumours of work taking up residence in clumps, but in time the city would fill itself. It might never be as large as Salia or Ater, the mountains would forbid such heedless growth, but in time it might become one of the great cities of Calernia regardless. Finishing to would be the work of decades yet, but already Cardinal had begun to pay for itself in part by collecting taxes in coin and food from its territories on both sides of the Whitecaps. It was a long way from no longer needing foreign coin to continue growing, but it would be provided for some years yet.

Besides, Chancellor Alaya and Empress Basilia had proved willing to sink a great deal more gold into the city than the Accords mandated. Not without concessions to show for it, of course, but negotiations with the seneschal of the city had not yielded as much as they might have hoped. Lady Cordelia was yet one of the finest diplomats on the continent.

Guests had begun arriving a month before the ceremony was due, but the grand names only in the sennight before. The incoming tide of crowned heads excited even the already infamously blithe Cardinalians, who had seen so many great works of magic used to mundane building purposes that very little could yet shock them. Formal reception only took place when the last of the delegations arrived, in the grand plaza between the two towers of the College. It was a long, ceremonious affair where the delegations marched up the avenue one after another to be welcomed and only made less dull to behold for the crowds by how richly dressed the delegations were.

The Warden, head of the still mostly empty ruling council of Cardinal, gave out those welcomes with the other three sitting members. Lady Cordelia Hasenbach, seneschal of the city, who had also taken on diplomatic and judicial duties that would in time be beyond the office's remit when they could be distinguished from the administrative ones. Lady Pickler, intendant of works, who had already fallen into the habit of rarely attending any meeting that did not involve allocation of funds. And lastly General Grem One-Eye, the famous Praesi general who had quietly retired at the end of the War on Keter and taken the offer of commanding Cardinal's fledgling army.

The Lord Hierophant having adamantly refused the office of Rector of Cardinal College in favour of remaining a permanent Senior Lecturer, he had gotten out of attending. First Princess Rozala and her consort Louis Rohanon were welcomed first, a panoply of princes trailing behind them.

"They tell she might be pregnant with a second," the Warden muttered.

"It was only a matter of time," Lady Cordelia replied in a murmur. "She was trying as early as last year."

Catherine Foundling let out a low whistle.

"During that mess in Salamans?" she said. "Bold."

It had been a tense time, and if not for their intervention the situation might well have devolved into open war between the League and the Principate. In the wake of the First Princess' decisive victories in Iserre, Salamans had broken into civil war only for its south to be invaded by the Prince of Tenerife in a lightning march. He had then formally applied to join the League of Free Cities, throwing lit matches into tinder. Valencis had immediately pulled out of its negotiations with the Highest Assembly, making a marriage alliance with Tenerife instead, and when the First Princess had directly intervened in Salamans she'd run into Tenerifan forces in the south that refused to cede the ground. An accidental skirmish turned into battle then drew Empress Basilia into the conflict, for though Tenerife could not be welcomed into the League in the Hierarch's absence it had status enough as an applicant to ask help of the Protector of the League.

With League armies camped a mere ten miles away from the Principate's in southern Salamans, there had been the scent of steel in the air.

The Warden's arbitration and a great deal of bargaining behind closed doors had helped tensions return to a simmer, but the miracle that put it to rest came in the form of Anaxares the Hierarch. Emerging from the Hells in the city of Orense, which

even after being returned to the Proceran fold was holding out, he collapsed the siege and led the citizenry into declaring the independent Republic of Orense before the White Knight chased him off. With another fire in her backyard as the insurrection spread across the principality, the First Princess agreed to a partition of Salamans, ceding the northern half the Principate kept between Iserre and her own Aequitan.

In return she received an open guarantee that Valencis would never receive help from Tenerife or be allowed to apply to join the League, a diplomatic coup that forced the rulers of Valencis to return to the negotiating table with a much weaker hand and a ruined reputation.

"If her south didn't keep setting itself on fire, she'd have most of the north back by now," General Grem opined in a growl.

Brabant and southern Lyonis had been reclaimed, but beyond that little else. Prince Otto Redcrown had led the return of the Lycaonese exodus, helping in the reconquest of Brus as he went, but though Neustria had been reclaimed and Rhenia relieved the rest remained in the hands of the dead. A push had seized the Morgentor and closed Twilight's Pass, but otherwise the great prince of the north seemed content to slowly reclaim old Lycaonese lands by pushing a little further every summer. He had done this with little help from any southerner save the Kingfisher Prince, who himself had been forced to essentially occupy southern Lyonis so the dead would not spill back through it into Brus after royal forces withdrew.

There was talk of a marriage with Sophie Louvroy, abdicated princess of Lyonis and last survivor of the main branch of the House of Louvroy, to formalize the arrangement.

After the Procerans came and went the rulers of Levant replaced them, riding with their lords of the Blood. King Razin and Queen Aquiline advanced under the star-studded banner of the Thuraya, the name they had adopted upon being crowned by the Majilis. The young queen's obvious pregnancy drew even more eyes than the appearance of the rather famous Lord Ishaq Rabia, first of the Barrow's Blood, whose town on the southern edge of the Brocelian was said to be growing fast.

"That succession is going to be a headache even if they have a kid," the Warden grunted. "Mark my words."

"The Circle of Thorns believe they want three children," Lady Cordelia noted. "One to inherit Levante and the crown after them, the other two for Malaga and Tartessos."

"The Majilis isn't toothless enough to allow that," Catherine Foundling replied. "They surrendered veto power, but it doesn't make them pushovers."

"Vaccei and Alava will threaten revolt, I agree," Lady Cordelia mused. "They will have to water their wine, pass the cities to kinsmen. It is doing them a favour in the long term, I would think."

"Three royal branches all with their own cities?" Lady Pickler snorted. "Because *that's* not a civil war in thirty years. I thought you said they were smart kids, Cat."

"They're still Blood," the Warden sighed, "it comes with some blinders. They've done well otherwise."

With the Levantines come and gone, the Callowan royal procession approached. Queen Vivienne of Callow led it, her recent husband prince-consort Cathal Iarsmai close behind. Though rumours had spread that marrying Grand Duchess Kegan's eldest grandson had been her price to keep Daoine in the Kingdom of Callow, the couple seemed happy enough. Cathal was only some years younger than the queen, after all, and handsome in the Deoraithe way.

"How much younger is he?" Lady Pickler asked.

"Just turned twenty," the Warden said.

"And divorced last year," Lady Cordelia said, sounding like she enjoyed the scandal. "A stroke of luck for Kegan, that, the second closest grandson is still twelve."

"If she'd been willing to settle for a nephew it could have been done years ago," the Warden noted, "but she wanted her own blood in the royal line."

House Foundling would inherit the same as any other, in the end, save that if it turned unworthy there would be a great many orphans ready to restore dignity to the crown. The decision had been contentious in the early years, but Queen Vivienne's reign had been peaceful and prosperous. Plenty had a way of silencing doubts, and the kingdom's rising trade guilds paired with the resettling of Liesse had occupied energies that might otherwise have turned to mischief.

After Callow came the League of Free Cities, Empress Basilia her vassal rulers of Nicae and Stygia arriving first. Formal diplomats from the other cities followed, as though Anaxares the Hierarch had kept his Name he had spurned invitations to return to the League when invited during his reappearance in Orense. It had been considered a surrender of the title, even by Bellerophon, which had allowed the League cities to resume foreign affairs and vote on joining the Liesse Accords.

"They'll have another Hierarch within the decade," the Warden said. "Basilia's getting too powerful, they'll want something to balance her influence."

And should she refuse, it might well come to civil war within the League. Which she could not afford, given that she was still trying to get Tenerife accepted as a member-state.

"She will pare down the powers of the office and get Tenerife brought into the fold as a trade," Lady Cordelia predicted.

"Don't say that in front of Ikaroi," Genera Grem grunted in amusement. "He'll send it home."

The head archivist of Cardinal College, Nestor Ikaroi, was not longer formally of the Secretariat but was still rather openly and amiably spying for Delos. He was so useful none of them particularly minded. The humour that had touched them at that retreated when the following delegation arrived.

Chancellor Alaya did not come in person, which only strengthened the rumours she was not far from stepping down – and that the Warden would kill her should they meet in person – but both High Marshal Nim and one of Lord Councillors had been sent, a strong showing. Especially so considering that Lord Councillor Sargon Sahelian being increasingly charged with foreign diplomacy was speculated to be a sign that the chancellor wanted him to succeed her.

"Queen Vivienne will be miffed," Cordelia predicted. "She would prefer High Lady Abreha to be in his place."

"Of course she would," Catherine Foundling snorted, "the old fox's promised to sell Callow the Blessed Isle if she's elected chancellor."

The border between the Confederation of Praes and the Kingdom of Callow had been a matter of some debate after the end of the War on Keter. The Blessed Isle was in Praesi hands and the Fields of Streges in Callowan ones, but the land had never been formally ceded and there had never been a declaration of war between either realms since the secession of Callow. Chancellor Alaya had traded the disarmament of the Isle to the Callowan crown in exchange for a lasting treaty that allowed the Confederation to buy a fixed quantity of grain at a fixed price every year, bolstering her position and securing food for Ater, but the borders had yet to be formally fixed.

"Sargon Sahelian's trade policies are sounder," Cordelia firmly said. "And his support for Cardinal College significantly stronger."

"You just want to edge Mercantis entirely out of the spice trade, you cutthroat bitch," the Warden fondly said. "At least own it."

"Their position as the perennial middleman is a loss to all of Calernia," Lady Cordelia righteously replied, but her lips twitched.

The northern realms came in swift succession. First the Herald of the Deeps, formally recognized as king of Kishar when he'd signed the Accords two years past, who'd come with a small retinue whose splendid armour was still eclipsed by the colourful parade of fire spirits that flocked to him like birds.

"Good call renaming Keter something that starts with a K," Lady Pickler said. "It'll make it stick sooner."

"I am sure that is the only reason the name was chosen," Lady Cordelia drawled. "Well spotted, my lady."

"I'm not taking that lip from someone who giggles at being called Cordy when she's drunk," the goblin bit back.

Following the dwarves came the representatives from burgeoning Zemebreg, the Firstborn colony that dwelled in the city once called Cleves. Mighty Rumena itself led it accompanied by a pack of the wandering riddle-priests endemic to its city that had become famous in the Principate. With them came the envoys from Serolen itself, eldest and greatest of the spreading drow cities, came greater names. Mighty Radegast led the group, now famous for the terrifying mercenary army it had led in Nesutria and Rhenia on Prince Otto's behalf. Then Ivah of the Losara, First Under the Night and Lord of Silent Steps. The priest was perhaps the best-known of the Firstborn, nowadays, for it had spent several years in the Principate after the end of the War on Keter. The bargains it had struck with the First Princess for mercenary sigils had been instrumental in clawing back control of the western coast, allowing Segovian shipping to resume to Prince Otto's realm.

"I'm glad Malanza didn't bring any of the Most Holy or we'd have a brawl on our hands," the Warden said, and it was not entirely a jest.

There were many names for the worship of Sve Noc, these days. The Tenets of Night remained most common, but the Faith of Crows and the House of Night were spreading as well. In Callow mostly through the Army, and aside from a scuffle over an order of knights that had insisted on being allowed anointment in Night to outrage from the House Constant there had been little trouble. It was seen as a soldier's cult, little more. In Procer and the Grey Eyries, however, things had taken a different turn. The Matrons had banned the worship, only for the measure to be backfire by spreading word and then be overturned by Chancellor Alaya besides, and now they were said to be wrestling with a great deal of unrest.

In Procer it had grown beyond that, however. Night was simply too tempting a power for a realm where banditry and roving bands of undead were still a real threat even all these years later. The House of Light's campaign of words to denounce the heresy had taken strong root in the south, but it had rung hollow north in the heartlands and north where drow sigils and wandering riddle-priests looking for worthy foes had saved many a life. Though yet frowned upon, the Faith of Crows was spreading and the Liesse Accords prevented the Highest Assembly from making this illegal. Hostility between the Proceran House and the Losara – considered a priest-caste in the Principate, and not without reason – in particular had risen to dangerous heights.

"Be glad we did not invite Tenerife," Lady Cordelia grimly replied. "They gave back their House the right to raise troops."

The last delegation to arrive, and not by happenstance, was that from Thalassocracy of Ashur. It was the last realm of Calernia not to have signed the Liesse Accords, and its envoys were the reason so many great names had come to the opening of Cardinal College. It would have been an important moment on its own, but the last signatory joining the Accord added great weight. Seven years after the fall of Keter, the Ashuran civil war had finally been brought to an end and the results had been expected by few. Instead of the Hadast claimant pushed by Arwad or Smyrna's insistence a Tyrian from overseas must be sent for, a fourth-tier citizen from Smyrna by the name of Baltsar Aderbal had taken control.

He'd been a middle-aged man with few allies when he'd declared the Committee of Government with the backing of only citizens of lower tiers tired of the fighting, but the reason he was now ruler of Ashur was the same two people standing behind him as he approached: the Blessed Artificer and the Archmage. Sapan the Apprentice had become Sapan the Mage and reportedly lost her temper when returning to Ashur after the war. After crushing the Blue Mage and half a school's worth of practitioners in a spectacular blowout when the other Named backed the Hadast claimant and attempted assassination of Baltsar Aderbal, she had transitioned into the Archmage and ended the civil war through sheer fear of angering her further.

She had, after all, blown up most of a mountain.

"Baltsar isn't the real power there," Lady Pickler said. "I don't care if he's called the head of their governing committee, either of those women could take his seat in a moment."

"Not Lady Adanna," Cordelia said. "She was born there but her looks are Soninke. Smyrnan elites rose up over having to back a Hadast relative married to a Levantine, they would go quite mad over her."

"Sapan's like Masego in some ways," the Warden said. "She wants to pursue her studies more than mingle. Mind you, she's a little more involved than Zeze's ever been."

"The decision to sever ties with the Baalite Hegemony is entirely hers," Cordelia agreed. "As has been reaching out to Praes in friendship to balance a resurgent League."

"Malicia's old dream come true," Catherine Foundling smiled, just a little too tightly.

"Boring," Pickler frankly said. "Can't believe I have to be here and Hanno got out of it. He's Ashuran, he should be here more than me."

"His having a look up north is more important," the Warden said. "If the word Hakram has sent is true, we have reason to be worried."

"There are records of elves being active outside the Bloom, if ancient ones," Cordelia said. "It is this talk of ratlings wandering the steppes that worry me. They could not have reached there without the Forever King's tacit allow."

The Warlord had been called in by far clans only loosely under his banner, tales of entire clans disappearing reaching his court, and duly informed Cardinal even as he moved north to investigate. The White Knight had gone alone, as the finest sword the Warden had to wield. General Grem cleared his throat.

"The Ashurans are getting close," he said. "They'll hear."

They fell into silence, the Warden allowing her gaze to fall onto the last delegation. The last great realm of the surface that had yet to sign the Liesse Accords, come here on the day where the great school she had dreamed with Hakram would open its gates to students. The sky above them was an endless sunny blue, cut only by the great towers of Cardinal College, and she let the warmth of the sun seep into her bones.

It was a good day, she thought, and there were better ones yet ahead.

—

The lecture hall was a large spread of stone with comfortable seats behind writing desks, built to easily fit a hundred, and it had been filled to the brim. Cardinal College allowed students to enroll in elective classes from their second year onwards, after the basics had been taught, and now that the first batch had reached the milestone near every mage in attendance had hurried to sign up for General Theory of Magic. Some had learned Lower Miezan specifically to be able to attend this particular set of

lectures out of the three of, for they would be given by the most famous mage of the age. Without warning the door burst open and the Lord Hierophant strode into the hall and it went quiet as a grave, save for the tinkle of the trinkets woven into his hair. He looked, many noted, in a foul mood.

A flick of the wrist had chalk rising and writing General Theory of Magic on the large grey slate, the odd-eyed man turning to face the silent class.

"Before the month is over," he said, "half or you will be gone."

Several students swallowed.

"No dead," the Hierophant clarified. "The College has rules about that."

The words were not as reassuring as he had clearly meant them to be.

"You will be expected to take notes and study on your own," he continued, "and I will not slow the pace for the slower students. Should you struggle, you are free to attend the Senior Lecturer Beaumont's lectures instead – they are also given in Lower Miezan."

A pause, waiting for volunteers. There were none.

"Then we proceed," the Hierophant said. "Before we begin, I have been informed I am to give you the opportunity to ask questions. Raise your hand if you wish to do so, you will be called on."

A dark-skinned young woman in elaborate red and black robes was the first to raise her hand and so the first to earn the right to speak.

"You," Hierophant said.

"My lord," she said, "may I ask why you are giving what could be considered an introductory lecture instead of something more befitting your talents?"

The Hierophant's flesh eye narrowed.

"Sahelian, are you?" he asked.

She proudly nodded.

"I am-"

"Not interested," the Hierophant noted. "I knew Akua Sahelian, still consider her a friend. Lesser variants are of little interest. As for your question, it's because the contents of my Deicide and Applied Blasphemy lecture are currently locked into a

vault after eating the soul of the warlock that tried to steal them."

A great many students breathed in sharply. Some second thoughts were had.

"And Hasenbach insists I have to teach something if I want my funding for the experiment," he continued. "Which is ridiculous, given the obvious benefits."

Though it had taken barely two years for Masego to accept Cordelia's invitation to refer to her by her first name, monthly funding debates saw her inevitably relegated to being 'Hasenbach' for a few days. A boy in the front, blond-haired and blue-eyed with stocky Callowan look, was the next called on.

"What's your experiment?" he eagerly asked.

"The technicalities are beyond any of you," Hierophant said, "but on the submission scroll I summed it up as 'forcing apotheosis onto a pig'."

Half the students paled. About a dozen leaned forward eagerly. Another boy, Ashuran by the looks of him, was next.

"Is it true you taught the Archmage?" he excitedly asked.

"Sapan learned from me," the Hierophant noted, "but I cannot claim to have taught her."

A pause.

"If you believe attending my lectures will turn you into her, abandon the idea," he cautioned. "She is a once in a generation talent and I have no reason to believe any of you are."

Several winces but few arguments. Even in the College, where already two Named were in attendance, few had the arrogance to compare themselves to the Archmage of Ashur. Next was a dark-haired girl, Arlesite in looks, and her accent was thick when she spoke up.

"Why should we attend your lectures instead of the others?" she asked. "What do they bring us?"

The Hierophant beamed.

"The first good question today," he praised.

The girl looked surprised, perhaps having expected irritation out of the infamously impatient mage. He glanced at her a second time, finding that she was young to be here. Eight, nine years old at most? And vaguely reminiscent of someone he likely should

have paid more attention to at some point, an unfortunately broad list.

"The other Senior Lecturers," he told the class, "will teach you general theory with an accent on the manner of magic they practice themselves. I will not."

Under the eye cloth, an orb of glass shone with the light of miracles crafted and stolen both.

"I will be teaching you of the rules," the Hierophant smiled, "only to best explain how to *break them*."

Half the class was gone by the moon's turn, as he had predicted. The rest signed up to every single lecture the Lord Hierophant gave at Cardinal College.

—

Ater had recovered from the Battle of the Spiders.

It had been years since then, almost nine, and in the wake of the War on Keter the newly founded Confederation of Praes had thrived. With a willing if wary Callow as a trading partner, Chancellor Alaya had gathered a like-minded few to her council and undertaken reforms. Taxation of territories was reorganized to be handled directly by Ater, cutting out the middleman collector of the the High Seats. It tripled the revenue of the chancellorship over the span of a year while she appeased the same great with exemptions tailored to ensure they would remain the wealthiest of the aristocracy. With the ardent support of the High Lady of Kahtan, a young woman of strong reformist bent whose life had once been saved by the White Knight in Keter, the Taghreb aristocracy HUNGERING SANDS made bereft of an overlord by the end of Thalassina and goblin rule in Foramen were reorganized into districts patterned on the past imperial governorships of Callow.

High Lady Rana Muraqib's rumoured marriage proposal to the White Knight in the wake of this was the subject of excited gossip for years.

Meticulously negotiated treaties with the Warlord solidified the vassal state status of the Clans and the rights of all greenskins in Praes, including confirming the cession of the fortress of Chagoro and attendant territories. Hakram Deadhand set his court there and began raising his capital, deepening trade ties as orc mercenary companies – verdant companies, they were called in Procer – were sent west to fight under Procer to bleed out the old urge to raid. Besides, the northern clans were occupied with the growing ratling infestation in the Lesser Steppes. There was plenty of war and meat to go around these days.

But only outside, for within there was order. Permanent Legions of Terror fortresses in all regions to ensure order did not collapse in the wake of the disbanding of the old armies. Negotiations with the rebels of the Green Stretch ended in the region being assigned a governor by Ater but receiving an electoral vote in return.

Only in the Grey Eyries did peace wane, as the Tribes had eaten themselves alive over the matter of Night. After a panicked ban of worship that ended in disaster the Matrons attempted to pivot into priesthood but found Sve Noc lukewarm to the approaches. Several tribes collapsed into infighting, males or lesser females using Night to overthrow their superiors, but wiser Matrons instead raised the status of those who could use Night as being above those others. Even the males. It avoided widespread civil war, but with every season as more left for the greener pastures of Foramen, Callow and Procer their authority ebbed. Perhaps in time it would shatter entirely.

And as the years had passed, as peace kept and Praes entered an age of prosperity, Catherine Foundling counted the days. Until one night, just before dawn, the Warden slipped into a palace at the heart of Ater. It was not Tower, not mountain of horror and hubris, but it was opulent nonetheless. Nestled at the heart was a great garden with the stars for a roof, kept pristine by gardeners and enchantments both. At this hour of the night, with dawn approaching, there was no one there.

No one save for Alaya of Satus and the Warden who'd come for her.

The chancellor sat alone in a copper garden chair, leaning back into silk cushions and looking at the starlit sky as she sipped a cup of wine. The bottle was on the table, empty. It was of rough make, cheap glass for a cheap wine that some might have said tasted of mud. The dark-skinned beauty was pleasantly drunk, by the look of her, but even so her face betrayed no surprise when the Warden slid out of shadow as if she had come into being from nothing at all. Alaya only smiled and invited Catherine Foundling to sit.

"Warden," she said.

"Chancellor," the other replied.

"Congratulations are in order, I believe," Alaya said. "The ealamal was successfully put to use."

"Adanna does good work," the Warden agreed. "The poison clouds are already dispersing and it will reverse the blight on the Kingdom of the Dead fully over the next thirteen months. Or so the latest word out of Kishar goes."

"The Herald will be pleased," the chancellor mused. "He has been chafing to expand on the surface as he has been doing below."

The collapse of the Kingdom Under into half a hundred squabbling fiefdoms had only continued, allowing the Herald of the Deeps to seize the lands beneath most of what had once been the Kingdom of the Dead. There were few cities and farms there, however, mostly fortresses and forges. Farmland would be a blessing for an expanding realm swelling with refugees from the brutal strife of the dwarven heartlands.

"The Archmage's theorem was impressive work," Catherine Foundling said. "Even Masego was impressed."

"A rising name as well as a rising Name," Alaya commented. "Her proposal of lending Baalite mages to help ours create irrigation canals in the Hungering Sands is the talk of Praes. I believe my successor will take her up on it."

"And you know who that'll be?" the Warden idly asked.

The chancellor smiled.

"Sargon Sahelian, unless I am much mistaken," she said. "I have allowed him to expand his influence unchecked, far beyond the gains I conceded to Abreha."

"Hakram tells me he's popular with the Clans," the other woman agreed. "The help he offered in Chagoro – Hagaz now, sorry – went over well with the chiefs."

"He can be quite charming," Alaya said, "and his utter disinterest in territorial expansion is exactly what we need. He would much rather spend the treasury on rebuilding Praes than consider adventures abroad."

The Warden slowly nodded.

"You will leave him a Confederation on the rise," she acknowledged. "Ater has been rebuilt, trade with Callow is the highest it has ever been and all of Praes is on the path to recovery from the Uncivil Wars."

She paused.

"I walked the city, before coming here," the Warden said. "They love you again, the people in the streets."

"Mobs have short memories," the chancellor sighed.

"Maybe," Catherine Foundling said. "But they're not wrong either. I gave you eight years, and you have used them to rule ably and justly."

The dark-skinned beauty smiled.

"Sentiment, Catherine?" she drawled. "So late in the game?"

"I've been known to indulge," the Warden shrugged.

She was no longer a young woman, to be offended by something she had long made peace with.

"Is that why you have been sending casual letters to Marshal Juniper and her wife?" Alaya smiled.

"Aisha's the Governess-General, that's as high a position as Marshal," the other chided. "And I'm being practical with that too. Grem has been talking about retiring down the line, living out his last years in the Steppes, and I'll need someone to command Cardinal's forces then."

Queen Vivienne would stringently object at losing Aisha and Juniper would not relish leaving the Army of Callow behind, but the Warden suspected the two of them would be swayed by the prospect of living in the same city enough to accept after Grem retired.

"A large army, for a young city-state," the chancellor said. "However important it has grown to be."

"If we were just handling the defence of our territory, suppressing banditry and the like, it'd be too large," the Warden freely conceded. "But the Black Legion is meant to be used against Named running wild and other threats to the Accords."

A moment of silence between them.

"He would have enjoyed the name, I think," Alaya quietly said. "He was always a little vainer than he allowed himself to believe he was."

"I figured," Catherine Foundling quietly replied. "Besides, it's his tactics we're teaching them."

Their gazes moved away, drawn by the night sky that did not yet betray the coming of dawn.

"How was it?"

"Eight years of choking down ash and dust," Alaya honestly said. "But it is done, Catherine. I laid both our sins to rest. I made Praes into what we wanted it to be."

The other woman considered that, for a moment.

"I'm glad," she said, and found she meant it.

Neither of them broke the silence for a long time. And as dawn approached, Catherine Foundling rose to her feet.

"It won't be painful," the Warden said.

That had never been the point. The chancellor of Praes drained the last of her cup, setting it down, and smiled the smile of a woman who had spent most of her life one step ahead of everyone else in the room.

"It wasn't," Alaya of Satus softly agreed, "when I drank the poison an hour ago."

She would die as she had lived, holding her fate in her own hands. Her body was cold when dawn found it, sitting alone in her beautiful garden and staring at the sky through dead eyes.

So passed Alaya of Satus, once known as Dread Empress Malicia and last of that dreadful line.

—

It had been ten years from the fall of Keter and a debt was owed.

Hye Su waited in the clearing where Refuge had once stood, greenery having since clawed back the grounds. She was sitting on a stone, honing the edge of her blades with a whetting stone. When the Warden arrived, near the coming of dusk, she displayed no surprise.

"So you came alone," Hye Su said, tone giving faint praise. "I wondered if you'd try to drag one of your little leagues into it."

It had not been so long since the Guild and the Society were founded, but Hye Su had kept her ear to the ground. The founding of both had led to a great deal of talk, for it was not everyday that companies of Named. The differences were not so great, even though the Guild stood for Below and the Society for Above. Behind all the details, the essence was the same: they were both ways for Named to make enforced bargains with one another and other entities. Be they with kingdoms or vagrants, the deals brokered by Guild and Society were made with the strength of Cardinal behind them. All at the simple price of those who joined the ranks agreeing to simple rules of conduct.

Named flocked to Cardinal for a reason.

"It's not what they're for," the Warden shrugged.

The other woman laughed.

"I suppose not," she conceded. "They're to corral the herd you let loose."

The Warden cocked her head to the side.

"So you noticed it," she said. "I wondered how obvious it was to those without our resources."

"Names are popping up like weeds," Hye Su said. "You don't need spies to see it. It used to be that there was one every few years, Foundling, but now?"

She snorted.

"I hear there's three Apprentices running around and your Knight Errant has already picked up a Squire," she said. "It's only been ten years since Keter and you've already made back every Name you lost and change."

"Too many people know stories, know about how Names work," the Warden said. "There'd never been so many Named in the same place as there were in the Arsenal or Keter, or a place like Cardinal. We made it easier for them to come into being."

"Made them weaker, too," Hye Su scathingly said. "Power spread around is thinned."

"It makes for a better world, I think," the Warden said.

"You would say that," Hye Su replied, "having made it."

She rose to her feet, blades in hand, and though she was one of the most dangerous women alive Catherine Foundling was not worried. She had learned tricks from friends and foes over the last decade, but her certainty did not come from them. She had made the world of today, her enemy had said, and there was truth to that. And it was just as true that Hye Su had been left behind by that world. It has passed her by.

And so this could only end one way.

—

There were only four students in the circular hall, which was deep below the College and so heavily warded the magic could be tasted in the air. Torchlight did not light up every shadowed stretch, but the sculpted ritual circle in the middle glowed faintly red and tinged even the dark. Many would have balked at such a sight, but these nine wore the silver stripe on their robes that denoted students in their last year who had distinguished themselves enough to be allowed into restricted classes.

"Welcome," the Lord Hierophant said, "to Nature of Divinity and Practical Applications."

There was a snort from a dark-skinned girl. Taiwo Sahelian cocked an eyebrow.

"Sir, you do know every still calls it Deicide and Applied Blasphemy right?" she said.

"As they should," Hierophant muttered, "it is a *much* better name."

"Seneschal Hasenbach is threatening to cut the lunacy fund again, isn't she?" fair-haired Anthony Fletcher grinned.

"It's Catherine this time," Hierophant sighed. "She says that feeding the Swine King to the fae wasn't enough to get the House of Light to drop the matter so we need to 'tread carefully for a bit'."

"It wasn't even a real god," Isabel Malanza complained. "We only got halfway there."

Occasionally First Princess Rozala's eldest daughter showed her age, the lowest of them all at twelve. None of them had dared to underestimate her since the time she'd made the Apprentice float atop Concord Bridge for half a day after the Taghreb condescended to her about Olowe's Theorem. Rumour had it the Warden had ordered to leave him up there as an object lesson.

"It was the village that did it, I think," Hiram of Arwad mildly said. "Upright pigs tilling the land and building houses was a mite disturbing, I'll admit."

Hiram was not the most talented of them, and by far, but solid common sense and a facility with language meant he had already been approached to serve as a Junior Lecturer after graduation.

"No matter," Hierophant dismissed. "Now, all of you should have read on Dumisai's Theorem over the last week."

A chorus of agreements.

"Good," Masego grinned. "Now the interesting part. If fae are fundamentally the stuff of Arcadia given form, then what happens if that stuff is used to try to make a devil?"

The circle glowed ominously as the four students leaned in eagerly.

—

It was fifteen years after the fall of Keter that the first true challenge to the Liesse Accords came.

"You know," the Warden said, "I really did think it would be the ratlings that made the other shoe drop."

"It's only a matter of time until the elves find a Horned Lord," the White Knight said. "But you know my thoughts on that already."

"And you mine," the Warden replied. "The Golden Bloom's not an Accords signatory and no one wants to try invading that wasp's nest when the elves aren't directly acting."

It had not been proved that the Forever King was using the shards of the Twilight Ways to ferry the Chain of Hunger east, though the leading mages of Calernia all agreed it was the most likely explanation. There were already suspicions that the same was being done to the Brocelian and the Waning Woods, the elves seeking to break apart human realms as a prelude for resuming expansion. The success of the Spring Crown ritual had ignited in them a thirst for intervention beyond their borders that had not been heard of in millennia.

"Passivity now will cost us in years to come," Hanno said.

"I don't disagree," Catherine grunted. "I just don't see a solution. Besides, let's start by putting out the fire in front of us."

Atalante was on fire. The Preacher's seizure of power through a coup had not been a breach of the Accords, no matter how heated the man's rhetoric, but after transitioning into the Philosopher King he'd ceased all pretence that he intended to respect the rules. Prescription of the worship of Night and execution of all suspected sympathizers of Below had been only the beginning of the bloodshed, but it was the King's use of angelic influence to raise an army of fanatics out of towns and villages that'd guaranteed there would be war.

The armies under Empress Basilia were facing the Host of Light and its fearsome general further south, but riots in Atalante had proved an opening for the Black Legion to risk a decapitating strike on the tyrant himself. The Archmage had blown open the gates and now black-armoured soldiers were putting down the Philosopher King's fanatic soldiers, and now the man himself was holed up in the Temple of Manifold Truths.

And he was, by the looks of the distant glow lighting up the night sky, calling on a Choir once more.

"Let us end it before more died needlessly," the White Knight agreed.

The two of them tore through the Philosopher King's personal guard like a storm. Numbers meant little to the likes of them, at the summit of their power, and it was not long before they entered the chamber where the Philosopher King himself awaited. The ragged, wild-eyed man sat in his pale robes and clutched the

many prayer beads on his wrists and neck as he hollered his prayers.

"You're too late," the Philosopher King laughed, "Contrition comes and-"

"**Silence**," the Warden said.

Catherine Foundling, it was said, had defied angels many a time. And won more often than not. The story held true that night, Contrition's light winking out.

"Cassander of Atalante," the White Knight said. "For breach of the Liesse Accords on counts of unfair proscription, malicious use of non-creational influence and mass murder by means of Name you are to receive judgement by the Warden."

"Never," the Philosopher King hissed. "Don't you see, Knight, how Below is winning? Spreading everywhere, villains growing like weeds to strangle all the world? They must be stopped now, purged while we still can and-"

"Cassander of Atalante," the Warden said, "I **Sentence** you to die."

And though angels screamed, though Light flared like a sun and the Philosopher King unleashed the last of his power, the White Knight's sword found his neck. As if it had been fated to be cut. The two of them stood over the cooling corpse, tired.

"He's only the first," the White Knight said. "There will be others."

"Below will unleash the next," the Warden softly agreed. "It'll get uglier, before it gets better."

"Isn't that always the way?" the other man smiled.

It was rare for them to take the field together, these days, but whenever they did the easy complicity of their youth always returned.

"I'll leave the corpse to you," the White Knight said. "General Grem might yet need aid securing the city."

She nodded. He had taken a wound today, an arrow to the belly, and though his life was in no danger she suspected it would only hurry the old orc's retirement. Aisha had been making noise in their letters about wanting more time to spend on finishing her memoirs. A hint that, now that Juniper was satisfied with General Abigail as successor, she might consider leaving the Army of Callow behind. Said Lady Abigail Tanner had retired thrice already, but the flooding of her first mansion and then going bankrupt twice had returned her to service every time. It was a

fond tale in Callow that she could not be out of the army for longer than three months without calamity striking.

The Gods themselves wanted Abigail Tanner to be Marshal of Callow one day.

The Warden felt the presence before she heard it. The way Creation shivered as someone who had not been came to be. And when she turned, her breath caught in her throat as she beheld Akua Sahelian. Lovely beyond words in a splendid red dress, golden eyes smiling as she touched the copper bracelet at her wrist. The cuffs of her dress were ornate lace, hearts woven into the pattern. Her two marks were these: red and a heart. No matter what she wore Calamity had a splash of red on it, and always a heart was hidden somewhere in it. Time had little changed her, the Warden saw.

Such a thing as time held much of a grip on either of them, she supposed. The gift of the Sister for one and eternity bound for the other kept age at bay.

"Catherine," Akua smiled.

"Akua," Catherine softly replied.

The wounds suffered in Keter were gone. As were Providence's, rumour had it, whose flask and lute had returned along with her arm. The faces of Yara of Nowhere and Akua Sahelian also remained, neither changing through the years.

"I though you might show up," the Warden said. "Your stars are out tonight."

Two bright shards of light in the sea of darkness. Fortune and Misfortune, some had taken to calling them. Providence and Calamity, others used instead.

"We bargained," Akua said. "She will get her way in Levant for the night, but I have the freedom of my own."

"And what," Catherine Foundling croaked, "would you do with it?"

Akua Sahelian took a hesitant step forward. It had been fifteen years since they saw each other last. It might be that long, or even longer before they saw each other again. Yet she still reached out to the other woman, fingers brushing against hers, a question asked. Neither of them were sure which reached out, not until they were kissing ardently and stumbling away from the throne and the corpse that lay on it.

They had only until dawn, so they must make the most of the time

Cordelia Hasenbach was drinking.

This was not as rare an occasion as when she had ruled Procer, but that it would venture past the first bottle of wine was. She was in a maudlin mood, however, and took no pains to hide it. Catherine found her in one of the private salons atop what Cardinalians had taken to calling the Warden's Tower, the northern of the two great towers that made up Cardinal College and the ruling seat of the city.

"I see you've heard," the Warden said.

"I have," Cordelia said, and poured her companion a drink without asking.

Catherine cocked a brow but sat, taking the implicit invitation and the cup with it.

"A lot of it stays," the Warden says. "Most of the trade clauses and part of the alliance."

"The Grand Alliance had ended," Cordelia calmly said. "You need not coddle me over it."

Procer and Callow still held a defensive alliance, but Levant had ended their own given the rising tensions at the border with the vassal Republic of Orense. Keeping the treaties alive had been increasingly unpopular, given that few still saw a need for it. Some argued such stringent alliances were more likely to create war than prevent it, these days.

"It was made to foster peace," Catherine said. "And it worked, Cordelia."

There had not been major strife since the Philosopher's War, and though skirmishes at borders were hardly uncommon the balance of Calernia was holding.

"I achieved what I set out to," Cordelia Hasenbach agreed. "But the great work of my life has still ended. I am, I think, allowed sentiment over that. And a drink."

The Warden drank of her cup.

"I can't argue with that," she said.

The other woman sent her sly look.

"I would expect not," she said, "given what happened last time I opened a second bottle."

News of Prince Otto's wedding to a Neustrian noblewoman a few years back had sent her into a fit of nostalgia. Not regret, but perhaps wonder at the life she might have lived. After all Otto

Reitzenberg, born the third son of a friendly royal line, had once been considered as a potential consort for Prince Cordelia of Rhenia. Catherine Foundling coughed, cheeks flushing in a way that still amused the other woman even after nearly two decades of acquaintance.

"I thought we didn't talk about that," Catherine said, tone careful.

"It seemed an unnecessary complication at the time," Cordelia said. "Besides, you are something of a cad."

"Hey now," Catherine weakly protested.

The once-princess idly traced the rim of her cup with a finger.

"Not only do you have a lover in Indrani whenever she visits," Cordelia said, "but you have taken others to bed."

"When the mood took me," she replied. "And not that many."

Which was true. The Ranger, who returned to Cardinal every year between the adventures across Calernia that made her the stuff of legends all over the continent, made up most of the dalliances. Cordelia had never felt jealous, not when Indrani was still so very obviously in love with Masego. Who reciprocated, she had seen, in his own way. Besides, the Ranger only blew in for a fortnight or so and the blew back out with a handful of Named students in two for one of her infamous 'field classes'. As a way to earn silver stripes of distinction, they had proved most useful.

"That is not untrue," Cordelia conceded.

"Then what?" Catherine frowned.

The former princess decided on honesty.

"I did not want to become involved with someone who was still in love with another," Cordelia admitted. "Akua Sahelian's shadow is yet cast on all your affections, I think."

The Warden drank deep of her cup, then set it down.

"I think I'll always be a little in love with her," Catherine Foundling admitted. "And I'm not sure I want to surrender that part of me. It shaped who I've become."

Cordelia waited. The *but*, though unspoken, had resonated loudly.

"It's not something that eats me day to day, though," Catherine said. "I don't go to sleep thinking of what might have been. It's just something about me, like the colour of my hair or the lines on my face."

Not that she had anywhere as many of those as Cordelia. The Warden still looked in her late twenties, and likely would for centuries yet.

"Sometimes you do have a touch of romance about you," Cordelia mused, "though it seems largely accidental."

"I am who I am," Catherine Foundling half-smiled. "I don't pretend otherwise."

And that was, Cordelia admitted to herself, true. In these affairs, the other woman was an open book. And though it still felt like there was too much of an encroachment, too much of Catherine already shared, looking upon that open book she found that she liked what she saw.

"Mhm," Cordelia said. "You truly do have luck with wine, my dear."

Catherine's eye sharpened.

"Do I?" she said, leaning back into her seat. "I wonder what that might mean."

The fair-haired woman drained her cup, then rose to her feet.

"It means," Cordelia Hasenbach gracefully smiled, "that we will get to find out how long you might keep my interest, Catherine."

She got no argument. She had not expected one.

—

Common Thaumaturgic Theory had existed in research scrolls and private correspondences for the better part of a decade now, but its formal unveiling was still something of a ceremony.

Though the Lord Hierophant's involvement made it a subject of interest to even rulers, it was ultimately a matter of scholarship and so none attended in person save for Chancellor Sargon – whose unflagging support for Cardinal College and the magical wing of it in particular was well-known. Even the growing commercial rivalry between the city and the Confederation over the artefact trade had done nothing to cool the relations.

Diplomats only politely listened to the impatient explanation given by the infamous Senior Lecturer, some of them disappointed by the plain speech given. Last year's juicy scandal of the man being revealed as the deity of an Ashuran love cult he had been a member of for many years had raised hopes for some scurrilousness. The scholars that accompanied the diplomats, however, were riveted. In the wake of the speech ending, Lecturer Hiram stepped forward to handle the divide between the learned and the uninitiated.

"Though it may seem abstract that the existence of a universally common most basic denominator has been proven, there are practical applications," he explained. "It might be best to think of it as the basic building block of all magic having been discovered."

He paused for effect.

"To accomplish this, it was necessary to be able to measure such a thing," Lecturer Hiram continued. "We have created artefacts capable of this, and in doing so created the necessity for a new unit of measurement that shall be named the 'thaum'."

The cleverest of the diplomats grasped the implications, but the young man spelled out the implications for the rest.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Lecturer Hiram said, "we have made magic quantifiable for all existing branches of sorcery. Enchantment and artefact crafting will now be no more difficult than smithing or weaving. A new age of sorcery has come upon us."

Cordelia Hasenbach, standing in the back, smiled as she considered how foreign sales of the measuring artefacts – certain to continue until national mages figured out how to reproduce them – would be yet another source of coin for Cardinal's treasury. Common Thaumaturgic Theory would remain the formal name, in the years to come, but as these things always went a shorter name stuck.

The Masegan theory of magic.

—

Twenty-four years after the fall of Keter, Lady Intendant Pickler died.

The Intendant of Works did not die young, as far as goblins counted things, but neither did she die as old as some of Matron lines did. Years of hard living and a collection of wounds had taken their toll, hastening her passing. Her funeral was well-attended by some of the great names of the continent, though not as part of any diplomatic effort. She has simply been loved by many of them. That evening twin stars shone in the sky, and the Warden stayed alone on Concord Bridge to overlook the great city sprawled below.

Providence and Calamity came calling, as she had thought they might.

"I thought you two only came at turning points," the Warden idly said, leaning against the balustrade.

Enchantments prevented the wind from crossing the threshold, leaving only a beautiful view.

"We do," Yara of Nowhere shrugged. "But then you're thinking of retiring, aren't you?"

The Warden did not deny it. The lack of a clear successor was a mark against the idea, but Cardinal and the Accords could be run without a Warden. It was the reason its ruling council existed, as there was no guarantee the Name would always be held.

"It's too early," Akua Sahelian said. "None of those might succeed you are ready."

"I'm not sure that's an argument against it," the Warden admitted.

"The Accords have to be able to hold without her holding their hands," Providence agreed. "Otherwise they're not really rules – just her authority made manifest."

"The Accords are not yet worn deep enough," Calamity disagreed. "A generation was raised knowing them but they are still fresh to Calernia's memory. She must stay until they are a bedrock."

The Warden almost laughed.

"The angel and the devil on my shoulder," she said. "Only you're neither and a little bit of both."

And she made her choice, looking down at the city she had seen grow from nothing. A little further yet, she thought. It was still too early to rest. When she turned they were both still there and her eyes found the woman she had once known as the Intercessor.

"You seem better," the Warden said.

"It has proved more interesting than I'd thought," Yara of Nowhere admitted. "Having someone else changes things."

"But you don't think it'll last," Catherine Foundling said.

"It will," Providence said. "For decades or centuries or a millennium. But it won't last, Catherine. Nothing is forever."

"Then take heart, Yara," the Warden said. "You are not nothing."

Providence's answering smile was mocking, a hatchet that would never be more than half buried. But when she vanished, Akua remained behind. That could not have been done without agreement, for that was the nature of the Fetters.

"Seven years," Akua Sahelian said.

"Felt like more than that," Catherine admitted.

"I understand," the golden-eyed woman said, "that you have taken a lover."

"Listening to rumours?" the Warden half-smiled.

She did not deny it. Neither did Akua.

"I still have evenings with Indrani sometimes, when she visits," Catherine said. "Not as often but still. We have an understanding over that."

Lycaonese mores were not flexible, but Cordelia had spent many a year among Alamans and in private their ways allowed much. Her lover had permission of her own, though she rarely used it. The lack of jealousy had been refreshing.

"And if I were to tell you I have bargained for a night?" Akua slowly said.

"I would tell you I bargained for one as well," Catherine smiled.

The tension in the air thickened even though neither of them had moved.

"It might be the last time we see each other," Akua said. "The opportunities are... rare."

"I figured," Catherine softly replied. "So let me say goodbye properly."

It was a long night but still felt all too short.

—

Thirty years after the fall of Keter, Hakram Deadhand came to Cardinal.

It was no longer the half-finished creature of its infancy, now turned into a rising city-state whose place at the crossroads of Calernia drew throngs of hopeful to. Already near twenty thousand dwelled there, and the number would only grow. He had changed no less than the city, for it was Hakram who had come to Cardinal and not the Warlord. He was no longer that, having passed down the mantle to his successor Anker Bluemane. Troke's daughter would do well as Warlord, having turned her clan's reputation around and tightened the alliance with the Red Shields and the Howling Wolves.

For all that he was thousands of miles away from the Steppes, in some ways going to Cardinal felt like coming home. It was, he thought, the people that waited for him there. Aisha and Juniper, settled there a decade ago with their pair of adopted boys – one

Taghreb, the other an orc. Masego, the perennial Senior Lecturer whose longstanding relationship with the famous wandering Ranger was scandalously scandalous. And Catherine Foundling most of all, who welcomed him with a warm embrace.

"Finally decided to retire, have you?" she teased.

"I could use something to keep my hands busy," Hakram admitted.

"I'm sure Cordelia will find something," the Warden amusedly replied. "She has a way with that."

"I'm sure," he gravelled, cocking an eyebrow suggestively.

Speculation of the true nature of the relationship between the Warden and her seneschal had been ongoing for many a year now, varying from simply very affectionate to them being secretly wed. Lady Cordelia seemed, if anything, to enjoying encouraging wildly different rumours.

"I don't want to hear that from you," she snorted. "How many kids have you got now?"

"Seventeen," Hakram shrugged.

He had raised few of them himself, as many had been born to strengthen alliances and not out of any particular affection. His three by the only lover he had never ended his time with were the only ones he was truly close to.

"My youngest by Sigvin's a student at the College," he said. "I've been meaning to look in on him."

"You'll have the time, I imagine," his friend smiled.

"Nothing but, Catherine," Hakram Deadhand smiled back.

—

Forty-three years after the fall of Keter, Hanno of Arwad died.

The Eater had risen, the ancient Horned Lord leading the Chain of Hunger through shard of Twilight to ravage the Free Cities even as Anaxares the Hierarch appeared in Nok and stirred rebellion against its hard-handed High Lord. The horde of ratlings overran the great walls of Delos, but for the second time in his life the White Knight came to the city's defence. He died slaying the Horned Lord, saving the better part of a hundred thousand people from certain death.

Hanno of Arwad died smiling, regretting little of the life he had lived.

His passing was mourned by as many souls as there were grains of sand.

—

Forty-eight years after the fall of Keter, Queen Vivienne Foundling's funeral was held.

It was, all agreed, the end of an era. The greats of Calernia gathered in Laure to pay their respect, even old Chancellor Sargon who was finishing up his second mandate. Vivienne the Wise had been the last survivor of the Woe, most agreed, though some insisted that since no new Ranger had risen Lady Indrani was still out there somewhere. Whatever the truth of that, the passing of the queen felt to many like the end of the revered generation that had won the War on Keter. The crown prince of Callow, Edmund Foundling, had insisted on his mother receiving full honours before his own coronation and so remained a prince as he welcomed the dignitaries.

It did nothing to weaken his authority, to the displeasure of the northern barons. Marshal Abigail, returned from her ninth retirement after her vineyard was burned down by an unseasonable lightning storm, stood firmly behind him and the Army of Callow behind her. Neither could there be question of disloyalty from the two great Callowan orders, not when the prince had served for years in the Broken Bells under old Grandmaster Talbot. And should that not have been enough, or even the enduring popularity of House Foundling across the kingdom, then the Knight Errant's presence as his former page's side would have even the most ambitious too wary to try anything.

Arthur Foundling, perhaps the most famous knight since Hanno of Arwad, rarely returned home but word of his deeds regularly trickled back. The Order Errant's acceptance of orcs into its ranks in the wake of the campaigns against the Half-Horn Lord in the marches had enraged some, but who could argue with the triumphs of the knights that had slain the three Necromancer Princes of Hainaut and crushed the riders of the Brocelian's infamous Fae Chevalier?

The procession carrying the queen's bier passed through the streets on the way to the palace, the people of Laure coming in droves to bid their farewell to the only ruler most of them could remember. Only Foundlings, royals and orphans both, held up the bier save for a single exception. The Warden herself, Sapan the Archmage. The queen was said to have been fond of Catherine Foundling's successor, in their few shared years as rulers. Prince Edmund's eulogy was heard by half the city, royal mages trained in Cardinal spreading his voice through clever spellwork.

"My mother," Edmund Foundling said, "will cast a long shadow."

He sadly laughed.

"The Woe all did, in their own way, but it is my mother's all of Callow will live in for centuries to come."

He was a skilled speaker, Edmund, but it was the sincerity of it that reached the people.

"There are few left who remember the days before the Black Queen, when we lived under Praes – now our closest ally, for all our squabbles over trade."

Laughter, some jostling, and none denying something that would have sounded sheer madness half a century ago.

"More remember the days after it, when a kingdom had to be rustled up out of thin air as enemies beset us all on our sides."

Old soldier gave grim nods, the elders of wars now passed into legend. How quickly the world moved on.

"Yet it is the days that came after the wars that made us who we are today. The peace, the struggle to stand in the world as more than an army and a cause. To rebuild villages burned, to uphold fair laws and punish the unjust. To bring prosperity to all, not only nobles."

The prince's voice grew quiet.

"It was those days of peace that decided our place in Calernia, and my mother was queen's own peace."

He shook himself, as if gathering strength.

"Today we come to bury Vivienne Foundling, but she goes to rest knowing our place was found. That we stand as proudly in peace as we did in war, that Callow is a land who need envy none other."

Edmund Foundling swallowed.

"There is much I could say of the woman who raised me, but that is a son's grief and it is a prince that speaks to you today. So instead I will bury a great queen, and hope that wherever she is she can hear me when I say this-"

The prince smiled.

"It is our turn carry your torch," he said. "And I promise you it will burn even brighter when we pass it to our children."

Laure filled with the sound of cheers and weeping, as Callow marked the death of a queen and the rise of a king. And as the noise crested, in a dingy old tavern Dockside a barkeep who'd closed her tavern for the afternoon let out a low whistle.

"He's a pretty good speaker, your boy," Catherine Foundling admired.

"Audrey's better, but she gets too clever sometimes," Vivienne Foundling replied. "I'm glad he was born first."

Her back ached. Even with Hierophant arranging a corpse that would pass for hers she'd had to sneak out of the palace, and these days she was an old woman. More so than Catherine bloody Foundling, who barely looked forty even that because she'd spread her gift around.

"Fill my tankard, wench," the former Queen of Callow ordered. "The beer is terrible, but what else should I expect from a dive like this?"

"Eh, get it yourself," the other former Queen of Callow replied. "And this is a respectable establishment, I'll have you know. The drinks are imported."

"From where, a mud pit?" Vivienne skeptically replied.

"Well, the Green Stretch so you're not actually that far off," Catherine admitted.

She was saved from a further verbal flaying by the arrival of the others. Indrani had barely changed over the years, only her face and figure maturing, and Masego had not changed at all since Keter. The one that stood out, though, was Hakram. Who had begun to age after putting down the Name of Warlord, enough that he had been as old as her until he 'died', but now looked much as he had in his prime.

"Are we drinking?" Indrani grinned.

"We are Dockside," Masego flatly said. "I refuse to sit down."

"The beer is bad enough I'm surprised she was able to sell this place," Hakram grumbled.

And the familiarity of it had her tearing up, silly old woman that she'd become. Catherine her took her hand gently.

"It'll be all right, Viv," she said. "If you're not ready to go..."

"I am," Vivienne said. "It's not that. My children are grown and my husband dead. Edmund doesn't need me looking over his shoulder as he grows into a king. It just..."

"Feels like coming home," Hakram softly said.

Even after all these years, the depth of their understanding still surprised her.

"That's because you are," Catherine Foundling smiled, and Night roiled.

A gift had been given Catherine once by goddesses that had, in their own way, grown to love her. A Mighty's lifespan, centuries ahead of her and more. And after many years of studying the Night, she had learned to share that gift. Night flowed into Vivienne's veins, cool but pleasant, and she felt herself change. Years return to her, time's ravages turning back until she was in her prime again. As Hakram had been, when Catherine shared a third of her gift with him.

"There," her friend smiled, like it was nothing.

Like she'd not just given back her youth, thrown away a third of her lifespan so that Vivienne might live it out instead. When the tears came this time she did not fight them. None mocked her, though, and instead she found arms going around her as the Woe reunited at last.

It was good to be home.

—

They bought a boat in Arwad and first boarded it in the early hours after dawn, which naturally was the moment it all went awry: in other words, at the very beginning. As the years had proved, this was a sadly typical turn of events.

"It's a ship," Masego heatedly objected. "A *ship*, not a boat."

Papers signed by the shipwright attesting to that, legal property and the name of the *Heady Wind* being changed to the *Inevitable Doom* were waved in the face of the others. A sudden but comprehensive bout of blindness preventing anyone from acknowledging this in any way.

"It floats," Indrani insisted. "It's a boat."

"The words *do* rhyme," Vivienne noted. "It checks out."

Motherhood had not softened Vivienne Dartwick. It had, if anything, added some spikes.

"I feel like I ought to have asked before getting on," Hakram gravelled, "but one of us knows how to sail this boat, right?"

"I know you did that on purpose, Hakram," Masego bit out.

He gestured sharply at the sky, wind gutting out and stranding them less than thirty feet away from Arwad's foreign docks. Not a single one of them paid attention to the increasingly angry people on said docks gesturing at them.

"I'm sure Cat could offer us a wise ruling over it," Indrani slyly suggested.

She then tugged at her collar to reveal her collarbone and offered the woman in question an exaggerated wink. Nearly five decades of occasionally sleeping with Catherine had changed Indrani from a terrible seductress to a *proficiently* terrible seductress, something only people with appalling taste could possibly enjoy. Catherine Foundling was such a creature, sadly, but in this case her friend's highly shoddy feminine wiles were to be of no avail.

"I don't do rulings anymore," Catherine informed them. "I'm retired, let go of the reins and all that."

Four skeptical gazes were turned onto her.

"Is that so?" Vivienne doubtfully said.

"Don't give me that tone," Catherine said, wagging a finger at her. "You know what? Wherever we go, I don't even want to be in charge. Someone else can do it this time."

The others conferred.

"She'll crack before the day is out," Indrani said. "I'll put coin on it."

"The *day*?" Vivienne snorted. "She won't last all the way out the harbour. Ten ducals on that."

"I'll take that," Hakram mused. "Pride will make her stick it out at least that long."

"I can hear you, you know," Catherine peevishly said.

"Five denarii she becomes captain before nightfall," Indrani offered.

"I will take that bet," Masego proudly said. "It is my name on the papers, you have been had."

"Mutiny has been the doom of many a boat, Zeze," Hakram told him.

Masego's flesh eye narrowed.

"Have you forgotten I can make your own hand hit you?" he said.

"They used to call it tyranny when I said things like that," Vivienne said, sounding happy. "Now I get to threaten people again. I've been looking forward to that."

"Come on," Catherine loudly complained. "You're all sure I'll go mad with power but she says stuff like that and no one bats an eye?"

On the docks behind them a company of armed guards arrived on the dock, escorting a bearded mage. The Ashuran gestured at the boat, but whatever the spell had been meant to accomplish it ended up setting his beard on fire instead. Masego turned and fixed the mage with a steady look. He began to back away slowly.

"Catherine's insatiable hunger for power aside," Hakram idly said, "I have to ask again because I am getting somewhat worried by the lack of answer. Someone *does* know how to sail the boat, right?"

His bone hand started slapping him on the back of the head, making the tall orc yelp and as he tried to wrestle it down.

"As captain of this ship," Masego proudly said, "I order you to your stations."

Indrani raised her hand.

"Question," she said.

"Yes," Masego allowed.

"Do we have assigned bunks?" Indrani asked.

"Yes," he happily told them. "And designated seats for meals. I have also brought assigned readings. Most of them are things you should know but are inexplicably still ignorant about, but I understand that is not always enough."

He gave them all a confident look that the students attending General Theory of Magic had learned to live in terror of and those few who took Deicide & Applied Blasphemy had learned to look forward to. It was most commonly known as 'Lord Hierophant Trying To Help'.

"So I have obtained recreational books," Masego said. "Which I will also be expecting reports about."

There was pause.

"Some of them," he confided, "are of nautical theme. I thought it would fit our journey thematically."

There was another pause. In the distance behind them, a squad of mages in blue robes formed up on the docks. Archers were lined up behind them and a guard officer was shouting at the boat, not that it made a difference for anyone on it.

"I'm sorry, Masego," Catherine sighed. "I'm going to have to usurp the captaincy of this ship."

"Yes," Vivienne cheered. "That's ten ducals for me."

Masego pouted.

"I should have known your insatiable hunger for power would get the best of you," he sadly said.

A tone that would have had greater effect had he not spent the last several decades using it whenever he was denied a funding increase or permission to make the laws of Creation wince.

"We can still do the assigned readings," she told him, and he perked up.

"Really?"

"Vivienne can," Catherine specified. "Because she fucking crossed me."

"Hey," Vivienne protested. "Do you think I'll just-"

"Indrani," Catherine called out, "if you bully Vivienne into obeying me, I'll pay you five ducals."

She fully intended to get these out of ten that had been bet against her. The long acquaintance of Cordelia Hasenbach had added a touch of biting irony to natural Callowan spite.

"I've done worse for less," Indrani cheerfully agreed.

"-agree you should be in charge?" Vivienne adjusted without batting an eye. "Because I do. Good to have you back, Catherine."

That left only the one. Hakram was still struggling not to his own head, as Masego had forgot to end the spell, so Catherine laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"I'll make it stop," she said.

"Please do," he grunted, wrestling down his wrist.

"I'll make it stop," she continued, "if you stop pretending you don't know how to sail this boat."

A pause.

"I was pulling Indrani's chain," Hakram said. "She wasn't sure whether she was the one supposed to learn or not because she spilled beer over her letter."

"Hakram, you gossipy bitch," Indrani protested. "I told you that in coincidence."

"You'd think they would have learned by now," he mused.

Catherine, magnanimous in victory, got Masego to end the spell and Hakram to move the steering wheel. The wind was released not long after, Indrani climbing up the rigging to the crow's nest, beginning an inevitable countdown before she got bored and shot a seagull under the thing pretence of acquiring fresh meat. Vivienne disappeared under the deck to hide her assigned readings before she could be made to read them, while Masego chased away the blue-robed mages on the docks by bespelling them to start kicking each other whenever they tried to use magic. Years of exposure to Indrani had, sadly, eroded his sense of humour into a strange and violent creature.

Hakram and Catherine moved to the back of the quarterdeck. Hakram too the steering wheel while she stood back, finding wakeleaf to fill her pipe with. Moments later she was puffing away at it, the acrid smoke rising up in curls.

"We're a little late for the tide," Hakram noted. "We might not make it out of harbour before it turns."

"Oh," Catherine Foundling smiled, looking at the sky where a star lay unseen, "I think luck might end up on our side."

It had been many years since she had last seen Akua Sahelian, but never so many as to forget.

"I suppose we're due some," Hakram chuckled.

Wind picked up, a warm breeze carrying the salty taste of the sea with it. It tasted like a promise long overdue.

"So where to?" Hakram asked, hand on the steering wheel.

Catherine considered that for a moment. They would cross the Tyrian Sea in time, on that they had all agreed. But there was no need to hurry, was there? They had earned a little time before they sailed away into the unknown. So as she leaned back against the side of the ship, Catherine Foundling offered her oldest friend a smile.

"Surprise me," she asked, and into the rising sun they sailed.

That's it, huh....One of the best stories I've ever read, recommend to me by one of my best friends. Thank you, E.E.

hue hue

I will cry then reread everything to cry again.

Errata you are a great writer and I want to know if you have any future project in mind

abdullah

They have a new series here <https://palelights613694448.wordpress.com/>

[Aotrs Commander](#)

Thank you for the time and effort, EE, for this remarkable story. Should this ever be released in print (as I believe was rumoured once to be), I would love to place the guide on my shelf; but until that point, I can only, with regret, offer to you my thanks.

I commented back in the early chapters of book 1 (I think it was at sometime around book 3 or 4 were being written?), but I can count on the fingers of one hand that I have EVER encountered characters I actually relate to, but the Guide managed (not consistently, but that is more than... Pretty much any other work of media I can think of has ever managed.)

It has been some time to catch up. I left off during the break before the last book (since Patreon is not an option for me) to come back later when the dust settled. (Coming as it did in the middle of lockdown, as everything faded out of reach it also... Stung a bit, if I am brutally honest, through no fault of yours.) But I come I did, and finished in something of a burst, as, like when I started, I was able to binge, which added a certain symmetry and satisfaction to reading it whole. (I technically should have done some work today, but as my holiday begins tomorrow, I decided I wanted to burn through the last chunk..)

Endings are difficult to get right, but this one was managed magnificently. I leave now satisfied, if perhaps a little melancholy (would that I had my own band of five), as the Woe sail off into the sunset.

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[Estelulu](#)

I used to follow this every week until near the conclusion when I didn't want it to end. Finally got myself to read through all of the highs and lows of the conclusion. Man was that a ride.

Thank you for the satisfying ending. Grateful for the closure.

Anonymous

damn, I'd love a sequel detailing their adventures across the tyrian sea, mostly because I'm still damn curious about these global powers that are talked about, especially the gnomes!
